

HOW STRATEGIC  
COMMUNICATION SHAPES VALUE  
AND INNOVATION IN SOCIETY

# ADVANCES IN PUBLIC RELATIONS AND COMMUNICATION MANAGEMENT

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ADVANCES IN PUBLIC RELATIONS AND  
COMMUNICATION MANAGEMENT VOLUME 2

# HOW STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION SHAPES VALUE AND INNOVATION IN SOCIETY

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## SERIES PREFACE

The field of public relations has never been more vibrant. There are more scholars, more projects, more conferences, more publications, and more outlets than ever before. Over the past decades, the European Public Relations Education and Research Association (EUPRERA) and its members have played a key part in this development. EUPRERA works to stimulate and promote innovative knowledge and practices of public relations education and research in Europe. The association facilitates networking among its members, and runs several cross-national research projects and a PhD seminar, in addition to its annual congress. It is on the heels of the latter event that the new series *Advances in Public Relations and Communication Management* is now published in cooperation with Emerald. With the series, we offer some of the best papers presented at the annual congress. All contributions are peer reviewed (double blind) in order to bring you, the reader, the best of the new and exciting research in our area.

Each volume in *Advances in Public Relations and Communication Management* will be edited by the local organizer of the recent congress, the Head of the Scientific Committee of EUPRERA, as well as the EUPRERA President. The editorial team reviews and selects the strongest work from the many full papers submitted. Each congress has a topic chosen by the local organizer in cooperation with the EUPRERA board, something that obviously will be reflected in each volume in the series. Previous topics have included communication ethics, public values, and cultural identity, to mention a few. The topic of the 2016 congress in Groningen showcased how strategic communication shapes values and innovation in society, while in 2017 we will gather in London under the heading “Public relations and the power of creativity – Strategic opportunities, innovation and critical challenges.”

EUPRERA traces its roots back to 1959, when the association CERP Education & Research was founded. In 2000, the name EUPRERA was adopted. The location of the annual congress speaks volumes about an association that now involves the *whole* of Europe. Berlin, Milan, Warsaw, Bled, Tallinn, Leipzig, Lisbon, Carlisle, Roskilde/Lund, Bucharest, Jyväskylä, Leeds, Istanbul, Barcelona, Brussels, Oslo, Groningen/Amsterdam, and London are some of the recent host locations. As an association, we pride ourselves that we represent large parts of the academic public relations community in Europe, counting approximately 500 professors, lecturers, and researchers as members.

With the advent of the new series, we also hope to strengthen the congress experiences of our members and to attract new members. Most importantly, however, we see the series as a crucial platform for high-quality research and Pan-European cooperation.

Øyvind Ihlen  
*EUPRERA President (2016–2017)*  
*Professor, University of Oslo, Norway*

# INTRODUCTION

With a society characterized by huge social, political, economic, and technological changes, it would be strange if the public relations discipline did not question its role in this picture. Hence, when the 2016 congress of EUPRERA was held in Groningen, the Netherlands, the theme summoning participants was *Let's talk society!* As stated by the organizers at the Hanze University of Applied Sciences: "Technological transitions, economical changes, medical advancements, environmental turbulence, political movements and other evolving circumstances influence public values that shape societies. It is important to analyze the situated meaning of these societal themes in everyday life, and the influence of public relations and strategic communication in this regard."

Within the time span of three days, over 200 participants from 25 countries and 71 institutions gathered to discuss such topics. This volume presents some of the best contributions among the 45 presented papers and contains chapters from scholars based in the United Kingdom, Finland, Germany, Norway, the Netherlands, Denmark, and Singapore. The nine chapters address the conference topic in a number of ways.

The first cluster is made up of three chapters that focus on *skills and competencies*. Adrian Crookes (London College of Communication, University of the Arts, London, UK) takes an inward look and explores how the university system in the United Kingdom readies the candidates for practice. In other words, Crookes addresses the social value of the worth of higher education. The chapter is titled "Educating Society's Future PR Practitioners: An Exploration of 'Preparedness' as a Qualitative Indicator of Higher Education Performance."

In the chapter "Lessons Learned: Communication Studies in Transition" Korien van Vuuren and Jan van der Stoep (both from Christelijke Hogeschool Ede, the Netherlands) review a new curriculum that has the aim of enabling the students to become relevant partners in dialogue with society.

The skills and competencies that are needed in the practice is also the topic of the chapter written by Markus Mykkänen and Marita Vos (both from University of Jyväskylä, Finland). That is, these authors research what practitioners say they need when they want to contribute to organizational decision-making. Business understanding and target group oriented reading top the list of the competencies that the practitioners feel are necessary. The title of the chapter is "Clarifying Skills and Competencies in Organisational Decision Making – Perceptions of Finnish Communication Professionals." These findings obviously point back to the educational system.

Research on *social media* and public relations abounds, and two contributions to the 2016 conference centered on the dialogic potential and the use of social media by governments. This is the second cluster of chapters in this book. The first of these chapters discusses the touted dialogic potential of social media. Wim J.L. Elving (Hanze University of Applied Science/University of Amsterdam, The Netherlands) and Rosa May Postma (Berenschot Communication Consultancy, Utrecht, The Netherlands) confirm what is found in much of the research literature: The potential of social media is largely untapped. In the chapter with the title “Social Media: The Dialogue Myth? How Organizations Use Social Media for Stakeholder Dialogue” the authors warn about missed opportunities for engagement and trust building.

