Playing a critical role: Experiential learning resources and analytical media studies in higher education

Kristin Demetrious
School of Communication and Creative Arts
Deakin University

This article compares two Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) used in the Faculty of Arts, Deakin University Australia, and investigates the relationships between technology, pedagogy and key issues in the teaching and practice of public relations, in a media studies context. The online role-play 'Save Wallaby Forest' and the e-simulation 'PRessure Point! Getting Framed (GF), in their different ways, afford learning environments with capabilities that present public relations and media students with opportunities to discover a critical consciousness, break out of naturalised world-views, and explore alternative approaches to organisational communication. Furthermore, they present students with complex ethical issues to investigate based around the idea that media industries are powerful discursive producers and reproducers of social norms, values and beliefs which in turn shape notions of identity and influence the formation of public opinion in society (Fairclough 1999; Habermas 1995). This article explores the intersections and differences between these distinct ICTs in their relationships to a constructivist learning approach and ethical questions about how public relations both produces and reproduces world views through practice. This interacting nexus – between technology, pedagogy and theme – is significant because "what happens in the learning process" relates to the learning outcome and therefore has the potential to develop holistic reflexivity in studies of public relations (Laurillard 2003, p.42).

Spinning out: Pedagogy in studies of public relations

From an educational point of view, it is important for teachers of media to present students with opportunities to learn how communication is both structured and ideologically invested and can be used by organisations as a powerful instrument to further self-interest. Indeed, according to critics of public relations, the potential for powerful, resource-rich organisations to use communication uncritically or unethically in the pursuit of self-interest is profound. Stauber and Rampton (1995), for example, argue that public relations practioners bow routinely to their employers, leading to unscrupulous behaviour and deliberate harm to the reputation of the opposition. They cite 'greenwashing' as an example of unethical public relations intended to convince the public, through various forms of representation that a corporation is acting in an environmentally responsible way (Stauber & Rampton 1995, p.125). Similarly, Beder, (1997, p.34) argues that the public relations practice of 'astroturfing', or the deceptive manufacture of public support for corporate programs, is accelerating with the proliferation of new information technologies and techniques. As graduates entering the professions of public relations and media production, an understanding of these deceptive practices will help them to develop value-based ethical competencies necessary to make sense of the powerful and sometimes negative effects that these industries have on the agency of less dominant groups and individuals in democratic society (Breit 2007, p.341).

The object of public relations can be understood as the pursuit of ideologically invested discursive control over 'target publics' – and in this sense, the professional domain is ethically complex and hard to regulate (Stauber & Rampton 1995; Beder 1997). This discursive control is entrenched hegemonically and can be reproduced and distributed in mass forms through media industries and practices, such as the Internet, television and newspapers. According to Gramsci, hegemony is "the combination of force and consent" whereby the control appears to be "based on the consent of the majority, expressed by the so-called organs of public opinion" (Gramsci, original in Storey 2006 p.85). Fairclough (1999) also regards discourse as a relationship between language and social change that constructs and reproduces the ways in which people are positioned in society. His (1999, p.80) work investigates how the text interacts with the processes of discursive practice – that is the text's production, distribution and interpretation using the resources of a particular social space – to embed practices in ongoing social life. For Fairclough, the speaking subject who interprets and uses the produced text is the consumer. However, Fairclough argues that the extent to which ideology is hegemonically naturalised means some people do not know that they

are investing ideology in the production of texts. Domains such as public relations are the apparatus or mechanism of powerful institutional sites in the reproduction and naturalisation of discourse. For this reason, public relations graduates, as practitioners, are especially at risk of "knowingly or unknowingly, disseminat[ing] false or misleading information" and adding to the problems associated with this profession (Breit 2007, p.341, brackets not in original).

