Re-framing the Use of Technology Enhanced Learning in Public Relations

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Abstract

As universities increasingly embrace technology enhanced learning (TEL) environments, students of communication and public relations face parallels in their use of technology for study and for professional practice that are not typically faced in other disciplines. This paper argues that a re-framing of the thinking about how technology is used in public relations education could have a positive impact on both the learning outcomes and the subsequent professional practice of graduates. It explores the value of viewing new communication technologies as tools to enhance learning, embracing them as ‘extensions of ourselves’ (McLuhan 1964, p. 7) and embedding this approach in teaching to model good communication practice and build learner self-determination.

Keywords: technology enhanced learning, public relations, education, self-determination
Introduction

The increasing use of technology for communication is changing the landscape for professional communicators as well as educators and students. Both the learning environment and the professional environment are faced with challenges in adopting new ways of delivering information and engaging with others, however there are also significant opportunities created by these new technologies. In the education field, there has been a growth in the concept of technology enhanced learning (TEL) across many disciplines, particularly through the implementation of Learning Management Systems. Defining TEL can be contentious and the use of the term itself attracts some valid criticism (see for example Bayne, 2014; Kirkwood & Price, 2013). However, in the absence of an otherwise all-embracing term, it is being used in this paper, as others have done, to describe the leveraging and application of information and communication technologies (ICT), (University of Texas, 2004; Price & Kirkwood, 2010) or the use of technology-based systems (Wang & Hannafin, 2005) to improve teaching and learning outcomes. While it could also be argued that technologies have been informing teaching and learning for centuries, it is the increasing focus on emerging ICT tools that is underpinning current notions of TEL in many disciplines. This paper acknowledges these debates, but focuses on one of the aims of using these technologies in TEL, which is to increase engagement in the learning process, particularly in an online environment. In doing so, it highlights a specific relevance for public relations students because, as future communication professionals, they will be required to use similar technologies to engage the stakeholders of their organisations. Yet there has been little discussion of this relationship, and TEL environments more generically, within the public relations education literature.

Simultaneously, research into the use of social media technologies in public relations practice is revealing a lack of engagement in, or effective use of new media platforms. In 2008, Eyrich, Padman and Sweetser’s research revealed a slower uptake by public relations professionals of more advanced technological tools that communicate to discreet audiences (2008, p. 414) and Wright and Hinson found a significant gap between public relations practitioners’ actual level of professional social media engagement and the extent to which they should be engaged with it (Wright & Hinson, 2009, p. 25). More recent research indicates that communication technologies are perceived simply as ‘just another channel’ through which to communicate with stakeholders (Macnamara, 2010a, p. 33) and highlights how practitioners are using these tools for one-way transmission of information (DiStaso & McCorkindale, 2012; Macnamara, 2010a; Macnamara, 2010b). Kent also views the communication professionals’ use of new technology as being relatively limited and argues a case for ‘thinking
about our technological spaces dialogically’ (Kent 2013, p. 342), although Aragón and Domingo (2014) present a further report of practitioners’ perceptions of the challenges in doing so.

These research findings suggest a need for future professionals to be more open and better equipped to handle the new communication environment and to be better educated in the role and use of communication technologies. This presents an additional rationale for public relations educators, beyond those presented by universities, for implementing TEL. A learning environment that embraces TEL can provide more flexibility for all students, but it could also prepare and familiarise future public relations professionals with increased knowledge and skills in the use of technology enhanced communication. Greater engagement between fellow students and lecturers in this way could equip students with the skills for greater engagement between organisations and their publics in a professional communication context. There are two core issues at stake here; a need to integrate the use of the communication technologies for the delivery of teaching and learning into the content of the course, and a need to understand the motivation of students in order to use the technologies to their maximum impact. This paper initially explores the first of these issues through the lens of McLuhan’s theory of media and the second issue through self-determination theory.

