

Scholarship of Teaching and Learning

A Different Kind of [Text]Book: Using Fiction in the Classroom

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Based on extant pedagogical and research applications of fiction to communication studies, this essay argues that fiction not only engages students and entices them to read, but also builds critical thinking and writing skills. The author used Carl Hiaasen's Native Tongue and Christopher Buckley's Thank You for Smoking as "texts" in an upper-division public relations class to enhance student learning outcomes. Student journals, class discussion, and final exam essays all indicated that the novels helped students reflect deeply on certain ethical issues in public relations and to think critically about course content. The essay includes suggestions for using this "novel" approach to textbooks.

Keywords: public relations education; fiction in professional training; student journals; ethics in education

Although numerous textbooks are available for most introductory communication courses, upper-division classes can pose challenges when it comes to textbook selection. Available texts are often expensive and not necessarily congruent with course content. To instructors seeking an unconventional solution to this problem, I offer this suggestion: use a different kind of [text]book—a novel.

Relevant novels provide students with different perspectives than the usual "how

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to" approaches that often prevail in preprofessional classes in particular. Novels also serve to contextualize communication strategies and provide learning opportunities for students by engaging them in critical thinking and writing. Although communication educators have suggested simulations, factual case studies, and "clients" as touchstones for discussion or writing (e.g., Bean, 1996; King, 2001; Newsom, 1996), few include the *fictional* case study as an option for provoking student critical engagement. Fiction can be used in varied courses; this essay, however, focuses specifically on the impact of novels on student learning in an upper-division public relations class. I sought to answer this fundamental question: Can novels prompt students to practice critical thinking and writing about course content in such a class?

Fiction on film has long been a mainstay of the communication classroom, especially in interpersonal communication classes (Proctor & Adler, 1991). In contrast to the popular use of film, the short shrift given novels as instructional tools is understandable. Novels are more difficult to excerpt meaningfully. An entire novel generally requires more time to read than the 90–120 minutes necessary to watch most feature films. Novels are less visually appealing and may be less appealing to reading-avoidant students. Novels may contain information and plot lines extraneous to the course.

In her influential theory of literary response, Louise Rosenblatt (1994) observed that reading fiction typically evokes an "afferent" process; students put much of themselves into their reading of novels. In contrast, reading instructional nonfiction is often mainly "efferent"; students passively process information without much active engagement. Novels, therefore, provide a different reading experience than do typical textbooks, a reading experience that can lead to thoughtful writing assignments, valuable class discussion, and most significantly, student critical engagement with higher-order questions regarding (among other things) issues of professionalism and ethics. A national survey of public relations practitioners found that the new hire traits most desired by employers but least in evidence among recent graduates are (1) critical thinking and problem solving and (2) writing skills (Neff, Walker, Smith, & Creedon, 1999). If integrating novels into public relations education can provide opportunities for students to develop both, then they are much worth using.

Fiction has been used both in researching and teaching communication studies. Pacanowsky (1988) offered fiction as a tool for researchers to use in reporting because of its vividness: "Fictional descriptions, by the very nature of their implicitness and impressionism, can fully capture ... both the bold outlines and the crucial nuances of cultural ethos" (p. 454). Nudd (1991) used Katherine Anne Porter's short story "Rope" to help students identify their own androcentric reading strategies; fiction was a pedagogical route to introspection about sexist bias. Following these scholars, I discovered that fictional accounts of public relations practitioners provided rich, situated texts that helped students evaluate PR stereotypes, encounter ethical dilemmas in context, and learn to be more critical producers and consumers of PR messages.

Creative Works as Pedagogical Tools in Public Relations

This essay examines a case in which novels were enlisted as pedagogical tools to teach an advanced public relations class. Using creative works as teaching tools in PR is not new; several scholars have identified specific movies for this use (e.g., Lee, 2001; Tavcar, 1993; Ziaukas, 1998). Miller (1999) is the only PR scholar to suggest both film and novels as instructionally significant but does not provide details about how such resources might be applied. This essay provides such details, along with analysis of how novels contribute to student learning.

Novels meet a need in PR education because of dissatisfaction with the available range of conventional textbooks and especially those texts' treatment of ethics (Coombs & Rybacki, 1999; Toth, 1999; Worley, 2001). Novels featuring ethical dilemmas provide new ways of addressing this crucial topic by considering different ways of approaching challenging situations through the vehicle of a fictional character.

In addition to addressing PR ethics, some of the other gaps that have been identified in PR education can also be bridged with fiction. Besides providing alternatives to actual or class-created "clients," fiction also answers Newsom's (1996) critique that PR "textbook" cases are too often neat and successful, many even award-winning. Newsom observed that these rosy visions of public relations tend to omit failures and the frequently messy internal processes that led to decisions in reality. In carefully selected novels, however, PR is not always neat or successful, and messy internal processes may be played out in very illuminating ways (Miller, 1999).