*Public organizations* typically face some of the same challenges as identified by Elving and Postma. Public organizations are the theme of the third cluster of chapters in this book. As indicated by the title, the chapter called “Towards a Societal Discourse with the Government? A Comparative Content Analysis on the Development of Social Media Communication by the British, French and German National Governments 2011–2015” traces this development in the three largest European countries. A three-person team consisting of Holger Sievert, Carolin Lessmann, and Jonas Henneboehl (all from the Macromedia University in Cologne, Germany) confirms that social media has become more important, but as the other social media chapter concludes, in terms of dialogue it is still a way to go.

The debate regarding the communication practice in the public sector is not only centered on social media use and dialogue with citizens. In addition, the transfer of private sector practices to the public sector is discussed. Much attention has been paid to the practice of so-called new public management. In their chapter, Aher Kaidi and Vilma Luoma-Aho (both from University of Jyväskylä, Finland) point to differences between the public and private sector in terms of change, and then link this topic to communication. The authors warn about implementing a top-down approach to change, and call for communication practices that emphasize engagement. The title of the chapter is “Contextualising Change in Public Sector Organisations.”

A mainstay in public relations research in general is *crisis communication*, and this volume has two contributions in this area. The first of these addresses the plight of the government, more specifically what happens when a nation’s leader experiences widespread critique. In the chapter titled “When a Nation’s Leader Is under Siege: Managing Personal Reputation and Engaging in Public Diplomacy,” Augustine Pang, Ratna Damayanti, and Eugene Yong-Sheng Woon (all from Nanyang Technological University, Singapore) explore image repair strategies. An addition to the well-established typology of William Benoit is the strategy of diversion.

The second crisis-communication chapter takes a step back to review a string of related key concepts across disciplines. The chapter titled “Reputation: A Cross-Disciplinary Study of Key Concepts in Public Relations,

Business Administration, and Public Administration” is written by Finn Frandsen, Winni Johansen, and Heidi Houlberg Salomonsen (all from Aarhus University, Denmark). In the text, it is particularly the concept of reputation that is under scrutiny and the authors conclude that public relations has not really engaged with this concept, while public administration has had a vibrant debate about the practice as indicated above (cf. new public management).

Lobbying or *public affairs* is yet another contested communication domain. In a chapter titled “Secrets of Public Affairs,” Mona K. Solvoll and Tor Bang (both from the Norwegian Business School, Norway) discuss the lack of transparency in this business. The authors construct a model for analyzing public affairs activities based on principles of transparency and secrecy. A conclusion is that the studied public relations agencies take care not to give away too much about their competencies or privileged insights.

Taken together the chapters demonstrate how the discipline of public relations influences society through, for instance, education, by emphasizing certain aspects over others. As pointed out implicitly or explicitly by several of the chapters: Public relations may or may not enhance societal dialogue, while the latter is obviously what the academic discipline aims for. Thus, it can be concluded, we need to continue talking.

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# EDUCATING SOCIETY'S FUTURE PR PRACTITIONERS: AN EXPLORATION OF 'PREPAREDNESS' AS A QUALITATIVE INDICATOR OF HIGHER EDUCATION PERFORMANCE

Adrian Crookes

## ABSTRACT

*In the context of debates about the performance of Higher Education (HE) in which quantitative measures proliferate, this chapter reports the top line observations of an initial exploration of the preparedness for practice of recent graduates of a Public Relations (PR) course at a post-1992 United Kingdom (UK) Higher Education Institution (HEI). Preparedness for practice is chosen as a conceptual lens (as preparedness for the uncertainty of practice) because HEIs frequently promise it. Using a Bourdieusian framework, preparedness is considered in relation to habitus-field match and HE performance as capital-added in habitus transformation. The chapter offers a complementary way of considering the dynamic between educator and recent graduate agency and how that might be applied when studying course and student performance, designing curricula and developing appropriate 'signature pedagogies', especially for those HE actors tasked with delivering against the 'promise' of graduate preparedness. In considering*

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preparedness for practice *as a performative function of HE, the chapter is located in wider societal debates about the 'worth' of HE and offers insight for educators of future PR practitioners.*

**Keywords:** Habitus; higher education; pedagogy; practice; preparedness; public relations

## INTRODUCTION

Policymakers and the university sector in the United Kingdom (UK) continue to debate the introduction of 'a scheme to assess and provide consistent and reliable information about the quality of education and teaching at English higher education providers' (Parliament. House of Lords, 2017). The scheme, identified currently as the *Teaching Excellence Framework* (TEF) (BIS, 2016) has proved controversial and some of the proposed measurement techniques have been criticised as 'crude' (Morris, 2017).

There has been increased focus on the quantitative measurement of Higher Education (HE) performance in recent years in the UK via metrics related to, for example, student satisfaction (NSS, n.d.) and employment after leaving university (HESA, n.d.) and globally through league tables such as those published by QS and THE (QS, n.d.; THE, n.d.).

There have been little focus on qualitative research into student and recent graduate experience. The research reported here is an exploratory qualitative study of HE performance as reported by recent graduates of an HE course in Public Relations (PR). The chapter considers the performance of HE as a 'post-experience good' (Brown & Carasso, 2013, p. 124 citing Weimer & Vining, 1992), largely absent in immediate quantitative assessment.

