

# **A Study in Competency-based Teaching in Public Relations Education**

Dissertation

By

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## **Declaration**

I hereby certify that this material, which I now submit for assessment on the programme of study leading to the award of the MA in Training and Education, is my own; based on my personal study and/or research, and that I have acknowledged all material and sources used in its preparation. I also certify that I have not copied in part or whole or otherwise plagiarised the work of anyone else, including other learners.

**Signed:**

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "J. O'Connell". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial 'J' and a distinct 'O'.

**Dated:** 24<sup>th</sup> April 2019

## **Abstract**

Higher education institutions worldwide are grappling with the challenges of meeting the modern learning needs of students and the ever-evolving demands of industry. Public relations is a relatively new profession and has yet to establish a framework of competencies and qualifications required to enter the profession and pedagogical standards for teaching these competencies. However, research also indicates that there are common non-academic competencies that are required by the industry and these competencies can be difficult to teach.

The purpose of this research was to explore whether the use of specific pedagogical techniques in public relations teaching could enhance the learning experience for students and assist students in developing competencies required by the public relations industry. To achieve this aim, a blended learning model was designed based on the Multimodal Model of Blended Learning and Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle. In this model, a simulation exercise was blended with other face-to-face and online pedagogical tools to teach students how to manage media communications in the event of a crisis. The core competencies that were analysed included business acumen, communications skills and critical thinking. Data was collected through qualitative and quantitative means including a Situational Judgement Test which was designed exclusively for this research by public relations professionals specifically to test for competencies that are required at an entry-level in the public relations profession.

The study found that students enjoyed the learning experience and that the pedagogical approaches used had a positive impact on the competencies analysed. The results of this research will be of benefit to the public relations industry in the setting of standards for competencies and qualifications required at entry-level into the profession. In terms of public relations education, the findings of the research will provide guidance to providers of third level education in the use of pedagogical approaches that have the potential to increase the employability of public relations students.

Further research would be required at an industry level to define the competencies and qualifications required by industry, and at an educational level to set standards in best practice in public relations pedagogy.

## **Keywords**

Public Relations Competencies, Pedagogy, Teaching, Learning, Education; Public Relations and Blended Learning; Simulations and Public Relations Education; Situational Judgement Tests and Public Relations; Blended Learning and Higher Education.

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## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

The higher education sector has been in a period of significant transition over the last two decades as a result of the evolution of technology, greater and more widespread participation in education and changing demands from industry as to the competencies required in graduates (Hunt, 2011; PWC, 2018).

In its 2018 report on the *'Workforce of the Future'*, Price Waterhouse Coopers (PWC) stated: *'We are living through a fundamental transformation in the way we work. Automation and 'thinking machines' are replacing human tasks and jobs and changing the skills that organisations are looking for in their people. These momentous changes raise huge organisational, talent and HR challenges – at a time when business leaders are already wrestling with unprecedented risks, disruption and political and societal upheaval'* (PWC, 2018, p.3).

In the same report, PWC quotes the findings of its Chief Executive Survey in which CEOs revealed that finding the skills they need was the biggest threat to their business. These skills are cited in the report as problem-solving, adaptability, collaboration, leadership, creativity and innovation (PWC, 2018).

In a survey of academic and industry leaders, the IBM Institute for Business Value, found that 71% of industry recruiters had difficulty in finding applicants with sufficient practical experience (King, 2015). The study also revealed that the skills leaders required in industry were the very skills that graduates lacked and it detailed examples of these as analysis and problem solving, collaboration and teamwork, business-context communication and flexibility, agility and adaptability.

There is no evidence of a single framework offering a definitive list of competencies that are required by the public relations industry in Ireland. However, competencies such as critical thinking and communications skills are referenced regularly as in demand by the profession (Barnes & Tallent, 2015; Flynn, 2014; Madigan, 2017). Competencies such as these however can also be difficult to teach. For example, a report from the Expert Group on Future Skills Needs' (2003, cited in Flynn, 2014, p. 4) found that *'soft-skills'* such as communications skills were of *'ever-increasing importance in the work-place'* but difficult to train.

The Higher Education Authority (HEA) in Ireland is tasked with addressing the disparity between the competencies that are in demand at industry level and those that can be taught in third level education. In its *'Strategic Plan (2018-2022)'*, the HEA highlights *'Skills and Employability'* as one of its eight goals and emphasises the importance of higher-level

education institutions working collaboratively with employers through '*work-placement, programme design, upskilling and enterprise-facing research schemes.*' It states that '*institutions will provide an entrepreneurial environment in which innovation is fostered*' (HEA, 2018, p. 15). Furthermore, Hunt proffered that higher-education providers should pay attention to '*core skills such as quantitative reasoning, critical thinking, communication skills, team-working skills and the effective use of information technology*' (Hunt, 2011, p. 35).

While industry is demanding more employable graduates, higher education institutions are grappling with larger class sizes and a more diverse student population comprising a range of ages, genders, nationalities and academic abilities. To address the increased diversity of the student population, third-level education is required to be more creative in its curricula design and in its teaching methods. Hunt stated that: '*we need new structures that better reflect the diverse learning requirements of our students, both those who enter after the Leaving Certificate and those who enter later*' (Hunt, 2011, p. 4).

To optimise the student experience, Hunt made reasonable recommendations for institutions, such as exposing students to the highest quality learning environment and resources, encouraging feedback from the students and engaging suitably qualified teachers who are trained and qualified in not only their subject area but in teaching skills also.

At an institutional level, this has resulted in providers of third-level education endeavouring to move away from the traditional didactic approach of teaching towards a more student-centred approach, involving a more interactive style of learning (Kember, 2009). At an instructional level, this has translated to curriculum design that encourages active learning and employs pedagogical techniques that can assist in the development of what Hunt refers to as the '*high-order knowledge-based skills*' (Hunt, 2011, p. 4).

It is also worth noting however that amongst all this change in teaching and learning styles, there does seem to remain a place for the traditional lecture format delivered through the means of a PowerPoint presentation. One reason that has been cited for the continued use of the traditional PowerPoint-based lecture is student preference. According to Frey and Birnbaum (2002), students have been reported as finding this format useful when studying for exams.

Blended learning is a learning approach that combines traditional and contemporary teaching and learning methods. Cost effectiveness, access, flexibility and an ability to address diverse student needs are cited amongst its benefits (Bonk and Graham, 2006). Blended learning is a term that has evolved in tandem with the evolution of technology over

the last twenty years and although it has many definitions, it is most commonly used to describe a programme or module where face-to-face and online teaching methods are combined (Partridge, Ponting and McCay, 2011).

This research set out to explore whether the use of the pedagogical practices combined together in a blended learning programme can enhance the learning experience for students of public relations and assist them in developing the competencies that are required by the public relations industry, including critical thinking skills, problem-solving skills, business acumen and communications skills (verbal, non-verbal and media communications skills).

Constructivist teaching and learning philosophy formed the foundation for the blended learning programme design for this research. The model used was designed by mapping the pedagogical objectives and approaches laid out in Picciano's Multimodal model of blended learning (Picciano, 2009) against the four modes of learning identified in Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle (Kolb, 2015).

The research used a mixed methods methodology involving a sample group of post-graduate students of public relations who participated in a programme of blended learning to receive training in the management of media relations in response to a crisis scenario. Face-to-face teaching and learning methods were combined with online techniques during the course including a Socratic discussion and a simulation exercise.

To collect the data, scenario-based multiple-choice questionnaires were specifically developed and designed in consultation with public relations professionals to examine competencies in the field of public relations. Data was also collected through observation in the simulation exercise, a reflective exercise and a focus group.

To follow is a literature review that analyses the competencies required in the public relations industry, discusses public relations education and pedagogy and explores blended learning theory, models and techniques. The methodology used and the resulting findings are then outlined and discussed in the context of the development of competencies in public relations students and the enhancement of the students' learning experience.

## **Chapter 2: Literature Review**

### **2.1 Introduction**

This Literature Review analyses peer reviewed and grey literature relating to the competencies required by the public relations industry, public relations education and pedagogy and the role that blended learning plays in higher education.

The Review examines published research on competencies that are expected in graduates and identifies competencies that are frequently referenced as required in public relations professionals. An analysis of research relating to blended learning is conducted in the context of these competencies and in relation to learning theory.

The objective of the literature review is to establish the competencies that are required in the public relations industry and to explore the most appropriate pedagogical approaches that can be blended together to assist students in developing these competencies.

The Review has been conducted by searching for key terms and phrases in academic journals, industry reports, search engines and online libraries including, Google Scholar, ResearchGate and Griffith College Dublin.

The findings of the review are grouped under: a) Competencies Required by the Public Relations Industry, b) Blended Learning and Higher Education, c) Blended Learning and Learning Theory and d) Public Relations Education and Pedagogy.

Note that the term '*Public Relations*' may also be referred to throughout the literature review as '*PR*'.

### **2.2 Competencies Required by the Public Relations Industry**

It is worth noting at the outset that throughout the literature, there is a lack of clarity between what are classified as '*skills*' and '*competencies*', with the terms often being used interchangeably. Flynn reports that '*there is a lack of strong consensus*' amongst researchers concerning the definitions of the terms '*competency*', '*skill*' and '*knowledge*' (Flynn, 2014, p. 1). Madigan states: '*a review of literature in relation to skills required for a public relations entry-level graduate was found to cover an unclear display of skills and seemed to place attributes such as problem-solving alongside writing skills*' (Madigan, 2017, p. 73).

This study agrees with Bartam's definition that explains competence as being about '*mastery in relation to specified goals or outcomes and it requires the ability to demonstrate mastery of specific job-relevant knowledge and skills*' (Bartam, 2004, p. 3).

In the PR industry, a comprehensive documentation of the competencies required by the industry can be found in the Commission of Public Relations Education's 2017 Report entitled '*Fast Forward: Foundation and Future State Educators and Practitioners.*' The Commission is an organisation comprising professionals from the public relations industry. Although, it is mainly concerned with the United States, the Commission indicates that its recommendations are for public relations educational and professional organisations worldwide. In this report, the Commission found that although employers valued knowledge at an entry level into the public relations profession, they were most concerned with the skills or competencies the entrants could demonstrate. The Report concluded that employers place writing skills as the most important '*skill*' that they require in graduates. A '*knowledge*' of ethics was identified as the most desirable knowledge and creative thinking, critical thinking and problem solving were identified as the most vital '*abilities*' for public relations professionals to have (Commission on Public Relations Education, 2018).

In Europe, the European Communication Professional Skills and Innovation Programme (2013) published a report on the competencies and role requirements of communications professionals. In this Report, the Programme identified communication skills (verbal and oral), critical thinking, problem solving, media skills and strategic thinking as competencies or skills required by the industry (ECOPSI, 2013).

In Ireland, there a lack of evidence available that outlines a national industry-wide framework for competencies required by the public relations industry. Although, the Public Relations Institute of Ireland (PRII), the organisation that represents public relations professionals in Ireland, states on its website that the '*focus across all its education programmes is on practical learning and transferrable skills*' (PRII, 2018).

Although competencies differ throughout the literature, there are several competencies that feature regularly. Based on this evidence combined with this researcher's own experience in the public relations work-place and classroom, the decision was made to concentrate on the following competencies in this study: a) Business Acumen, b) Communications Skills (verbal, non-verbal, media communications) and c) Critical Thinking Skills.

### **2.2.1 Business Acumen**

'*Business Acumen*' and related terms such as '*Strategic Thinking*' and '*Strategic Communication*' are competencies referenced frequently in the literature. '*Acumen*' is

defined as *'the ability to make good judgements and take quick decisions'* (Oxford Dictionary of English, 2010). A competency in business acumen therefore would indicate an ability to make good judgements and quick decisions that are appropriate in business.

