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A model for value based public relations education in a diverse and poly-contextual society

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the merit of using a Value Based Education (VBE) approach to equip future public relations and communication practitioners with the values needed to adhere to ethical practice and foster these values in the organizations they will steward. The approach utilizes in-depth and sustained exposure to complex societal issues to instill an ethical, poly-contextually responsive and diversity sensitive consciousness in students. The need to sensitize future practitioners at institutions of higher learning to the professional requirements of this context and to the inclusive values needed to respond appropriately is an important priority in increasing their strategic relevance globally. This article illustrates how VBE was practically implemented through engaging public relations and strategic communication students in complex social issues such as the plight of economically marginalized communities, human trafficking, and migration. In this paper we propose a Value Based Education model for PR education, based on our experience of teaching Millennial students in South Africa.

1. Introduction

South Africa's emerging context offers an ideal example of the complexities presented by 11 official languages coexisting and jostling between a multifaceted African and Western worldview. Not only does South African's labor market favor men (Statistics South Africa, 2018) but exhibits high levels of racial inequality, income polarization with a few high-income earners and a small middle class, chronic poverty and low intergenerational mobility that primarily manifests amongst black South Africans, the unemployed, the less educated, female-headed households, large families, and children (Sulla & Zikhali, 2018). Sharp shifts in stakeholder expectations and business are compounded by reports of large-scale fraud, looting of state coffers, anti-competitive business practices including price fixing by monopolistic cartels and accounting fraud. Prominent examples include South African electricity supplier and public enterprise, Eskom and global brands McKinsey, SAP, and Steinhoff International. Against the backdrop of political and economic upheavals, the demise of British public relations firm Bell Pottinger and its expulsion from Britain's Public Relations and Communications Association (Alderman, 2017), elicited a call for stricter regulations in the industry by the Public Relations Institute of Southern Africa (PRISA) to safeguard against any further damage to the reputation and credibility of the profession in South Africa. Described as an aggressive reputation laundering firm, with despots and rogues as clients (Alderman, 2017; Segal, 2018), Bell Pottinger met its demise for the unethical campaign it ran on behalf of a private firm accused of involvement in state corruption. The campaign manipulated public opinion in South Africa to serve a narrow interest that fueled racial divisions based on inequality and a lack of economic transformation.

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The higher education space in South Africa went through its own watershed moment from October 2015 to October 2017 during the #FeesMustFall movement (Chikane, 2018). The movement, addressed issues of access to higher education for predominantly poor black students and a need for radically transformed, diverse and inclusive curricula. Students demanded free education that incorporated indigenous knowledge, an inclusive curriculum that accommodated all races, genders and classes of students. Students not only wanted a change in content but also the modes of delivery used. These were not evolutionary incremental requests but revolutionary demands sparking a change in higher education in South Africa as a whole.

Consequently, the South African context necessitates a redefining of roles and requirements of public relations practitioners, inculcating the relevant values and socio-cultural literacies for successful ethical practice. This requires knowledgeable and responsive communication practitioners that can work in a diverse context according to virtuous acts driven by their personal values and purpose, while also adhering to acceptable professional and inclusive values (Harrison & Galloway, 2005). Personal values are those standards, ideals and enduring principles stemming from “the moral knowledge” within a culture, which dictates behaviors as personally or socially desirable (West & Turner, 2010 p.279). Professional values are cumulative, often implicitly held principles about how work ought to be completed and circumstances dealt with, guiding professionals on undesirable and desirable conduct (Buchanan & Huczynski, 2010). The dissonance exhibited by younger Millennials between their aspirant values and the values that guide their professional behavior needs to be addressed (Oksiutycz, Azionya, & Benecke, 2018) by developing values based foundation for ethical PR practice, leading to what Edwards (2012) calls the change in “habit of mind” needed in public relations, with practitioners becoming ‘organizational activists’ (Holtzhausen, 2012).

The objective of this paper is to present a model based on our reflections on the use of value based education (VBE) through engaging in complex social issues in the development of the personal and professional values of emerging communication practitioners.

Zerfass, Verčič, Nothhaft, and Werder, (2018) assert that scholars working from emerging market contexts like South Africa provide perspectives that inform the cultural scope of communication research and practice, and issues that are not apparent to scholars working in different societies. We argue that South Africa offers a best-case example of contextual complexity (social, cultural, political, economic, and technological) and our model offers a novel way on how to bring the voices of the marginalized to bear in curricula and practice.

