
International study tours and public relations pedagogy: Insights from a practice-oriented approach

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Abstract

Public relations learning and teaching scholarship has been largely silent, to date, about international study tours as classroom-extending pedagogical initiatives. We address this gap in the literature by discussing two recent international tours built into a Master of Professional Public Relations degree. Melbourne, London and Singapore were the destinations of the first tour, while Dubai, Abu Dhabi and Singapore were the stops on the second. We use autoethnography to give voice to our experiences . including challenges and successes . as the study tour coordinators. We argue that such tours play an important role in helping students appreciate the wider factors that impact diverse public relations practices.

Keywords

study tours; international public relations; public relations practice; postgraduate study; intercultural sensitivity

Introduction

Multiple scholars (e.g. Weaver & Tucker, 2010; Riggan, et al., 2011; Gomez-Lanier, 2017) have explored international study tours as classroom-extending pedagogical initiatives with the potential to bridge a perceived gap between theory and practice (Porth, 1997, p. 190). These tours have been tagged with varying terminology, including short term study trips and the outbound mobility experience (Gray et al., 2018; Hall et al., 2016, in Hall, 2018, p. 1). Here, we prefer the descriptor study tours for the sake of consistency. Despite such tours growing vogue in the wider academy, public relations teaching and learning scholarship appears to have been silent, to date, about these types of learning experiences. We address this gap in the literature by discussing two recent international tours built into a Master of Professional Public Relations degree. In the first case, the tour took students to Melbourne, London and Singapore. In the second, the students travelled to Dubai, Abu Dhabi and Singapore. In both cases, the students were exposed to public relations practice in diverse organisations in the corporate, government and non-government sectors.

The international public relations study tours were particularly valuable due to the fact that they were embedded in a rigorous academic degree. While the tours themselves included academic input – both informally and through formal teaching sessions – the emphasis was on discovering similarities and differences in public relations practice in local cultural settings. We considered it important not to conduct the tours as standalone activities, but rather to embed them in a preparatory course on global public relations. The assignments emphasised critical reflection on students' evolving understanding of differences in public relations practice across borders. Thus, we argue that these tours can play an important role in giving rich texture to students' appreciation of the ways in which various cultural and environmental factors (both national and organisational) impact on divergent public relations practices. Not only does this paper report on the triumphs and challenges of the trip; it also provides advice to other public relations educators wishing to plan similar study tours themselves.

The rest of the paper is divided into five sections. Background details about the Master's degree (containing the study tour), as well as the rationale for the tour, are provided first. The scholarly literature about study tours, as classroom-extending pedagogical initiatives, is then discussed. Next, the method (autoethnography) is outlined. Subsequently, the experiences of the study tour coordinators – both the successes and the challenges (before, during and after travel) – are canvassed using the autoethnographic approach. Finally, the conclusion discusses the implications of this analysis of study tours for public relations pedagogy and outlines avenues for further research.

Background

The study tours discussed here were undertaken in the context of a course – titled Global Public Relations Management – that was a compulsory component of the Master of Professional Public Relations (MPPR) degree offered by Massey University in New Zealand. The degree was designed for students whose background included not only an appropriate academic qualification but also a modicum (ideally two to three years) of professional experience. The degree was developed to offer an advanced credential to public relations practitioners who

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sought to refresh or extend their understanding of the dynamics of contemporary public relations. It aimed to integrate a wide range of practice-based insights with current research in a six-course program, taught by a combination of industry specialists and academics interested in addressing practice as well as theoretical issues. Student occupations ranged from self-employed public relations business owners to freelance consultants.

Teaching in the degree was carried out through weekend block courses, supported by online teacher-student interactions, with further assistance provided by the program leader as required. The three assignments in the Global Public Relations Management course comprised: (1) a case study of public relations practice in a selected country (most often one of the countries to be visited), (2) a profile of a public relations agency or the communications function of a government or quasi-government body, and (3) an extended reflection on the tour and the learning experiences it provided. All assessments were due for submission after the tour was over to enable students to concentrate on data-gathering and reflection, both individual and group, on their experiences while they were away.

The course had four learning outcomes. By the end of the course, students should have been able to:

1. Appraise and describe public relations' inextricable link with global media power, international marketing and emerging technologies;
2. Undertake a comparative study of public relations practice in different countries;
3. Evaluate the function of public relations in the context of national culture, diplomacy and politics; and
4. Develop appropriate public relations plans to address transnational communication problems and opportunities.