In their article published on the Institute of Public Relations's (IPR) website and entitled *'Public Relations and Business Acumen: Closing the Gap'*, Ragas and Culp state that *'as the public relations industry evolves, the need for greater business acumen among professionals working in all levels of the field..... has never been more important.'* They add that *'to be a strategic partner to clients requires an intimate understanding of business, and how your counsel can advance organisation goals and objectives'* (Ragas and Culp, 2014).

The Global Alliance, an international organisation for public relations professional bodies analysed public relations associations around the world in terms of competency, education and accreditation. In its findings, it found *'the ability to set strategy and contribute to the strategic direction of the organisation'* as key competencies required in entry-level graduates in PR (GBOK 2014, cited in Madigan, 2017, p. 4).

### **2.2.2 Communications Skills (verbal, non-verbal, media communications)**

Communications skills are widely quoted as competencies required in the Public Relations industry. Finegold and Notabartolo stated that *'communication competency was referenced in 'every national framework surveyed'* and that *'employers viewed communication skills as a prerequisite for hiring'* (Finegold and Notabartolo, 2010, cited in Flynn, 2014, p. 4).

Alongside writing skills, communication skills are absolute requirements in senior public relations professionals, whose role is ultimately to communicate on behalf of an organisation in a written or oral manner. The 'Mexico Definition' of PR states that PR is *'the art and social science of analysing trends, predicting their consequences, counselling organisation leaders and implementing planned programmes of action which will serve both the organisation's and the public interest'* (Theaker 2016, p.5). These *'planned programmes of action'* can be translated as strategies that assist an organisation in communicating its messages with its publics through the media. In addition to general oral and written communication skills, an ability to communicate with the media is therefore a vital skill required by all public relations professionals.

### **2.2.3 Critical Thinking**

Critical Thinking is defined by the Foundation for Critical Thinking as *"...that mode of thinking — about any subject, content, or problem — in which the thinker improves the quality of his or her thinking by skillfully analysing, assessing, and reconstructing it....Critical thinking is self-directed, self-disciplined, self-monitored, and self-corrective thinking..... It*

*entails effective communication and problem-solving abilities...*” (Foundation for Critical Thinking, 2019).

Barnes and Tallent’s (2015) study focussed specifically on teaching critical thinking skills to ‘Millennials’ (people born between 1981 and 2000) in public relations classes. They referred to an ability to think critically in this research as a vital ability in public relations professionals and one that should be taught in communications courses.

In Flynn’s (2014) literature review published in *The Canadian Journal of Communications*, he identified several competencies that are referenced consistently in the literature as required by the PR professionals of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, including Information Communications Technology (ICT) competency, communications skills, collaboration and team work. Critical thinking was identified in this article as a global communications competency that is essential in the workplace of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

PR is a relatively young profession that originated only in the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century and as such it is still facing challenges relating to the establishment of an industry-wide competency framework and the setting of educational and pedagogical standards. Flynn (2014) stated that despite the evolution of the media in recent years and resulting impact on the communications fields, there has been a limited focus on the requisite competencies of communications professionals working in the industry in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

Indications are that further research is required on the present and future competencies expected by industry leaders in public relations graduates and how these competencies are taught. This research will aim to address this gap in part by analysing the blending of specific pedagogical techniques in the teaching of selected competencies.

## **2.3 Blended Learning and Higher Education**

### **2.3.1 Definition of Blended Learning**

Blended Learning first emerged as an educational concept in the nineteen nineties with the growth of the internet and online technologies. It is a learning approach that combines multiple tools, including the traditional lecture format, with more interactive and technology-based methods of teaching, such as in-class discussions and online forums.

In their literature review of blended learning, Partridge, Ponting and McCay (2011) acknowledged that there is no collective agreement on the definition of blended learning when they stated that the *‘debate about the meaning of the term is still ongoing’*. However, they did proffer some of the attempts that have been made to define blended learning as follows:

*'Blended learning can be viewed as a combination of various pedagogical approaches (e.g. constructivism, behaviourism, cognitivism),'*

or

*'Blended learning refers to the mix of different 'didactical methods (e.g. expository presentations, discovery learning, cooperative learning) and delivery formats (personal communication, publishing, broadcasting, etc.).'*

Partridge, Ponting and McCay themselves defined blended learning most succinctly as: *'A term used to describe any and all varieties of teaching where there is integration of both face-to-face and online delivery methods'* (Partridge, Ponting and McCay, 2011, p. 2, 3). Allen and Seaman (2007) postulated that a blended learning course is one where a substantial proportion of the content is delivered online. To qualify 'substantial' they stated that a blended learning module should deliver anything between 30% to 80% of its content online in order to be classed as a blended learning programme. They proffered that a blended learning course such as this *'typically uses online discussions'* and *'some face-to-face meetings'* (Allen and Seaman, 2007, p. 4).

However, the research also indicated that reaching agreement on a universal definition for blended learning may become irrelevant in due course. Partridge et al postulated that when the concept of blended learning was born in the nineteen nineties, the internet had only just begun to make inroads into the classroom. Since then, the evolution of technology has meant that online learning, which was once termed as *'e-learning'* has now become ubiquitous in the teaching and learning strategies of most third level institutions. This could mean that the term 'blended learning' could essentially become phased out as the multiple-learning tools and approaches offered by blended learning programmes, increasingly become commonplace in higher education.

Elliott Masie stated that *'we can stop using the word blended just as we can stop using the letter e in e-learning'* (Bonk and Graham, 2006, Ch2, p. 25). Masie stated that *'Great learning is blended and learning in the 2000s will always have an element of e.'* Ross and Gage supported this view when they proffered that *'in the long run, almost all courses offered in higher education will be blended'* (Bonk and Graham, 2006, Ch 11, p. 167). The tools and techniques associated with blended learning therefore are subject to change over the coming years as technologies continue to evolve and blended learning becomes more commonplace (Partridge, Ponting and McCay, 2011). PWC's observations on the significant role that technology is playing and will continue to play in the *'Workplace of the Future'* would corroborate this finding.

An example of emerging technologies that could be combined with others in the design of a blended learning programme are Virtual Reality (VR) and Augmented Reality (AR). In the NMC Horizon Report (2016), in discussing emerging technologies in teaching, it identified Virtual Reality (VR) and Augmented Reality (AR) as technological developments that could be adopted by the education sector within three years. These technologies offer learners the opportunity to immerse themselves in an experience using computer generated scenarios. The report identified a number of fields in which the technologies are already making an impact in education including the medical, military and engineering disciplines. However, at this stage, there is little evidence available on VR's and AR's educational efficacy in communications and specifically in public relations education. This could change as these technologies evolve. As Fowler (2015) states, more research is needed on pedagogies and subject areas in relation to VR and AR and its use in education.

### **2.3.2 Models of Blended Learning**

There are many reasons cited in the literature as to why blended learning models are used, for example to improve pedagogy, to offer increased access and flexibility and to increase cost-effectiveness (Bonk and Graham, 2006). Ross and Gage stated that blended learning is highly effective in *'addressing diverse student needs, expanding access to flexible learning opportunities and improving the quality of education'* (Bonk and Graham, 2006, Ch 11, p 155).

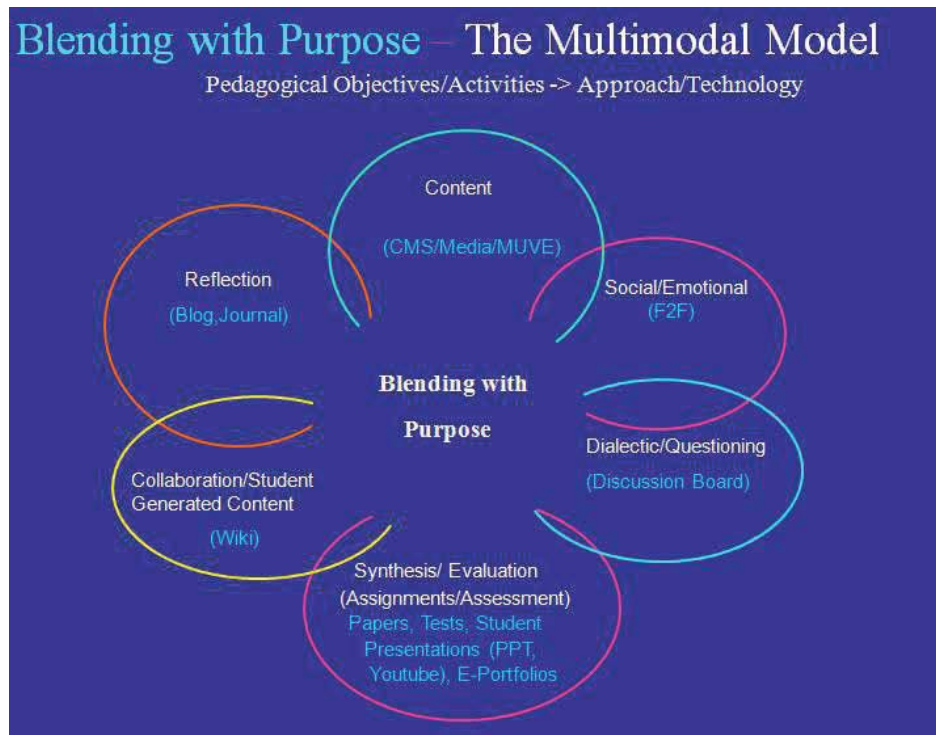
Masie proposed that instructors have been blending for thousands of years and only the tools have changed (Bonk and Graham, 2006, Ch 2, p. 23). As an example of older programmes of blended learning, Masie references lectures combined with project work, library research and assignments. Masie's suggestion is that these implements have now been replaced with more contemporary and online tools.

The Multimodal model of blended learning was proposed by Picciano (2009). This model recognises the role of blended learning in addressing the varying learning needs in a group of learners. Picciano states that this model caters for the diverse needs of a modern classroom that may include different personalities, different generations and different learning styles.

In the Multimodal model, six basic pedagogical objectives are recommended when designing a blended learning programme including content, social and emotional, dialectic/questioning, synthesis/evaluation (assignments /assessment), collaboration/student generated content and reflection. Picciano proffers teaching approaches to assist the learners and the teachers in meeting these objectives, including: Content Management Systems (CMS), Multi-User

Virtual Environments (MUVE), discussion boards, presentations, PowerPoint presentations, assessments, e-portfolios, wikis, blogs and journals. The Model is illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1 – Blending with Purpose – The Multimodal Model (Picciano, 2009)



The pedagogical approaches recommended in this model commence with content and finish with evaluation. It is important to note also that the pedagogical approaches proposed are not prescriptive. As discussed in this research, the tools appropriate for use in a blended learning model are constantly evolving in conjunction with the development of technology. Picciano also recommends that It is key when designing a blended learning module that the pedagogical objectives and technology used are driven by the academic requirements and learning outcomes of the module.

### 2.3.3 Blended Learning and Learning Theory

In designing a blended learning module, consideration should be given to learning theory. In their recommendation for best practice in blended learning programme design, Galvin and O'Neill stated that *'good blended module design should be based on good teaching and learning design principles'* (Galvin and O'Neill, 2013, p. 5). In designing such a module, they recommended that consideration should be given to: the learning needs of the group and the context of their learning; the learning tasks and desired outcomes; constructive alignment; active student learning, in particular peer-learning, self-monitoring and autonomous learning and finally, time efficiencies for students and staff.

Blended Learning is a learning approach that complements the Constructivist learning philosophy. *'Constructivism is an epistemology, or philosophical explanation about the nature of learning'* (Schunk 2012, p. 230). Constructivist theorists, such as Piaget and Vygotsky, postulate that learners construct their own knowledge from not only the content that is provided and their cognitive abilities, but also their prior experiences and their environment. Schunk therefore states that *Constructivism requires that we structure teaching and learning experiences to challenge students' thinking so that they will be able to construct new knowledge'* (Schunk 2012, p. 274). He further outlines the instructional methods of teaching and learning most effective in a Constructivist classroom as those that provide *'rich experience, much student activity, social interaction and authentic assessment.'*

Within the Constructivist learning philosophy, several teaching and learning strategies have been proposed, with one of the most influential contemporary models being Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle (Kolb, 2015). The Experiential Learning Cycle explores the concepts of grasping and transforming experience. Grasping experience is defined as the process of taking in information, and transforming experience is explained as the process of interpreting and acting on that information. Under these two distinct areas, Kolb then identified four modes of learning.