The ideas of Habermas (1995) provide an additional rationale for teachers of media to provide students with a means to achieve a deep and effective exploration of media production and power in society. In fact, he argues that public relations is especially problematic and insidious, more so than advertising, precisely because the public is unaware of its presence within the bourgeois public sphere. For Habermas (1995, pp.3-5), the idea of the public sphere, is as a centre of self-interpretation which, through discussion and debate, promotes the overall common good. But he argues that public relations mimics and undermines the original intention of the public sphere through the creation of 'news' anchored to commercial self-interest (Habermas 1995, p.194). As a result, consumers are given a false consciousness and believe that they are actually making a decision based on their own judgement about what is good for society. This is significant in a discussion of ethics and media power because, not only is it possible for discursive control to be hegemonically entrenched and the production of media texts to be unconsciously ideologically invested to advantage some groups over others, but also because for consumers the process is largely invisible and has enormous potential to undermine agency to deliberate and discuss issues surrounding the common good. Clearly, the theories of discourse and power (Gramsci, original in Storey 2006, Fairclough 1999, Habermas 1995) are important for providing undergraduate students with the critical tools to understand media structures and effects, but pedagogically, mediating learning in studies of public relations can take place in a myriad of ways (Laurillard 2003).

Laurillard (2003, p.13) argues that a central problem in university learning is that "students do not transfer their knowledge across different settings, and they often find it difficult to relate theory to practice, that knowledge does seem to be context-dependent". She argues that "[E]very academic subject faces this same kind of challenge, to help students go beyond their experience, to use and to reflect on it, and thereby change their perspective on it, and therefore change the way they experience the world" (Laurillard 2003, p.21). In fact Laurillard argues that academic learning, mediated through the teacher, is not just about acquiring knowledge but also the process by which this occurs. She argues that, firstly, it is important to situate learning in "the domain of the objective, and that learning activities must match that domain" (Laurillard 2003, p.24). Secondly, that "learning environments must be designed with features that afford the learning of precepts, the affordances for academic learning" "(Laurillard 2003, p.24). Lastly, "academic teaching must help students reflect on their experience of the world in a way that produces the intended way of representing it" (Laurillard 2003, p.24). Drawing on the work of Laurillard (2003), effective teaching strategies for abstract areas of study like public relations ethics would benefit by being situated in accurate contextualised, objective real-world settings, designed with features to afford learning and that encourage reflection.

Another effective way to mediate learning about the effects of media production and reproduction is through an approach that reflects democratic principles, such as the creation of capacities in students that enable participation, the provision of alternative viewpoints, and the debunking of notions of determinism. According to Hyslop-Margison (2004, pp.137-138), combined, these lead to "teaching practices that foster student agency and encourage political involvement". In practice, Shapiro outlines a social constructivist method to achieve this and describes these five constructivist principles:

- Student perspectives are valued and used in an organic process to feed new learning approaches appropriate for the individual students
- Lessons should be structured to challenge students' assumptions
- Recognition that students must attach relevance to the curriculum. As students see relevance in their daily activities, their interests in learning grow
- Lessons should be structured around big ideas, not small bits of information
- Assessment of student learning in the context of daily classroom investigation, not as separate events (Shapiro, 2003, pp. 337-8).

In the teaching of the ethics of public relations and media production, the pedagogical approaches outlined by Laurillard (2003), Hyslop-Margison (2004) and (Shapiro, 2003), with their shared notions of learner empowerment through interpretative, experiential and real world context-based learning environments that encourage reflection, provides a satisfying counterpoint to the study of hegemony and discursive control that creates passivity in citizens. Later, in my analysis, I apply these notions to two different ICTs and investigate if, and in what ways, the interacting nexus between pedagogy and theme

has the potential to strengthen studies of public relations by bringing to life institutional relationships to individuals (Abercrombie, Hill & Turner 1994, p.201). However, first I describe these technologically distinct, but thematically related, ICTs.

Students: Actors or spectators in the public sphere?