The rationale for the Global Public Relations course was multifaceted and began with Massey University's 2018-2022 strategy. This document claims that:

As Aotearoa New Zealand transforms, so too does Massey University. This transformation positions us to lead globally – Working together across disciplines and locations, we solve national and global problems through fundamental, applied and interdisciplinary research, while culturally and artistically enriching our world (Massey University, 2018a, para. 8, 9).

The tours also recognised the fact that public relations is a globalised industry, with the size of the international public relations agency sector estimated at \$U.S.15 billion annually (Holmes Report, 2018, para. 4). In this light, even if working at a distance from larger populations, New Zealand practitioners need to see themselves as global citizens (Israel, 2012, para. 1) who should equip themselves for possible outward-bound mobility (Kuys & Thompson-Whiteside, 2012, p. 2). As one student in Bardhan's (2003, p. 167) study commented, 'even if you are not working directly with someone from another country, the messages you produce are seen by members of all ethnicities. If you do not know about issues from other nations and cultures, you are likely to fail at what you are trying to accomplish'.

The geo-cultural nature of Aotearoa New Zealand itself was another factor in the rationale for the study tour. While the country has a vigorous public relations industry, with some firms being local subsidiaries of global promotional enterprises, and others being linked to various international professional networks, the country

itself is geographically distant from major centres of public relations practice and theory development. Auckland, the largest city, is polycultural, with 39 percent of its population being foreign-born (Tan, 2016); however, other urban areas are not so culturally diverse. Due to New Zealand's geographical location, there is a long history of citizens undertaking Δ Eq(overseas experience): an implicit recognition that exposure to other countries can provide experiences not available at home. The study tours examined here were built on that insight and arranged so as to offer students a smorgasbord of encounters with practitioners whose professional demands often reflected those confronting tour participants in their own work lives.

It was also considered important that students be able to identify not only modes of public relations practice in different cultural settings, but also those in varied media regulatory environments. The New Zealand public relations industry and the small, local public relations academy operate within the setting of a liberal, western-style democracy with a media sector largely governed by the laws of privacy and defamation. In contrast, public relations professionals in other countries must contend with the vicissitudes of tighter media regulatory frameworks, even where (as in the United Arab Emirates) the controls are more implicit than explicit. New Zealand public relations professionals should, the course designer assessed, not only be able to appreciate the contrasts but also to adjust their practice to take account of those developing media constraints in their own country driven by both economic and security-related concerns.

Literature Review: Study Tours

Multiple scholars have outlined the uses and benefits of study tours, which have been growing in number around the world. Hall (2018, p. 1) points out that more and more students are engaging in short-term overseas travel as part of their studies. Riggan, Gwak, Lesnick, Jackson & Olitsky (2011, p. 236) agree, asserting that short-term study tours are among the fastest growing of study abroad experiences and serve the largest percentage of students choosing to study abroad. However, as far back as 1997, Porth (p. 191) identified that:

Despite the growth of study tours, there is healthy scepticism about such courses. Fears often stem from a concern that the study course is more tour than study. This need not be the case – the study tour offers unique potential as a learning vehicle.

Tour participants may be able to enhance their cultural intelligence, defined as an individual's ability to function in various cultural contexts (Earley & Ang, 2003, in Wood & St Peters, 2014, p. 561). They may also be able to develop or acquire five global competencies described as follows by Oddou, Mendenhall and Ritchie (2001, p. 161, in Wood & St Peters, 2014, p. 561):

- understanding different viewpoints, and seeing things from a new perspective,
- managing uncertainty,
- being inquisitive and having curiosity or interest in people who are different than oneself,
- being willing to stretch one's mental maps, and
- being savvy and sensitive to cultural differences.

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At the same time, scholars have been wary of these learning experiences. Riggan et al. (2011, p. 236) are dubious, suggesting that these trips are potentially ill-equipped to promote in-depth experiences of another place and culture. They question whether short-term tours typically allow students to be transformed by their experiences or if these brief trips only serve to reify and legitimise preconceived notions and stereotypes about the world (p. 237). They argue, however, that such travel can offer benefits if it includes a critical reflection component. Drawing from Bruner (2005), they suggest that the term *reflexive tourism* is an apt descriptor for study tours. Given such reflexivity, tours can provide an opportunity for students to experience culture and appreciate the influence of cultural differences on business decision making (Porth, 1997, p. 193).

