



Immersive simulation as a public relations pedagogical tool

Karen Sutherland, University of the Sunshine Coast
Alistair Ward, University of the Sunshine Coast

Abstract

The purpose of this study is to explore immersive simulation as a pedagogical method to provide public relations students with the practical experience of media conference coordination and delivery. This experimental research involved surveying public relations writing students in Queensland, Australia before and after the simulation of a media conference in an immersion facility; images and video were projected onto three walls to simulate a range of different scenarios. The survey results indicated that students enjoyed the immersive simulation activity, that it enhanced their learning and analytical skills, and recommended the use of immersive simulation as a public relations teaching tool in the future. Based on the results of this study, public relations educators are encouraged to consider using immersive simulation as a pedagogical tool in their courses to enhance student learning when providing students with 'real life' experiences is unfeasible.

Keywords: public relations, pedagogy, immersive environments, simulation, media conferences, teaching and learning, higher education

Introduction

Public relations pedagogy aims to prepare graduates to cope proficiently with the everyday challenges of professional practice (McMillan, 2016; Todd, 2009). While there has been speculation with regard to the most appropriate ways to prepare public relations students to enter the workplace upon graduation, there is a consensus within the literature that recognizes the value for students of including 'real world' experiences within public relations curricula (Swanson, 2011; Kim & Freberg, 2017; Sutherland, 2014). Within Australian universities, where this research study was conducted, public relations pedagogy usually includes opportunities for students to gain some form of 'real world' experience within coursework, also known as Work Integrated Learning (WIL). As an overarching term, WIL can be used to describe "activity based learning, work-based learning and co-operative education which attempt to link learning in practice settings and in university courses" (Fitch, 2011, p. 492). Activities described as Work Integrated Learning can include internships and course assignments involving real clients to provide students with practical industry experience. However, some tasks relating to the public relations profession present difficulties for those who attempt to offer 'real world' involvement with for their students within a traditional classroom environment (Nayan et. al, 2016; Fall, 2006). Staging media conferences are one example of this challenge to educators. Students may be able to gain practical experience with media conferences as part of an internship (or by witnessing one in action). However, providing an entire cohort of students with the experience of organizing and participating in a media conference is a challenge within a public relations curriculum. There is a scarcity of literature exploring best-practice techniques in learning and teaching relating to delivering media conferences (Pyle, 2017; Wang, 2016; Donahey et. al, 2015; Baglione, 2006) as part of public relations pedagogy that is not focused on crisis communication. This study addresses this gap in research through the exploration of immersive simulation as pedagogical method to provide public relations students with the practical experience of media conference coordination and delivery.

Literature Review

Immersive simulations to facilitate technology enhanced learning

Establishing techniques to develop student critical and analytical thinking and problem-solving skills is a key objective for educators and class room simulations have been highlighted in the literature as an effective way for students to develop these skills by practically applying the theoretical knowledge learned in the classroom (Shellman & Turan, 2006; Brock & Cameron, 1999). While simulations used as a pedagogical tool can involve simple role playing, with or without specialized equipment, the rapid development of immersive technology has enabled educators to conduct simulations that facilitate Technology Enhanced Learning (TEL). Immersive technologies are those that can create a digital representation of reality in which users can interact and perform designated tasks and can facilitate simulations including those used in virtual reality and in virtual worlds such as *Second Life*. Immersive simulations can be conducted in a completely virtual world or can blur the lines between offline and digital spaces in an Immersion Room, where images and/or videos are projected onto the walls that surround the participants (Cooper Hewitt Smithsonian Design Museum, 2016).