2. Identifying the values of South African Millennials

The focal generation for this paper is the 18 to 24-year Millennial student. This emerging-market young adult, attending tertiary education institutions, is an ambitious, aggressive social climber seeking the material dream using the golden ticket of education. A university qualification is seen as a means to overcome barriers to the material world, rise above inequalities and get a good job. We assume that students of a similar age experienced a common combination of circumstances such as technological developments (e.g. web 2.0 technology), various environmental conditions, historical events that may affect their behavior and cognitions (Jonck, van der Walt, & Sobayeni, 2017). For instance, South African Millennials born post the first democratic elections in 1994 do not have personal experience of living in apartheid in South Africa and are often referred to as ‘born frees’. However, they have a collective memory of the #FeesMustFall, movements that brought about free higher education in South Africa. The Post #FeesMustFall Millennial university student exhibits activist values particularly around poverty and access to opportunities as they directly relate to them (Chikane, 2018). Therefore, education and employment are key issues for them but with many being apathetic towards politics. They are less likely than older Millennials to participate in elections or engage in political activism (Amoateng, 2015). In work situations, South African Millennials value social relationships, authority, risk, creativity, (Jonck et al., 2017), flexibility and autonomy (Mofokeng, 2017).

Although South African Millennial university students are aware of the social issues (Halliday & Astafyeva, 2014) affecting South African society, they are generally removed from the reality of such problems because of their materialistic aspirations (Azionya, 2015; Oksiutycz & Kunene, 2017). Such aspirations draw their focus away from the experiences of marginalized communities and their residents. In fact, they seek ways to escape the realities of economically and socially marginalized strata of society. Additionally, student membership of formerly disadvantaged communities does not always translate into sensitivity when framing and delivering appropriate communication. Moreover, lack of exposure to work contexts creates a gap between the realities of working versus their imagined world of work. Thus, they are removed from the demands of performing appropriately in different contexts (NGO, government, community, corporate etc.). Wright, Marvel, and DesMarteau, (2014) point to a multiplicity of ethical decision-making frameworks that are used inconsistently by Millennials. For instance, although most self-report their decision-making approach as deontological or based on moral absolutes, results point to a more teleological framework rooted in relativism. Boyd (2010) posits that this is due to a need for self-gratification competing with a concern for society’s greater benefit. Therefore, junior Millennial employees exhibit a dissonance between the values that guide their behavior and their aspirant values. For instance, junior Millennial employees are more at risk of engaging in unethical behaviors than older generations (Wright et al., 2014). In this context, deciding on the emerging value system they will use to navigate future professional and personal interactions is an ongoing process while obtaining a university education. We argue that higher education is best placed to introduce a systematic and reflective approach for the inculcation of an ethical professional conscience, which is a career spanning learning process. As the first practical interface with the discipline, PR curricula are best placed to catalyze it, even if not fully form it, using VBE.

3. Value based public relations education

The question of relevance of public relations education in a contemporary world, which is characterized by ambiguity, change, diversity, poly-contextuality and social divisions emerging along new fault lines of truth and post-truth, has been a matter of debate in the field of public relations, with increasing attention being paid to the moral and social context of practice (Somerville, Purcell, & Morrison, 2011). New approaches that go beyond vocational and functional outcomes of PR education, have been described in different ways such as critical public relations (L'Etang, 2008), critical pedagogy (Somerville et al., 2011), transformative learning (Motion & Burgess, 2014), co-constructed learning (Willis & McKie, 2011) and value based education (McLean, 2012). They embrace innovative teaching methods including: authentic learning (Garuba, 2015), narrative inquiry (Eschenfelder, 2011) and experiential learning (Freberg, Remund, & Keltner-Previs, 2013; Werder & Strand, 2011). They argue for a diversity of views and perspectives in a classroom and the involvement of students and other stakeholders in educating public relations practitioners (Freberg et al., 2013; Willis & McKie, 2011) who can engage in complex social contexts in which they operate (Somerville et al., 2011) and consider the ethical implications of their solutions (Eschenfelder, 2011). These approaches also relate closely to a student-centered focus (Smart, Witt, & Scott, 2012) and problem-based learning approach (Piland, 2011), in which students are actively engaged in authentic learning experiences (Benecke, Malan, & Janse van Rensburg, 2019). The starting point on a professional journey, which for many begins in a college or university, is the need to develop awareness and knowledge of values, and the ability to reason and work with values (Woodbridge & Fulford, 2004). A VBE approach uses a communication curriculum as a "moral education" framework (McLean, 2012, Sellman, 2009) and reflective practices for professionalism (Mules, 2018) founded on the three pillars, namely, self-awareness, the awareness of others and professional values (McLean, 2012).

