

CHALK(INTER)FACE:
**the role of public relations in the dialogue between schools and
parents in south east Queensland**

Anne Lane

School of Arts, Griffith University, Gold Coast, Queensland, Australia

Abstract: *This paper focuses on the under-researched area of direct communication between schools and their publics in Australia. The results of a pilot survey of schools in south east Queensland are used to explore the notion that public relations is indeed being carried out in this context. Next, the motivations behind this practice are explored, initially using the four model theory of J. Grunig and Hunt. This paradigm is found to have some relevance in this context, but the degree of 'misfit' is significant. As a result, the survey findings are re-visited and a variation on the original four models is suggested that more adequately address the results.*

Two of the revised models (the development of relationships and the creation of partnerships) particularly highlight the potential of a strategic approach to public relations to make a difference in the administration of schools.

Stream: *Public and political communication (public relations)*

This paper falls into two distinct – though inter-related – halves. In the first part, data from a small research project in south east Queensland is presented, which explores the presence and practice of public relations in selected schools. This clearly establishes the relevance of public relations in this context, and therefore the right of public relations theorists to claim and examine the practice. The second half of the paper does just that, describing and analysing the data using J. Grunig and Hunt's (1984) four models of public relations. These in turn are critiqued for their applicability in this setting, resulting in the suggestion of four variations on the original theoretical theme.

The development of dedicated public relations theory has proceeded exponentially in recent years. Previously, the discipline borrowed theories from areas such as organisational studies to explore, describe and predict public relations activities. However, these were rarely more than a 'best fit' solution, and the resulting areas of discrepancy led to much confusion surrounding the form and function of public relations: it is this legacy which is still apparent in the way that so much of the writing around the topic of public relations begins with a definition, or an explication of what understanding the author is using. In 1984, James Grunig and Todd Hunt took the first steps towards the evolution of specialist theories of public relations with the publishing of their four model paradigm (J. Grunig, 1984; J. Grunig & Hunt, 1984). Although these ideas still drew heavily on scientific, formulaic antecedents (specifically the work of Thayer, 1968) they represented a significant departure away from the use of appropriated theories. Through subsequent revisions and refinements (including the development of situational theory and the mixed motivation model) J. Grunig and Hunt's original four model conceptualisation has remained extraordinarily influential, if only as a point of departure for critiques.

It was because of this long-standing and widely-recognised significance that the four models of J. Grunig and Hunt were used in one of the first explorative, descriptive analyses of public relations in Australian schools (Lane, 2002). The idea of looking at the role of public relations in schools might not seem terribly strange or challenging, but it is an area that has received scant attention in Australia. In other countries, particularly America, school public relations is widely recognised as a legitimate topic to be addressed by professionals and academics alike. As examples, the Phi Delta Kappa organisation provides useful and practical information for school administrators on the 'how to' aspects of public relations (see for example Kinder, 2000; Wilson & Rossman, 1986). There is even a dedicated National Schools Public Relations Association (National Schools Public Relations Association, 2004), which produces a wide range of training opportunities and specialist collateral for its members¹. Academic analysis of this area is still in its infancy, but nonetheless it is beginning to receive some attention in America (Merz & Furman, 1997; Sheldon, 2003).

In Australia however, it seems that the concept of schools as organisations that carry out public relations is still some way from acceptance, if this can be measured by the

¹ The National Schools Public Relations Association has been established in America for over 65 years, and has 40 chapters across the country (National Schools Public Relations Association, 2004). No directly corresponding organisation exists in Australia although the Association of Development and Alumni Professionals in Education (ADAPE) has some similarities (Association of Development and Alumni Professionals in Education, 2004).

amount of professional recognition and/or academic attention an area receives. A few Australian studies (such as Blackmore & Thorpe, 2003) have focused on addressing flows of information between schools and publics via the media. Less work has been done on the direct (public relations) communication contact between schools and publics, and little – if anything – has been done on the impact of the reverse flow of information from publics on the behaviour and attitudes of schools. As a result, the specific consideration of the role of public relations theory in Australian schools is a significantly under-researched area.