While the benefits of TEL have been explored extensively in the literature, the use of immersive simulations as a pedagogical tool, particularly in the area of public relations education, remains an under-researched field (Chandler & Ward, 2016; de Freitas, 2014; Savin-Baden, 2010, Savin-Baden et al 2010). Immersive technologies have been used predominantly in engineering and science-related disciplines to explore objects and concepts

through digital (Dinis et. al, 2017; Onime et. al, 2017) but other areas of scholarship, such as history and design, have also employed immersive learning techniques (Chandler & Ward, 2016; Cooper Hewitt Smithsonian Design Museum, 2016). For example, Chandler and Ward (2016) used an immersive facility, called the Immerse Lab, to conduct a series of learning activities for design students and this involved projecting their work onto the walls. One activity involved projecting students' work in a range of configurations to create different designs and this enabled students to view their work from new perspectives. Another activity created a virtual art gallery where student interpretation of classic artworks was projected onto the walls. A study by Chandler and Ward (2016) found that immersive activities supported and engaged students in the learning process and provided them with new perspectives on their own work and that of their peers. The objective of our study was to use of an immersion facility to conduct the simulation of a media conference as a pedagogical tool for public relations students.

The use of simulations in public relations pedagogy

Simulations have been identified as helping students to understand and apply theories in order to solve practical problems (Dutta-Bergman, Madhavan & Arns, 2005; Veil, 2010). However, there is a scarcity of research in relation to the use of simulation as a pedagogical tool to educate public relations students about the problems and challenges they will face when they enter their profession. While there are many studies exploring the benefits and dynamics of public relations internships (Yeomans, Kostopoulos, & Halliday, 2016; Fitch, 2011) simulation is an underexplored area of public relations teaching. One study (Veil, 2010) that investigated the benefits of a classroom simulation used groups of public relations students that were informed of a crisis situation and told that they had to organize a press conference the following day. Students were required to develop briefing notes for a classmate who was nominated as the organizational spokesperson. Journalism students posed as media representatives and asked questions of the public relations students to simulate the atmosphere of a real press conference in a crisis situation. The students reported that the exercise was highly beneficial to their learning, although some commented that the spontaneous nature of the activity was challenging. Other students stated that, while it was a worthwhile exercise, it could never compare with the realities of a true press conference during a crisis.

While our study is similar to that of Veil (2010), in that it involves the simulation of a media conference, it differs because students were allocated a range of scenarios and the media conferences organized by the participants were not exclusively in response to crises. Students were also allowed a longer time (four classes) to prepare. However, the most significant difference was that the simulations in our study occurred in a technologically immersive environment not in a traditional classroom. This allowed for specific scenes relevant to the allocated scenarios to be projected onto the walls with the aim of creating a much deeper simulation experience than what could be achieved in a traditional classroom environment. The study explored student perceptions and evaluations of the use of immersive simulation as a public relations pedagogical tool and provided the following research question:

RQ: What are public relations student perceptions of the use of immersive simulation as a tool to support their learning about media conferences?

Method

The Simulation Activity

The immersive simulation experiment was used as an assessment task for undergraduate students enrolled in a public relations writing course at a university in Queensland, Australia and was conducted in the university's The Immerse Lab. The lab has a projection area of

19.4m by 2.25m and 10,548 by 1,200 pixels, and 7.1 surround sound and was secured for the experiment through the university's timetabling system (University of the Sunshine Coast, 2017).