Kolb's model states that *'Grasping Experience'* incorporates the two modes of *'Concrete Experience'* and *'Abstract Conceptualisation.'* *'Concrete Experience'* involves the dissemination of information, possibly through a lecture or another means of content delivery. *'Abstract Conceptualisation'* refers to the development of the learner's own thoughts. Under the banner of *'Transforming Experience'* are *'Reflective Observation'* and *'Active Experimentation.'* *'Reflective Observation'* allows the learner to learn through reflecting on the information acquired and during the *'Active Experimentation'* phase, the learner puts the learning into practice (Figure 2).

Figure 2 – Kolb’s Experiential Learning Cycle (Kolb, 2015)

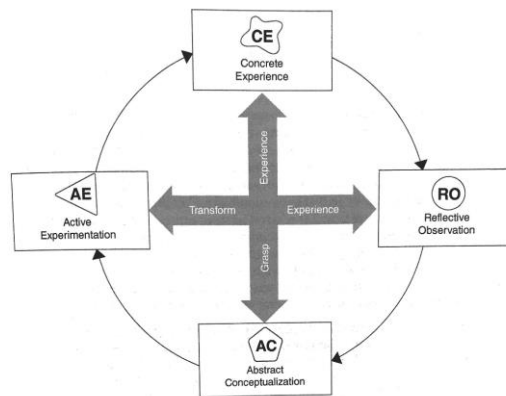
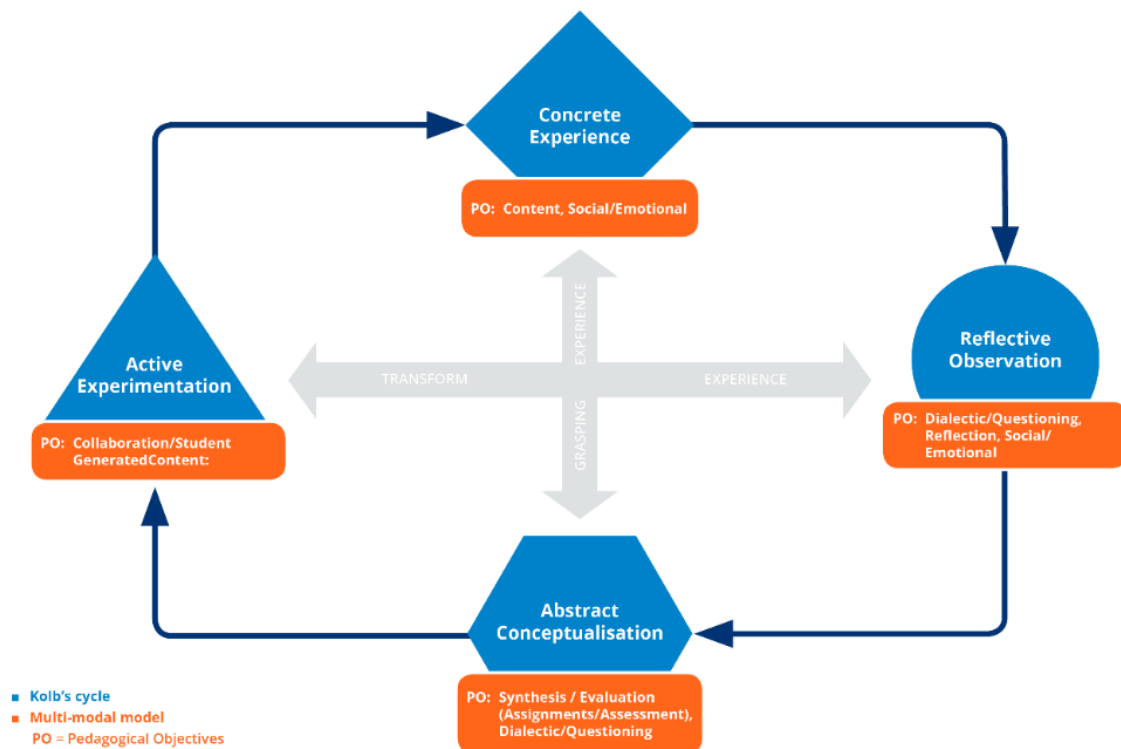


Figure 2.5 The Experiential Learning Cycle

By mapping the Multimodal Model of Blended Learning against Kolb’s Experiential Learning Cycle a model of blended learning can be designed that meets best practice recommendations in blended learning programme design (Figure 3). The methodology section of this research discusses the pedagogical objectives and learning approaches used in the adaptation of this model in a public relations classroom. (Figure 3).

Figure 3 – Multimodal Model of Blended Learning and the Experiential Learning Cycle

**Kolb’s Experiential Learning Cycle and the Multimodal Model of Blended Learning.**



## 2.4 Public Relations Education and Pedagogy

### 2.4.1 PR Education

There is a dearth of research in PR education which is becoming an issue for the profession worldwide. Flynn postulated that the lack of empirical studies on public relations education and industry is an issue that affects the sector in many countries. Referring to Canada, Flynn states that *'the lack of empirical and theoretical consideration from and within both professional associations and academia has opened the field of public relations to ambiguous interpretations and loose definitions about what it takes to practice public relations in the current Canadian context'* (Flynn, 2014, p. 2).

In her thesis which explores the role that education plays in preparing students for employment within the public relations industry in Ireland, Madigan (2017) deduced that the occupation requires no official formal qualifications or continual professional development. It is not surprising therefore that there is also an absence of a conclusive national framework for curriculum design in public relations education.

The Commission on Public Relations Education (2017) made recommendations for designing and structuring third level undergraduate public relations programmes at an international level. The report deduced that PR educational curricula should cover six essential topics including: introduction to or principles of public relations, research methods, writing, campaigns and case studies, supervised work experience or internships, and ethics. However, on performing a website review of the most prominent PR courses in Ireland, there is no reference to the findings of this report suggesting that it serves as a guide only. The majority of the topics outlined however are covered in most courses accredited by the Public Relations Institute of Ireland (PRII). For example, three of the most prominent accredited PR courses on offer are at a post-graduate level at the Dublin Institute of Technology (DIT), Dublin City University (DCU) and the Fitzwilliam Institute.

The Dublin Institute of Technology (DIT) offers a level nine course that is nationally and internationally recognised. The course is a one-year full-time programme that includes conventional lectures, project work, a dissertation, and work experience (DIT, 2019). Dublin City University (DCU) offers an MSc in Public Relations and Strategic Communications. On its website, DCU states that *'this specialist masters programme is designed to provide the skills and ability to think strategically and make effective use of the latest tools in modern communications'* (DCU, 2019). It is a one-year course consisting of eight modules, including work-placement. The Fitzwilliam Institute, a private third-level institution, offers a full-time postgraduate Diploma in Public Relations. It offers work experience and places heavy

emphasis on industry collaboration. According to a statement on its website, the course *'contains all the core and vital public relations industry key skillset'* (Fitzwilliam Institute, 2019).

In the United States, widely considered to be the birthplace of the profession of public relations, the University of Texas at Austin offers an undergraduate public relations course. On its website, it states that its programme *'rigorously prepares leaders in public relations/communications industries by providing hands-on practice and real-world experiences'*.

In common amongst these public relations programmes is the emphasis on industry collaboration and employability of students.

## **2.4.2 PR Pedagogy**

Indications are that the PR industry is unofficially requiring its professionals to have certain academic knowledge and competencies in practical areas that can be difficult to teach for using traditional or didactic methods. Present research supports the use of creative teaching methods such as the Socratic Method and simulations to provide students with an opportunity to develop competency in these required areas. These methods will be discussed to follow alongside a discussion on appropriate assessment tools in PR pedagogy.

### **2.4.2.1 Simulations**

The word simulation can have several meanings. It can be used to define the *'imitation of a situation or process'* or *'the production of a computer model of something, especially for the purpose of study'* (Oxford Dictionary of English, 2010).

An example of *'simulation as the 'production of a computer model of something'* can be seen in the previously discussed emerging technologies of VR and AR. VR allows users, through the use of a headset, to immerse themselves completely in an alternative reality. AR allows the user to bring elements of the artificial world into the real world. There is little evidence available by comparison with the STEM disciplines, cataloguing AR and VR use in the teaching of public relations to date. In his article on immersive interfaces in education, Dede (2009) states that further research is required on instructional design methods most appropriate for immersive media and the impact of these technologies on learning. Research in this area in PR education could offer insight as to whether simulation of this nature could be beneficial in teaching media communication skills and critical thinking by enabling learners to immerse themselves in computer or video generated common scenarios such as a press conference or a media event.

Although there is a greater magnitude of evidence available on the use of simulation in PR pedagogy as an *'imitation of a situation or process'* (e.g. role play) than there is of its use in technology, there is still limited evidence available as to the use of simulation as a pedagogical tool in public relations as a whole. Public relations education to date has focused its immersive activities and research on internships or work-placement, largely ignoring simulation (Sutherland and Ward, 2018). However, for courses that do not have work-placement included in their curricula or even for those that do, role-play-based simulations may offer a cost-effective and convenient alternative or complement to work-based training.

This point is evidenced in the studies of Sutherland and Ward and Veil (2010). In their Australia-based study, Sutherland and Ward conducted research on the efficacy of using immersive simulation as a pedagogical tool to provide students with practical experience of a media conference. In the study, they combined simulation tools such as role-play and immersive technology (scenes from PR scenarios were projected onto the walls). They found that students enjoyed the experience, they felt that it enhanced their learning and analytical skills and the students recommended the use of the pedagogical tools in the future.

Veil (2010), in his study in the University of Oklahoma in the United States, simulated a press conference held in response to a crisis with communications students. Role-based scenario simulations were the main simulation tool used in the study. Students reported that they found the exercise beneficial to their learning although some did report reservations on the spontaneous nature of the activity. Shellman and Turan (2006) conducted a study on the role of simulations in enhancing student learning and found that simulation assisted in the development of critical thinking skills.

#### **2.4.2.2 The Socratic Method**

Barnes and Tallent found that the Socratic method as well as certain Constructivist *'thinking tools and exercises were successful in teaching critical and creative thinking'* (Barnes and Tallent, 2015, p. 435). The study offered examples of such tools and exercises as group work, discussions, reflective writing and mind-maps in which students are encouraged to visualise information, group related items together and identify problems and solutions as a result.

The Socratic method is a style of teaching that requires discussion, questioning and analysing to assist students to think critically about a topic and to come to their own conclusions. The method draws on students' reading, writing, speaking and listening skills,

which, according to Barnes and Tallent (2015), *'should sharpen their ability to think critically and reflectively.'*

Parkinson and Ekachai (2002) examined the role that the Socratic or Case Study Method played in PR pedagogy using an approach modelled on a *'well-established'* introductory law course. In their study, they used a pre and post-test to compare results from two groups of undergraduate students taught at the same university at the same period of time. One group of students was taught using the traditional lecture format. The other group was taught using the Socratic approach. During the process the students read cases, reports or events relevant to their profession. An instructor who was familiar with the scenarios and principles for their evaluation then led the students in a discussion to assist them in discovering for themselves the principles by which the cases could be evaluated.

The study found that students who received the Socratic instruction reported more opportunities in practicing their critical thinking ability and ability to solve practical public relations problems than those who didn't receive the Socratic instruction.

#### **2.4.2.3 Assessment**

Common assessment tools used in PR education include written and practical assignments. These can be used for example to measure a student's knowledge of public relations theory and practices. To assess the non-academic competencies that the PR industry requires, more interactive tools may be required. For example, Bartam (2004) links competencies to performance and identifies work-place assessments and simulations as appropriate measurement tools, for example.