The PR Novels

For one semester, two upper-division sections of the required course "Problems in Public Relations" (a combination writing and campaigns class) used two novels as "textbooks": Christopher Buckley's (1994) *Thank You for Smoking (TYFS)* and Carl Hiaasen's (1991) *Native Tongue (NT)*. No other textbook was used in this class. Both novels feature PR practitioners as main characters (and supporting characters), and both are written by professional journalists. After summarizing the novels, I will explain the reading schedule and assignments that aimed to increase critical engagement of PR in both discussion and student writing.

Buckley (1994) tells the story of Nick Naylor, chief spokesman for the Academy of Tobacco Studies (his friends are PR professionals in alcohol and firearms organizations). Though Nick's PR job includes a lot of intrigue PR undergraduates are unlikely to encounter, it also forces Nick to grapple with a variety of ethical questions, meet with various publics (e.g., smokers' rights groups, antismoking groups, other people in the tobacco industry, legislators), conduct strategic media relations (e.g., interviews for print media, broadcast media appearances on *Oprah*, *Larry King Live*, and *Today*), work with product placement, and produce public relations advertising. Nick's story provides insight into PR tasks involving strategy sessions, prioritizing publics, and tailoring messages to meet those publics' needs.

Hiaasen (1991) features Joe Winder, a former reporter and Disney PR employee who has hit rock bottom and ended up working an entry-level PR writing job at the Amazing Kingdom of Thrills in South Florida. Unlike *TYFS*, where PR professionals retain a patina of respectability (although Nick constantly rationalizes away the consequences of his work), *NT* presents PR at the Amazing Kingdom of Thrills as something mercenary and without honor. As a raccoon-costumed park employee tells Joe early in the book, "My job's crummy, but you know what? I think your job is worse" (p. 28).

Both of these novels are entertaining. They contain humor, suspense, and surprising denouements. They both deal with crisis management and have a moral—it's better to be ethical and lose your job than to make money but be ashamed of what you do. Protagonists in both novels struggle with this moral but ultimately make good choices.

The novels' pedagogical strengths complemented each other. Both address ethics, and the strength of *TYFS* is its attention to detail on PR strategy and media relations. The strength of *NT*, on the other hand, is its emphasis on PR writing and special events. It explores in detail the writing and revision of Joe's press releases, and there are actually seven press releases included in the story.

Reading Schedule

The reading schedule reflects the fact that the novels were only one component of the course. Student-led groups were central to this PR course, proposing, executing, and evaluating PR campaigns for local nonprofit clients during the semester. In addition, most class meetings included some lecture and exercises dealing with PR writing and campaigns. The novels supplemented these other aspects of the course. Consequently, there were only four reading deadlines, two for each book. Students responded well to this loose reading arrangement—most of them were prepared on time, and they seemed to prefer this sort of schedule to a schedule that would require two or three chapters per class meeting.

Student Responses

The novels were not employed as the basis for any major assignments. Instead, smaller assignments were spaced throughout the semester to promote critical thinking and writing, that is, "posing questions, proposing hypotheses, gathering and analyzing data, and making arguments" (Bean, 1996, p. 1). In exploring whether or not novels could prompt critical engagement, I looked for student comments that illustrated some of the components of Bean's definition. How did students go beyond plot summaries to pose critical questions and make arguments about the ethical and effective practice of PR? The novels' impact on learning was assessed via three different integrated activities: guided journals, discussion of critical concepts, and exam questions.

Guided Journal Questions

In guided journals, "students respond to content-specific questions developed by the instructor" (Bean, 1996, p. 107). Two of the guided journal questions, along with a sampling of students' responses, illustrate how novels helped students think critically about PR.

To the journal prompt, "Describe Nick Naylor's media relations philosophy," student Carla found that Nick "assertively approached the media," was "quick to speak," kept in shape to look "attractive on television," was "ready to debate anyone," and had "the uncanny ability at turning things around in his favor." Bridget summed it up this way: "He had to work to make himself look like the good guy. ... He took every interview. ... He never says, 'No comment.'" Sarah wrote that Nick "seemed to like broadcast media better than print media because of the immediacy of it and because he was able to be seen and not just quoted." "Nick takes every opportunity to assert a protobacco mindset," wrote Melanie. That mindset, she wrote, stressed that "tobacco is a victim."

To the question, "What did you learn about writing press releases?" several students made the critical observation that good press releases result from thinking like a journalist. Hope learned "to have all the facts. Joe did a really good job researching his info, getting credible quotes, and telling the story." Bridget observed, "You have to have a certain flare [sic] to your writing so a paper will want to pick up your story. You want to keep the writing simple and keep to the facts."