Ultimately, meeting the needs of today's learners in globalised world becomes a vital factor in establishing and running study tours. Kuys and Thompson-Whiteside (2012, p. 3) address the question of study tour length; in their analysis of three-week European study tours, they note that Sanders and Ward (1970); Goodwin and Nacht (1988), Oppen (1990) and Hutchins (1996) all reinforce the importance of broadening student experience through their total immersion in another culture, regardless of the duration. There is, contend Festgervand and Tillery (2001, p. 106), a responsibility that faculty members, administration, and the university as a whole must accept and satisfy for preparing students, as well as faculty, for the challenges and opportunities increasingly found in the global marketplace.

Therefore, the Massey study tour assignments were designed to move from descriptive accounts of public relations practice in a given country, and exposure to the operations of a selected public relations agency, to a critical examination of the insights acquired during the trip. In practice, one of the study tour coordinators found that students re-entering the academic environment, in some cases after a number of years, and juggling study with work commitments, often had difficulty demonstrating the required critical appraisal. They could readily identify learnings for their professional lives and apply those to their day-by-day concerns. They could also take note of some barriers to the kind of media freedom experienced in New Zealand and Australia, such as unwritten rules of the game (Scott-Morgan, 1994), which underscore expectations that public announcements or commentary will not upset the political *status quo*. However, the students' evaluations often fell somewhat short of the critical thinking expected at Master's level. This could be due to several factors, such as a lack of training in critical evaluation during undergraduate study, discomfort with a rigorous evaluative approach, or a lowest-common-denominator style of tackling assignments. For future study tours, students should be taught, or reminded about, how to undertake critical thinking as applied to their experiential learning. This should, we propose, become part of pre-departure preparation, and even form the basis of a short assignment undertaken before the tour.

In contrast with Riggan et al.'s (2011) characterisation of short-term tours as inadequate in providing an in-depth learning experience for students, we contend that such tours play an important role in giving rich texture to students' appreciation of how various cultural and environmental factors (both national and organisational) impact on divergent public relations practices. They enhance the international and multi(inter)cultural perspectives that can be offered in public relations education (Bardhan, 2003; Fitch, 2013), and help meet students' desire to engage in international experiential learning. For many faculty members and their students, a long-term visit to another country (or countries) may be infeasible for reasons such

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as timing and cost. Those wanting a more extended experience may be best suited to a traditional study abroad programme. For others, however, a 10- to 14-day tour (as was the case for Massey) with a busy schedule was more than sufficient. It allowed for meeting and hearing from a wide variety of practitioners in organisations as varied as a major theme park to a huge government communications service. Albeit a ~~fast~~ this intensive experience enabled students to form some interim judgments about differences in public relations operating environments and the resultant practice demands, providing professional interactions that students as individuals could not have arranged for themselves.

Method

In critically examining the successes and challenges entailed in the running of the study tours as part of the MPPR degree, this paper uses autoethnography to give voice to the experiences of the study tour coordinators. This method refers to the use of analytical self-narrative: that is, ~~the~~ the use of the self as a source within a narrative form that portrays some aspect of lived experience (Hinckley, 2008, p. 79). In this instance, the autoethnography comprises our ~~our~~ i.e. the study tours ~~our~~ organisers' self-narratives provided about pre-, in- and post-travel experiences. The method has been selected because it is the best approach for achieving the paper's aim: sharing critical insights from the organisation of such international public relations study tours. Unless otherwise stated, both of the study tour coordinators' experiences have been merged together (as one voice) and written in the plural first person in the following section.

Results: The Experiences of the Study Tour Coordinators

Preparing and undertaking these study tours involved a range of requirements: organisational, legal, financial, and logistical, among others. Some of these we could foresee, or were required (by university guidelines and other regulations), to plan; others we could not have foreseen. We hope that the following experiences, compiled autoethnographically, will benefit other public relations educators wishing to undertake similar tours themselves. A range of experiences, large and small, before and during the tours, are outlined in the following sub-sections.

Pre-Travel Experiences

University approval processes were arduous, even though the tours were a core component of the Global Public Relations course, which ~~like~~ like the whole degree ~~had~~ had received both internal and external accreditation. In particular, the tour organisers needed clearance from the risk management office, which took a very conservative approach to risk mitigation. We agree with Hall (2018, p. 2) that developing an international study tour demands ~~a~~ a huge amount of work ~~not~~ not only logistics and budget management, but also designing the day-by-day student experience.