By using the lens of their own reality and their comprehension of it, their empathetic and critical interpretation of others' realities and their personal values, students can identify and respond appropriately to the values of others. In light of the reality of gender, economic and societal inequalities, Garuba (2015) argues that, curricula through contrapuntal pedagogy can bring knowledge of marginalized constituents of society to bear on teaching and praxis. This encourages the development of future practitioners whose morality is based on their own values, beliefs and decision-making skills versus instilling specific values in them (Barman, 1980) that are seldom adopted in practice. Therefore, the personal and professional values developed experientially in community engagement programs dealing with "wicked" problems during their studies, assist emerging professionals to navigate future contexts, develop valuable contextual knowledge and reflective capabilities on their professional identity, ethical performance and the purpose of PR. Therefore, a values-based approach to PR education adopts values as the basis for determining that which is or not deemed important and valuable.

Furthermore, Meyers and Nulty (2009) argue that authentic learning is a deep learning approach that produces high quality learning because of the interplay between the student's learning, the curricula and teaching methods employed. Authentic activities that introduce students to real world disciplinary related tasks of practitioners (Lombardi, 2007) help students to contextualize and assimilate content and develop professional skills. These skills are forged by open-ended problems without prescribed paths to solutions and that are open to multiple interpretations (Lombardi, 2007). Complex issues are tackled to demonstrate that complex issues do not have simple solutions, thus being called wicked problems. Consequently, the involvement of students in community engagement programs not only allows for these experiential opportunities but also develops valuable contextual knowledge and provides opportunities for reflection on a students' future role as practitioner in organizations and in society. Students are furthermore able to develop their confidence in presenting possible solutions to their learning communities as well as those they are aiming to assist with their strategies and plans (Piland, 2011). These aspects are explored within the context of the professional identity, ethical performance and purpose of PR.

4. Professionalism and personal values in PR

Professionalism in PR is equated to adherence to a set of professional codes of conduct (Skinner, Merhsam, & Valin, 2004; Meyer & Leonard, 2014) that promote externalized ethical principles to guide professional practice. However, they are not always subscribed to or practiced since adherence is a matter of personal integrity. The limitations of the set codes of conduct in a practitioner's everyday practice are emphasized by the Global Alliance for Public Relations and Communication Management. In the preamble to its Guiding Principles for the Ethical Practice of Public Relations, the document emphasizes the following: "A code of ethics and professional conduct is an individual matter that should be viewed as a guide to make sound values-based decisions". Harrison and Galloway (2005) and Lutz (2000) concur and elaborate that instead, common human values (such as caring, search for truth and pursuit of fairness and justice), can be applied to decision-making processes and used as justifications for outcomes involving stakeholders. Doubts around the sustainability of externalized values and their application in organizational settings necessitates a co-created and sustainable value system developed by an individual versus learned behavior according to a pre-determined set of values and ethics. Without deliberately incorporating this co-creative component in curriculums, the co-development of such values in future practitioners and ethical performance in practice will be lacking. Consequently, negative associations borne from the use of spin doctoring, propaganda and other unethical practices of practitioners (Zerfass et al., 2018) divorced from externalized codes of practice will continue to plague the profession unless addressed through the development of an intrinsic set of values by means of a VBE approach.