The chapter conceptualises *preparedness for practice*, which is often promised by vocationally focused courses, such as PR. What is meant by this and would students report it? If so, when, and how? The validity of such a conceptual framework is considered against reports by recent graduates of their HE experience. The chapter considers a theoretical framework that might assist understanding of approaches to educating society's future PR practitioners for their *preparedness for practice* and as a complementary way of considering HE performance.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### *The Quantification of Higher Education*

The 'discourse of employability' that surrounds HE today (Hesketh, 2003; Moreau & Leathwood, 2006) in which students think of HE as a 'route to a



(better) job' (Boden & Nedeva, 2010, p. 50) has contributed to quantitative data sets becoming the routine way of monitoring and auditing Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) around the world (Barefoot, Oliver, & Mellar, 2016; Cheng & Marsh, 2010). These data produce league tables and rankings (e.g. QS, n.d.; THE, n.d.) that are increasingly used to inform student choices at an institutional and disciplinary level (Barefoot et al., 2016).

In the UK, such research is typified by quantitative data drawn from the National Student Survey (NSS) (Unistats, n.d.) and the Destination of Leavers in Higher Education (DLHE) survey (HESA, n.d.) and which is presented to prospective students as a way of considering course and graduate performance at their chosen HEIs.

The 'march of quantification' shows no sign of abating (Lather, 2013; Lohr, 2012) and the recent introduction of the TEF by the UK government (BIS, 2016) foregrounds this approach further. But there are increasing calls for an 'ascendance of reflexive knowledge' (Lather, 2013, p. 643 citing Mihic et al., 2005) including from education researchers within the PR discipline (Jelen, 2008; Grunig, 2008; Rühl, 2008) that might support a more qualitative approach to our understanding of HE performance.

There is a broadly recognised lack of qualitative, ontological research of student/graduate lifeworld (Barnett, 2004; Dall'Alba, 2009; Dall'Alba & Barnacle, 2007; Tymon, 2013) which could provide more nuanced understanding of the effectiveness of courses and a balance to 'quantitative imperialism' (Lather, 2013, p. 638).

One possible lens through which qualification of lifeworld might be viewed is *preparedness for practice* – an often promised, but little considered concept.

### *Claims of Preparedness*

*Preparedness for practice* is thus offered as an alternative lens through which to qualify HE performance because it is routinely claimed as a course outcome in the marketing collateral and programme specifications of UK HE undergraduate courses, and particularly those that are vocationally or professionally focused such as PR, where three quarters of observed courses 'promised' it (Crookes, 2016).

Claims of preparedness are similarly rooted in the 'discourse of employability'. Terms typically used to describe the outcome of students attending HEI PR courses include: 'the course will prepare you for a successful career in the PR industry' or '(the course provides) the ideal preparation for a career in public relations' (Crookes, 2016), with use of the term 'career' seemingly connoting some longer term viability beyond initial employment in the field, or as 'employability' – itself a contested term that is often interchangeably used to mean 'employment' (Harvey, 2001; Knight, 2001).

Yet given the proclivity to ‘promise’ it, *preparedness* is not widely scrutinised. The current DLHE survey (HESA, n.d.) asks leavers at six and 42 months after graduation the hypothetical supplementary question ‘how well did your course prepare you for employment’ against a five-statement Likert scale (from ‘very well’ to ‘can’t tell’). This quantitative measurement makes no attempt to define the term *prepare* nor is the relationship between the study discipline and employment destination considered (i.e. studying PR might be expected to be evaluated by subsequent work in the communication field), nor is work permanency or precarity captured. Whilst the survey is currently being revised, with new focus being considered (Boyd, 2017) there is seemingly little appetite for describing or understanding *preparedness* (Morris, 2016).

Thus *preparedness* remains significantly ‘promised’ in relation to ‘employability’ and without any focused attempt to understand or test for it. At the very least we might expect to understand what *preparedness* might mean, followed by an assessment of what it might mean to facilitate it in others.

### *Preparedness for Practice as Preparedness for Uncertainty*

Dictionary definitions of *preparedness* refer to a state of readiness, often related to war (Oxford Dictionaries, n.d.) and Psychology researchers have associated preparedness with uncertainty as:

a goal state of readiness to respond to uncertain outcomes. It (preparedness) includes being prepared for possible setbacks should they occur, but also being prepared to take advantage of opportunities when they arise

(Sweeney, Carroll, & Shepperd, 2006, 302)

Viewing *preparedness for practice* as preparedness for the *uncertainty of practice* chimes with Schön’s notions of professionals inhabiting a ‘messy swamp’ characterised by ‘uncertainty, instability, uniqueness, and value conflict’ (Schön, 1983, pp. 16–17), particularly in knowledge fields where a lack of definition frequently leads to ‘ambiguous ends, shifting contexts of practice, and no fixed content of professional knowledge’ (Schön, 1983, p. 46). Since uncertainty and ambiguity may be the very essence of PR practice (Galloway, 2013; McKie & Heath, 2016) a conception of the *preparedness* of future PR practitioners may be firmly situated in preparedness for uncertainty.