It is not easy to arrange appointments for students with key practitioners based on the other side of the world. Schedule arrangements relied on a mix of ~~old~~ cold calling (by phone and email) and approaches to personal contacts within the organisers' networks. Differences in time zones (especially when calling potential hosts) needed to be taken into consideration in this regard; often, we ended up making phone calls well after close of business (local time) and, indeed, late into the night. We were

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conscious of the need to offer students a mix of organisations . government, non-government, corporate, and academic, as well as local, international, and multinational . in the cities that we visited. High-profile organisations were usually approached first; although these were able to be secured in a number of cases, we received more negative than positive replies, and were obliged to find other organisations to approach. Inevitably, the programme needed to be flexible to a degree. Although three to four visits were scheduled each day (taking into account time for travel, eating, etc.), sudden changes necessitated quick adjustments. In one case in Singapore, an appointment was cancelled at the last moment.

Student preparation included a combination of classroom orientation, teaching about the theories and principles of global public relations, and issue-specific advice. For example, the 2018 tour visited the United Arab Emirates during the holy month of Ramadan, during which time devout Muslims fast from sunrise to sundown. Offices and retail outlets may observe limited hours and close during prayer times. (The schedule of visits had to be adjusted to suit this.) One of the tour coordinators developed an information sheet for students to help ensure that all tour members respected Ramadan practices and behaved appropriately. (Another information sheet was developed about observing Singaporean cultural expectations.) We recommend that prospective tour participants are given written, situation-specific guidance so that they can refer to, and meet, key cultural and religious expectations when outside the classroom. (We realised, of course, that sometimes this sort of guidance will inevitably be neglected; some students forgot the points mentioned on these documents, and were either chided for their faux-pas by locals . in Abu Dhabi, for instance, in terms of the observation of Ramadan . or realised their own lack of intercultural sensitivity at particular points on the trip in relation to specific cultural protocols.)

In-Travel Experiences

Study tour organisers should be aware of the multiple challenges that their students will encounter on the trip. Fundamentally, meeting students' needs must be the key priority; that is, organisers must ensure that students are kept healthy and well, fed, hydrated, and able to cope with travel and shifts in time-zones, as well as demanding hours (bearing in mind early starts and late ends to particular days). Not only that, they must also ensure that students' emotional needs are met (in challenging situations), religious needs are met (in being able to observe particular religious protocols or customs) and occupational needs are met (in being able to undertake video-meetings, reply to emails and call their teams or staff members) while on the journey. In this respect, tour organisers would do well to be *servant-leaders* (Greenleaf, 1977): leading by prioritising others and their needs.

The availabilities of the different organisations' hosts were another key factor that, collectively, shaped the tour significantly. We acknowledge that the sequence of meetings and events structured the participants' experiences (Riggan et al., 2011, p. 247) and therefore may have coloured some of their perceptions. However, this structuring is an inevitable concomitant of the practical need to arrange a schedule that meets the students' academic needs, engages their interest and respects the time commitment being made voluntarily by willing practitioners in other countries. In one case, that of the UK Government Communications Service, the commitment extended to an entire, richly informative afternoon, whereas most meetings were one to two hours long.

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The programme of meetings and events was complemented by opportunities to explore informally aspects of the different cities visited, such as shopping districts, tourist sites and leisure facilities. These opportunities are vital. As the daily schedule was intensive, with appointments sometimes occurring late in the day, these more spontaneous occasions helped mitigate the pressures of moving quickly from one session to another. As Hall (2018, p. 6) observes: 'The academic pursuits, cultural engagement, and free time need to be mixed appropriately and strategically timed throughout the overall tour'. At times, although some group dinners were arranged (and paid for as part of the tour cost), it was challenging to maintain some cohesion in the tour group, as, on occasion, individuals sought to pursue personal agendas in free time. This is to be expected, as the students have contacts (personal or work-related) in different cities around the world who they want to see, of course. To address this issue . to ensure group cohesion, but also allow flexibility for particular individuals . we ensured that all tour members had phone contact details for the organisers and knew (thanks to the detailed schedule with which they were provided) when and where to re-connect with the group.