4.1. Ethical performance

Public relations scholars have long associated ethics with professionalism in public relations (Bowen, 2016; Fitzpatrick & Gauthier, 2001; Tryner, 2017) and suggested that ethical considerations should be applied to organizational, professional and societal levels of PR activity (Bowen, 2007). Ethics can be understood as a sense making device based on intrinsic moral values, which guide practitioner's conduct and choices. Applied to communication, these guidelines may be translated into such virtues as honesty, authenticity and openness (Bowen, 2016) fairness, care, authority, sanctity, freedom and loyalty (Tryner, 2017). However, these values are not easy to apply because PR practitioners need to reconcile their role as "a professional, an institutional advocate, and the public conscience of institutions served" (Fitzpatrick & Gauthier, 2001, p.192). To elaborate, when acting ethically, PR practitioners become the conscience of the organizations they represent (Bowen, 2016; Fawkes, 2012; Holtzhausen, 2012; Neill, 2016) by raising concerns about unethical behavior that can negatively affect stakeholders within and without the organization (Neill & Drumwright, 2012, p.221). As an organizational activist, the public relations practitioner acts as the internal organizational conscience and provides external stakeholders with the platform to voice their concerns and to highlight social issues, especially those experienced by marginalized groups (Wolf, 2013). This represents an acknowledgement that the role of PR and practitioners should transcend a set of narrow organizational interests (Fawkes, 2012; Gregory & Halff, 2017; Macnamara, 2012).

Therefore, not only does the practitioner take personal and moral responsibility by resisting conformity and normalizing practices (Ruf, 2005) but they take responsibility for their ethical behavior based on their agency (Bowen, 2016) and awareness of their importance to internal and external stakeholders. The sensitivity and awareness of this responsibility and the influence their decisions and actions have on a specific context, form part of the constructivist paradigm in which a student actively construct his/her own knowledge "rather than passively receiving information transmitted to them from teachers and textbooks" (Smart et al., 2012, p. 393). Advantages include the improvement to an organization's reputation as well as the PR professional's reputation and credibility (Bowen, 2016; Brunner, 2016), the development of relationships with stakeholders, the resolution of organizational issues and improved organizational effectiveness (Bowen, 2016; Le Roux, 2014). Consequently, PR increasingly recognizes that its remit goes beyond representing the interests of the client.

4.2. From organizational interests to societal interests

Involvement in social issues by PR practitioners has appeared under different names, ranging from communitarianism (Leeper, 1996), civic PR (Brunner, 2016), PR activism (Brooks, Wakefield, & Plowman, 2018; Holtzhausen, 2012) and engagement (Danesh, G.S. 2017). Brunner (2016), p.237) high lights the need for "ethical responsibility on the part of the professional to better serve the public good". Practitioner behavior and choices can be guided by the concepts of common values (such as caring, search for truth and the pursuit of fairness and justice), common good or public interest and social progress (Lutz, 2000, p.343). Thus, PR practitioners should look beyond ethical representations of organizational interest and use their skills and position to drive engagement in social causes. Halff and Gregory (2015) position PR as an essential social institution in mitigating market complexity. They further elaborate on the societal value of purposive and incidental conversations on matters of societal interest (Gregory & Halff, 2017) and the value of practitioners with inclusive worldviews in multicultural diverse contexts (Tindal & Holtzhausen, 2011). Tsetsura (2011) challenges PR practitioners to expand their understanding of diversity beyond ethnicity, national origins, gender or religion. Fostering such understanding in students will improve their appreciation of their professional role in a global and local context. This stance is relevant to South African society, which is a one of the most unequal countries globally and is still striving to overcome the historical injustices of apartheid. Currently, South Africa has numerous social problems that need addressing, such as poverty, access to good education, lack of adequate housing, crime, and different forms of discrimination and exploitation. Benecke and Oksiutycz (2015) suggest that PR practitioners are perfectly positioned for building the agenda for organizational involvement in societal issues. This process may include recognizing the cultural and scientific knowledge of previously devalued groups of people (Verwey, Benecke, & Muir, 2017). It also involves authentic representation of all groups when communication is framed with and for them, including the correct use of cultural symbols and language that resonate with these publics.

Fawkes (2012) links involvement in social issues to a fluid professional identity, expressed at an individual, organizational and national level, which places practitioners in circuit moments where communication is influenced by factors such as identity, representation, production, consumption and regulation. Hence, to this continuous and experiential approach, a cultural identity could be added, which is particularly relevant to culturally diverse countries such as South Africa (Tindal & Holtzhausen, 2011). Le Roux (2014) asserts that displaying an individual quality of cultural sensitivity and being able to act as cultural intermediary in a multicultural society has a positive impact on performance at a professional and an industry level. Tindal and Holtzhausen (2011) further highlight the high social value of PR practice as a differentiating feature of PR in South Africa, where practitioners contribute to social change and build a more equal society. Therefore, there is a need for ethically responsible practitioners who draw from a broad set of values that equip them to act as cultural intermediaries (Le Roux, 2014) who deliver a service that advances societal interests and social progress (Brunner, 2016; Lutz, 2000). Additionally, Tryner (2017, p.128) suggests that communication practices should draw from "a broad set of values, gaining strength through richness and diversity". Therefore, complex social issues require active citizenry and diverse stakeholder partnerships. Consequently, over several years of educating future communication and public relations practitioners we worked in collaboration with various partners such as charities, local government departments and intergovernmental organizations on projects that exposed our students to various social problems that affect society such as human trafficking, international migration, xenophobia and the stigma of mental health, just to mention a few.