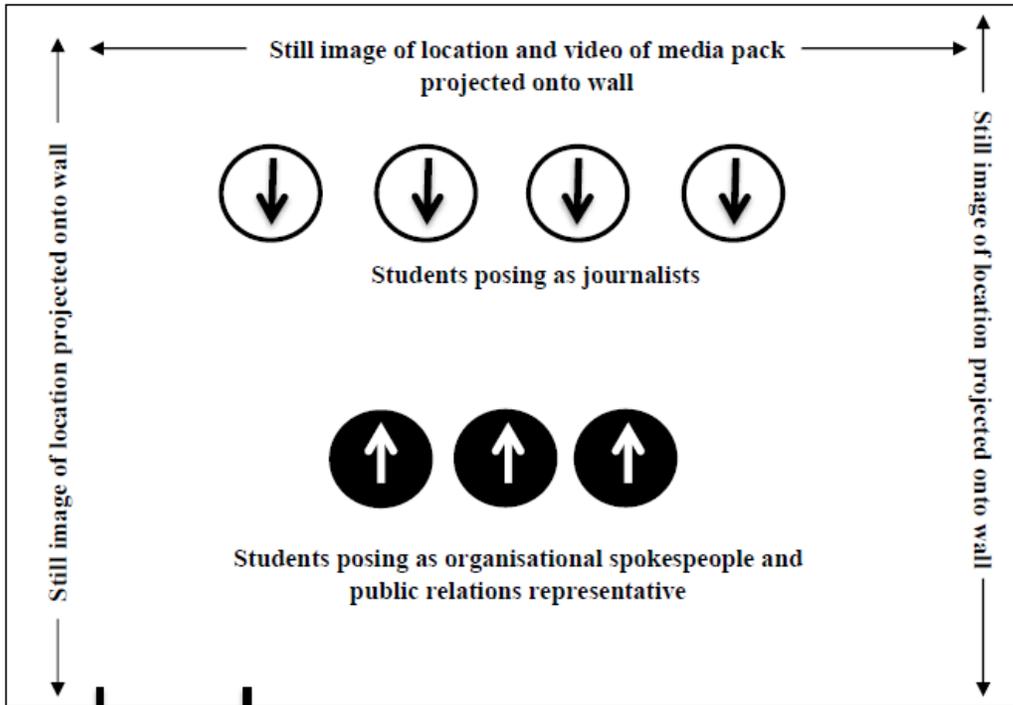
The student cohort consisted of two students from first year (7%), four second year students (15%), 17 third year students (63%), three graduating students (11%) and one student who did not specify their year level. A total of three males and 24 females participated in the experiment. The small representation of males in the course is in line with research findings exploring the numbers of males and females in the wider profession (Grunig, Childers & Toth, 2014). There were ten Bachelor of Public Relations students, six Bachelor of Journalism students, five Bachelor of Communication students, one student each from the Bachelor of Business Administration, Diploma of Communication, Bachelor of Mass Communication, Bachelor of Business, Bachelor of Business Management and one student who did not specify their degree program.

Student groups (4/5 participants in each) were assigned one of six scenarios and were required to conduct a mock media conference twenty minutes in duration. The roles of the students varied according to the allocated scenarios. However, each media conference was required to have an organizational spokesperson or spokespeople, a public relations professional, and at least two journalists asking prepared questions. Other students, and the assessor also asked unprepared questions. Groups and scenarios were assigned to students a month before the experiment was conducted to provide students with time to prepare. However, the students' first experience in the immersive simulation space was on the day of their assessment to investigate their reactions in an unfamiliar environment (Veil, 2010).

The six assigned media conference scenarios and locations were: (i) A child lost in bushland (bushland); (ii) the announcement of a new health policy (hospital exterior); (iii) The winner of the Formula 1 Grand Prix (car racing track); (iv) the opening of a theme park (theme park); (v) a disgraced sportsperson (sports stadium exterior); and (vi) emergency services responding to a cyclone (ravaged town). For each activity (Figure 1) a still image depicting the location was projected on to three walls of the room. Video of a media pack, with camera operators, photographers and reporters, jostling for attention, was projected onto the wall directly facing the students who were posing as the organizational spokespeople and public relations professionals. These assets (video of media pack and still images of scenes) were developed to meet the specifications of the Immerse Lab by the authors (one of whom had previous experience within the immersive space) in collaboration with the Digital Services area of the university's Information Technology Services. The sound of the camera clicks and the movement of the media pack video projections provided sound and sight stimulation for students, not available in the traditional tutorial room.

The student journalists stood in front of the video media pack facing the students delivering the media conference.