Viewing *preparedness for practice* as readiness for setbacks and opportunities chimes with Shulman’s notions of uncertainty as a generator of anxiety (Shulman, 2005a) that may threaten individual paralysis or facilitate adaptive deliberation (Shulman, 2005b). A graduating student might thus be considered to be in a state of *preparedness* in their early-practice if they are able to adapt with sufficiency so that they might deliberate through their anxiety, driven by the uncertainty and ambiguity of practice. Such an individual might be said to

be displaying one of the 'Great Eight' professional competencies (Bartram, 2005) – the ability to 'adapt and cope'.

There is resonance here with the wider societal prospect of 'good citizens deliberating well' which forms a central pillar of Aristotelian character ethics – as 'phronesis' or 'practical wisdom' (Aristotle, 1980). That we might understand PR education as *preparing the phronimos* firmly places PR education at the centre of the field's continuing professional project, with practitioners at the service of both the organisations that employ them and the society in which they operate. As conceptualised, *preparedness for practice* therefore has a longitudinal societal dimension beyond initial employment/employability that lends itself to once fashionable definitions of HE purpose (Newman, 1907).

An emphasis on the development of the individual as *phronimos* almost certainly requires a re-imagining of PR education – one that is less reliant on teaching skills and knowledge. The latter approach has largely dominated discussion of PR education to date (Roper, 2016) and the 'body of knowledge' has historically taken centre stage when PR education is described (see CPRE, 1975, 1999, 2006, 2015; IPRA, 1982, 1990).

Increasingly, PR education researchers are considering wider perspectives to educating for future PR practice in terms of both technical ability and for the ambiguity of the field (Fitch, 2011; Heath, 2010; MacNamara, 2016; McKie & Heath, 2016; Roper, 2016; van Ruler, 2005) including through competency approaches (Gregory, 2008; Jeffrey & Brunton, 2011; Tench & Moreno, 2015). Educating for *preparedness through uncertainty* may provide a further dimension to this.

The extent to which a graduating PR student can be said to be in a state of readiness to adapt and cope with deliberative sufficiency through the anxiety of uncertainty and ambiguity is therefore offered as a basis for conceptualising *preparedness for practice* as a performative function of HE PR courses.

### *Theories of Practice*

One challenge often cited by PR educators tasked with preparing future PR practitioners is the changing nature of professional PR practice and the increasingly fluid nature of the roles required within it (Zerfass, Moreno, Tench, Verčič, & Verhoeven, 2013). A lack of definition of the practice has also consumed the industry and academe (Galloway, 2013). But PR is not unique in its disciplinary ambiguity, nor is change a specific of the 21st century; professional practice is increasingly defined by disciplinary challenge (Beck, 1992; Schön, 1983).

Practice theories may assist in describing a professional practice such as PR because they focus on the conditions of practice that individuals may be exposed to rather than the specificities of the practice itself. A practice may thus be considered the total of 'what is possible in a given...environment'

(Farrugia, 2013, p. 294) or, an ‘organized, open-ended, spatial-temporal manifold of actions’ (Schatzki, 2005, p. 471). Practice theory would therefore recognise PR practice as a site of uncertainty, ambiguity and anxiety, enabling consideration of how individuals might be adequately *prepared* for this.

Whilst absent to date in PR education research, Rittenhofer and Valentini (2015) and Aggerholm and Agmuß (2016) have considered the application of practice theory to global PR practice and to strategic communication practice respectively. Considerations of *preparedness for practice* as a performative function of HE might similarly benefit from a practice theory approach.

Schatzki identifies the ‘building blocks of practice’ as (1) ‘understandings of how to do things’, (2) ‘rules’ and (3) ‘teleo-affective structure’ (what it makes sense to do in a goal-oriented activity in which humans are invested) (Schatzki, 1997). The ground covered by the first two building blocks has thus perhaps been well trodden in PR education research, but the individual and relational aspects of *preparedness for uncertainty* in the practice less obviously so. How do early-practice graduates in PR understand ‘what it makes sense to do’?

Doing ‘what it makes sense to do’ may thus be considered the essence of an ambiguous practice – with a nod towards the ‘deliberating well’ of Aristotelian phronesis and to the Bourdieusian concept of habitus.

Bourdieu defines habitus as ‘the durably installed generative principle of regulated improvisations’ (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 78), i.e. the sum of personal dispositions that operates as a ‘structured and structuring structure’ (Bourdieu, 1994, p. 170) (in decision making within a practice). For Bourdieu, formal education therefore represents ‘attempts to inculcate (to make embodied) a habitus, the principle of which is congruent with...a predisposition to the “rules of the game”’ (Moore, 2008, p. 106). In other words, the process of education may be seen as the capital-added in habitus transformation (Clark & Zukas, 2013; von Rosenberg, 2016) to achieve a ‘habitus-field match’.

Bourdieu describes a theory of practice thus:

‘Practice = [(habitus) × (capital)] + field’ (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 95).

Using the component parts of Bourdieu’s theory of practice as intended (i.e. as ‘thinking tools’), habitus, capital and field may provide the theoretical basis for the concept of *preparedness for practice* as ‘habitus-field match’ or ‘fish-in-water status’ (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 127) for the field on which that preparation may be focused.