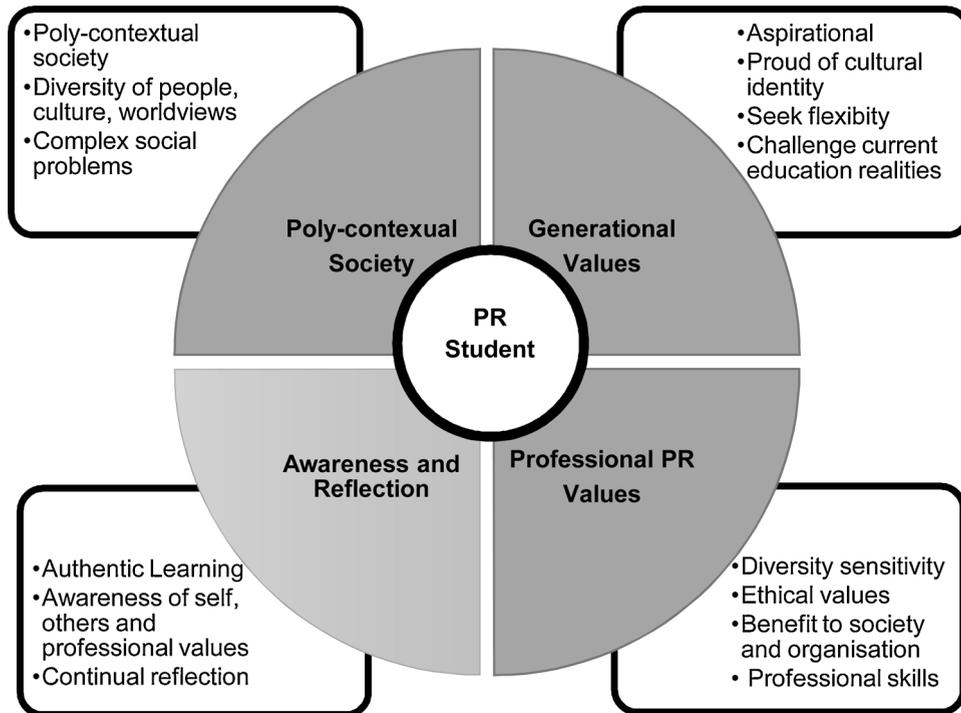


Fig. 1. Model for Value Based PR Education in a Poly-contextual Society.

5. A VBE model for PR education

From the review of the above literature, it became clear that several key elements should be taken into account when developing courses to educate public relations practitioners for the future. Firstly, the students' embeddedness and interrelations with society must be considered (Somerville et al., 2011), secondly generational values, generational idiosyncrasies and the aspirations of younger Millennials need to be taken into account as the learning is co-constructed (Smart et al., 2012; Willis & McKie, 2011) within communities of learning. Furthermore, contemporary PR scholars (e.g. Bowen, 2016; Fawkes, 2012; Holtzhausen, 2012; Neill, 2016) identified the importance of cultivating multifaceted professional values, knowledge, and an ethical mindset in future professionals. Lastly, based on a positive student feedback on our authentic learning and project based teaching (Oksiutycz & Azionya, 2017), we argue that a teaching philosophy focused on innovative ways of program delivery, which merges applied skills acquisition and theoretical learning and is based on engagement and deep reflection, is essential in achieving desired learning outcomes. Based on these insights we developed a student centered values based PR education model aimed at responding to the needs of a diverse poly-contextual society.