**Challenges in engaging students**

While developments in technology are constantly being embraced by educators in an attempt to increase the flexibility in the way education is delivered, there remains a lack of student engagement with the new tools, which is potentially limiting their effectiveness. Research into student perceptions, satisfaction and engagement with these modes of learning has not been significant in public relations education, however findings in other disciplines remain valid (Palmer & Holt, 2009; Pedro, 2010). A review of research completed in 2010 identified some student reluctance to embrace technology in a learning environment (Pedro, 2010, p. 111). Appreciation for technology that made students’ study more convenient or productive was demonstrated, though preferences for face-to-face teaching were still strong with few students recognising opportunities for technology to enhance their learning. Kennedy, Judd, Churchward, Gray & Krause’s (2008) research identified a link between student use of technology outside the classroom and a preference for it to be used at University, yet the researchers emphasised that ‘the transfer from a social or entertainment technology…to a learning technology is neither automatic nor guaranteed’ (p. 119). At the same time, expectations that the latest generations of students are ‘digital natives’ who can easily transfer their personal skills in using communication technologies into a learning environment are being
challenged (Helpser & Eynon, 2010; Kennedy et al, 2008; Pedro, 2010; Wood & Bilsborow, 2010).

Potential reasons for the lack of student engagement include incorrect assumptions about their competency and confidence in the use of technology, discomfort with non-traditional learning environments and the tendency for course websites to be perceived purely as a means of organising and delivering information, equated with old models of distance learning where information was mailed to students. Some of these assumptions may be held by teaching staff who are being encouraged to move into the new online teaching environment, sometimes before a good understanding of the different teaching philosophies can be developed. The challenge for educators in this transition is to maintain the student engagement that is achieved through face-to-face teaching. To an extent, this could be done through the use of technologies such as recorded lectures, discussion forums, chat rooms and virtual classrooms. However, two interrelated elements are crucial to the success of the use of these tools: the relevant application of the tools and student motivation to engage.

The delivery is the content

While many studies have considered either the use of TEL or the use of new technology in professional communication practice, the transference of skills and knowledge between the learning and professional environments has not been given much consideration within the literature. One way of addressing this transference is to draw parallels between the use of technology for study with the use of technology for professional purposes. For example, if TEL tools are used to aid learning by facilitating the exchange of two-way communication it can be argued that these technologies are used with the same functionality as those used by communication professionals to reach and engage with their many stakeholders. To elaborate, discussion forums are increasingly used in both learning environments and issues management. Similarly, student wikis, chat rooms and virtual classrooms mirror online collaboration tools in public relations practice, and recorded lectures reflect webinars, which are increasingly common in the communication industry.

In both learning and professional environments, the technology is often seen as the medium or channel for the delivery of information and its potential for facilitating engagement is often overlooked. If the tools of TEL are used merely as channels to pass information, yet the content of public relations courses is about the strategic value of using engagement to change attitudes and behaviours, and ultimately society, then there is an incongruity. For the student of public relations, familiarity with the full
capacity of the communication technologies or platforms can add value to the learning thereby becoming part of the content of the course.

In this situation, the delivery becomes the content. Just as McLuhan argued that the medium ‘shapes and controls the scale and form of human association and action’ (1964, p. 9), the delivery of these online courses could also influence how future communication professionals will approach their thinking and practice in using technology to deliver communication outcomes for organisations. To McLuhan, the medium is an ‘extension of ourselves’ (1964, p. 7) and the introduction of any new technology (as another medium) has personal and societal impacts.

Before the acceptance of the ‘medium is the message’, McLuhan claims that the message was seen as simply the ‘content’ (McLuhan, 1964, p. 13). In that context, the traditional content of the courses being delivered through these new TEL tools could be equated to this earlier idea of ‘message’. However, McLuhan observed the content as another medium in itself, also carrying further messages and this, to an extent, describes the blurring of content and delivery in terms of their combined and constant impact on changes in society. In the education environment, this idea highlights the importance of teaching students to be future professionals who are ready for the present and who can also adapt to the future needs of communication between organisations and other elements of society. If students are reluctant to engage with TEL, then their understanding of how similar platforms could be used to promote a product, to speak with employees, to collaborate with the community or to engage with other important stakeholders will be limited to the theoretical concepts they are taught or their ability to envisage any personal use of the technology within a professional context.

The move to online delivery of the program is therefore no longer just about flexible study but can focus on creating a deeper learning. This presents an opportunity for online educators to take a different approach to the design and structure of online courses by improving the integration of technology to enhance learning, knowledge and skills. This is not to say that public relations educators have not understood the implications of technological developments on both teaching and practice, however the pressures of time, resources and workloads can also impact educators’ abilities to fully consider, develop and implement approaches to teaching in TEL environments. In addition, educators often have little influence over the design and choice of tools offered by the university systems. Reframing the delivery of public relations education as the content of that education may serve as a useful cue or reminder and provide another approach to the design of courses within these limitations. In doing so, this has the potential to influence and change the way students interact with communication
technology within and outside the learning environment, and their attitudes towards its use. For the public relations student in particular, familiarity of communication platforms adds value to the learning, and in a sense, becomes part of the content of the course. If online educators overlook or fail to promote the connection between technology for learning and technology for practice, students may not fully understand its relevance to their future professional practice.