Classroom Discussion

By offering specific questions for students to respond to in journals, students had the opportunity to organize and record their thoughts about a particular question ahead of time. Students could be called upon spontaneously, and yet were still usually prepared to answer. Discussions that followed guided journal writing tended to be lively and sparked voluntary participation from about half the students. Discussion was not limited, however, to the guided journal questions or times allotted for the books. Additional issues arising from the novels kept being raised by students and me throughout the semester.

Final Exam Questions

Two questions (20%) on the final exam addressed the novels' PR stereotypes and PR ethics. One of these asked students to compare the ethical stature of the two protagonists. Some students, such as Brian, found Joe less objectionable ethically but took issue with calling any of the books' characters "ethical": "Both men manipulated the media, both deceived, and both behaved unethically, but Nick's deception was at a different level in consequence if not in spirit." Those who did choose one character over the other were split about the ethics of Nick and Joe. Kelly praised Joe's introspection, saying that Joe "always found himself questioning whether his

work was ethical." Jay thought Joe displayed balance: "Joe was the type of character who felt some kind of loyalty to his organization and wanted to do his job. However, he also felt loyal to the public and didn't want to deceive them."

Students such as Hope defined ethics in terms of advocacy on behalf of one's employer. She argued, "Nick was most ethical because of his passion and advocacy to the tobacco industry." Ken defended Nick's actual PR tactics in spite of his disapproval of Nick's job—"Even though you and I might think that what he is promoting is unethical, the way that he is pursuing it is ethical...."

Evaluating Learning Outcomes

The greatest benefit of incorporating fiction into PR instruction, well illustrated in some of the preceding exam answers, was the engagement it encouraged students to have with real PR issues such as critical thinking, ethical dilemmas, and strategic writing. Students read the books closely and were able to apply their PR knowledge to the fictional situations to make critical judgments and support claims about what they read. Instead of talking generally about "spin" or ethical standards, class discussions could deal with concrete instances of those PR issues.

Another benefit of this "novel" approach is that it responds to student complaints about the dry nature of many textbooks. Students had two different opportunities to express opinions about the novels—in their journals (with their names attached) and on student evaluation forms (anonymously).

Some pointed criticisms notwithstanding, the majority of students found the novels both interesting and helpful in achieving class objectives. Kelly wrote, "I found myself wrapped up in the reading—I guess a plausible explanation could be that anything beats an ordinary textbook." Bridget added, "I really like the idea of learning from a novel with a great story." Barbara said, "I loved [NT]. I found it to be extremely funny. If working in PR is half as interesting I will be in for a fun ride." Kevin thought *TYFS* was more entertaining, but he found *NT* to be more useful for PR writing. More important, he said the books had him reconsidering his career options—rather than looking for a university-related job, he might consider corporate PR after all. Ellen believed that *TYFS* made her a more critical consumer of PR messages, and she found the book "much more interesting and more applicable than a regular textbook."

Kelsey found the PR challenges of *TYFS* appealing, writing, "It has changed my life in a way that none of the other things I have done in any of my PR classes have. ... After reading this, I have become extremely interested in media relations and I feel that I would be good at it. ... I never would have really considered it without reading this book."

All comments about the novels on *anonymous* student evaluation forms were positive. Although coincidence or halo effect cannot be discounted, it is noteworthy that my numerical end-of-term student evaluations were the highest they have ever been for this course.

Conclusion

Certainly, this experiment in using novels in communication class is limited in important ways. I report only one semester's implementation in just two classes, though I have since continued successful use of the two novels. The classes were part of a professional track. As public relations majors, these students had presumably already developed stronger writing and speaking skills than many other undergraduates. Given these caveats, the evidence does point to the great pedagogical potential of novels in instruction of this type. They seem to promote significant student reflection and especially critical thinking and writing about important course topics. This small-scale teaching experiment highlights certain factors that may have contributed to its apparent success. First, it was necessary to prepare more thorough lectures, handouts, and reading packets than would have been the case had a traditional textbook also been adopted in this class. If fiction is used as a *supplement* to a conventional textbook, perhaps the need for this additional preparation would be negligible. Second, it is important to construct course objectives pertaining to critical assessment of communication practices. These objectives signal to students that expectations for careful reading of the novels are integral to the course and subject to examination. And of course, it is important to select lively and engaging works of fiction. In addition to the two PR novels featured in this essay, three others (though not as appropriate for my course objectives) also merit consideration: Carol Brennan's (1994) *Headhunt*, Christopher Buckley and John Tierney's (1999) *God Is My Broker*, and Michael Crichton's (1997) *Airframe*.

It is critical for instructors to appreciate that novels can serve as an excellent basis for deeper thinking, but they must be only a basis. The novels are not an end in and of themselves, and instructors must push students to take the stories they read and figure out how those might be consistent or inconsistent with communication theory, how they might apply to lived communication practices, and how they problematize important communication issues. Students must be asked and encouraged to treat the novels as touchstones for discussing course content, but not as primary course content in themselves.

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