'Save Wallaby Forest', an online role-play and the eSsimulation 'PRessure Point! GF' are ICTs used in the Faculty of Arts at Deakin University centred on providing on-campus and off-campus (distance) students with an opportunity for social and professional practice in an experiential workplace learning context. This section describes each ICT works and how they have been used in the classroom

Save Wallaby Forest: Online role play

Save Wallaby Forest is an online role-play that aims to give depth of understanding to different theoretical perspectives and relationships between groups in society. The learning exercise was built originally in 2003 using *WebCT Vista* learning management system (now *Blackboard Vista*), a flexible and adaptable technology where new components, such as video, dummy websites, additional pages or discussion groups, can be added in without disturbing the logic of the original learning design and template. In the exercise students of public relations are asked to consider the theoretical perspectives that shape the social and political views and the discursive production of texts, and their distribution, within different organisations in a simulated exercise. In particular, this online role-play casts students into a local planning debate as public communicators in order to give them an insight into the complex process of text production and its relationship ethics and other groups in society.

The role-play is designed around a simple but effective narrative and linear progression. Students work in groups as either 'developers' or 'activists', and must organise to prepare a submission and attend a public meeting to convince the Council to either reject or accept a planning application that will facilitate the construction of 600 houses in a 40-hectare tract of land called Wallaby Forest. Participants in the role-play are anonymous and randomly divided into two groups. Anonymity was designed to afford the student freedom to experiment with identity in that ways that would lead to a greater level of involvement. In the first step of the role-play, participants, as individuals, are given generic information about the planning dispute scenario via a four-minute video and two mock websites that house media releases and other information that helps form the identity and values of the two groups. Participants are then asked to research their particular theoretical position through relevant and informative hyperlinks to web information. Once allocated as 'activists' or 'developers', participants are provided with detailed 'role profile' description relating to their group, and a task to complete. The task is to produce a 500-word speech to post at a public meeting. Finally, after the two groups have posted their speeches representing different their perspectives, they are encouraged to critique each other's position. In the reflective discussion, students are asked to consider the theoretical perspectives that shaped the social and political views as well as the discursive production of any texts and their distribution in the exercise.

The role-play uses a four-step structure to move students logically through the complex task of understanding the debate, forming a group, completing a shared task, evaluating the experience, and linking it to the theory. For example:

1. *Introduction and scenario review*: students familiarise themselves with the Save Wallaby Forest video and mock websites set up for the Developers and Activists.
2. *Planning*: Students are randomly allocated to an Activist or Developer group they:
   • study 'Your Role Profile'
   • familiarise themselves with frameworks of Marxism (for activists) and pluralism (for developers)
   • join in a group discussion area to prepare group submission to present at the a Public Meeting (500 words)
3. *Performance*: students present the group submission at the Burralinga Public Meeting. Group members can now critique the other group's speech and make additional points – just as in a real public meeting
4. *Debriefing and assessment details*: The role-play is over. Students go to the discussion area to debrief with the groups, and process the experience. They find the ' Assessment 1 Details' which as individuals, they need to complete for this assessment.

The narrative for Save Wallaby Forest originated from my knowledge of local planning debates and was developed from a face-to-face classroom exercise, in which 'public relations' was examined from the point of view of a community action group. Over three years the role-play has been modified and changed

in line with student feedback and the experience of doing. In its 2006 run several new elements were added. In particular, the inclusion of a series of interruption events or unpredicted dynamics such as the *Metro Daily* reporter Peta Ellison asking for both Activist and Developer groups for some additional copy and a new slogan. Another interruption event was the creation of a mock account in the name of Councillor Cathy Engerdeen, the mayor of the fictional town in which the debate was set. She posts a message that implies that the groups have contributed a level of mischievous misinformation in the debate. Therefore, the role-play components are updated on an ongoing basis. The online participation, which takes between 4-10 hours over several weeks, and essay contributes to 40% of students overall mark.

PRessure Point! virtual practice: An e-simulation

Built around the narrative and characters developed in Save Wallaby Forest, the e-simulation 'PRessure Point! Getting Framed (GF)"[1] also puts students in virtual workplaces, with a deadline and task to complete. However the different technology used to create this ICT opens up other possibilities and takes some new directions. According to Segrave, (2007, personal interview) " the Deakin LiveSim method for creating an e-simulation uses various Flash objects to assemble, house, control and render other Flash components and media assets (such as video, audio, images), presenting them on the screen as events defined by 'State' logic. 'ActionScript' and XML scripting are used to enable the LiveSim architecture to present the required behaviours of objects and the simulated events over time, in a series of system 'states' that respond to user interactions".