**Engaging the extrinsically motivated student**

Even without a proactive integration into the course content, the tools within the TEL environment can still provide a useful learning experience for the public relations student who engages, albeit one that may go unrecognised. The disengaged student though, is missing that altogether. Some of the reasons for not embracing the tools may have to do with convenience or confidence, and these can typically be addressed through easier access and greater support for the student. However motivational factors are also likely to be a contributor and need to be understood to be addressed. Self-determination theory (SDT) offers one theoretical framework in which to explore these motivational factors further.

Self-determination theory categorises human motivation into three groups (Hartnett, George & Dron, 2011, p. 3). First, amotivation is applied to those who are deficient in motivation because they feel incompetent. Second, extrinsic motivation is aligned with learners who are motivated or incentivised by external factors, such as high grades, increased employment opportunities, or simply a path of least resistance in completing the program of study. Third, intrinsic motivation is assigned to people with a sense of achievement and fulfilment from the learning process itself. The intrinsically motivated student does not need to be made aware of the connection between the TEL tools and the professional skills as they will engage with them regardless. In contrast the extrinsically motivated student will be looking for the external factors to indicate a reason to be motivated to engage.

Literature that draws on SDT to explain levels of motivation in online learning environments has mostly focused on intrinsic motivation (Hartnett et al, 2011, p. 5) and on identifying the behaviour traits of these more interested and engaged learners. In contrast, amotivation and extrinsic motivation do not seem to have been widely researched (Harnett et al, 2011). Students who need little encouragement to interact online with teaching staff and fellow students are more likely to be intrinsically motivated. There is a need though, to understand how TEL tools could support those who are amotivated or extrinsically motivated to become more self-determined learners, and the extent to which this might positively
impact on learner outcomes. To a large extent, amotivation can be addressed by assisting students to become more competent with the TEL tools by providing clear guidance, instruction and help in their use. However, identifying the previously unstated connection between the TEL delivery and the public relations content of the course could potentially address some of the needs of extrinsically motivated students.

For example, online activities are often made a part of the assessment, compelling the extrinsically motivated student to undertake the task in order to pass the course. Within SDT, this is a form of ‘external regulation’ (Deci & Ryan 1985; Deci, Vallerand, Pelletier, & Ryan, 1991) which can inhibit the students’ ownership of the learning process. Hartnett et al's (2011) research indicated that extrinsically motivated learners will be conscious of the value (or utility) of undertaking an online task when they perceive it to be of personal importance to them, creating a greater degree of self-directed learning. Self-determination theory labels this process 'identified regulation' (Deci & Ryan 1985; Deci et al, 1991), as students who are extrinsically motivated in this way apply this personal value in identifying with the regulations of a task, increasing their sense of autonomy in relation to that task.

To move to an even greater level of autonomy in learning, students who demonstrate 'integrated regulation' identify with the regulations of a task but they internalise these regulations to such an extent that they become integrated into a person’s sense of self; they choose to accept the regulations as part of their identity (Deci et al, 1991). As such, integrated regulation offers the most autonomy for extrinsic learners because of a deeper connection with the task and a greater awareness of choice in their actions. Choice is not just synonymous with self-determination and a sense of autonomy but can be seen in what other researchers have discussed about self-regulated learning (McLoughlin & Lee, 2010; Sansone, Fraughton, Zachary, Butner & Heiner, 2011), self-directed study (Bartolome & Steffens, 2011; Simmering & Posey, 2009), and learners’ levels of ownership (Casim & Young, 2013).

The idea of students having ownership of their learning derives from Milner-Bolotin’s model of ownership (2001), which measures the amount of personal value, control and individual responsibility a learner associates with their study. This is not dissimilar to Keller’s research that investigated strategies for stimulating motivation based on varying levels of challenge, confidence and control (1987, cited in Jones & Isroff, 2005). Keller’s work and that of Milner-Bolotin’s, are both reflective of SDT’s framework for extrinsic motivation, in that online learners who succeed in integrating the external regulations of things like exams, assignment deadlines, e-forums or online course materials, are able to assign meaning and value to these
tasks. This in turn, increases their sense of autonomy, empowering them to move from external regulation, to identified and integrated regulation.