Figure 1. The Immerse Lab (Projection area of 19.4m by 2.25m and 10,548 by 1,200 pixels, and 7.1 surround sound) (University of the Sunshine Coast, 2017)



The Research Design

The research design chosen for this experiment was a combination of approaches used in two previous immersive simulation studies (Chandler & Ward, 2016; Shellman & Turan, 2006). A pre- and post-study design was employed after approval was granted by the University's Human Research Ethics Committee. Students were requested to complete a hard copy questionnaire before and after the immersive simulation experiment in order for the researchers to compare students' responses. This was an approach used by Chandler and Ward (2016) in a study involving design students using the same immersive space used in this study. Using a pre- and post-study approach can identify changes in participants' attitudes and perceptions as a result of the experiment (Valente & MacKinnon, 2017). In accordance with ethical guidelines, participation in the study was voluntary and anonymous. Students submitted their non-identifiable completed (or uncompleted) surveys into a box before the experiment began and again at the end of the session.

The survey questions were adapted from the Shellman and Turan (2006) study of an international relations simulation in which students were surveyed at the end of the simulation. In our study the language had to be adapted so that the questionnaire conducted before the experiment used the correct tense and the references to international relations were replaced by those related to public relations (Table 1). Consistent with the research questions of Shellman and Turan (2006, p.25), students were asked whether they thought the immersive simulation (pre) would and (post) had enhanced their understanding and knowledge of theories and concepts relating to media conferences and how they are organized for their assigned organizations. Questions 1 - 8 inclusive used a ranking scale from 1 (low) to 5 (high) whereas other questions included specific options to select or requested comments. Students were also asked pre- and post-immersive simulation activity whether the experiment facilitated the

development of critical and analytical thinking skills. Furthermore, students were asked to compare the experiment with other learning experiences throughout their degree, whether they found the experiment to be enjoyable, and if they now planned to change their major to or from public relations. As Shellman and Turan (2006) suggest, there are advantages and disadvantages when conducting surveys of this type. For example, students may become excited when experiencing an immersive simulation for the first time and overestimate its effects. The pre- and post-survey approach adopted for our study was consistent with the Shellman and Turan (2006) method of separating the questions regarding pedagogical impact and enjoyment and aims to address this potential subjectivity. Overall, the questionnaire was structured so that its result would indicate: how the immersive simulation compares with other pedagogical methods; whether the sample found it enjoyable and/or beneficial to their learning; and how the activity can be improved when next delivered.

Table 1. Pre- and Post -Immersion Simulation Activity Survey Questions

	Pre-Immersion Simulation Activity	Post-Immersion Simulation Activity
Question 1	Overall, on a scale from 1(low) to 5 (high), how much do you think the simulation will enhance your knowledge of a media conference from a public relations perspective?	Overall, on a scale from 1(low) to 5 (high), how much did the simulation enhance your knowledge of a media conference from a public relations perspective?
Question 2	On a scale from 1(low) to 5 (high), how much do you think the simulation will enhance your learning about public relations theories and concepts beyond lectures, readings, and class discussions?	On a scale from 1(low) to 5 (high), how much did the simulation enhance your learning about public relations theories and concepts beyond lectures, readings, and class discussions?
Question 3	On a scale from 1(low) to 5 (high), how much do you think the simulation will enhance your learning about how media conferences are organized beyond lectures, readings, and class discussions?	On a scale from 1(low) to 5 (high), how much did the simulation enhance your learning about how media conferences are organized beyond lectures, readings, and class discussions?
Question 4	On a scale from 1(low) to 5 (high), how much do you think the simulation (and its assessment requirement) will enhance your learning about your assigned organization?	On a scale from 1(low) to 5 (high), how much did the simulation (and its assessment requirement) enhance your learning about your assigned organization?
Question 5	On a scale from 1(low) to 5 (high), how much do you think the simulation will enhance/develop your analytical and	On a scale from 1(low) to 5 (high), how much did the simulation enhance/develop your analytical and