The idea for a series of Deakin e-smulations across several Faculties at Deakin University, designed around interactive virtual workplaces, was seeded in the successful online experiential learning resource developed for journalism students: HOTcopy. PRessure Point! Segrave says (June, 2003),

---

[1] Pressure Point Virtual Practice is the umbrella architecture that houses *Getting Framed: the construction of a media release*. In time, it is hoped other units offered in the Public Relations program at Deakin University will develop e-simulations within PRessure Point.

HOTcopy scenarios simulate 20-40 mins of journalism experience, crafting real stories while working to real-time deadlines. Assignments are delivered to learners from workplace characters. HOTcopy addresses professional skills through dilemmas challenging the knowledge, values and emotions of learners, inviting a new learning relationship, engagement in roles and situation knowledge-building.

However, in comparison to the technology used in PRessure Point!, Segrave (2007, personal interview) says that "the earlier HOTcopy architecture was simpler, generally built on a fixed time-line of events that included interactivity but few interdependencies resulting from user behaviour".

PRessure Point! GF draws on the HOTcopy template but develops a different treatment. For example, it is holistic in that it seeks to link three discreet scenarios by an interconnecting narrative thread of logic and action. Time and spatial arrangements are also different in PRessure Point! GF. For example, students are asked to perform the same task three different ways according to three paradigmatic approaches. Lastly, PRessure Point! GF seeks to motivate students to excavate knowledge about relations of power and to understand the discursive and social practices that embed the production, distribution and consumption of texts such as media releases. In this sense, PRessure Point! GF introduces more ambitious pedagogical outcomes than the development of a set of work related skills, although, unlike the online role-play Save Wallaby Forest where team work is central, it is designed as a 'stand alone' activity where individual students control the learning process.

PRessure Point! GF uses virtual technology as a teaching tool to shed light on the deeper questions about the ways actors reproduce frame paradigms using instruments of communication, and the consequences this has for communication and citizenship. In the e-simulation, the task of the student is to interact with the technology to play the role of the public communicator in a range of settings, each with the task of writing a media release, a central and powerful 'PR' document, based on three versions of the same event. Each media release represents and reproduces a different frame or way of seeing and understanding the world. To complete the exercise successfully, students need to have an understanding of the concept of 'framing' in media texts as a form of reproducing paradigms. They should also have the basic skills involved with writing a media release, (several online quizzes and activities are designed to prepare the students for this but housed separately). To complete the assessment, students need to participate in PRessure Point! GF and then draw on the media releases they produce to respond to an essay question. The two parts of the assignment are worth 60% of their mark.

In practice, students take 3 - 4 hours to participate in three separate sessions of the e-simulation. On completion they should have an understanding of unethical and undemocratic communication practices and their implications for citizenship in areas such as: 'greenwashing'; 'spin' and distortions; misinformation and 'astroturfing'(phoney front groups).

To commence the task, students select one of three sessions, business, civil or state. (The screen grab shown is from the civil session.) However, before they begin students they are exposed to extensive introductory information about the role they will play, including their age, job, background and information about the other characters they will encounter in the session. Students are also introduced to layout and features of their office in a dummy session, as well as given a detailed synopsis of the narrative action. On the interface, a media release workstation and transcription space provides a unique delivery of resources to help students to produce a virtually authentic media release. Other features the technology affords are a timer; a facility to copy text across to a media workstation, and a series of alerts/prompts and interruptions for students that provide information from a range of sources, such as telephone, face-to-face, email and television.