The Situational Judgement Test (SJT) has been used extensively in the medical profession to measure non-academic attributes in medical graduates (Patterson et al, 2016). Its objective is to test graduates' abilities to apply knowledge to challenging situations that they would be likely to encounter in the medical work-place. Specific competencies it can test for include reasoning, problem solving and decision making.

According to Patterson et al, an SJT comprises a hypothetical scenario (presented in written or video format) that medical graduates are likely to encounter in the workplace. Candidates are then asked to identify the appropriateness or effectiveness of various response options from a pre-defined list. Patterson et al recommend that response instructions for SJTs should fall into one or two categories: knowledge based (what is the best option? / what should you do?) and / or behaviour (what would you be most likely to do?). To ensure validity, the response options and scoring mechanism should be agreed in advance by industry experts.

There is no evidence available of the use of Situational Judgement Tests as assessment tools in public relations education. A test was therefore specifically designed for this research and will be discussed in the methodology section.

## **2.5 Conclusion**

PR is a relatively young profession having been established only in the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century. As a result, its educational systems and processes are still maturing and a national framework for competencies required by the industry and standards for teaching these competencies has yet to be identified and agreed.

Although there is no universal agreement on the competencies required in graduates by the public relations industry, several competencies are referenced regularly across the literature including critical thinking skills, communication skills (verbal, non-verbal and media communications) and business acumen. Evidence also suggests that these are competencies that are most appropriately taught for using student-centred and immersive pedagogical techniques such as Socratic discussions and simulations. However, research also indicates that students have a preference for receiving content through traditional lectures.

A blended learning module can be defined as a course that delivers anything from 30-80% of its content online with the rest delivered in person. Blended learning programmes offer teaching methods that are delivered through multiple channels, including student-centred and didactic approaches, that can communicate therefore with today's diverse student demographic. Such programmes are becoming ubiquitous in third level education and its tools are constantly evolving.

Programmes involving blended learning should be designed using teaching and learning theory as a foundation and with the academic requirements and learning outcomes of the course at their core. This methodology to follow explores the use of a blended learning programme that is uniquely designed for PR pedagogy and modelled on the Experiential Learning Cycle and the Multimodal Model of blended learning. The research seeks to establish if the use of the combined tools used in this model can contribute towards the development of competencies required in the public relations industry and enhance the learning experience for students.

The research will address the gap in research education in the public relations sector by assisting in identifying the most effective methods to teach students for the competencies in demand by industry, in order to increase students' employability and prepare them for the public relations workplace.

The findings of the research will also contribute to the PR industry by assisting it in developing standards for entry into the PR profession. As stated by Madigan (2017), further and broader research in the field is required - particularly articles in peer reviewed academic journals that would contribute to the further development of the profession.

## **Chapter 3: Methodology**

This study set out to examine the influence that specific face-to-face and online pedagogical tools, when blended together, had on the learning experience for post-graduate students of public relations.

The main objective of the study was to explore how the pedagogical methods impacted on the development of competencies required by the public relations industry, on students of public relations. The research concentrates on the competencies of business acumen, communication skills (verbal, non-verbal and media) and critical thinking skills. Secondly, the research aimed to investigate whether the students' participation in the activities enhanced the learning experience for students.

The research used a concurrent mixed methods methodology involving qualitative and quantitative techniques. In such a methodology, qualitative and quantitative data are integrated and interpreted simultaneously (Daymon and Halloway 2011). In this study, a combination of methods was used that was driven by the desired learning outcomes of a PR curriculum and recommendations for best practice in blended learning programme design. Data was collected by combining quantitative multiple-choice questionnaires and through qualitative methods that included a simulation exercise, a focus group and a reflection.

The design of the research strategy was rooted in Constructivist teaching and learning philosophy using Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle (Kolb, 2015) and Picciano's Multimodal Model of Blended Learning (Picciano' 2009) to guide the research design.

To follow is a discussion on the research design, the research sample and settings, the research and data collection methods used to inform this study alongside a discussion of the pertaining ethical issues.

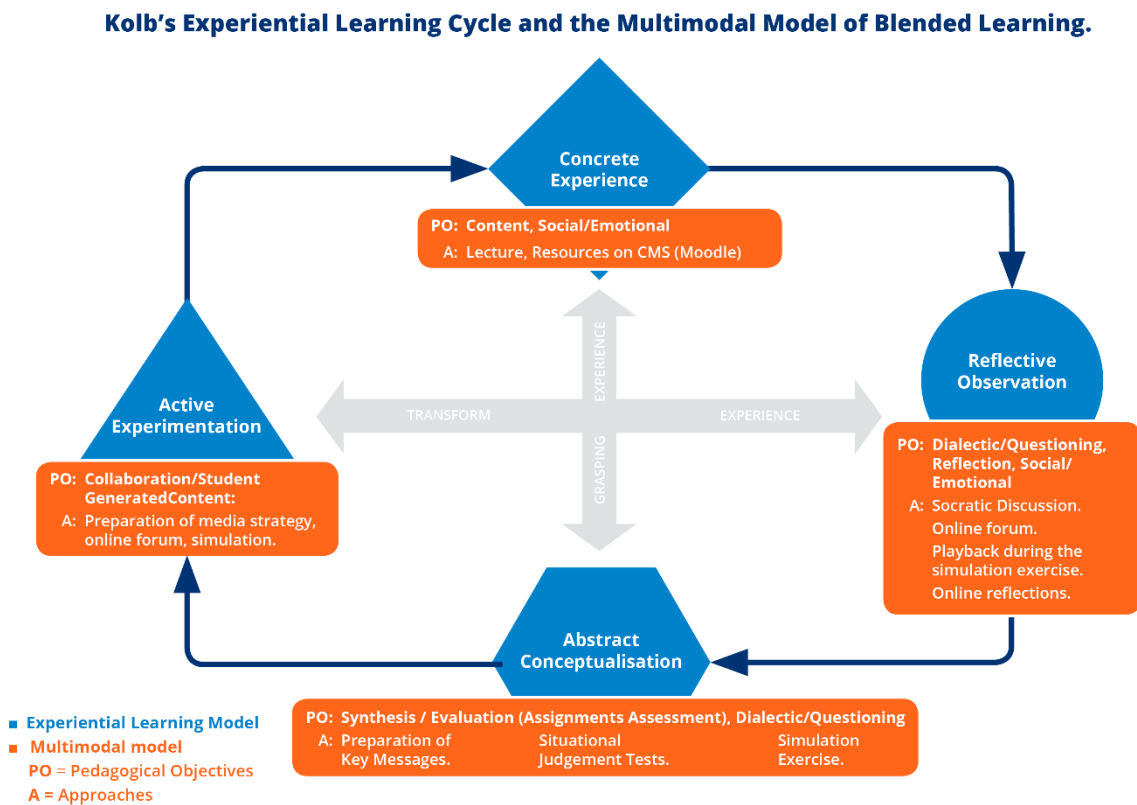
### **3.1 Research Design**

Galvin and O'Neill (2013) recommended that the design of a blended learning programme should be based on best practice in instructional design. The Multimodal Model proffers that blended learning programmes begin with content and end with evaluation and are driven by pedagogical objectives. The blended learning activity used in this study was driven by the pedagogical objectives that arise from the academic requirements of a public relations course. The activity aimed to teach students how to manage media relations in the event of a crisis – a common scenario experienced by public relations professionals in practice.

The programme was designed using the Multimodal model of blended learning which was mapped against Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle to direct the learning stages and

approaches and pedagogical objectives of the course. This process is illustrated in Figure 4 below.

Figure 4: The Multimodal Model of Blended Learning mapped against Kolb’s Experiential Learning Cycle.



The process outlined above, explains the face-to-face and online pedagogical tools or approaches used in this study and aligns them with the Multimodal Model’s six pedagogical objectives of content; social/emotional, dialectic/questioning, synthesis/evaluation, collaboration/student generated content and reflection. The figure also illustrates how the learning approaches and pedagogical objectives can then be aligned with the Experiential Learning Cycle to ensure the course delivers on the four modes of learning identified by Kolb including: Concrete Experience, Reflective Observation, Abstract Conceptualisation and Active Experimentation.

This process can be further explained by examining each mode of the Experiential Learning Cycle individually. Looking at the mode of ‘Concrete Experience’ for example, the ‘Concrete Experience’ in this instance is the theory and relevant information delivered by the lecturer on the management of media relations in the event of a crisis. The figure above demonstrates that the lecture and content that was made available on Moodle during these exercises, also fulfilled two of the Multimodal Model’s pedagogical objectives of ‘Content’

and *'Social and Emotional'*. The Multimodal Model views *'Content'* as *'the primary driver of instruction'* and states that it can be delivered and presented via numerous means (Picciano 2009, p. 14). In this programme, the content was delivered using a lecture and PowerPoint slides and by making case studies and articles available on the course management software system, Moodle. The delivery of the content through an in-class lecture also fulfils the *'Social and Emotional'* pedagogical objective of the Multimodal Model. The Model stipulates that *'social and emotional development is an important part of anyone's education'* and that even students on advanced graduate courses require *'someone with whom to speak whether for understanding a complex concept or providing advice'* (Picciano 2009. P. 14). Therefore, the diagram demonstrates that the delivery of the content using these *'face-to-face'* and online approaches meets the *'Content'* and *'Social and Emotional'* pedagogical objectives of the Multimodal Model and falls under the *'Concrete Experience'* learning mode of Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle.

The figure above can continue to be followed in the same manner to examine each of the modes of experiential learning and the associated pedagogical objectives and the *'face-to-face'* and *'online'* learning approaches used to achieve them.

## **3.2 Research Sample and Setting**

This research was conducted over a two-month period (February – March 2019) using a sample group of 16 post-graduate students of public relations at Griffith College, Dublin. The students involved were students of the researcher.

The study was centred on the media response of an international technology organisation to a major international crisis, involving a breach of data. To encourage participation in and engagement with the activities involved, it was decided that the simulation exercise would contribute towards the students' final mark for the module.

## **3.3 Research Methods**

The learning approaches used in this model comprised a combination of face-to-face and online methods as advised by Partridge, Ponting and McCay (2011) in their observations on the best practice in design of blended learning modules.

### **3.3.1 Face-to-face Learning**

Face-to-face methods included a lecture that aimed to deliver content to the students and a Socratic discussion, the purpose of which was to encourage critical thinking. The students were presented with content on Crisis Management through a conventional lecture. The

lecture provided students with information as to how to communicate with the media on behalf of an organisation in a time of crisis.

Managing a crisis as a PR professional requires a level of critical thinking, problem solving skills, an ability to think quickly alongside general and media communication skills. Students then presented with a topical crisis scenario and watched a video relating to this crisis, which was followed by a Socratic discussion, led by the lecturer. As identified in Parkinson and Ekachai's study, the leader of the Socratic discussion is required to have a knowledge of the subject in addition to an understanding of how to conduct a Socratic discussion (Parkinson and Ekachi 2002). The aim of this discussion was to assist the students in developing an understanding of the principles and concepts involved in representing an organisation in the media in response to a crisis. Its ultimate goal was to encourage students to think critically. An example of the questions used in this research can be viewed in Appendix I.

### **3.3.2 Online Learning**

Online methods used in this study included an online forum, which enabled collaboration, peer learning and formative feedback; a video and online reflection that allowed the students to reflect on the learning experience of a simulation exercise.

Following the completion of the Socratic discussion, students were directed to work in groups to develop their media strategies to respond to the crisis. Each group then worked together outside of the classroom and online in a collaborative forum where the groups posted their strategies to enable feedback from their peers and the lecturer.

A simulated media interview was then conducted in which a real professional journalist was engaged to act out the role of the interviewer and each student was interviewed as if they were the spokesperson for the organisation in question. Through this exercise, students became immersed in the activity and were facilitated in putting their learning and their media strategies that they had developed into practice as they or their clients would be required to do in the real world.