	critical thinking skills (i.e. problem-solving skills, negotiation skills, creativity, etc.)	critical thinking skills (i.e. problem-solving skills, negotiation skills, creativity, etc.)?
Question 6	On a scale from 1(low) to 5 (high), how much do you think you will enjoy the simulation activity?	On a scale from 1(low) to 5 (high), how much did you enjoy the simulation activity?
Question 7	On a scale from 1(low) to 5 (high), how much do you think the technology will enhance your simulation experience?	On a scale from 1(low) to 5 (high), how much did the technology enhance your simulation experience?
Question 8	On a scale from 1 (low) to 5 (high) how effective to your learning do you believe it would be to conduct the media conference activity in a tutorial room?	On a scale from 1(low) to 5 (high), how effective to your learning do you believe it would be to conduct the media conference activity in a tutorial room?
Question 9	What is your degree? a. Bachelor of Public Relations b. Other please specify	What is your degree? a. Bachelor of Public Relations b. Other please specify
Question 10	Do you currently have any thoughts about changing your degree or major to public relations? a. No, I am still NOT planning to major in PR. b. No, I am currently a PR major and will remain one. c. Yes, I am thinking about or planning to change my major to PR. d. No, quite the opposite, I am changing my major from PR to something else.	Did you have thoughts about changing your degree or your major to public relations after taking this class? a. No, I am still NOT planning to major in PR. b. No, I am currently a PR major and will remain one. c. Yes, I am thinking about or planning to change my major to PR. d. No, quite the opposite, I am changing my major from PR to something else.
Question 11	Following the completion of this semester in what year of study will you be? a. First b. Second c. Third d. I am graduating e. Other, please specify	Following the completion of this semester in what year of study will you be? a. First b. Second c. Third d. I am graduating e. Other, please specify
Question 12	Any other feedback?	Rate the simulation exercise compared to other exercises in your university experience on a scale from 1 to 5 (where 1 represents the worst university course learning exercise you have performed at USC (thus far) and 5

		represents the best university course learning exercise you have performed at USC (thus far).
Question 13	Nil	Do you recommend using the simulation in the Immersion Lab as a teaching tool in future public relations classes? a. I recommend against the use of the simulation in the Immersion Lab in future classes (do not use it in future). b. I recommend the use of the simulation in the Immersion Lab in future classes. c. I strongly recommend the use of the simulation in the Immersion Lab in future classes.
Question 14	Nil	What do you consider to be the benefits of undertaking public relations exercises in the Immerse lab when compared with the tutorial space?
Question 15	Nil	What do you consider to be the limitations of undertaking public relations exercises in the Immerse lab when compared with the tutorial space?
Question 16	Nil	Any other feedback?

Results

Table 2 presents the results (pre- and post-immersive simulation experiment) to Questions 1 - 8 plus descriptive statistics of mean and median. Questions 1 - 5 inclusive were specifically related to the pedagogical impact of the immersive simulation activity. The results indicate a significant shift in responses pre- and post -activity. While the pre-experiment answers were predominantly ranked 3, 4 or 5, in more than 50% cases the post activity answers were ranked much higher and there were more than double the number of 5 (high) answers for questions from 1 - 5.

The results demonstrate that students enjoyed the activity (Question number 6). However, 14 (52%) scored 4 and seven (26%) scored 5 in response to this question *before* the experiment. After the experiment the assessment changed and 5 (19%) of students answered a 4 and 17 (65%) of students that ranked the enjoyment of the activity as a 5 after the experiment. There was a similar shift in the numbers of students who answered that the technology enhanced the simulation activity, with 19 (70%) of students answering 4 and 6 (22%) answering 5 *before* the experiment and 13 (50%) of students answering 4 and 12 (47%) choosing 5 *after* the experiment.

While most of the results clearly demonstrated that students enjoyed the activity and believed that it enhanced their learning, the answers to questions 8 and 12 were less than

supportive. Question 8 asked the sample to rank the effectiveness of conducting the media conference in a tutorial room, and the answers to this question ranked higher for the tutorial room after the immersive simulation activity. Similarly, Question 12 asked students to rank the experiment from the worst (1) to the best (5) of their university teaching and learning experiences. There was a significant negative shift in the responses to this question. Eleven (41%) students ranked the experience a 4 and 12 (44%) ranked the experience a 5 before the immersive simulation yet this dropped to 9 (35%) students ranking the experience a 4, 3 (12%) rating it a 5 and 4 (15%) students ranking the activity as low as 1 after the experience.