The Model presented in Fig. 1 is divided into four quadrants. It takes into consideration the above conceptual discussion and previous empirical studies on South African Millennial PR and communication students experience of authentic learning methods. Previous studies (Oksiutycz & Azionya, 2017) showed that the students who engaged in projects based on real life complex problems and worked in multidisciplinary teams, reported a positive learning experience in terms of acquiring specific skills and achieved better pass rates. The student's voice is illustrated using data collected in another study (Oksiutycz et al., 2018), through a simple random sample of 45 short reflective essays about an International Organization for Migration project on human trafficking and informal settlements, drawn from 175 essays written by the class of 2017 and a focus group with four students from the 2016 and 2017 cohorts. The focus group discussion was recorded and transcribed. The data were analysed using the Brinkmann and Kvale (2015) approach to thematic analysis. It involved reading the data, selecting natural units of text, coding natural meaning units into simplified terms; that were analyzed according to the purpose of the study and, then significant themes were identified and presented as descriptive statements. The study used an inductive approach, without predetermined categories or codes (Sunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2003). The model incorporates pertinent elements from McLean's (2012) VBE model, which was envisaged for midwifery and nursing curricula, specifically to encourage the formation of empathetic values. The need to develop professional PR values in a poly-contextually diverse society amongst students signals the importance of developing empathetic values in them and reinforces the value of McLean's model.

5.1. Poly-contextual society

This quadrant focuses on introducing students to diverse people, cultures and worldviews and contextual complexity. Through

VBE Millennial students expand their awareness of the poly-contextual nature of the environments in which they will operate in as professionals by being attuned to the complexity of social, cultural and even political relations within the communities they engage with. Students had this to say regarding cultural norms:

"Entering 'houses' that had both a man and a woman, we experienced cases where the woman would not want to speak to us and preferred that the man of the house speaks instead. This opened our eyes to the kind of culture that exists among these communities."

Applying a VBE approach creates the awareness of the range of socio-economic circumstances, often achieved by comparing the circumstances of different social strata with a student's own situation. Value based education can foster an awareness of diversity and leads to a deeper understanding of those issues that were previously only understood on a superficial level, such as poverty, migration or being victims of xenophobia (Oksiutycz et al., 2018). This was evident from comments made by students involved in an informal housing survey who said:

"I had an emotional experience with one of the interviewees who lives with six family members in a two room [the entire dwelling is two rooms] and does not know any form of privacy."

"Interacting with people on a more personal level helps you understand their perspectives and their thought processes. Interacting with different people with different values, backgrounds and education levels that differ from mine was an eye and mind opening experience"

Thus, it can be suggested that the learning environment should be designed with the intention of engaging in a broad spectrum of societal issues and creating opportunities to interact with diverse communities from different strata of society. The diversity should reflect both the profiles of the community and the students enrolled in the course. Interaction with others and practical immersion in the issues that are important to the students and broader society become an opportunity for students and educators to recalibrate their knowledge of diverse cultures and find meaningful ways to include the broad spectrum of issues in the teaching and learning experience. Such an approach is a departure from traditional PR teaching, which is centered on teaching theory with a limited opportunity to implement or discuss it in authentic settings.

5.2. Awareness and reflection

Oksiutycz and Azionya (2017) identified that authentic learning through engagement in complex societal issues is valued by students as a learning approach. Therefore, this quadrant uses authentic learning to catalyze student's awareness of self, others and professional values using continual reflection. Oksiutycz et al. (2018) research on the role of VBE in the development of professional PR values among Millennial students further highlighted that the students' involvement in issues that are not part of their everyday life experience such as modern slavery, illegal migration and living in informal settlements, influenced their sensitivity to and awareness of the other, which is an element of McLean's model of VBE (2012). Our VBE approach focused on authentic learning projects, which made a significant impact on the development of students' personal values (Oksiutycz et al., 2018) and resulted in a re-defining of some of their career goals. For example, several students have decided to pursue a career in the not-for-profit sector, while others consciously engage with various social issues through informal charitable acts, volunteering and becoming social activists.

"It completely changed my perspective. I don't want to work with brands like Coca-Cola, Nike, Apple, I want to use the power of purpose driven communication to bring about change."

Participating in authentic learning projects enables students to learn practical skills that can be applied immediately with reflective learning as an embedded approach.

5.3. Professional PR values

This quadrant ties in with the second dimension of a VBE (McLean, 2012), namely, the instilling of professional values. We expand this notion to include ethics and professional skills. Engagement in complex social issues within the VBE framework provides a platform for students recognizing the role of communication practitioners not only as organizational actors but also as important social actors. The engagement in complex social issues facilitates a journey of discovery about the PR profession, ranging from reflections on its purpose to the context in which communication skills can be applied on a practical level. One student said:

"I realized that strategic communication can bring about a lot of change."