Following the simulation exercise, students were issued with a secure online link to their own individual video. Students could view this video in their own time and privacy and reflect on their performances. On viewing the video, students completed an online reflection offering their opinions on their performance. The reflection aimed to encourage deeper learning in the students and provided them with an opportunity to document their observations on the learning experience.

### 3.4 Data Collection Implements

The methods used in this research were evaluated using questionnaires, a simulation exercise involving role play, student reflections and a focus group.

#### 3.4.1 Questionnaires

At the commencement of the study, prior to the first lecture and on completion of the study, students were directed online to complete a questionnaire in the form of a Situational Judgement Test (SJT).

SJTs are scenario-based questionnaires that are used to measure knowledge and behaviours. They have been used extensively in the medical sector and by recruitment organisations to measure non-academic attributes in graduates. There was no readily available template for a SJT that could be applied to a public relations context and therefore a template was specifically designed for the purpose of this research.

In designing the SJTs, validity was a key factor. Validity can be defined as *'the extent to which the researcher's findings are accurate, reflect the purpose of the study and represent reality'* Daymon and Halloway 2011, p. 369). To ensure the validity of the study and in line with best practice in SJT design as recommended by Patterson et al (2016), a team of senior PR professionals who were working in the industry was assembled to consult on the structure and design of the SJTs, including the scenarios, questions and answers and the scoring method for each test. Scenarios were then drafted and questions were formulated around these scenarios. The questions were grouped together under the three steps involved in managing media relations in a crisis including, Preparation, Response and Follow-up. The majority of the questions were designed to demonstrate an ability to make effective arguments to support the key messages that the students were attempting to communicate, in order to demonstrate a competency in critical thinking.

Answers were proposed for each question and the expert team reached a consensus on the most appropriate answers for each question. A 'scoring key' was then developed for each test in order to group student responses into the categories of excellent, good, satisfactory and poor. An example of the scoring key used can be reviewed in Appendix II. The questions and answers were specifically designed to measure the competencies of media communications and, critical thinking skills in participants. Students' answers were analysed on completion of the first test and responses were compared to those of the second test on completion of the entire study to provide a quantitative analysis on the development of each of the predefined competencies. The process of designing the SJT in consultation with

industry experts ensured the validity of these tests in their use for the first time as a test to measure competencies in PR students.

### **3.4.2 Simulation Exercise**

An immersive simulation exercise took place in which students assumed the role of the spokesperson for an organisation in crisis in an interview with a real news journalist.

A camera was set up and operated by a professional camera technician. Microphones and lighting were connected to simulate a real-life television news interview situation. The students were split into two groups of eight. Each individual group member was then immersed in the experience as they were interviewed individually by the journalist and asked to put their learning into practice by responding to the crisis in a simulated live media interview. Each student was recorded on camera and observed and assessed as the interview took place. On completion of all eight interviews, students were invited back into the room where a selection of excerpts from videos were played back for discussion and feedback. The process was repeated with the second group.

The objective of the simulation exercise was to fulfil the learning requirements of the '*Active Experimentation*' mode of the '*Experiential Learning Cycle*' and the '*Synthesis/Evaluation*' objective of the '*Multimodal Model*' of blended learning. In terms of data collection, this exercise offered an opportunity to observe and assess the students and to record and collect the video footage necessary for the reflection.

### **3.4.3 Reflections**

Following completion of the simulation, students were afforded the opportunity to reflect on their performance and the learning experience in general in an online exercise. All participants viewed their performance in a secure video link which they viewed in their own time and in privacy. Students then completed an online reflection the objective of which was to inform the research as to their enjoyment of the learning experience. The reflection also served as a learning exercise for the students to encourage a deeper learning experience.

### **3.4.4 Focus Group**

The purpose of a focus group, is '*to concentrate on one or two clear issues or objects and discuss them in depth*' (Daymon and Halloway 2011, p. 241). On completion of this study, seven students participated in a focus group to discuss their perceptions of the learning experience and the impact that they felt that it had on the development of the competencies

identified. Focus groups in their nature are interactive and facilitate the sharing of opinions. According to Daymon and Halloway, focus group members often present arguments to challenge the views of another. The focus group was a good exercise in itself in using and developing critical thinking skills.

### **3.5 Ethical Issues**

Ethics can be defined as the *'moral principles that govern a person's behaviour or the conducting of an activity'* (Oxford Dictionary of English, 2010). In reference to qualitative research in PR, ethics are essential and researchers must ensure that research is carried out with *'integrity, honesty and a concern for the wellbeing of participants'* (Daymon and Halloway 2011, p. 55). At the outset and throughout this research, ethical concerns were addressed as follows:

- *Participant Consent*

Participants were informed about the research verbally and in written format. They were informed about the content of the research to ensure that they knew what to expect and they understood that they were being asked to participate in a voluntary capacity. Participants were offered the opportunity to revoke their consent at any stage during the process. All participating students signed consent forms. A copy of the consent form used can be viewed in Appendix III.

- *Storing of non-anonymised and personalised data*

All student data collected during the questionnaires was anonymised including quotes provided during the reflection and the focus group exercises. The anonymity of the students was protected throughout and the data was not identifiable during the research process or in the findings presented. All information provided by the participants was treated in the strictest of confidence.

No person, other than the researcher has access to this information obtained during the course of this study. The data collected as part of this research is encrypted and stored securely on a laptop and a USB memory stick. All information gathered will be destroyed within 24 months from the date of this research.

- *Potential for bias*

As the lecturer for these students was also the conductor of the research, there may have been a potential for bias. However, as the exercises were taking place as part of the curriculum being taught over the course of the semester, it was deemed that the knowledge and skills required to facilitate a structured Socratic discussion and encourage critical thinking in the field of public relations outweighed the potential for bias.

### **3.6 Limitations**

As is common, this research was limited by several factors. The first limitation of this study concerned the duration of the study. It would have been preferable to conduct this study over a longer period of time allowing for another SJT and a simulation exercise to be performed and thus offering a greater insight into the influence of the activity on retention of learning.

The second limitation of this study relates to the sample size. The group was small and hence making the findings of the quantitative methods statistically insignificant. It would have been beneficial to perform the study on a larger group or another class that would allow for the use of a control group. This would enable a statistically significant quantitative analysis and offer greater insight into the efficacy of the methods used on the development of competencies in learners.

Finally, it was not possible to use a control group in this research due to the fact that the lecturer was conducting the research on her own group of students. Students were excited to participate in the research activity and in particular in the simulation exercise. It was deemed inappropriate to split the groups and offer this learning activity to one small section of the class, thereby providing them with a superior learning experience to the other group. For future research, the use of a control group would be recommended, using two separate classes at the same level of ability.

### **3.7 Summary**

This study used a model based on the Experiential Learning Cycle and the Multimodal Model of Blended Learning to explore the influence of blended learning tools on the development of competencies in PR students. The study also analysed the impact that these learning approaches had on the experience of the students.

The research used mixed methods in its design including face-to-face and online techniques in line with best practice recommendations in blended learning programme design. Quantitative and qualitative means were used to collect the data, including a simulation, a

questionnaire, a reflection and a focus group. The study was limited by the period of duration of the research and the size of the sample. These factors were due to the fact that the researcher was conducting the research using her own class members. In future studies, a longer time period would be recommended to investigate retention of learning. A larger sample size would also be recommended, using two classes to allow for the use of a control group which would enable the collection of more statistically significant quantitative data.

## **Chapter 4: Data Analysis and Results**

This chapter outlines the findings of the analysis conducted in this research and discusses the relevance of these findings in the context of the original research questions posed as follows:

1. Can pedagogical practices, when blended together, influence the development of competencies in students of public relations?
2. Can pedagogical practices, when blended together, enhance the learning experience for students of public relations?

To discuss these questions, the results of the quantitative and qualitative data collection methods, including the Situational Judgement Tests, simulation exercise, reflection and focus group will now be analysed.

### **4.1 Situational Judgement Tests (SJTs)**

As outlined in the Methodology section of this research (Chapter 3), the SJTs were designed in consultation with a team of public relations professionals who developed topical and common crisis scenarios, designed relevant questions and agreed on the most appropriate answers and the scoring key for the tests. The result was the development of four standards of responses (Excellent, Good, Satisfactory and Poor) to indicate competency across a range of areas, including business acumen, communications skills (verbal, non-verbal and media) and critical thinking skills. Critical thinking was the core competency being measured in these tests and therefore two of the six questions were designed around the construction and presentation of the most appropriate arguments to use in media communication. The overall results of the SJTs are now explained alongside a discussion on the measurement of the individual competencies identified.

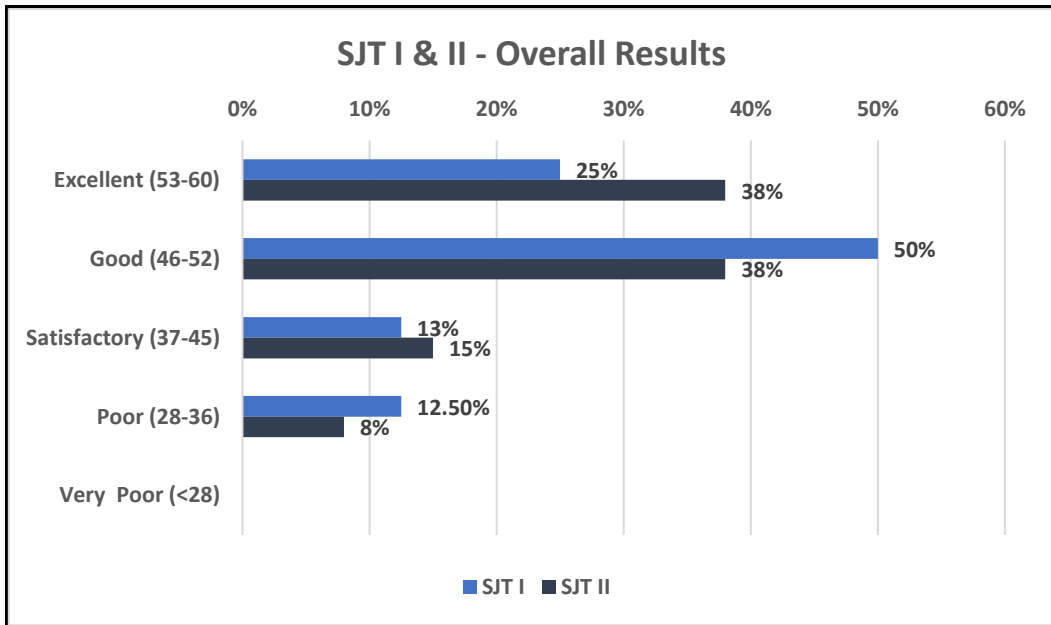
#### **4.1.1 Overall Results**

16 students took part in the first test and 13 students participated in the second test. When comparing the results of the first test (SJT I) and the second test (SJT II), the most significant observation was an overall increase of 13% in the number of students performing in the *'Excellent'* category in the second test (SJT II). The overall results of the SJTs are outlined and illustrated in the table below and in Figure 5 respectively.

**SJT Results Table**

Results		SJT I		SJT II	
Results	Category	Students	%	Students	%
53-60	Excellent (53-60)	4	25%	5	38%
46-52	Good (46-52)	8	50%	5	38%
37-45	Satisfactory (37-45)	2	13%	2	15%
28-37	Poor (28-37)	2	12.5%	1	8%
<28	Very Poor (<28)				

Figure 5: SJT Overall Results



**4.1.2 Individual Competencies**

The SJTs were designed to ultimately assess students for the competencies of critical thinking skills and media communications skills. Two out of six questions were designed to provide an indication of critical thinking and problem-solving ability. These two questions were centred around the development and communication of effective arguments in response to difficult or unexpected questions.