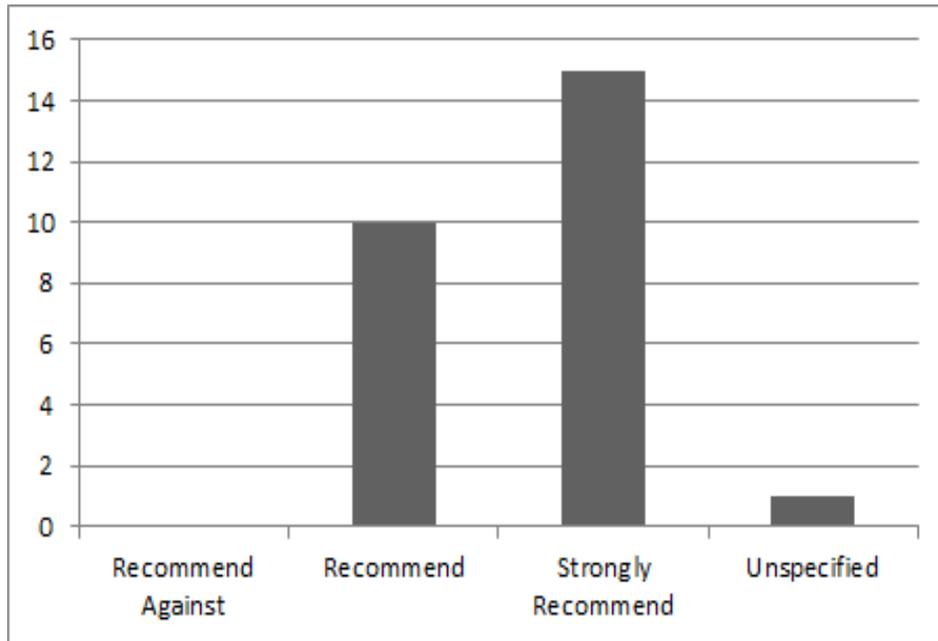
Table 2. Distribution of student rankings on simulation enhancement pre- and post- the media conference immersive simulation activity

Frequency of Enhancement Levels							Descriptives	
Question		1 (low)	2	3	4	5 (high)	Mean	Median
1. Simulation enhanced knowledge of media conference from PR perspective.	Pre	0	1	9	12	5	5.4	5
	Post	0	1	4	11	10	5.2	4
2. Simulation enhanced learning about public relations theories and concepts beyond lectures, readings, and class discussions.	Pre	0	4	7	15	1	5.4	4
	Post	0	6	6	10	4	5.2	6
3. Simulation enhanced learning about how media conferences are organized beyond lectures, readings, and class discussions.	Pre	0	0	6	15	6	5.4	6
	Post	0	1	5	8	12	5.2	5
4. Simulation enhanced	Pre	0	4	8	11	4	5.4	4

learning about your assigned organization.	Post	0	4	5	6	11	5.2	5
5. Simulation enhanced/developed analytical and critical thinking skills.	Pre	1	1	13	10	2	5.4	2
	Post	0	0	6	12	8	5.2	6
6. Enjoyment of the simulation activity.	Pre	1	0	5	14	7	5.4	5
	Post	0	1	3	5	17	5.2	3
7. Simulation experience enhanced by the technology.	Pre	0	1	1	19	6	5.4	1
	Post	0	0	1	13	12	5.2	1
8. Effectiveness of conducting media conference in a tutorial room.	Pre	1	5	9	8	4	5.4	5
	Post	0	0	3	11	12	5.2	3
12. Best or worst university experience.	Post	4	5	5	9	3	5.2	5

This negative deviation was not reflected in the results of Question 13 that asked the students if they would recommend the simulation in the Immersion Lab as a teaching tool in future public relations classes. All students either strongly recommended (16, 62%) or recommended (10, 38%) using the Immersion Lab for public relations classes in the future.