A habitus-field match facilitated through a PR course in HE might therefore expect to incorporate ‘understandings of how to do things’, ‘rules’ and the ‘teleo-affective structure’ that graduates will require in achieving ‘fish-in-water’ status in the field (i.e. of PR).

From this perspective, theorising education to facilitate the individual’s *preparedness for the uncertainty of practice* as transformation for a ‘habitus-field

match' requires a turn from a view of teaching as solely 'how to do things' and 'rules' (that have occupied much of our discussion to date in PR education) towards the socialisation aspects involved in inculcating into a 'teleo-affective structure' and, additionally the beginnings of how we might understand how that might be achieved – or not. It is this focus that might be achieved by a qualitative approach to understanding *preparedness*, since quantification seemingly can tell us only very little of this story.

### *PR's 'Signature Pedagogies' as Pedagogies of Ambiguity*

The final component of *preparedness for practice* conceptualisation must also therefore consider the PR pedagogies that might embody the 'habitus-field match' as 'capital-added in habitus transformation'. How might educators facilitate a 'habitus-field match' in another?

Barnett has described the world that students enter as one of increasing 'supercomplexity' (Barnett, 2000, 2004) and describes education as a place where students can develop a 'capacity to embrace multiple and conflicting frameworks and to offer their own interventions in that milieu' (Barnett, 2000, p. 167). He describes the role of the educator as modelling 'being-for-uncertainty' (Austin – on Barnett – 2012, p. 61), supporting the student with the 'confidence to have a go' (Barnett, 2004, p. 71).

Vaughan et al. describe how this might happen in 'pedagogies of ambiguity' that create a place where 'students learn mostly by doing (and where) the tutor role is more that of a coach' (Vaughan et al., 2008, p. 22) perhaps akin to the 'practicum' as envisaged by Schön (1987), as a place to reflect and reflex.

It is likely that these activities are being undertaken in PR education but that we have yet to codify them (Crookes, 2016) as 'signature pedagogies', defined by Shulman (2005a) as the nurseries of professional preparation that ultimately define a practice. Shulman describes signature pedagogies as themselves being 'pedagogies of uncertainty (that) render classroom settings unpredictable and surprising, raising the stakes for both students and instructors [...] (creating) "adaptive anxiety" as a necessary feature of learning' (Shulman, 2005a, p. 57).

Perhaps examples of practicum-style working in the PR curriculum (as signature pedagogies) might include role-play simulation (Crookes, 2016) or service learning (Panic & Lasky, 2002) – providing an added element of social purpose – and perhaps through student-run PR agencies (Bush, 2009; Bush & Miller, 2011; Maben, 2010; Swanson, 2011).

Researching the early-practice lifeworld of recent graduates from a PR course through the lens of *preparedness for practice* ought thus to provide insight into the 'organized, open-ended, spatial-temporal manifold of actions' they might face and the extent to which their PR education inculcated a

habitus-field match that assisted their deliberation in the anxiety of uncertainty. In other words, if we can understand what was done well to prepare our students for practice, we might do more of it.

## METHODOLOGY – RESEARCHING PREPAREDNESS FOR PR PRACTICE

An exploratory small-scale qualitative research study was undertaken into the early-practice lifeworld of six recent graduates of a PR course at a post-1992 UK HEI through a lens of *preparedness for practice*, conceptualised as ‘sufficiency for adaptive deliberation through the anxiety of uncertainty and ambiguity’. Bourdieu’s thinking tools of habitus, capital and field were used as a theoretical framework where HE performance might be considered capital-added in habitus transformation to achieve habitus-field match.

The study’s research questions (RQ) were:

RQ1: How do recent graduates of a PR course identify with *preparedness for practice*?

RQ2: What are the critical incidents in PR practice that present as sites of anxiety production resulting from uncertainty?

RQ3: What might recent graduates identify as critical incidents in HE that *prepared* them for these critical incidents in practice?

‘Critical incidents’ are defined as ‘brief descriptions [...] of significant events’ (Brookfield, 1990, p. 179), drawing on Flanagan’s (1954) ‘critical incident technique’ to identify significant sites of anxiety in practice and of capital-added in HE.

A purposive sampling method was chosen to ensure relevance to the research questions (Bryman, 2008). From an initial sample of 25, five female and one male participant were chosen for the research – broadly reflecting the course gender ratio – and identified by using the researcher’s LinkedIn account where the current employment status of potential participants was visible.

Participants represented a spread of sector (public/private), type (in-house/PR agency) and duration employed in PR – which was between 12 and 48 months after graduation. All participants were working in London and the South East of England at the time of interview.

A semi-structured interview approach was chosen to encourage biographical narrative – the student’s early-practice life story after graduation. Participants were asked open-ended questions to assist reflection on critical incidents in professional practice and on critical incidents from their HE experiences that may have assisted their deliberation in practice.

Average interview length was 27 minutes, producing 2 ¾ hours of interview material which was transcribed and coded. Codes were identified from data repetition, and these were grouped into ‘framework’ themes (Bryman, 2008, p. 555). Three framework themes are presented here as (1) identification with preparedness; (2) evidence for habitus-field match in sites of practice anxiety and (3) evidence for HE capital-added as habitus transformation to achieve habitus-field match.

*Limitations*

As a small-scale exploratory study this initial research is intended to be used to guide further research.