In PRessure Point! GF the students use the technology to situate themselves in three very different simulated workplaces – responding to the same task. This is a situation which would be awkward to achieve in other teaching settings such as face-to-face. The e-simulation enables the student to have a powerful virtual real-world experience, produce data in the form of media releases, and then to critically analyse their unique experience[2]

---

[2] For further information about the Deakin LiveSim experience access; Cybulski, J., Parker, C. M., and Segrave, S. (2006) 'Using contructivist experiential simulations in RE education', Proceedings of the 11th Australian Workshop on Requirements Engineering AWRE 2006, Adelaide, Australia, 9 December; and Cybulski, J., Parker, C. M. and Segrave, S. (2006) 'Touch it, Feel it and Experience it :Developing Professional IS skills using interview-style experiential simulations', Proceeding of the 17th Australasian Conference on Information Systems ACIS 2006, Adelaide, Australia, 6-8 December
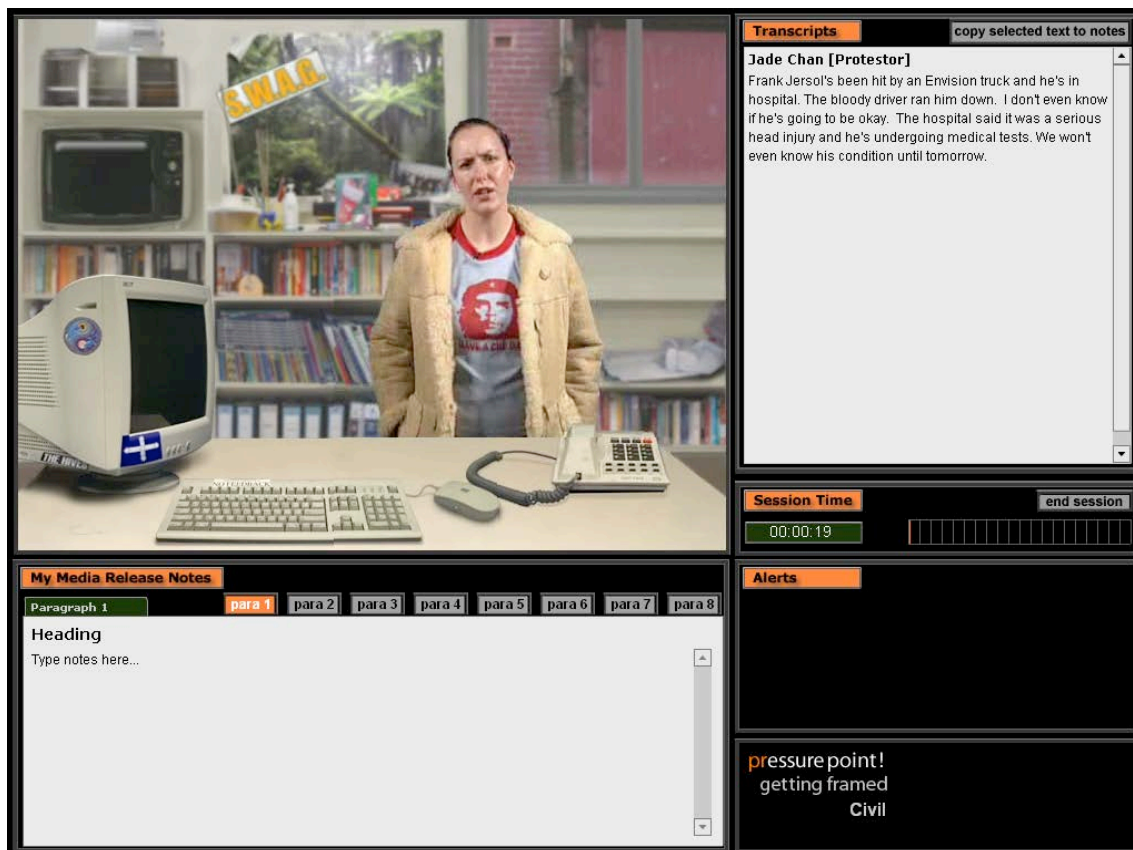
Virtually teaching: In practice