A theory-based approach to the analysis of the conduct of public relations in schools in Australia was the main focus of a small research project carried out in south east Queensland in 2001 (Lane, 2002). As the idea of studying communication between Australian schools and their publics has rarely – if ever – been approached from a public relations perspective, this should therefore be seen as a pilot study. Geographically, enquiries were restricted to south east Queensland, mainly for pragmatic reasons of proximity to the researcher. Given that there are significant representations of most school types in the area (that is private and state, primary, secondary and mixed) this geographical restriction should not be seen as posing a significant threat to the credibility of the overall conclusions, but it does mean that particular care is necessary in extrapolating the results beyond their original limits. This research was therefore presented as being descriptive and exploratory in nature, rather than predictive.

The research took the form of questionnaires sent to 148 schools (the response rate was 56, or 38%) and three in-depth interviews or case studies. The purpose of the questionnaire was largely to establish whether public relations was actually being carried out in schools, and if so, how and by whom. The case studies allowed for a deeper exploration of topics raised by the questionnaire. The mixture of data obtained in this way was extremely useful. Quantitative research techniques – as utilised in parts of the questionnaire – were helpful in this project as so much of the area under scrutiny had not yet been mapped out in any way: hard facts and figures were useful in delineating the boundaries. The qualitative approach of the case studies and other parts of the questionnaire were however vital in gathering in the more subjective aspects of how people thought and felt about public relations in schools.

Questions were devised that were designed to identify and interrogate the practice of public relations, even if those practices were not recognised or classified by this name. In addition, this also helped address the potential problem that people who carry out these practices might not always be trained in public relations, and would therefore not necessarily identify themselves as practitioners. The covering letter accompanying the questionnaire specifically requested that it should be completed by ‘the person in [the] school who has major responsibility for communicating with external groups’ on the assumption that this is the person most likely to be responsible for and/or carrying out a public relations role.

The first part of the research survey instrument was aimed at finding out whether, in fact, public relations *was* being carried out in the schools under consideration. In order to do this without using the key phrase of ‘public relations’ – which might have prejudiced or influenced answers – a list of potential publics or communication audiences that the respondent might recognise was used. The list was drawn up based

partly on descriptions of American schools' public relations publics given in Gallagher, Bagin and Kindred (1997). Schools were asked to indicate with which of these groups they communicated, both in terms of sending out information and receiving it inwards. This distinction was made in order to begin determining whether two-way communication flows were in any way significant. The results from this section were as follows:

	Send info to	Receive info from
Parents of current students	56 (100%)	53 (95%)
Parents of prospective students	54 (96%)	46 (82%)
Members of staff	55 (98%)	51 (91%)
Current students	55 (98%)	46 (82%)
Past students	30 (54%)	29 (52%)
The media (TV, radio, papers etc – local or national)	51 (91%)	32 (57%)
Local business community	41 (73%)	34 (68%)
Local householders	28 (50%)	17 (30%)
Politicians (local)	47 (84%)	45 (80%)
Politicians (state or national)	40 (71%)	38 (68%)

The answers to this question showed that schools were communicating with all of the designated publics across the sample, although in some categories the figure was very low. For example, every respondent school said they sent information out to parents of children currently at the school, but only 28 schools (50%) said they sent information out to local householders. Generally the schools had more out-going communications than incoming. However the differences in most categories between the numbers of schools who sent information out and those who received information were quite small. This indicates that schools' communication is not unidirectional, and does in fact incorporate some sort of capability to handle reverse flow. The questionnaire responses also showed that there was a marked emphasis on communicating with internal publics, such as current parents and students, and members of staff. Figures in these categories were higher than those for communications with external publics, such as former students and local households. This may be because these internal groups' presence within the school makes them easy to contact; and also because their cohesive and unified identity makes it much easier for schools to address their information needs. This identification of the existence of managed channels of communication between schools and their publics

clearly indicated that schools are conducting public relations, whether they realise (or acknowledge) it or not.