Although all research participants attended the same PR course, they did not all attend at the same time and thus experiences might have differed or memory fade occurred. In a larger sample, comparisons might be drawn within and across cohorts.

Whilst participants were all working in PR, their job roles, employment sectors and working environments were varied with a potential impact on comparison.

Only graduates who were LinkedIn to the researcher were contacted for this study and it is likely that these students had been most engaged with the course.

The researcher was personally known to all participants and whilst this may have assisted in the interviews being more relaxed, it is equally possible that participants were more reserved in their reporting.

**RESPONSES**

*RQ1: How Do Recent Graduates of a PR Course Identify with Preparedness for Practice?*

Components of *preparedness for practice* were identified from participant-reported preparedness and are included in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Framework 1. Identified Components of *Preparedness for Practice*.

Components of Preparedness	P1	P2	P3	P4	P5	P6
Skills and knowledge	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Socialisation	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Confidence	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
Assisted advancement			✓	✓	✓	✓

All participants identified skills and knowledge acquisition with preparedness, supporting PR's traditional educative focus on 'the body of knowledge':

'(it's) being knowledgeable about the subject area, feeling like I had the right skills' (P4)

All participants also identified *preparedness* with socialisation into their chosen field, supporting the notion of preparedness as habitus-field match and of the need for attention within education to a 'teleo-affective structure':

'when they talk PR lingo, I'm able to understand it, I'm able to contribute in meetings... anything they ask me to do, I'm able to do it, I don't have to ask them 'what does this mean', 'how does this work'...' (P6)

References to *confidence* and being *confident* were made in five of the six interviews and is identified as a separate component of *preparedness* here, since this is likely to be a major factor in *adaptive deliberation through uncertainty* but may require further educator attention as to how it is achieved beyond general socialisation:

'(It's) the process that you need to go through in your head when it comes to knowing who you are as a practitioner and being confident enough at stuff' (P5)

At the time of interview, five of the six participants had experienced a further full-time role in PR, beyond their initial employment. Four participants identified 'assisted advancement' with preparedness:

'It definitely helped coming from a PR course (getting a promotion).' (P4)

The longitudinal dimension to *preparedness* contributed by HE (as a 'post-experience good') is therefore evident in comments made by some of the participants. This is not recognised in quantitative assessment of HE performance. Indeed, P2 reported how they did not feel prepared until their second role in PR:

'I can (now) see the opportunities, I can see where this is going.' (P2)

A qualitative approach to understanding HE performance through a deeper and more nuanced understanding of the lifeworld of early-practitioners has the potential for educators to rethink their role beyond the focus on initial employment, and to consider the wider societal and longitudinal dimension of their performativity.

*RQ2: What Are the Critical Incidents in PR Practice that Present as Sites of Anxiety Production Resulting from Uncertainty?*

Participants contributed critical incidents of anxiety production in practice that might (1) have tested their *preparedness* and (2) provided evidence of *adaptive deliberation through uncertainty* as *preparedness for practice* (habitus-field match). All participants recalled an incident without hesitation, reported in



**Table 2.** Framework 2. Sites of Anxiety Production in Early-Practice Requiring Habitus-Field Match.

Critical Incidents in Practice	P1	P2	P3	P4	P5	P6
Lack of support from manager/colleagues	✓	✓			✓	✓
Calling a journalist/client			✓	✓		

Table 2. Examples given fell into two categories – lack of support in their role, and exposure to a ‘high stakes figure’, for example, a client or journalist.

In each case, participants identified an adaptive strategy for deliberating through uncertainty that demonstrated *preparedness* and that might be understood as habitus-field match. But two of the participants were unable to act on their deliberation because they were prevented from doing so by the prevailing organisational doxa (to use another Bourdieusian term) caused by the organisational ‘field-specific sets of beliefs’ (Deer, 2008, p. 125).

The discussion in this section is thus divided into the individual’s *preparedness* as habitus-field match and the extent to which that could be exercised in the organisational field.

*Individual Agency*

Even the most ‘expert’ practitioner is confronted with anxiety from uncertainty that challenges their habitus-field match. The ‘expert’ practitioner can often rely on critical incidents from past practice in their deliberation. That recent graduates have not yet developed such a bank of ‘critical incidents’ that might be recalled in uncertainty is exposed in the language participants used to describe the extent of their anxiety.

P3 described their feelings when a senior client requested counsel which they felt unable to provide:

‘I felt **stumped**...and that’s when I got **scared**, because, this is the client and he’s paying the company millions of pounds...’ (P3)

Despite these feelings, P3 deliberated with sufficiency by advising the client they would call them back once they had sought advice.

P4 also described the fear of their first ever call to a journalist:

‘I remember picking up the phone and being actually quite **scared** and for the first time not really knowing what... the reaction was going to be on the other side’ (P4)

And P6 described their feelings on discovering they were being given responsibility for holiday cover at the time that an important media conference had been scheduled – despite being only in their second week in the role:

‘I have literally got to do everything... I didn’t show it but inside I was **screaming**...’ (P6)

Words such as *scared*, *stumped* and *screaming* are strong descriptors of anxiety in moments of uncertainty, perhaps not extensively considered by educators or employers alike, perhaps because we never hear them (because we never ask). Qualitative research thus enables a greater understanding of the difficulties faced by early-practitioners. And yet, in each case participants were able to describe how they negotiated these sites of deep anxiety. In each case these early-practice graduates demonstrated a sufficiency for adaptive deliberation that might be considered a habitus-field match.