In this section, I draw on my experience as designer, teacher and moderator of Save Wallaby Forest and PRessure Point! GF to compare, contrast and evaluate their relationship to the core principles of democratic learning, (Hyslop-Margison 2004), the five constructivist principles described by Shapiro (2003) and notions of mediated learning outlined by Laurillard (2003, p.24). In particular, I evaluate the extent to which each ICT creates a learning environment that encourages participation, provides for alternative viewpoints, fosters student agency, encourages political involvement, values student perspectives, challenges students' assumptions and is structured around 'big ideas' in the context of daily classroom investigation. Finally, I analyse the teacher's and students' roles and the achievement of learning outcomes drawing on the theoretical discussion set out earlier in the paper (Beder 1997; Stauber and & Rampton 1995; Hager & Burton 1999; Gramsci in Storey 2006; Fairclough 1999; Habermas 1995; Briet 2007).

Overall, the two ICTs vary in the extent to which they provide for student participation and their active contribution to ideas, core principles of democratic and constructivist learning (Hyslop-Margison 2004; Shapiro 2003). Save Wallaby Forest, for example, draws substantially on student contributions in dialectic, collaborative and participatory ways to a greater extent than PRessure Point! GF. In the online role-play, the dialectic process is facilitated through interaction between the developers and activists at the Burralinga Public Meeting. This interaction leads to discussion, comparison and clarity of ideas around broad-ranging themes such as power, politics, economic development, environmentalism and the common good. But equally, there is evidence of a dialectic taking place within the groups as extensive peer discussion occurs to reach consensus in order to complete the set task. (A value of the online learning environment is individual postings serve as records). However, while there is evidence that students have found this process engaging and satisfying, it should be noted that for the teacher, the participatory dimension opens up potentially challenging territory, especially when groups disagree, for example, about the distribution of and commitment to work requirements. In my experience, the exciting pedagogical dynamics of the online role-play also place unexpected demands on both teachers and learners. Students' capacity to participate fully in the exercise can be affected by such things as distance for example, students that are located in different time-zones, or by an unwillingness to commit. Furthermore, like most group-work, Save Wallaby Forest is subject to the sometimes unpredictable social processes of membership formation that may affect the extent of a participant's inclusion or exclusion. Indeed, these dynamic and problematic factors influenced my decision to offer online role-play in the

post-graduate study area of Deakin University where smaller cohorts of around 40-50 students were a more manageable size for the learning activity.

PRessure Point! GF, while based around similar learning themes as Save Wallaby Forest, was developed for large undergraduate cohorts where students interact with the technology as individuals. As a result there is no collaboration with other students and therefore no dynamic interactions that lead to a dialectic to inform debate (Hyslop-Margison 2004). It is designed as a stand alone activity, precisely to address some of the limitations of the online role-play. However, while participation in the learning design is in this sense narrow, Pressure Pont! GF affords technical features that immerse students in the experience in other, highly engaging, ways. One is the inclusion of a visually prominently time-line that progressively diminishes from the moment students begin the activity. Another is the non-linear unfolding of information through for example, the appearance of characters, crucial to their task. Yet another is the inclusion of 'alerts', or text based tips that appear about how to write a media releases. These build complexity and pressure in the task that immerses the student. Lastly, there is the added imperative: the output of the sessions in PRessure Point! GF – three ideologically invested and biased media releases – are central to students' assessment. Therefore in PRessure Point, students' participation is encouraged through the learning design affordances and the complexity of the narrative, but not through the complexities of the rich dialectic and collaborative learning, particular to Save Wallaby Forest.