For example, in SJT I, participants were presented with a scenario involving a hypothetical group representing the interests of vegans. Respondents in this test were asked to assume the role of the public relations consultant for the Famers’ Association which would have been

expected to have an opposing view point to that of the vegans. Participants were asked to choose the most appropriate responses and arguments that they would communicate through the media on behalf of the Farmers' Association. In SJT II, participants were tasked with representing a mobile phone manufacturer following a product recall. In the same questions in SJT II, participants were asked to choose the most appropriate responses and arguments to present in the media on behalf of the phone company.

In question four there was an improvement of 36% in those achieving an 'Excellent' result as illustrated in Figure 6 below. In question five, which related to arguments, there was an improvement of 28% in those receiving an 'Excellent' result in SJT II (84%) compared to the same style of questions in SJT I (56%). Examples of all questions in the SJTs are contained in Appendix IV and V.

Figure 6: Q4 Media Response Results

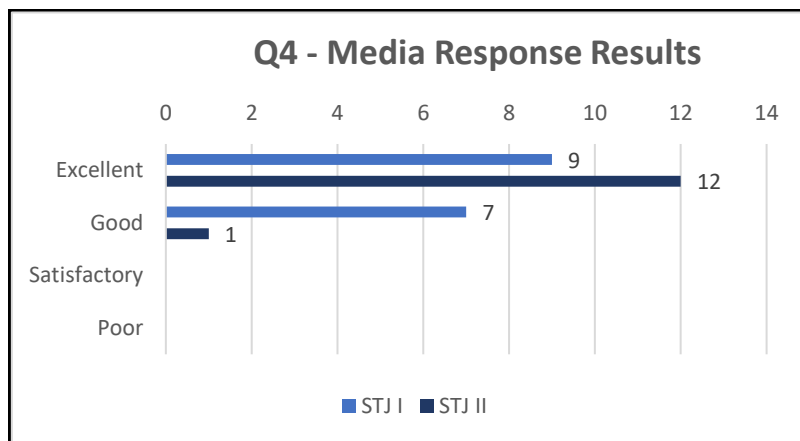
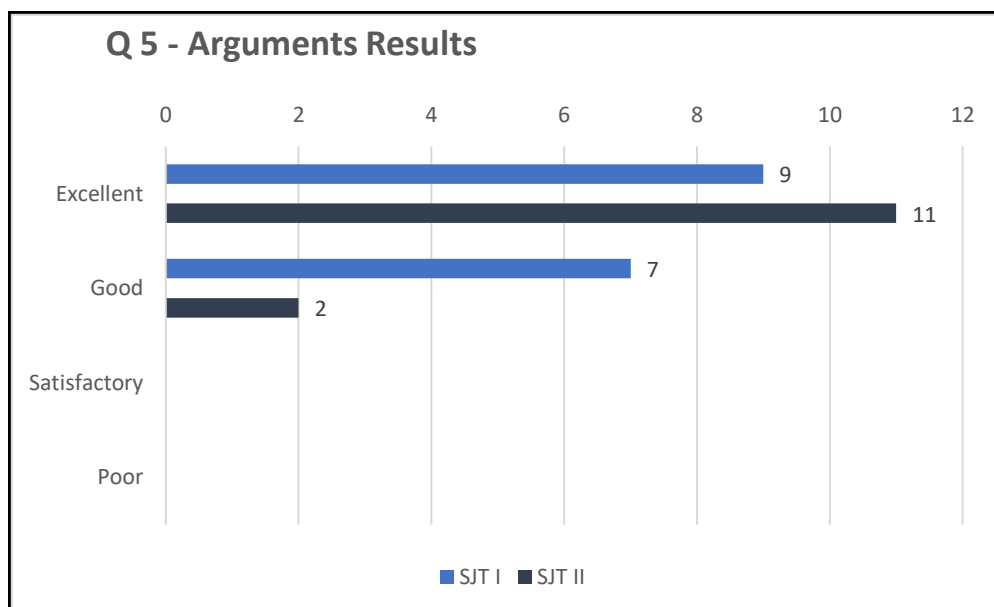


Figure 7: Q5 Arguments Results



In relation to Media Communications Skills, the second question in both tests offered the most significant finding. This question was centred around the media strategy and in particular the construction and communication of key messages. The results for this question in SJT II indicated a significant increase of 48% in those selecting all three most appropriate Key Messages as identified by the panel of public relations experts. Students also referenced the importance of key messages several times during their feedback. For example, one student said: *'I learned how important it is to have key messages that you can refer to when answering tricky questions'* while another said: *'I was pleased with how I communicated my message. I thought that I reverted back to the key messages when in a difficult corner.'*

The preparation of key messages is a vital element in participating in and preparing a client for an effective media interview, particularly when responding to a crisis. The performance of the students in this question could indicate the value in using the multiple teaching channels in the Multimodal Model. Throughout each teaching and learning approach used in the research, the importance of Key Messages was emphasised. Students were provided with information on this topic through a lecture, encouraged to discuss them in the classroom and subsequently in an online forum where they were peer reviewed and formative feedback was provided.

## **4.2 Simulation Exercise**

At the core of the pedagogical approaches employed in this research was a simulation exercise in which students assumed the role of the spokesperson for an organisation in crisis and each student was interviewed by a real journalist. The interviews were observed and recorded using professional equipment and by a real camera technician. Excerpts from the interviews were played back to the participants at the end of the session and secure video links of their interviews were distributed to the students online offering them the opportunity to review and reflect on their performances.

Through their feedback on the simulation it is evident that students viewed the media interview simulation as the focal point of the learning activities and viewed the other exercises such as the lecture, Socratic discussion and online forum as preparatory activity for this exercise. This is understandable as the interviews were assessed and contributed to 10% of their overall final mark. However, this may have also ensured that there was high engagement in all activities involved and it could be questioned whether students would have been as engaged if the activity had not included a practical and assessed *'Active*

*Experimentation*' stage. For example, in their discussion on the barriers to online learning, Allen and Seaman (2007) cite student discipline as an issue. All academic leaders surveyed in this report stated that '*Students need more discipline to succeed in online courses*' as an '*Important*' or '*Very Important*' barrier to widespread adoption of online learning (other factors included cost, retention of learning and acceptance by potential employers). This indicates the importance of structuring a blended learning programme of activity that has clear objectives and in which the learning outcomes, teaching, learning and assessment methods are aligned.

Students were visibly both excited and apprehensive on presentation for the interview simulation. Many reported feeling nervous but also a feeling of accomplishment which was evident when each student had completed their interview. For many of the participants this was their first time viewing themselves on a real camera and screen and many students used their own phones to video their performances during the playback session and to take pictures of themselves participating in the exercise.

Students were observed and assessed during the simulation. An example of the assessment form used can be viewed in Appendix VI. Data was collected in the form of the video which was then used in the reflective exercise.

### **4.3 Reflections and Focus Group – Thematic Analysis**

On completion of the simulation exercise, a secure link to a video of the students' performance was distributed to students to view and reflect on in their own time and in their own privacy. Students were also issued with a link to an online reflection form and asked to submit a reflective paragraph to document their perceptions of the learning they achieved and their enjoyment of the simulation exercise.

A week following the simulation exercise, seven students participated in a focus group in which they discussed their views on the exercises in terms of their perceptions of the experience and the learning achieved.

The objective of both the reflection and the focus group was to assess the students' enjoyment of the learning experience. The observations of the students from both the Focus Group and the Reflection are therefore now grouped together using the recurring themes of competencies, immersion and apprehension.

### **4.3.1 Theme One: Competencies**

The competencies that this research set out to investigate were business acumen, communications skills (verbal, non-verbal and media) and critical thinking. The findings from the Reflection and the Focus Group in relation to these competencies are now outlined as follows.

#### **4.3.1.1 Business Acumen**

Business acumen was demonstrated through the students' conveyed understanding of the challenges that businesses face in the event of a crisis and in communicating with the public through the media as a result. Students commented:

*'It was an eye-opener to find solutions to problems other companies are facing. It was practical.'*

*'It was good in the sense that we have an insight as to how these people try to resolve cases like this.'*

*'If I were working in a massive organisation that had this crisis and I'm approached by the media, even without them informing me in time, I would have something to say. It was of immense benefit for me.'*

*'We were trying to be very neutral and very accepting. We wanted to gain their [the public's] trust. We didn't want to say anything that would contradict whatever has been happening or make the matters worse. We were just trying to manage our customers and in the business sense that is what we're supposed to be doing, because we should always try to be there when our customers ask for anything.'*

*'The interview will help me to protect the interests of my company and the reputation of the company. Once you maintain ethics in business there are certain areas you don't have to expose to the outside world. You have to maintain maturity while protecting the interest and the reputation of your company.'*

#### **4.3.1.2 Media Communications**

Over the course of the activities, students received training in media communications as well as verbal and non-verbal communications, comprising content delivery, tone of voice, body language, hand gestures and facial expressions. During the simulation students were able to put this training into practice in a safe and supported environment. When asked what they felt they had learned from the experience, many students reported communication skills as a learning achievement as evidenced in their feedback:

*'I sometimes talked more than needed so going forward I could stop sooner when I was happy with my answer.'*

*'I learnt how to communicate effectively.'*

*'I communicated my top-line at the beginning and got my three key messages out.'*

*'I believe I did communicate my key messages and top-line clearly.'*

*'I learned that you should speak clearly and slowly and in concise sentences.'*

*'[In the media training - lecture and discussion] we learned each detail about body language, facial expressions and other things that I wouldn't have known previously and then I felt, when we discussed it in groups, it was helpful because we could all help each other figure out what to do.'*

*'[I learnt] communication. Time management. Ability to work under pressure. Ability to communicate under pressure because there's a difference between having the communication skills and being able to work under pressure and being able to do both of them at the same time.'*

*'Body language in front of the camera.'*

*'Listening skills because sometimes when she asked me questions I just blanked out. Then I had to take my time. If not, I'd answer with the wrong answer and not actually hit the point.'*

In addition to media communications skills, verbal and non-verbal communications skills were studied. Verbal communications were measured by the students' ability to make effective arguments during the simulation and to effectively express their key messages that they had prepared in advance. The non-verbal communications skills that were assessed consisted of tone of voice, hand-gestures, body language and facial expressions. The majority of students referenced Communications Skills as a key learning and focussed heavily on this in their Reflections and the Focus Group. However, the analysis also reveals that there was also a tendency for students to be overly self-critical of their non-verbal communications skills, more so than their verbal communications skills. This is illustrated in the following comments:

*'I think that at times my facial expressions during the questioning were a little bit distracting so I would try and keep a less expressive face next time.'*

*'I assumed my body language was ok but I realised there were some mistakes after I watched the video.'*

It was therefore important that the students were not discouraged by being too negative or self-critical about their performances, based on their perceptions of their non-verbal communication. In future studies, greater emphasis could be put on and direction given to verbal communication in these exercises to steer the students away from self-criticism of non-verbal communications.

#### **4.3.1.3 Critical Thinking Skills**

The competency of critical thinking was predominantly measured through the quantitative SJTs used in this study. Through the feedback in the reflection and the focus group also, students cited critical thinking and problem solving as learning achievements from the exercises. For example, when asked what they learned from the experience, one student said: *'being creative in thought - creative mentally'* while another cited: *'on the spot critical thinking.'* Further observations made by students on this topic included:

*'I thought I made some good arguments.'*

*'The arguments used in the interview from my point of view were good but I could have done better by being more confident and professional.'*

*'I made a few effective arguments, although the responses could have been more precise and direct.'*

*'I learnt how to work effectively under pressure and how to be prepared for any question or situation at any time.'*

#### **4.3.2 Theme Two: Immersion**

As stated by Sutherland and Ward (2018), public relations students who have the opportunity to participate in work experience or internships, may gain deep understanding over time through practical exposure to common 'real-world' public relations scenarios, including press conferences. However, providing students with the experience of organising and participating in a 'real-world' situation involving media can be difficult without access to work-experience, in a standard public relations curriculum. A simulated experience therefore could offer a class-based immersive solution.