In order to further explore the notion of schools as potential sites of public relations practice, a subsequent question asked respondents about the tools used in the communication between the organisations and their publics (as identified in the previous question). Again, use of the trigger phrase 'public relations' was avoided, this time by asking the schools if they produced specific items of collateral. These items – such as newsletters and media releases – are widely accepted as being the tools and/or product of public relations activities: their presence could therefore be taken as being indicative of the existence of a public relations function within the surveyed schools. Results were as follows:

Prospectus	52 (93%)
Newsletter (parents)	56 (100%)
Newsletter (students)	23 (41%)
Newsletter (staff)	27 (48%)
Press release	49 (88%)
Fundraising plan	34 (61%)

Answers to this question clearly showed that many – in some cases, all – of the schools were producing items that would require at least some de facto public relations activity. By this, it is meant that whether or not there was a strategic approach to the public relations function in this context, or even a conscious awareness of its existence, nonetheless public relations was being carried out in these schools. Therefore separately and in combination, the findings of the first part of the research clearly established that public relations was indeed being carried out in the schools surveyed.

Answers in this section of the questionnaire also identified a range of 21 different job titles used by those carrying out public relations tasks, including Registrar and Head or Director of Development. The response that occurred most often (45%) was Principal, which may either suggest that many Principals regard public relations functions as part of their remit, and are in fact responsible for carrying out those functions; or perhaps that these functions are being carried out by a whole range of people throughout the school, and the Principal is acting simply as a central point of contact for this survey. Only two schools directly acknowledged the term 'public relations' in their job titles for these positions. Yet answers to other questions showed that all the schools contacted had employees performing other tasks that could be considered as falling under the remit of public relations, such as business development, media liaison, fundraising, or community relations. This lack of use of the specific label 'public relations' is not so much because schools do not conduct public relations, but rather because the relevant practices they carry out are often not recognised or classified by this name. In addition, the people who carry out these practices are not always trained in public relations, and would not necessarily identify

themselves as practitioners (Lane, 2003). This tendency is exacerbated by the value-laden associations and negative connotations the term 'public relations' has attracted in recent years (for examples of this, see Carty, 1992; and Stauber & Rampton, 1995), coupled with a misunderstanding of exactly what it is that a public relations person does. One of the schools in the case study also pointed out that some schools are still uneasy with the 'actively corporate' image the use of such job titles suggests. This resistance to the label 'public relations' may be one of the main reasons this territory remains largely unclaimed by public relations professionals, researchers and theoreticians in Australia.

The next stage of the survey was designed to find out more about the motivation behind these activities. The information obtained in this way was analysed using J. Grunig and Hunt's (1984) four models:

- Press agency/publicity
- Public information
- Two-way asymmetric
- Two-way symmetric.

Although one of these models – the two-way symmetric model – has been included as a component in the development of normative theories of public relations by J. Grunig and L.A. Grunig (J. Grunig, 2001; J Grunig & Grunig, 1992; J Grunig & White, 1992; J. E. Grunig, 1992; L. A. Grunig, 1992), the use of the four models in this context should not be seen as suggesting or supporting a privileged position of authority for any of these concepts. Rather, they were simply chosen as a convenient lens through which to first view the results of the data obtained in this research project. As in many other attempts to further the theoretical underpinnings of contemporary public relations practice (such as Deatherage & Hazleton, 1998; Hallahan, 2000; Y-H Huang, 1997; Kent & Taylor, 2002), the work of J. Grunig and Hunt is used here primarily to provide a widely-recognised frame of reference, a point of departure for critical analysis.

Adhering to J. Grunig and Hunt's original definitions of the models, it was found that there were very few occurrences of communication that could be categorised under the heading of press agency. Although schools were found to be staging events to which the press were invited – such as special assemblies, literature festivals and eisteddfods – these events were not devised with the primary intention of obtaining positive coverage in the media. The schools surveyed explicitly stated that their motivation in holding these occasions was to directly present achievements favourably to an audience, either within the school or further afield. The media were often invited to cover these events and to help present them to the wider public, but the main aim was to publicise accomplishments within the school community. Another point of differentiation is that the schools strongly refuted any suggestion that the staging of these events might involve the use of 'incomplete, distorted, or half-true information' (J. Grunig & Hunt, 1984, p.21) as specified in J. Grunig and Hunt's original description of the press agency model.