Nonetheless, there are significant intersections between these two ICTs that underpin commonalities. Both provide for students' exposure to alternative viewpoints and challenge assumptions. On the one hand, PRessure Point! GF gives students a rich triangular experience of considering alternative viewpoints by casting them into the role of a public communicator in three scenarios: civil, state and business. Save Wallaby Forest, on the other hand, gives students the opportunity to construct knowledge that is contested by peer debate in a dialectic process. Furthermore, both create the opportunity for students to interact with real-world unethical communicative activity, such as astroturfing and greenwashing, and compare alternative views about it, especially focused around the production of texts around themes of social change. This helps break through the discursive control or hegemony that leads to the naturalisation of views as described by Gramsci (in Storey 2006) and Fairclough (1999) and helps students to build and shape understanding of issues in ways that are deeper and more challenging. As a result, both learning environments enable students to create a far more nuanced understanding of ethics (Laurillard 2003, p.23). This is enhanced by objective learning characterised by diversity of viewpoints and multiple 'truths' (Laurillard 2003, p.24). In both ICTs, students construct a text, either as speeches and media releases, to compete in the public sphere and achieve status as a dominant truth (Habermas 1995 pp.3-5). Hence they participate in the process by which texts are ideologically invested and distributed. This powerful experience in turn, leads to a deeper understanding of how professional practitioners in areas such as public relations can unwittingly produce and reproduce spin which can frame opponents as the enemy and cause conflict and marginalisation in society (Fairclough 1999, p.80; Breit 2007, p.341; Stauber & Rampton 1995, p.125). However, in PRessure Point! student reflection on this point, necessary to facilitate contextualised "descriptions of the world" is not entirely facilitated within the ICT – rather the media release provides the student with data to use separately, as part of a written reflective exercise (Laurillard (2003, p.24).

The themes of both Save Wallaby Forest and PRessure Point! GF centre on media production and social change. In this sense, students' learning is structured around 'big ideas' such as the Habermasean concept of public sphere (1995, pp.3-5). These ideas are contextualised objectively within a real-world environmental planning debate, something that students could be familiar with from local newspapers or television sources (Shapiro 2003, pp. 337-8). In this sense, the ICTs attempt to foster student agency and relevancy that encourages them to transfer knowledge to different settings (Laurillard 2003). For example, students in Save Wallaby Forest and PRessure Point! GF get the experience of what is like to be a decision maker or a 'doer' in society – even if only in a benign, mediated sense. Although speculative, I think it is reasonable to assume that students' experiences with Save Wallaby Forest and PRessure Point! provide them with the idea that as individuals, they are able to participate in the shaping and development of the polity. In a similar way, the ICTs encourage political involvement, by giving students frameworks, such as communicative theory, to understand social events and cultures (Habermas 1995). However, a semester is a short time and a learning activity can only do so much. More generally, students' overall interaction with the unit content and themes are more likely to develop agency[3].

---

[3]At this point in time, limited data exists about students' experiences of PRessure Point! GF. However, data on students' experiences of the online role-play shows that it is an effective learning tool (Rice 2004, Deakin University Unit Evaluation 2004). Future discussion around these ICTs would benefit from a full investigation into the student responses to each.

In summary, both ICTs address different aspects of democratic and constructivist learning principles, however, I found that Save Wallaby Forest has more creative potential for students than PRessure Point! GF. This is because the role-play uses technology that facilitates communicative interaction and also because the dynamics of teamwork leads to greater opportunity for dynamic creativity and input by students. In comparison, PRessure Point! GF is more rigid. Students are pointed at the resources and aside from varying levels in their ability to write a media release, most will produce similar looking and sounding documents. However, PRessure Point! GF exposes students to more alternative viewpoints than the online role play which may lead to a richer learning experience. Moreover, in Save Wallaby Forest, the intensive moderation and input required by students and teachers offsets the value of collaborative, dialectic learning. Therefore, PRessure Point! GF, while less participatory, exposes students to a wide range of ideological views in a highly engaging way and can be used successfully with large groups. In effect, both ICTs have learning design characteristics that are appropriate to particular teaching conditions. Overall, they help students to break up the powerful naturalisation of world views relates to the learning outcomes to create critical thinking in engaging, authentic and reflective ways as discussed by Laurillard (2003), Hyslop-Margison (2004) and Shapiro (2003).