Others indicated how participation in the hands-on project based on the complex real-life issues enhanced their professional skills. One student recounted the situation where, as an intern, she was given a task and recognized that her involvement in the joint project with the International Organization for Migration on creating awareness of human trafficking gave her skills to complete the task:

"I realized I can actually do this."

These interactions are enabled by multi-directional communicative acts. Communication therefore becomes interactive, participatory at all levels and an omnidirectional diachronic process of meaning development that represents an ongoing and complex process of learning (Van Ruler, 2018). Public Relations students in a diverse society like South Africa should attain a deeper

understanding of communication processes, such as the need to use a variety of communication tactics and approaches corresponding to the diversity of audiences and ultimately engage in communication practices and messages reflective of South Africa's multi-cultural and socio-economic diversity. This expanded view of the purpose of PR as an important contributor to all aspects of societal needs should reflect more prominently in PR education and nurtured within the set of professional values of Millennial and Gen Z (upcoming generation) students. Our pedagogy takes the context, the professional values of PR and the generational values of our students into consideration and actively engages our students in reflection to challenge their existing values and encourage a co-creation and where appropriate, a recalibration of their budding professional value systems.

5.4. Generational values

Students admitted that, if they had not participated in these projects, they would not have engaged in these issues because they are outside the usual sphere of interest of South African Millennials (Oksiutycz et al., 2018).

"Young people our age, we really don't speak about social issues."

"At first I wanted to finish the project because I wanted to put something on my CV. My perspective about the project and my drive completely shifted. I realized I not only have to put effort but my heart into it."

Value based education has a potential to spark in the participants a concern for social issues and an engagement in personal activism, which suggests that labelling Millennials the "selfish generation" may not be entirely justified. We also argue that with the student being at the center of the model, it is also necessary for educators to understand the generational values of the students they teach. Student centered learning acknowledges prior or own knowledge individuals bring to a learning community; allows for continuous reflection on what is known, what needs to be known and what was learned; enables collaboration with others within the learning community to solve 'real-world' questions; and finally, uses collaboration to find a shared vision (Smart et al., 2012).

6. Recommendations for further research

The merits of a VBE approach, particularly as they relate to preparing future practitioners for the realities of ethical practice in emerging market contexts like South Africa or the highly mediated global environment most organizations operate in are commendable. However meritorious the approach, it does not offer concrete answers to dilemmas such as whose values should we teach students? Do we teach western value systems or value systems that are indigenous to the operational contexts of the organization? If we teach indigenous values, how do we incorporate a global perspective in a meaningful manner, which considers the complexity of trans-regional and global business? What elements should be present in a curriculum to co-create a responsive organizational conscience? Does the answer lie in developing a sensitivity towards the nuances present in cultural, gender and ethnic diversity rooted in a deep understanding of the socio-economic and geopolitical lived worlds of others?

7. Conclusion

This paper highlighted the value of a Value Based Education approach to foster an ethical conscience that is responsive to diversity and poly-contextuality in future public relations and communication practitioners established on exposure to multifaceted societal issues. With the proposed model, we argue that the recalibration of the students' existing preconceptions, notions and most importantly, their values to be sensitive to that of others happens during learning opportunities founded in real world complex societal issues. It confronts students with the realities of others and require solutions using their professional skills. This approach utilizes the student's personal values as they relate to the values of others while enacting their roles to guide knowledge creation, skills for praxis and ethical decision-making (Woodbridge & Fulford, 2004). The model suggests that the re-norming process facilitates the discovery of and reflection on rich contextual information that challenges and deepens their understanding of the complexity of the issues and the gaps in the knowledge of others. Consequently, exposure to this type of learning environment catalyzes the emergence of inclusive and empathetic values. These inclusive empathetic values form the basis of ethical practice that form the secondary aim of a VBE approach. Specifically, a VBE approach aims to equip students with the tools for being the ethical conscience for the organizations they will steward and lead by example with ethical professional behavior. The need to sensitize future practitioners at institutions of higher learning to the professional requirements of this context in contemporary society and the inclusive values needed to respond appropriately is an important priority in increasing their strategic relevance in South Africa and other parts of the world.

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