The observations of the students indicate that the immersive nature of the simulation exercise impacted on their critical thinking and problem-solving skills. For example, a student cited a key learning from the activity as *'applying your skills in the outside world.'* This student elaborated by stating: *'When she asked me the last question, she said, why should they trust you? I know that question was a bit daunting because I didn't know what exactly to say. I had to pretend like I was working with the company. I didn't want to make*

*any promise that I knew that I wouldn't be able to fulfil. At that point, I had to think on the spot.'*

In this discussion, other students elaborated on this topic by making the following observations:

*'She asked me a question along the lines of should the public have known that this could happen? I was trying to balance not placing blame on the public but not placing blame on the organisation as well. I think that was good because it was difficult in the situation trying to find a neutral point, and not place blame on anyone, while at the same time protecting the organisation's reputation.'*

*'I thought about self-confidence. Before I went in, I saw myself as the CEO. I said, "I'm in charge." Then secondly, the interviewer, the journalist gave me very good confidence.'*

*'I found this really helpful and beneficial. I think that it gave a true to life experience, which was really helpful.'*

The students also demonstrated in their feedback, the role that a safe environment offers in an in-class immersive exercise as opposed to a real-world situation. For example, one student said: *'The environment the interviewer and the lecturer gave us that day, instils confidence in us'* while another added: *'It gave us the impression that this is what clients actually feel when they're in that position. It prepares you for the worst, prepares you for the good. The fact that the lecturer was seated there as well gave me some confidence.'*

### **4.3.3 Theme Three: Apprehension**

When asked to rate their enjoyment of the exercises out of five (five being 'Excellent' and one being 'Poor'), 71% (five out of seven people) rated the experience as 'Excellent' with the remainder rating the experience as 'Good' (four).

One of the students who awarded the exercises with a 'Good' rating cited reasons concerning her own nervousness and apprehension relating to the simulation exercise by explaining: *'I felt really under pressure and nervous – it's probably something to do with myself.'*

This feeling of nervousness and apprehension is a topic that appeared often. For example, when commenting on the simulation, another student stated: *'I enjoyed it because it was quick and fast paced. I'm very shy normally and I do not like talking. It was just a different experience. I didn't like it because it's not something I'm used to. I don't like being videoed by*

*anybody. That was just very new for me. It just brought me out of my comfort zone.'* This student also added: *'It was a good thing.'*

These findings would correlate with the findings of Veil (2010) whose study involved testing the efficacy of using a simulated press conference in teaching crisis management to public relations students. Students in Veil's study found the experience to be a positive one, but some also reported feelings of apprehension, citing reasons such as uncertainty of what to expect and the prompt or immediate nature of the activity.

#### **4.4 Discussion and Recommendations**

The objective of this research was to ascertain if the pedagogical activities used could enhance the learning experience for the students and assist them in developing competencies required in the public relations industry. The analysis found that there was a positive influence on the development on competencies, particularly critical thinking and that the students enjoyed the experience.

The evidence of student learning is demonstrated in the overall quantitative results of the SJTs which showed a 13% improvement in students' performance. The tests also revealed an improvement in the students' performance in relation to the specific competencies of critical thinking and media communication skills. The qualitative analysis which included the student reflections and focus groups offered an indication that the students themselves enjoyed the experience and felt the exercises had an impact on their learning experience and in particular had assisted them in developing their business acumen, critical thinking and communications skills.

The learning that the students achieved or felt they had achieved could be attributable to a number of factors including, the use of multiple learning approaches for the students to connect with, the manner in which the pedagogical model used in this study was constructed with the simulation assessment at its core and the immersive nature of the simulation exercise.

The simulation exercise in particular resonated with students who experienced both excitement and apprehension in relation to this activity. The reflections on this activity revealed the nature of students to be self-critical of their body language and future studies should seek to direct the students away from being overly critical of non-verbal communications. However, overall the feeling of accomplishment expressed by students would outweigh the apprehension. As a demonstration of this point, some students observed that they would like to expand on the exercise in the future. For example, one student stated: *'Maybe next time we should have two or more journalists instead of one'* and

another said: *'I suggest that in subsequent exercises we give students the opportunity to pick different companies or allocate different companies to each student.'*

The study was limited by the size of the sample group and the duration of the study. A more detailed study using a large group, including a control group over a longer period of time would offer greater insight into the efficacy of the methods used in this study on the development of competencies required in the PR industry. It would be of interest also to expand this research into industry in order to develop a definitive list of knowledge and competencies required by the industry in new entrants to the profession and to design an SJT that could be used to test for these competencies. Academic curricula could then be aligned with the demands of industry, thus increasing the employability of students both now and into the future.

## **Chapter 5: Conclusion**

The higher education sector worldwide is endeavouring to meet the learning requirements of a technologically-savvy and increasingly diverse student demographic. Simultaneously, the sector is challenged with ensuring third-level graduates can bring modern relevant competencies required by industry with them into entry-level positions on graduation.

As a relatively new profession, the public relations industry and education sector are still developing and as such the profession has yet to define the competencies required of its professionals at entry-level. Research into public relations education and pedagogy is lacking and there is an absence of evidence to indicate best practice in public relations pedagogy to assist students in the development of the competencies required in PR professionals in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. However, there is evidence to suggest that the industry is actively seeking competencies in new entrants to the PR profession that can also be difficult to teach such as business acumen, communication skills and critical thinking.

This study set out to explore, whether the use of specific pedagogical techniques in public relations teaching, could assist students in developing these competencies which were identified in the research as business acumen, communications skills (verbal, non-verbal, media) and critical thinking. The study also sought to establish whether the use of these pedagogical tools could enhance the learning experience for students of public relations.

To investigate these questions, a blended learning model was designed that was rooted in Constructivist teaching and learning philosophy, based on the Multimodal Model of Blended Learning and mapped against Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle. In this model, a simulation exercise was blended with other face-to-face and online pedagogical tools to teach students how to manage media communications in the event of a crisis. Face-to-face tools included a lecture and a Socratic discussion. Online tools included a collaborative online forum, the simulation experience in which videos were recorded and distributed online and a reflection exercise.

To analyse the efficacy of this model in assisting in developing these competencies in and enhancing the learning experience for students, a concurrent mixed methodology was employed using both quantitative and qualitative data collection methods. Qualitative methods were designed to offer an indication as to the enhancement of the learning experience and included observation during the simulation exercise, a reflection and a focus group. The quantitative method implemented in the research was a Situational Judgement Test which is more commonly used in the medical profession to test for non-academic attributes in medical graduates. To ensure its validity for use in this research, a Situational

Judgement test was designed exclusively in consultation with a team of public relations professionals. The test was designed specifically to test for competencies that are required at an entry-level in the public relations profession and identified in this research.

The results of the exercises indicated that the blended learning exercises had a positive impact on the learning experience and the development of competencies identified in students. Reasons for the positive effect could be due to the multiple learning approaches used that provided numerous opportunities for peer learning and formative feedback; the manner in which the programme was constructed with the simulation at its core, which may have resulted in increased engagement and the immersive nature of the tasks involved, in particular in the simulation exercise.

The simulation exercise was an immersive experience that asked students to assume the role of the spokesperson for an organisation in crisis. Students reported enjoying the experience, although some did report feelings of apprehension that were mainly connected to the *'true-to-life'* format and the fact that for many, it was their first time being recorded on camera. The reflections provided by students revealed that there was a tendency for students to be overly self-critical in relation to their body language in the simulation, which could detract from the learning experience. For future studies therefore, it would be recommended to steer students away from being overly critical of their body language.

Limitations involved in this study included the size of the group and the duration of the study. In relation to the timeline, a longer duration would have afforded the opportunity to test for the retention of learning, which could be indicated by performing another Situational Judgement Test in three to six months' time. Regarding sample size, the group involved in this study was small and as a result the findings from the quantitative research were statistically insignificant. A larger group of at least 100 participants would enable a significant statistical analysis and offer greater insight into the effects of the learning exercises on competencies. A larger group would also enable the use of a control group, where one group would not have access to the simulation for example. The effect of the lack of simulation on the development of competencies and on the enhancement of learning could then be analysed. It was not possible to use a control group in this exercise due to the small size of the group and as the teacher of the class or sample was also the researcher.

The results of this research will be of benefit to the public relations industry and public relations education. In terms of public relations teaching, the findings of the research offer insight to providers of third level education in the use of pedagogical approaches that can be implemented to assist students in developing competencies required by the public relations

industry. Further research would be required at an industry level to define the competencies and qualifications required by industry and at an educational level to set standards in best practice in public relations pedagogy.

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## **Appendix I - Socratic Discussion Questions**

### **1. Preparation**

- Do you think the organisation was prepared for this crisis? Why?
- What could they have done better to prepare? Why?
- Who should be on the crisis team?
- Is the Chief Executive the most appropriate spokesperson for the company / crisis?
- Can you think of a better spokesperson and why? What effect do you think that would have had?

### **2. Response**

- What do you think of the Headlines surrounding this case? Why?
- How does the spokesperson come across? Why?
- Did he address public concerns?
- Did he answer questions effectively?
- Did he let people know what to expect next?
- Did he apologise? Should he have apologised?
- Do you think he handled it well?
- What are his key messages?
- Did he use jargon?
- What effect did that have in your opinion?
- What did you think of his body language, appearance, mannerisms?

### **3. Follow-up**

- What do you think the company should do should do next?
- Why?

## Appendix II – SJT Scoring Key Example

This table offers an example of the scoring key used in the SJT tests. R1 – R4 outline the responses of the public relations professionals who participated in the consultation process. Each respondent's results is indicated in the columns next to their responses.

Each question was analysed in a similar manner and standard scores were created following discussion and agreement amongst the group. Categories of responses were then identified as outlined below.

<b>SJT 1 Scoring</b>											
<b>Question 1</b>											
Answers	Points	R1	Result	R2	Result	R3	Result	R4	Result		
Option A	10	2	0	1	10	1	10	1	10		
Option B	8	1	8	3	0	2		2			
Option C	6	3	6	2	0	3		3			
Option D	4	5	0	4	4	5		4			
Option E	2	4	0	5	2	4		5			
<b>Result</b>			<b>8</b>		<b>10</b>		<b>10</b>		<b>10</b>		<b>10</b>
<b>Assumptions</b>											
Scores are based on answers for Option A											
All agree that option 1 - 3 are highest ranking options.											
Good students would not pick 4 or 5 as their top rank.											
<b>Scoring Key</b>											
Excellent	Option A correct.	10									
Good	Option B picked as rank 1	8									
Satisfactory	Option C picked as rank 1	6									
Poor	Option D picked as rank 1	4									
Poor	Option E picked as rank 1	2									

## **Appendix III - Consent Form**

### **Research into the Use of Blended Learning Techniques in Public Relations Teaching**

You are invited to take part in this research into **‘The use of blended learning techniques in public relations teaching’**.

The research aims to explore how blended learning techniques can be used in public relations teaching to assist learners in developing competencies required by the public relations industry and to enhance the learning experience for students.

The research will be conducted by Aoife O'Donnell from Griffith College, Dublin in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the MA in Training and Education (QQI) at Griffith College, Dublin. Should you choose to participate in this research, your involvement will consist of participating in the following activities:

1. Situational Judgement Test (multiple-choice questionnaire) to test your responses to various crisis scenarios, common in public relations. There will be a number of tests involved.
2. Traditional lecture on crisis management followed by an in-class discussion.
3. Media Training lecture. This lecture will aim to train you in how to prepare clients for media interviews.
4. Online collaborative discussion on a crisis management scenario.
5. Media Interview simulation – you will take part in a media interview with a journalist. Interviews will be recorded and played back to the class for discussion.
6. Reflection – you will be required to complete a short reflection on your experience.
7. Focus Group – 45-60-minute exercise to acquire your feedback on the learning experience.