The public information model was similarly found to occur so rarely as to cast doubt on its relevance in this context. At first glance, tools such as newsletters and press

releases might seem to provide school public relations practitioners with the opportunity to disseminate truthful, factual information to various publics, as described in J. Grunig and Hunt's conceptualisation of this model. However, much public relations communication that might otherwise belong in this category is actually excluded by their additional qualifier that the function of such communication should only be to 'report objectively about [an] organization to the public' (1984, p.22). Prospectuses, brochures and much other public relations collateral are designed specifically to convey a very subjective point of view. In determining whether schools' public relations communications come under the heading of 'public information', all communication of this overtly promotional type has therefore been discounted. As a result, the public information model of public relations is of surprisingly little use in schools, despite J. Grunig and Hunt's assertions that 'government, nonprofit associations, business' (1984, p.22) – descriptions which cover most schools – rely heavily on this form.

Instances of the two-way asymmetric public relations model were much more widespread, and were indeed the most numerically prevalent model identified in this research. In both the questionnaires and the case studies, schools indicated how important it was to present management's views to the public favourably, and to persuade the public/s to support that view: this is one of the prime distinguishers of two-way asymmetric communication. Some public relations people working in schools also spoke about how they felt it was part of their job to explain to management what the public would accept. However, this interaction did not take place in the vacuum suggested by J. Grunig and Hunt's original explication of the four models. Communications appropriate to the heading of two-way asymmetric public relations identified in this research were conducted as part of the ongoing creation and maintenance of relationships between schools and their publics. This correlation is explored in more detail later in this paper.

Examples of the two-way symmetric model appeared comparatively infrequently in this study. Very few schools gave any examples of truly symmetric communication but – significantly – lots of them gave instances where they *believed* this was occurring. This was interpreted as indicating an awareness of the desirability of this type of communication, and a perceived need to be seen to be functioning in this way. The rhetorical environment within which schools – including those in Australia – are operating may influence this apparent need. Schools are positioned within this rhetoric as sites of special responsibility and potentiality in areas requiring mutually-responsive interaction with publics, such as the teaching *and implementation* of democratic practices (Knight, 2001). It is perhaps an awareness of these requirements at a theoretical and policy level that are reflected in the desire of schools to provide examples of their use of two-way symmetric communication (public relations).

This analysis therefore revealed a less than perfect fit between J. Grunig and Hunt's original explication of the four model theory and the reality of public relations in the schools surveyed. In particular there seen to be disparities between schools' expressed awareness of the importance of two-way symmetric public relations and the actual occurrences of this model. Other responses in the survey suggested that this might have been because the people undertaking public relations in schools were either *unaware* of the strategic, theoretical underpinnings of their practice; or were *unable* to implement different ways of thinking and doing public relations due to

organisational and/or legal constraints; or they were *unwilling* to consider alternative approaches, which might have required a substantial and significant shift in power relations.

At this stage, it became necessary to address these discrepancies or variations between theory and data. The options were a Wisconsin-type approach, which would question the data discovered in the pilot study; or a data-driven Stanford stance, which would instead challenge the theoretical underpinnings (L. A. Grunig, 2004). Given the plethora of challenges to, and critiques of, J. Grunig and Hunt's original models in recent years, it was felt that the option of varying the theoretical approach might be most productive. As a result, a reconsideration of the data obtained in this pilot research program led to the identification of four concepts appropriate to the function of public relations in the respondent south east Queensland schools, based on the motivations of the originating organisation. This might seem to rely upon J. Grunig and Hunt's organisation-centric approach, which has been criticised by Broom et al (2000), and Leitch and Neilson (2001) amongst others. To a certain extent, an organisation-centric approach is unavoidable in this case, as this is a good example of circumstances in which the organisation (that is, the school) often has the most influential role in determining the conduct of communication (Hallahan, 2000). In addition, the school provides a fixed and stable point of reference, making it easier and more practical to assess and evaluate their public relations communications, in this exploratory stage at least. However, it is important to point out that the revised conceptualisations do incorporate some acknowledgement of the potential for reflexive communication, and so should be seen as understanding the importance of other parties.