Figure 2. Students recommending the simulation in the Immersion Lab as a teaching tool in future public relations classes



The results indicated that none of the students were considering changing their major to or from public relations after the immersive simulation experiment.

When asked to identify benefits relating to the experiment, 11 out of the 20 students who responded felt the media conference simulation seemed more realistic when conducted in an immersive environment than in a normal classroom. This contradicted the quantitative data from Question 8.

“Feels more realistic (especially good to learn to stay focused with the virtual journalists in the back).”

“It’s more realistic, just like the real media conference.”

“More realistic and you have the interruptions and noises of real life. Whereas in a tute room you don’t and it’s not as realistic.”

Furthermore, some students found the unfamiliar and unpredictable nature of the immersive simulation experiment to be beneficial to their learning.

“Practice. Quick thinking. Feeling comfortable in front of an audience.”

“Real life situation. Puts you on the spot.”

Students identified few limitations in relation to the immersive simulation. Of the 16 students who responded to this question, nine stated that they could not identify any

limitations. The few limitations that were identified by the other seven students included the small size of the room, the length of the session, the noise from the media pack video, and that the experiment was a simulation and not a real media conference.

“Noise from cameras were too loud and when watching the other group, I got distracted by noise and it was hard to concentrate on what was being said.”

This demonstrated the reality of the situation. It was a good example of the reality of what happens at a media conference. This taught the student to better position themselves at a real media conference to hear the speaker. It was also an example of the effectiveness of this learning space.

“Was a long time watching all of them. The flashing of the media got annoying.”

“Just that you’re not in the real thing with a real audience, press, cameras and crisis.”

Overall, the majority of students responded positively to the immersive simulation experiment. However, there were some discrepancies between the results and the positive response to the activity was not unanimous.

Discussion

The results in this study supported the findings from the literature that investigated the use of simulations as a pedagogical tool (Shellman & Turan, 2006; Brock & Cameron, 1999). Consistent with the findings of Shellman and Turan (2006) and Brock and Cameron (1999), the participants in our study also indicated that the simulation activity helped to enhance or develop their analytical and critical thinking skills. After the activity there was an increase of 27.8% of participants awarding the highest level (5) to the question concerning the enhancement of their analytical and critical thinking skills. The participants also indicated that the simulated media conference activity helped them to understand and apply theories to solve practical problems as highlighted by Dutta-Bergman, Madhavan and Arns (2005) and Veil (2010). After the activity, a greater number of students awarded the highest level (5) to questions two and three that specifically asked how the simulation enhanced their knowledge about public relations theories and concepts beyond lectures, readings, and class discussions and how media conferences are organized. The number of students scoring a five to question three doubled after the activity, indicating that the simulation provided them with a beneficial opportunity to apply theory to practice that was not achieved using traditional pedagogical tools. However, as indicated in the Veil (2010) study, some of the study participants felt challenged by the spontaneous nature of the activity. In the Veil (2010) simulation the students had less time to prepare than in our study and this was the case in our study where the participants’ first experience with the immersion room was when the simulation occurred. Also, in line with Veil’s (2010) research, the majority of the participants in our study described the activity as providing a close to real life experience although some stated that because it was staged, it was not possible to make an accurate comparison with the realities of a media conference. Overall, this study supported the findings by Veil (2010) and Chandler and Ward (2016) in that the participants enjoyed the activity and that it had a positive influence on their engagement and learning. As reported by Chandler and Ward (2016), participants in our study

strongly indicated after the activity that the use of immersive technology had enhanced their simulation experience.