The idea of choice is also central to Lee and McLoughlin’s argument for recognition of ‘the central role of the user or learner in determining the possibilities and uses of the technologies available’ (Lee & McLoughlin, 2008, p. 1). For the student who is extrinsically motivated, the connection between technology use in both learning and professional environments is particularly crucial. Enabling a sense of self-regulated learning in these students requires a move away from the linear delivery of online content towards student-driven use of technology. If the technologies are seen as integral to the content of the course and students are able to implement a more autonomous approach to learning, there is an opportunity for educators to increase student engagement with the technology enhanced learning environment. But they need to be guided towards their adoption of the autonomous learning. Ultimately, it is the responsibility of educators to help these extrinsically motivated students to make informed choices.

**Building self-determination in public relations students**

Online educators can help build learners’ levels of self-determination by offering technologies that help to increase autonomy in order to achieve greater learning outcomes. This may help transition students along the continuum of self-determination (Chen et al, 2010) from a position which inhibits a sense of autonomy (external regulation) to one where there is a synthesis between what are they are learning and their sense of self (integrated regulation).

The main challenge for educators therefore is to identify, provide, and use TEL tools in a manner that meets the needs of this diverse group of extrinsically motivated students. Yet current online practices often use one-way communication – pushing out content and expecting students to engage with it. The extent to which this is done within public relations education more specifically is unknown at this point in time, however educators are often encouraged to use learning management systems (such as Moodle and Blackboard) that can restrain the design of a course, or they only have the time and resources to implement a basic version of the tool. McLoughlin & Lee (2010) criticise the linear delivery of online content of courses that rely on rigid content management systems to communicate, and emphasise how this can impact on learner autonomy and self-regulated learning. Instead, the authors highlight how Web 2.0 tools can ‘shift control to the learner’ (McLoughlin & Lee, 2010, p. 28), reinforcing the central focus of self-determination theory in enhancing learner autonomy.
These considerations are particularly significant for students studying communication subjects in an online environment as the added value of learning through new communication tools comes from the augmentation of their professional portfolio through building their relatedness to and competence in communication technologies – an essential skill requirement for any public relations or communication practitioner. Online educators need to continue identifying and providing opportunities for students to build autonomous relationships with TEL tools – to see them as an extension of themselves (McLuhan 1964, p. 7) – which they can then transfer into a professional context. By adapting the delivery of course content based on motivational factors, educators can help students align with identified and integrated regulations of the task. This can be done by acknowledging and reinforcing how their motivation is based on the utility of passing a course whilst emphasising the added value that higher levels of technological literacy can bring to their professional career.

Milner-Bolotin (2001) supports this by identifying some strategies for increasing ownership of learning and student autonomy, particularly in relation to value, control and responsibility. One way of increasing value is to highlight the relevance and parallels of technology use in learning and professional practice. In relation to increased student control of their own learning, Milner-Bolotin recognises that linear, designer-driven content needs to be replaced by user-driven sequencing. Just as public relations professionals recognise the value of user-generated content and engagement, educators need to design navigational tools that allow learners to control or take ownership of the sequence of the learning process. She argues that this can be done through allowing optimal pacing and bookmarking for easier referencing on the student’s own terms. Individual responsibility can also be increased by allowing self-goal setting and providing opportunities for self-evaluation, which further reinforces a sense of autonomous or self-determined learning (Milner-Bolotin, 2001). There is much scope to offer students more choice and, in doing so, increase their level of self-determination. One way of doing this is to collect more information about their extrinsic motivational factors and the value or utility they attach to the task of online learning by asking specific questions about their competence and their relatedness to technologies in multiple environments. Including some form of research to assess levels of motivation to learning and attitudes to the use of technology at the beginning of the course, will provide students with an opportunity for reflection on their personal learning styles and their technological capabilities. Simultaneously, educators could use the research outcomes to develop delivery methods aimed at better meeting the needs of extrinsically motivated students and to engage students in a discussion about the
transference of technology skills between personal, professional and study environments.

