**Mind the Gap:**

**Key Ethical Principles for Ethical Literacy in Public Relations**

Module 2/Lesson 1 Lesson Plan

*Christie M. Kleinmann, Belmont University*

**Overview:**

Public relations practitioners are encouraged to integrate ethics into the practice of public relations, but before that can be accomplished, practitioners need to develop an ethical public relations literacy. Public relations ethical literacy allows professionals to identify personal values as well as the values of others, understand the ethical orientations that shape our perspectives, critically analyze the appropriate ethical frameworks, apply the ethical principles, and evaluate the ethical decision. This lesson considers the initial steps for ethical literacy: identifying ethical viewpoints and understanding the ethical orientations.

Ethical public relations literacy begins with an understanding of the values that guide our decisions. These values determine how an individual judges ethical behavior; yet, many students have never considered the values that guide their action. This lesson then considers four ethical orientations or principles commonly used to guide ethical decision making: axiology, deontology, teleology, and situational ethics. Students will gain an understanding of these orientations and their influence on public relations practice. The lesson concludes with the realization that public relations professionals understand ethical situations differently. As a result, there is a great need for ethical public relations literacy to help professionals not only understand their own ethical orientations, but the ethical orientations of others.

**Learning Objectives:**

*As a result of this lesson, students will be able to:*

* Define the concept of ethical public relations literacy.
* Identify the four ethical orientations common to public relations practice.
* Describe the role of values in ethics.
* Explain the advantages/disadvantages of the four ethical orientations in public relations practice.

**Key Concepts:**

Axiology

Categorical imperative

Deontology

Ethical public relations literacy

Golden Mean

Higher and lower pleasures

Instrumental values

Situational ethics

Subjectivism

Teleology

Terminal values

Utilitarianism

Values

Virtue ethics

**Activities:**

1. Many students have never considered the values that guide their understanding of the world around them. A personal values assessment is a good tool to help students identify their core values. There are many assessment tools available online. One is the [personal values assessment](https://www.valuescentre.com/our-products/products-individuals/personal-values-assessment-pva)) from the Barrett Values Centre ([www.vauescentre.com)](http://www.vauescentre.com)). Students can complete the assessment outside of class and then reflect on how their values have guided their life. This activity is very introspective and helps students connect their values to their ethical judgments.
2. A second values-based activity allows students to see how their values compare with other students in the class. Students are placed in small groups. Each group represents a new organization who must identify five core organizational values that will guide the organization. Students are encouraged to begin by using their personal values identified from their own assessment. Each group will then present the organization’s core values and explain their importance to the ethical behavior of the organization.
3. Depending on the class size, students are divided into pairs or small groups and given one of the ethical orientations described in lesson one. If the class is large, the instructor may provide a specific aspect of the ethical orientation. For example, within teleology, one group may receive utilitarianism while another group may receive John Stuart Mill’s higher/lower pleasures. The entire class is given the same scenario and asked to approach the situation from their given ethical orientation. Instructors can use the scenario provided at the beginning of lesson one, the lesson one case study, or a scenario of their choice. The key in this activity is not to choose a “right” answer, but to discuss how different ethical orientations lead to different ethical judgments.

**Discussion Questions:**

1. How do personal values guide ethical behavior?
2. The axiology ethical orientation believes values are habitual and consistent. How might this approach impact public relations practice?
3. Using the deontology ethical orientation, explain the importance of intention to ethical action.
4. Discuss the advantages and disadvantages of utilitarianism in public relations practice.
5. How might the prevalence of subjectivism impact the perception of public relations as an ethical profession?
6. Why might ethical literacy be important to a public relations professional?

**Suggested Readings:**

Bivins, T. (2004) *Mixed Media: Moral distinctions in advertising, public relations and*

*journalism.* Mahwah, NJ:Lawrence, Erlbaum.

Fitzpatrick, K. & Bronstein, C. (2006). *Ethics in public relations: Responsible advocacy.* Thousand

Oaks: Sage Publications.

Gower, K. (2003). *Legal and ethical restraints on public relations.* Long Grove, Illinois:

Waveland Press, Inc.

Parsons, P.J. (2008). *Ethics in public relations: A guide to best practice*, 2nd ed. London: Kogan

Page.

Smudde, P. (2015). *Managing public relations: Methods and tools.* New York: Oxford

University Press.

Tilley, E. (2005/2009). The ethics pyramid: Making ethics unavoidable in the public relations

process*.* *Journal of Mass Media Ethics,* *20*(4), 305-320.

Wright, K. (1994) Examining ethical and moral values of public relations people, *Public*

*Relations Review, 20,* 225-231.