Conclusion

I have found that despite their different affordances, the interacting nexus between the ICTs Save Wallaby Forest and PRessure Point! GF, a constructivist learning approach and issues relating to the ethics of public relations, have significant implications for the teaching and practice of public relations. Critics of public relations argue that it has advantaged business interests in ways that encourage hegemony and unscrupulous behaviour, particularly in relation to the civil sector (Stauber and Rampton 1995; Beder 1997). A challenge for teachers of media studies is to design contextualised mediated learning resources and environments with the affordances that enable students to investigate such claims (Laurillard 2003; Hyslop-Margison 2004; Shapiro 2003). Save Wallaby Forest and PRessure Point! GF are learning resources that provide students with technology and pedagogy to discover, understand and describe these invisible discursive practices in effective ways (Fairclough 1999; Habermas 1995). In this exercise, students absorb and represent organisations' values and views from different ideological perspectives, both as producers and products of the text. One way or another, their opponents of the organisation become outsiders to be managed and categorised. Therefore, students find themselves in powerful positions whereby they can manage identities.

However, at the same both ICTs rupture the idea that there is a natural worldview, and in this sense they are powerful learning tools for complex studies of media. Furthermore, the fact that this is achieved using online learning resources is significant because it counters the view that that as a mode, it creates passivity and promotes "instrumental rationality or uncritical means/end reasoning" in students (Hyslop-Margison 2004, pp.138). Save Wallaby Forest and PRessure Point! GF show that ICTs can challenge ideological assumptions and teach students to explore relations of power in society in complex ways that lead to a critique of discourse and foster political agency. The knowledge students construct will assist them to develop ethical competencies and to further understand how media industries, such as public relations organisations, shape and reinforce discursive control over consumers and audiences by constructing definitions of what should be a 'reality' (Fairclough 1999). This interacting nexus – between "what happens in the learning process" and the theme of ethical media practice shows students how the activities as public relations practitioners affect society as whole. As a result, graduate students may develop powerful, new and integrated approaches to ethics that have the potential to develop reflexivity in the professional domain of public relations.

References

Abercrombie, N., Hill, S. and Turner, B. (1994). *Penguin Dictionary of Sociology*, Penguin Books, London

Beder, S. (1997). *Global Spin: The Corporate Assault on Environmentalism*. Scribe Publications, Melbourne.

Breit, R. (2007). *Law and Ethics for Professional Communicators*, LexisNexis Butterworths, Australia.

Deakin University: Unit Evaluation System: http://www.deakin.edu.au/unit_eval/results/general.php accessed 28 January 2004

Fairclough, N. (1999). *Discourse and Social Change*, Polity Press, Cambridge.

Habermas, J. (1995). *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere, An Inquiry into the Category of Bourgeois Society*, The MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts.

Hyslop-Margison, E. J. (2004). Technology, human agency and Dewey's constructivism: Opening democratic spaces in virtual classrooms. *Australasian Journal of Educational Technology*, 20(2), 137-148. http://www.ascilite.org.au/ajet/ajet20/hyslop-margison.html

Laurillard, D. (2003). *Rethinking University Teaching A conversational framework for the effective use of learning technologies*, Routledge/Flamer London & New York

Rice, M. (2004). ALR 276: *Public Communication and Citizenship Summary of 2003 Evaluation Findings*, TLSU, Learning Services, Deakin University, Geelong

Segrave, S., (June, 2003). HOTcopy simulations for learning professional journalism, *Training and Development in Australia* pp.6-9

Shapiro, A. (2003). *Case Studies in Constructivist Leadership and Teaching*, The Scarecrow Press, Inc. Lanham, Maryland and Oxford

Stauber, J. & Rampton, S. (1995). *Toxic Sludge Is Good For You! Lies, Damn Lies and the Public Relations Industry*, Common Courage Press, Monroe, Maine

Storey, J. (Ed.) (2006). *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture, A Reader*, Pearson Prentice Hall, Harlow England

Kristin Demetrious
Lecturer, School of Communication and Creative Arts, Deakin University
Email: kristin.demetrious@deakin.edu.au