The information that is collected as part of this research will be treated in the strictest of confidence. Your anonymity will be protected and your data will not be identifiable at any point during the research process or in any version of results submitted for publication or presentation. You will not be asked to provide your name or any other identifying information. There will be no way of identifying your responses in the data files.

All information will be converted to numbers for statistical analysis and stored securely on the encrypted researcher's laptop and a backup encrypted USB memory stick. No person, other than the researcher will have access to the data. All information gathered will be destroyed within 24 months.

Results will be sent to the examining board at Griffith College, Dublin. Versions of the results may be submitted for publication to journals and presented at appropriate conferences. Results will be available to you upon request.

If you could please indicate your consent to participate in this research by ticking the boxes and signing the form below, I would appreciate it. For any queries, please contact [aoife.odonnell@griffith.ie](mailto:aoife.odonnell@griffith.ie).

I confirm that I have read and understood the information above and have had an opportunity to ask questions.	
I understand that my participation is voluntary and I can withdraw my input at any stage.	
I understand that participation in this study involves engaging in the blended learning exercises as outlined in the information sheet attached.	
I understand that at no time will any identifiable information about me be present in any of the research or subsequent reports or presentations.	
I agree to the use of anonymous quotes in this report.	
I understand that the information gathered as part of this research will be destroyed after graduation, or in 24 months, whichever is sooner.	
I understand the information I provide will be used for the sole purpose of this study.	

Signature:

Printed Name:

Date:

Signature of Researcher:

## **Appendix IV – SJT I**

### **Situational Judgement Test 1**

The National Vegan Association has launched a national campaign to raise awareness on animal rights and promote veganism. The campaign includes high-visibility outdoor advertising activity that uses a range of emotive posters to encourage people to cease eat and dairy consumption and to convert to veganism.

The Organisation’s spokesperson has been in the media (radio, TV, print and online) discussing its new ad campaign and the rationale behind it. Its central argument is that the widespread consumption of animal products is having a catastrophic effect on the environment. The source of the Vegan group’s funding is unclear.

You are the Public Relations Officer / Consultant for the National Farmers’ Association, who view this as a potential crisis situation. The Farmers Association is concerned that the Vegan Association is communicating information that could be harmful to the business of its members.

Please outline your PR strategy in response to this crisis by responding to the following questions.

Please answer all questions with a view to what the best course of action should be and do not base your answers on your own personal beliefs. For example, if you yourself agree with the Vegans or the Meat-eaters, it is of no relevance to this test.

#### **1. Research**

The first step in managing a crisis is to gather the facts. Rank the actions you would take in order of priority below.

(1 = Most Effective, 2= Very Effective, 3 = Quite Effective, 4 = Slightly Effective and 5 = Least Effective).

	A: Check media (including social media) and analyse coverage
	B: Find out what the best practice is in your organisation and check if there is a precedent for this activity in other countries.
	C: Pull together a crisis management team consisting of the most informed people in the organisation on this topic, brief them on the situation and acquire their feedback.
	D: Contact a journalist for an 'off-the-record' chat on the topic. Investigate the potential of running a negative story about the Vegan Group.
	E: Contact the Vegan Group away from media view to discuss and try and silence the conversation.

## **2. Key Messages**

Your key messages should aim to present the organisation's business objectives and protect the reputation of your organisation and its members.

Choose the THREE most appropriate key messages that you think would be most effective in your communication with the media (all three choices are equal in importance).

	A: There are many benefits to eating meat and dairy.
	B: Vegans are prone to various health issues
	C: The source of the Vegan Group's funding is not clear.
	D: The importance of farming and agriculture to the economy
	E: A list of top ten healthy meat and dairy recipes

## **3. Media Strategy**

As part of its campaign, the Vegan Group has also cited a report stating that the public's consumption of meat and dairy is harming the environment.

Please rank the most appropriate media approaches below (1 = most appropriate, 5 = least appropriate).

	A: Host a press conference to announce your response to the ad campaign and state your case. Invite all media to attend.
	B: Contact a select number of trusted journalists and arrange to set up feature interviews with them in which you set out your key messages and evidence-based arguments.
	C: Contact a prime-time current affairs show and request a live debate between the heads of the two organisations.
	D: Issue a press statement to all media criticising the Vegan campaign and dismissing its arguments.
	E: No comment.

#### 4. Response to Media

There has been some discussion in the media regarding the sources of funding for the Vegan Group's campaign. The Vegan Group have not disclosed their sources.

During an interview, a journalist cites a recently published report in which it states that meat consumption must decrease significantly to avert a climate catastrophe. The journalist has asked you, as the representative for the Farmers Association, for your response to this report.

Choose the THREE most appropriate responses below:

	A: Highlight the fact lack of transparency in the Vegan group's finances.
	B: You agree that sustainable farming is important but this country has one of the most sustainable records in the world.
	C: Question the accuracy of the Vegan Group's Research
	D: Agree with the seriousness of some of the issues presented in the report but outline the health benefits of meat and dairy consumption.
	E: Present research and studies supporting meat and dairy consumption.

#### 5. Arguments

Your arguments should assist the interviewer and the listener/reader in understanding your key messages. Choose the THREE most appropriate arguments to support your key messages below:

	A: An emeritus professor of agricultural policy at Trinity College Dublin has said that Ireland's agriculture is mostly grassland based and there is no need for a reduction of 90% in meat consumption.
	B: A renowned economist from the London-based Institute of Economic Affairs, an organisation funded by the tobacco industry said that the potent combination of nanny state campaigners, militant vegetarians and environmental activists poses a real and present danger to a free society.
	C: Prior to the release of the findings of this report, the Irish Prime Minister had said that he was cutting down on his meat consumption and increasing his intake of vegetables.
	D: The Minister for the Environment, said it's really important that agriculture has a long-term strategy as to how it can contribute to decarbonisation and be competitive in an environment when people's choices and expectations may be different.
	E: A report published by a renowned environmental group has outlined a clear strategy for the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions in this sector in Ireland.

## 6. Aftermath

The immediate crisis is over and media attention has been diverted to another issue. Rank the most appropriate course of action for your organisation now (1= Most appropriate. 5 = least appropriate).

	A: Correct a journalist on one radio interview in which on one occasion, they used an incorrect name for one of your representatives.
	B: Assess and analyse the media coverage and the reaction of your stakeholders / audiences.
	C: Immediately launch a high-visibility campaign informing people of the benefits of consuming meat and dairy.
	D: Seek corrections in any significant inaccuracies in the media coverage.
	E: Conduct research to support your arguments and launch a campaign promoting the benefits of consuming meat and dairy products.

## **Appendix V – SJT II**

### **Situational Judgement Test II**

You are the Public Relations Manager/Communications Officer for an international technology company and leading producer of smartphones.

One of your phone products which is already on the market has been found to have a defect in the batteries. The company has already sold over two million devices but there have been reports of fires breaking out with some. As a result, all the phones now have to be recalled at a cost of over \$5 million.

Please respond to the questions below to explain how you would manage this crisis.

Please answer all questions with a view to what the best course of action should be and do not base your answers on your own personal beliefs.

#### **1. Research**

The first step in managing a crisis is to gather the facts. Rank the first steps you would take to manage this crisis in order of priority below.

(1 = Most Effective, 2= Very Effective, 3 = Quite Effective, 4 = Slightly Effective and 5 = Least Effective).

	A: Check media (including social media) and analyse coverage.
	B: Find out what the best practice is in your organisation and check if there is a precedent for this activity here or in other countries.
	C: Pull together a crisis management team consisting of the most informed people in the organisation on this topic, brief them on the situation and acquire their feedback.
	D: Contact a journalist for an 'off-the-record' chat on the topic.
	E: Contact the people who have been affected away from the eyes of the media.

## 2. Key Messages

Your key messages should aim to present the organisation's business objectives.

Choose the THREE most appropriate key messages that you think would be most effective in your communication with the media (all three choices should be equal in importance).

	A: We are conducting an investigation which will result in the development of even better and safer phones.
	B: Our phones aren't the only ones on the market with safety concerns. There are some safety issues that we are aware of with competitor phones.
	C: We have launched an investigation into the problem.
	D: We can assure customers that there are no other phones or products at risk.
	E: A list of the Top five safety features of this product.

## 3. Media Strategy

You have conducted an extensive investigation into the issue and are now ready to release the results. Please rank the most appropriate media approaches below (1 = most appropriate, 5 = least appropriate).

	A: Announce a press conference and invite all media to attend.
	B: Contact a select number of trusted journalists and arrange to set up interviews with them in which you set out your key messages and evidence-based arguments.
	C: Contact a prime-time current affairs show and request a live interview on the topic.
	D: Issue a press statement to all media highlighting safety issues with competitor phones.
	E: No comment.

#### 4. Response to Media

In an interview about phone safety, a journalist has thrown you a curve-ball. The journalist has decided to ask you for your views on a recently published report from a reputable medical organisation into mobile phone usage. The report warns parents to limit screen-time for children due to health risks. The journalist has asked you, as the representative of a leading manufacturer of mobile devices, for your response to this report.

Choose the THREE most appropriate responses below:

	A: Dismiss the findings of this report
	B: You agree that monitoring children's phone usage is important.
	C: Question the accuracy of this research.
	D: Encourage responsible usage of phones amongst children.
	E: Highlight some of the benefits of phone use for children, once usage is controlled by guardians.

#### 5. Arguments

Choose the THREE most appropriate arguments to support your messages:

	A: The Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health recommended time-limits and a curfew on 'screen-time', but said parents need not worry that using the devices is harmful in itself.
	B: Experts say that looking at screens such as phones, tablets or computers in the hour before bed can disrupt sleep and impact children's health and wellbeing. Spending long periods on the gadgets is also associated with unhealthy eating and a lack of exercise.
	C: Parents are often told that gadgets can pose a risk to their children, but they can in fact be a valuable tool for children to explore the world. Nevertheless, screen time should not replace healthy activities such as exercising, sleeping and spending time with family.
	D: A review published by the British Medical Journal found "considerable evidence" of an association between obesity and depression and higher levels of screen time.
	E: Although there is growing evidence for the impact of phone usage on some health issues such as obesity, evidence on the impact of screen-time on other health issues is largely weak or absent.

## 6. Aftermath

The immediate crisis is over and media attention has been diverted to another issue. Rank the most appropriate course of action for your organisation now (1= Most appropriate. 5 = least appropriate).

	A: Correct a journalist on one radio interview in which on one occasion, they used an incorrect name for one of you representatives.
	B: Assess and analyse the media coverage and the reaction of your stakeholders / audiences.
	C: Immediately launch a high-visibility campaign informing people of the safety features of your phones.
	D: Seek corrections in any significant inaccuracies in the media coverage.
	E: Analyse the findings of the investigation and launch a campaign to communicate the findings and the new safety measures in place as a result.

## Appendix VI – Simulation Marking Rubric

Marking Rubric	Critical Thinking	Communication Skills	Business Acumen
	<b>40%</b>	<b>45%</b>	<b>15%</b>
> 70%	Clear and consistent evidence of an ability to present valid arguments, make quick decisions and problem solve evidenced in the response to questions.	Consistent demonstration of an ability to effectively present a valid argument and key messages clearly, in response to questioning from the interviewer.  Appropriately responds to difficult questions.	Consistent and demonstrable ability to represent the organisation's key messages throughout the interview.  Demonstration of a critical understanding of the organisation's business objectives and its marketplace.
55-69%	Some evidence of an ability to present valid arguments, make quick decisions and problem solve evidenced in the real-time response to questions.	Ability to present an argument and key messages, in response to questioning from the interviewer.  Responds to difficult questions well.	Demonstration of an ability to represent the organisation's key messages.  A critical understanding of the organisation's business objectives and its marketplace.
40-54%	Adequate knowledge of skills required evidenced in the real-time response to questions.	Adequate response to questioning from the interviewer. Some evidence of arguments and messages presented.	Reference made to the organisation's key messages.  An understanding of the organisation's business objectives and its marketplace.