The four suggested models for the motivation behind the respondent schools' public relations activities are summarised as:

1. Publicity
2. Persuasion
3. Relationship
4. Partnership

This broad spread of motivations is intricately linked to the particular and peculiar position of the Australian educational sector as the provider of a compulsory service paid for by people who don't necessarily actually use it, with competing private and state streams, operating in a policy context dominated by rhetoric advocating social justice and equity agendas. The recent presentation of these ideas at an Australian-based international conference of education marketers (among them many de facto public relations practitioners) elicited a very favourable response to the identification of these motivations. Without exception, practitioners said they could recognise in the list the purpose/s behind their work, although many of them made the comment that there was usually a mixture of them in place in any one situation. Each of these motivations will now be discussed in more detail.

Publicity

As noted previously, the schools surveyed were actively seeking publicity for themselves and their students, but were not necessarily creating events to secure

positive coverage in the media. This is one of the main points of difference between this motivation and the publicity model proposed by J. Grunig and Hunt. Another is that the end result of this push for publicity is not necessarily the spread of organisational lies and half-truths. It is rather to increase positive awareness of the school and its pupils in the internal and (perhaps) external communities, leading to a perceived sense of linkage or connection to the school, and/or an approval of its achievements.

Persuasion

J. Grunig has been said to consider all persuasion to be inherently unethical (Botan, 1989), and so avoided it in his original four model construct. However, the idea that the practice of public relations is inextricably linked to the function of persuasion is evident in the findings of this research. There are plenty of antecedents for this view: it has been said that 'public relations and persuasion are two Ps in a pod' (Gallagher et al., 1997, p.5; see also Miller, 1989). Such an understanding prioritises the possibility for public relations and persuasion to go hand-in-hand, particularly in consumer-driven democracies where 'persuasive discourse [is] founded on influence rather than force' (Mayhew, 1997, p.5). This obviously has great potential relevance in the area of schools, both state and private, as they compete for a share of the pupil 'market'. The potential for public relations and marketing to work closely together in this arena might also explain why the public relations functions of schools were so difficult to identify in isolation. Discussions with schools about the process of devising prospectuses and brochures showed how important the persuasive aspect of public relations is, and how similar its outcomes can be to those of the marketer. One school outlined the process they had followed when drawing up their new school promotional brochure. A working party had brainstormed the school's unique 'selling' points and why they appealed to their target publics. These ideas were then incorporated into the brochure, which was designed to *persuade* parents to view the school positively (the public relations outcome) and as a result to send their child to the school (the marketing outcome).

The persuasive capacity of public relations also had a role in the internal functioning of the schools in this research. In both the questionnaires and the case studies, schools indicated how important it was to explain management's view to the public and to persuade the public/s to support that view. As an example, one administrator had to use persuasive public relations techniques – including convincing information leaflets and personal meetings – to get parents and teachers to accept a 'Nit Buster' program that the Principal had decided to implement. The notion of persuasion of dissenting factions and the prioritising of organisational objectives was also evident in the techniques that another school's public relations practitioner used when introducing curriculum change.

Relationships

One of the most significant recent areas of growth in public relations activities is the requirement to create, maintain and enhance relationships between organisations and publics. Even the explicit motivations of publicity and persuasion could be said to be in some measure determined by the desire to establish positive connections or relationships with other groups or individuals. Some public relations theorists – such

as Kent and Taylor (2002), Hallahan (2000) and Heath (2000) – see organisation-public relationships as being characterised by dialogic discourses, with both participants engaged in discussions. Interestingly, this has also been recognised as an important area of development within education. At an international symposium conducted at the April 2002 meeting of the American Educational Research Association, a global trend was identified towards ‘a refocusing on the centrality of relationships in the process of education’ (cited in McCombs, 2003, p.99). In Queensland, the *Education and Other Legislation Amendment Act, 1997* outlines a clear expectation (but not yet a mandatory requirement) that all state schools should set up school councils to act as portals for the wider community to access the functioning of schools (Beere & Dempster, 1998).