Post-Travel Experiences

Following the trip, the students were assisted in synthesising their notes and reflections about their experiences, in order to produce high-quality assignments (outlined in sections two and three). The synthesis was no mean feat, as the students had to digest their thoughts and written records from many discussions. For instance, the 2018 study tour (in Dubai, Abu Dhabi and Singapore) comprised appointments with 41 communication experts, representing the following organisations (listed in alphabetical order):

- ACWA Power (Dubai),
- Baldwin Boyle Shand (Singapore),
- College of Communication and Media Sciences, Zayed University (Dubai),
- Dubai Cares (Dubai),
- Dubai Tourism (Dubai),
- Ferrari World Abu Dhabi (Abu Dhabi),
- FleishmanHillard (now part of the Omnicom PR Group) (Singapore),
- Hill+Knowlton Strategies (Dubai),
- Institute of Public Relations of Singapore (Singapore),
- Interesting Times (Dubai),
- Lee Kong Chian School of Business, Singapore Management University (Singapore),
- Middle East Public Relations Association (Dubai),
- New Zealand Embassy in the United Arab Emirates (Abu Dhabi),
- New Zealand Trade & Enterprise in East Asia (Singapore),
- New Zealand Trade & Enterprise in the United Arab Emirates (Dubai),
- Porter Novelli (now part of the Omnicom PR Group) (Singapore),
- Procter & Gamble in the Arabian Peninsula (Dubai),
- Raffles Hotel (Singapore),
- Singapore Art Museum (Singapore), and
- Weber Shandwick (Abu Dhabi).

Several of these organisations' experts had also kindly sent the organisers materials relating to the presentations that they had given. These presentations were

forwarded to the students. Correspondence continued with the organisations and their hosts, to whom the organisers continue to be deeply grateful for their time and hospitality.

The post-tour activities also included the generation of publicity and news coverage, primarily through controlled communication formats. One of the organisers wrote a media release for distribution by the university's communications team (Massey University, 2018b); the release was picked up by a range of news feeds from various organisations in New Zealand and abroad. The release was also posted as a short news item on the university's Facebook account. The tour Twitter feed was also wrapped-up; Tweets, featuring text and photos, had been posted to a dedicated Twitter account (www.twitter.com/mpprtour) by one of the organisers during the trip. The account had been monitored closely for actions such as re-Tweeting. The final Tweet strategically used the university's handle (@MasseyUni) and provided condensed key details about the tour. Final information – including photos, text, and host organisations' logos – were also added to the official tour website (www.mpprtour.com) that had been set-up deliberately for the trip.

The remaining administrative matters were also finalised. (These matters included the logging of expenses, the destruction of tour-specific credit cards, the return of mobile phones provided for the organisers, and the like.) Fortunately, no insurance claims needed to be lodged, and no accident reports needed to be completed. However, the possibility that such forms may need to be completed always exists due to the complex demands of international travel. Public relations educators wishing to organise international tours must be prepared to document any incidents as part of the post-trip activities.

Discussion and Conclusion

The study tours run as part of the *Global Public Relations Management* course in the Master of Professional Public Relations (MPPR) degree at Massey University illustrate the benefits and challenges inherent in undertaking this type of learning experience. As we have argued in this paper, such tours enrich students' learning by providing them with a direct appreciation of the cultural and environmental factors that impact on divergent public relations practices in various countries around the world. At the same time, the tours entail a significant amount of work and require tour organisers – be they academic or administrative personnel – to deal with multiple challenges and meet the needs of students. We hope that the autoethnographic approach used here, as well as the insights from the teaching and learning literature about study tours more generally, will help public relations educators who wish to run their own study tours.

Several implications arise from this analysis of the tours undertaken at Massey University. Perhaps most importantly, public relations educators wishing to develop their own tours will now have a set of insights on which to draw and will be able to heed both the challenges and triumphs discussed here. Also, now and in future, study tour organisers will need to be aware of the many different aspects involved in organising such learning experiences: aspects that, we would suggest, will only grow as our societies (especially in the West) become more risk-averse and reputation-conscious. Additionally, tour organisers will need to ensure that critical scholarly training is embedded into the overall course design and that students are able, in particular, to reflect critically on their experiences. The situation discussed here

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aligns with the experience of Riggan et al. (2011, p. 250), who found that, in relation to their study tour, their lack of a framework from which to approach formal critical reflection while on the trip stunted the depth with which the participants were able to approach their experiences.

This paper opens a number of avenues for further enquiry. Analyses of other public relations study tours, conducted at different institutions, would help build knowledge in this area. Critical appraisals of different approaches taken to the organisation and running of such tours would provide public relations educators with further options for the running of their own tours. For instance, co-created tours, ones developed with students as partners, could be an interesting approach. This paper has drawn its insights from autoethnography; in future, other methods could be used (focusing on other tour participants, especially students) to gain data about the strengths and weaknesses of such tours. Opportunities abound not only for further enquiry, but also for the education of public relations students to be significantly enriched through international study tours.

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