The results indicated that public relations students perceived immersive simulation to be an effective tool that supported their learning of media conferences. The responses to questions one to seven suggested that, after participating in the immersive simulation activity, public relations students felt more positively towards the use of immersive simulation as a teaching technique. Therefore, it was necessary for the participants to experience immersive simulation before they could perceive any benefits. These benefits included enhanced understanding of public relations, media conferences, public relations theory, and their assigned organization, as well as further development of their analytical and critical thinking skills. These outcomes support the use of immersive simulation as a pedagogical tool and this is confirmed by 26 of the 27 participants stating that they would recommend or strongly recommend the use of the Immersion lab as a teaching aid in future public relations classes. Nonetheless, the responses to questions eight and nine demonstrated that before the simulation, many students expected the activity to be a better and more rewarding experience and this needs further investigation. Some students ranked the effectiveness of completing the simulation in a traditional classroom higher after their experience in the immersion room. Again, these results somewhat contradict the main findings of our study and require further investigation.

While this was an experimental study, the results clearly demonstrated that the use of immersive simulation technology had a positive impact on students and supported their learning. As technology continues to evolve, it is not enough for public relations educators to rely solely on established and conventional methods to teach students. It is essential that public relations educators keep abreast of technological advances in methods of learning and teaching and how these can be used to best prepare students for the everyday challenges of professional practice (McMillan, 2016; Todd, 2009). This experiment required the authors to collaborate with others within their university with the specialised knowledge necessary to develop the digital assets for the immersive simulation to take place and to learn how to use the user-friendly interface required to operate the immersive technology. However, once the technology is learned, and the digital assets created future preparation and work-load is very minimal, because this knowledge and these assets can be used multiple times in the future deliveries of the course.

By leveraging new technologies and adopting innovative teaching approaches, public relations educators are teaching students a valuable lesson. Public relations educators must lead by example and demonstrate to students that experimenting with new technologies is an essential component of the curriculum. It is unfair to expect students to be creative and innovative if public relations educators are not modelling the same behavior through their teaching. Not every technological tool will be of value but being aware of what is available and communicating with experienced colleagues is important before adopting novel methods. The results from our study have demonstrated that immersive simulation offered an opportunity for students to engage in an activity that was closer to reality of a media conference than what could be achieved in a traditional classroom. Furthermore, investing the time and effort to innovate public relations pedagogy can reap rewards for the overall student experience and may positively impact graduate employability by providing closer to 'real world' industry experiences for students.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to explore the use of immersive simulation as a pedagogical tool for public relations education. This objective was achieved through an experiment that

involved students undertaking a public relations writing course participating in the simulation of a media conference in an immersion room. Overall, the results indicated that using immersive simulation as a pedagogical tool for public relations was received positively by the participants who not only indicated that they enjoyed the activity but also perceived the simulation as enhancing their understanding of public relations and helping the development of their critical and analytical thinking skills. However, in general, students did not rate the immersive simulation as one of their best teaching and learning experiences at university and thought that the activity would be more effective if taught in the conventional way in a tutorial room. The disparity between the positive and negative responses in this study requires further investigation.

While the results in this study were largely positive, further research is required before the benefits of using immersive simulation as an educational tool in public relations pedagogy can be accurately assessed. This study was limited by its sample size and because it explored the perceptions of students from only one course and one higher educational institution. However, in this instance, the sample size was appropriate due to the experimental nature of the study and the constraints of space and teaching capacity, as it reduced the potential of negatively impacting a larger group of students if the immersion technology could not be adequately executed. Furthermore, the study was also limited to the use of immersive simulation of one professional function of a public relations practitioner, the media conference. With consideration of the constraints of this experimental study, further research is recommended that includes an increased number of participants from more than one higher educational institution to ensure a greater representation of public relations students. Also, conducting immersive simulations for other functions of the public relations profession will help to test its versatility as a pedagogical tool for the discipline. Other immersive simulations should be conducted around scenarios involving other public relations activities such as event management, media training, public speaking, and coordinating photo opportunities. The results from this study are encouraging to public relations educators who are considering exploring the benefits of immersive simulation in the delivery of their courses. This method is especially important to provide students with an experience of the realities of the public relations profession when the opportunities for real life experiences are limited.

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