### *The Structure of the Field*

Four of the six participants reported incidents where their anxiety resulted from being unable to influence a situation. This was either because of their junior status or, more worryingly, due to unsupportive colleagues or management. Yet their habitus-field match was apparent from their critical incident report.

P1 recalled an in-house situation where they were expected to make decisions amid organisational ambiguity:

'The predicament came...when the people who were comms people were thinking with a comms head and the people who weren't comms people weren't thinking with a comms head...' (P1)

In recognising this ambiguity, P1 provided evidence for a habitus-field match but their difficulty – and their anxiety – resulted from their feeling unable to challenge more senior and/or long-serving staff (who may or may not occupy communication roles). P1 was not paralysed as a result of an inability for adaptive deliberation, but more likely as a result of the prevailing doxa.

Lack of managerial support was also cited by P2 who worked in-house in a large public sector organisation – reporting to a communications practitioner. The critical incident P2 described was the realisation that a sub-standard report was about to be presented to a senior committee:

'I was looking at the document thinking 'actually it needs to be re-written'...but...I was still junior in my role so...I can't challenge her [manager] too much, she obviously knows what she's doing...' (P2)

P2 appears to be describing the habitus-field match of a reflective practitioner and did influence some minor changes to the document, but the report that was subsequently presented to the committee was rejected for precisely the reasons P2 had observed. The apparent clash of habitus-field match and what might be a misaligned doxa is a combination that is problematic for early-practice graduates, and for HE courses preparing them, not to mention the questions this raises for the employer and wider industry.

P5 likewise reported an incident where they felt unsupported in early-practice. They had accepted the challenge of 'stepping up' to create a client presentation, receiving no guidance to assist them to do so. When P5's manager finally gave

the presentation their attention, they requested that work on the presentation be restarted. Although disappointed, P5's habitus-field match was manifested as dispositional resilience:

...you just need to get over it and I guess the more professional you are in that situation, the easier it is to show them that you can actually deal with it (P5)

Qualitative approaches enable a much deeper understanding of the challenges and opportunities faced by early-practice graduates and also reveal the structures they must navigate as well as their own ability (agency) to do so. In considering *preparedness for practice* as habitus-field match, such research provides valuable insight for educators that may assist approaches taken to capital-added in transformation but also for knowledge-exchange opportunities with industry.

*RQ3: What Might Recent Graduates Identify as Critical Incidents in HE that Prepared Them for These Critical Incidents in Practice?*

Participants identified critical incidents in HE that may have assisted their adaptive deliberation through the anxiety of uncertainty in their practice example given in RQ2. Here participants described critical incidents in education – as capital-added in habitus transformation – that were considered most useful in negotiating practice (Table 3).

All participants described the benefit of studying alongside tutors who had experience of practice and who had contributed to student feelings of ‘confidence’, often by providing ‘sayings’ or mnemonics that were remembered in moments of practice anxiety:

I can always vividly remember...the lectures with [tutor who would] point out...or say...certain things...those stories inspired me... (P2)

tutors... guide you (to) the best way of dealing with situations (P5)

they didn't just teach what...the book told (th) 'em to teach (P6)

The role of the tutor as ‘coach’ or in ‘modelling being-for-uncertainty’ is supported by such comments.

**Table 3.** Framework 3. Identified HE Capital-Added That Supported Habitus-Field Match Transformation.

Critical Incidents in Education	P1	P2	P3	P4	P5	P6
Tutor intervention	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Curriculum design		✓			✓	✓
Education challenges			✓	✓	✓	✓
Theory		✓		✓		✓

Many of these critical incidents were embedded in the curriculum or were presented as assessment challenges, notably in *practicum* working (Schön, 1987):

you'd throw questions at us and... that...was close to...creating a moment that was gonna be in our career. (P3)

We would have 20 minutes to grab a group and create a...presentation and come back and do it, so you had to learn how to think on your feet quickly (P6)

And the models and theories that sometimes frustrate students on a professional practice-oriented course were also cited as critical incidents that assisted practice. P6 recalled how they had used theory in their very first full-time role:

the first thing I did when I started this job was I analysed everyone according to Belbin's theory of team roles (P6)

The longitudinal dimension of preparedness inculcated by HE was highlighted by P4 who reflected how they had recalled theory when progressing to a managerial role 4 years after graduation:

the one thing that really startled me (is how)...the theory side's come more into play because (the managerial role is) more thinking than doing... (P4)

Participants were less able to directly attach critical incidents from HE to their recalled sites of practice anxiety and gave general responses in some instances but which nevertheless described capital-added during HE that supported habitus transformation in achieving habitus-field match.

## DISCUSSION AND FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

### *A Qualitative Approach to Understanding HE Performance*

The chapter has argued for qualitative research to understand the early-practice lifeworld of recent graduates through the lens of *preparedness for practice* as a valuable complement to current quantitative measures of HE performance. The responses made by early-practice graduates in this exploratory study provided educator insight unlikely to be achieved by undertaking quantitative measures alone. In particular, participants highlighted how *preparedness for practice* stretches beyond skills and knowledge into the relational aspects of dispositional matching to a field.