By applying McLuhan’s approach to media and self-determination theory as discussed above, additional strategies to support the autonomy of public relations students in a TEL environment could be employed. For example, in addressing the value proposition, a student induction to online learning could highlight the links between the TEL tools and their relationship with professional practice. A change in the taxonomy of the tools could also be introduced to better align with a professional environment rather than a learning environment. For example, virtual classrooms could become online meetings and lectures repurposed as podcasts. In terms of control, there needs to be a clear scaffolding of learning material but students should be encouraged to explore this at their own pace. Guidance can be given regarding timeframes to allow them to keep track with the learning required for each assignment task and equated with the need to meet deadlines in public relations practice. At the postgraduate level in particular, students could be given wider choices in their readings and support in sourcing their own credible, reliable and relevant material, learning research skills that will be valuable in their work in the profession. All of these changes are currently being implemented and trialled in post-graduate public relations courses developed at the University of South Australia and evaluated through research that is exploring an evidenced-based approach to the design and redevelopment of technology enhanced learning environments.

Discussion and conclusion

While some educators may feel as though the introduction of TEL has been somewhat radical, the transition has at times been relatively subtle in terms of a general movement of traditional teaching styles into the online space. To a certain extent the medium has been invisible. In discussing McLuhan’s position, Federman argues that instead of understanding the medium, people ‘tend to focus on the obvious … [missing] the structural changes in our affairs that are introduced subtly, or over long periods of time’ (Federman, 2004, p. 1). Educators form some assumptions about what TEL can do for them immediately, such as providing flexibility in time and space within learning. And they make initial judgements as to its advantages and disadvantages, often based on statistics gathered at the end of the course. McLuhan’s notion of the medium and the message however spurs us to look more deeply and to think of the effects we may see if we were to reflect back on it in the future. The value that is added to the skills and knowledge of the professional communicator through the use of TEL tools is perhaps one of those largely unseen effects. Technology enhanced learning indicates that technologies are there to ‘enhance’ learning, so they
need to be considered as more than just a set of tools for delivering information or course content. The technology use should not be seen as a distinct function in delivering learning, but as a part of the learning as well and as an aid to extrinsically motivated students in particular.

For educators, the delivery and content can be considered as one and the same when teaching communication students. In this context, content transcends the topics being taught, and draws attention to how the student changes in his or her interaction with the world, just as McLuhan’s ‘message’ is about changing attitudes and behaviours in society. Online public relations educators have an opportunity to change the thinking and practice regarding technology use to impact on both learning and business outcomes. This, in turn, may change the way a student engages in online activities, developing greater motivation and potentially having a positive impact on the way they operate as a public relations professional in the future.

In Milner-Bolotin’s (2001) terms, educators could highlight the value of learning in an online environment by clearly demonstrating to extrinsically motivated students the alignment between study and practice, and by promoting the view that the delivery is the content. Students are gaining more control over their studies but educators could encourage this further by talking more openly about it in terms of building autonomy and taking ownership of their learning. Essentially, TEL can and perhaps should be used as a pull strategy in learning. That is, rather than pushing information out to students, the technologies can be used by students to take more control of their learning, ‘pull’ down the information and engage with the content in their own way. The continuing challenge for educators is to make them realise they are in control of how and when they interact and that there are worthwhile consequences from that participation. This needs to be done in a positive way that inspires them to be pro-active and self-regulatory, rather than being evasive and disengaged. The benefits or disadvantages to students engaging with TEL tools needs to be highlighted in terms that the extrinsically motivated students will value. Assisting students to identify the personal value in TEL may increase their autonomy and enable them to accept individual responsibility for their learning.

By assessing the engagement and motivation of students in learning and professional environments in tandem, educators can identify how the tools used for learning could help develop more confident users of technology in professional practice. But it has to be more than knowing how to use technology; rather the focus should be on why it is used and the potential outcomes of engagement with such technologies. As Price and Kirkwood argue, educators need to ‘actively examine [their] assumptions, seek robust evidence as to effectiveness, and [be] prepared to change
when the evidence indicates this need’ (2010, p. 780). Online educators of public relations students have the opportunity to reframe the use of the technology platforms as integral to the content of the course for both themselves as designers of online courses, but also for students. At the same time linear and rigid approaches to learning can be relaxed in order to provide increased opportunities for students to build an autonomous relationship with their study. The theoretical notions discussed in this paper have informed and inspired changes in the delivery of online education in one institution. However, more evidence-based research is required in public relations education to fully understand the impact and further opportunities for the use of TEL. As a start point, in reframing the thinking behind TEL, benefits could potentially be realised in both the education and practice of public relations.
References