### *Conceptualising Preparedness for Practice as Preparedness for Uncertainty*

*Preparedness for practice* was conceptualised because it is 'promised' by a significant number of HE courses and particularly in PR. *Preparedness* was

considered as 'sufficiency for adaptive deliberation through the anxiety of uncertainty and ambiguity', drawing on notions of preparedness for uncertainty at the nexus of setback and opportunity. The critical incidents reported by participants in practice reveal the extent of uncertainty and ambiguity present in the field and the deep feelings of anxiety these produce.

### *Theorising Preparedness for Practice as 'Habitus-Field Match'*

Practice theory offers a way of theorising *preparedness for practice* by supporting a focus on the practice environment as the site of production of uncertainty, ambiguity and anxiety. Using a Bourdieusian framework assisted the description of individual negotiation of practice as 'habitus-field match' or 'fish-in-water' status. Participants were able to describe adaptive deliberation through uncertainty that might be identified as habitus-field match even where this ultimately was misrecognised by the doxa.

### *Understanding HE Agency as 'Capital-Added' in Habitus Transformation*

Participants identified *preparedness for practice* as capital-added in habitus transformation in terms of skills and knowledge gained – the approach frequently taken to curriculum discussion in PR education – but recognised also their habitus transformation as growing confidence for relational activity.

Descriptions of capital-added that assisted deliberation in uncertainty highlighted the tutor as a site of confidence, often through 'sayings' where the 'magic happened' and perhaps thresholds were crossed in transformation. Significantly then, described critical incidents had less to do with skills and knowledge and more to do with the tutor modelling 'being-for-uncertainty'. The latter point is lost if an entirely skills-focused agenda is followed.

### *Implications for PR's Signature Pedagogies*

The value of the 'practicum' was identified as central to student experience. There is nothing necessarily new in this. Indeed practicum working – simulations, service learning, student-run agencies – should be considered as a signature pedagogy of PR education, as opposed to, for example, the lecture method.

The practicum itself should be designed as a site of ambiguity that enables students to undertake activity in a 'low-stakes environment' with the tutor role akin to a coach or mentor in 'modelling being-for-uncertainty'. This is worth further focus and understanding. Case studies of practicum working may further assist an understanding of preparing the student in habitus transformation.

‘Confidence’ was an unexpected term used by participants to describe the outcome of their interaction with HE and considering the role of the tutor as providing students with the confidence to ‘have a go’ is not always central to curricula discussion. It should be, and course teams should be challenged to understand how to formally embed this.

### *Societal Dimensions*

Given that participants also described the relevance of their studies to a second or third role in PR, qualitative study provides scope to think about longitudinal *preparedness for practice* as preparedness for lifelong learning or in relation to the notion of HE as a ‘post-experience good’. Quantitative research interest frequently ends at the point where students ‘get a job’.

The longitudinal dimension to *preparedness for practice* supports the worth of HE in terms that Aristotle might have recognised as *phronesis*. Further investigation into the longer term effects of *preparedness for practice* would again enable HEIs and course teams to identify their efforts to promote this. A PR course that supports a *phronimos* – a good citizen deliberating well – seems like a good place to be.

### *Research Directions*

The study demonstrated how practice theories may be appropriate for the study of ambiguity and uncertainty given the complex nature of the field for which students might be *being prepared*. Bourdieusian concepts of habitus, capital-added and field thus seem valid ‘thinking tools’ for the basis of further discussion of the purpose and performance of a PR education, and theoretical development of PR education as capital-added in habitus transformation to achieve ‘habitus-field match’ might be further researched alongside other theories of practice.

The chapter largely considered what the HE *does* in preparing students because the performance of HE formed the basis of the research questions, but how the individual habitus might be pre-dispositionally constituted is a further area for exploration as is the employer’s responsibility in supporting adaptive deliberation.

When working alongside non-communication managers or others where support was seemingly not readily forthcoming, early-practice graduates reported experiences that may at best be described as frustration or at worst, disinterest or lost (hard-built) confidence. A PR degree is not a substitute for training and managed well-being in practice. Surprisingly, it was the PR recruits working at the larger employers who reported, in this exploratory

study, an apparent deficiency in support. It would be unfortunate if the 'discourse of employability' surrounding HE has given the impression that new graduates are fully formed workers who can be expected to self-manage and perform to the level of more experienced staff. Further investigation and the opportunity for industry knowledge-exchange would be welcome.

Whilst there is therefore danger in the HE rhetoric of promising *preparedness for practice* that absolves employer responsibility for training and well-being, there is a lesson too for educators. Whilst preparation for strategic roles (*the professional project*) should be encouraged, students must also be *prepared* for early functional roles to avoid the same frustration highlighted above. This may be particularly appropriate for graduates who join Small to Medium-Sized Enterprises (SMEs) where there may be evidence of a doxa that misrecognises the habitus-field match inculcated by the course. Course teams might reflect on this.

*Preparedness for practice* may therefore continue to be a useful lens through which to view the performance of both students and educators on professionally focused HE courses such as PR. Further conceptualisation and theorising would support further research to improve educator understanding, curriculum development and to identify innovative (signature) pedagogies that may be incorporated alongside existing frameworks. In particular, development of the concept will further improve understanding of what it means to be prepared, how that may be embodied in another and what the individual's contribution to that might be expected to be.

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