Within this understanding of relationships, no importance is attached to the relative levels of importance and/or influence of the input and output by participants, so long as there is contact between them. This means in effect that power balances in the relationship can be perpetuated without adversely affecting the existence of the relationship itself. There are obvious similarities between this paradigm and the two-way asymmetric model of public relations suggested by J. Grunig and Hunt (1984), which outlines a bi-directional communication flow between organisation and public that allows an organisation to put out its information and to receive feedback from its publics about that information. J. Grunig and Hunt’s original model focused on the process of this communication, rather than placing it in context as a tool towards the creation and maintenance of relationships. However, the findings of the pilot survey of schools in south east Queensland revealed this was often the motivation behind the use of communication techniques that fell under the heading of two-way asymmetric public relations. Using such communication and other relationship-building techniques, schools found out what was important to parents and others, and emphasised those aspects of their organisational behaviour and attitudes that satisfactorily addressed these issues. In addition, schools found that involving the community in decision-making could be a proactive step in avoiding negative issues and crises. One school’s public relations practitioner indicated that the creation and maintenance of relationships with publics was a very high priority for her school, and had direct benefits for the organisation. She explained that the level of debate and discussion over issues that her school fostered gave people a high level of ownership of the decisions, leading to a minimisation of conflict and disputes.

Partnerships

‘Relationship through dialogue’, however, does not necessarily encompass the moral and ethical democratic dimensions of interaction between organisations and publics subscribed to by such authors as Culbertson and Chen (1997), Huang (2001), L.A. Grunig (1992), and of course J. Grunig (2000; 1984 for example). For this, it is necessary to turn to the notion of ‘partnership’ (arguably an extrapolation or logical conclusion of the idea of relationship) in which organisations seek to relate to their public/s on an equal and co-responsive footing. This distinction in phraseology between ‘relationship’ and ‘partnership’ is not a matter of mere semantics, but indicates a deep and radical difference in the nature of the connection between the participants. In a relationship, organisation and public interact with each other while still largely maintaining the *status quo* or power gradient between the two. In a partnership, however, each participant is equal in power and influence, which may

require the voluntary devolution of power by one of the participants, resulting in a symmetric interaction: 'large disparities in power seem antithetical to symmetry' (Culbertson & Chen, 1997) and yet would not prevent the formation of a relationship.

These precepts are reflected in J. Grunig and Hunt's two-way symmetric model of public relations communication. The basic concept of using two-way information flows can be expanded still further in schools, using public relations professionals and/or practices to facilitate not only the development of relationships between schools and publics, but also fully participative partnerships. This is an idea that has been the focus of a great deal of debate and discussion in schools and at policy level in recent times. This type of connection between schools and publics involves a willingness on both parts to make changes and to compromise to achieve success. Of course, schools are not totally free to do as they please in many – if not most – matters. They are strictly bound by state and federal government requirements and laws, and have set parameters within which they have to operate. However, the application of appropriate public relations techniques can ensure that this partnership-building form of communication is maximised wherever possible, within whatever external constraints are imposed. The role of public relations theory and practice in helping Australian schools fulfil their obligations in these areas is only just beginning to be explored.

In summary, it can be seen that this small pilot study conducted in schools in south east Queensland has led to a number of important conclusions:

- The schools surveyed *are* carrying out public relations functions, although they may not recognise, use, or even accept this label. Although the parameters of this research make generalisations unwise, this finding might have broader implications for Australian schools in general.
- The respondent schools are using public relations techniques and skills to achieve four main organisational aims:
 1. Publicity
 2. Persuasion
 3. Relationships
 4. Partnerships

The information gathered in this research project certainly seems to indicate a major disjuncture between the requirements of education theory and policy, and the practical execution of those requirements: the potential for public relations theory and practice to help plug that gap is an intriguing possibility. In these ways, public relations techniques can offer schools the opportunity to not only create and present the image of the school portrayed in the brochure, but to go beyond, building up real relationships and partnerships both within the school and the wider community. However, these suggested motivations for the public relations activities in certain schools are in no way intended to be viewed as a fully-formed alternative public relations theory. They are instead submitted as a context-dependent finding, which might be used as a step or developmental stage in the formulation of richer, more layered and complex approaches to public relations.

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Address for correspondence:

Anne Lane
PhD candidate
Griffith University
School of Arts, Gold Coast campus
PMB50 Gold Coast Mail Centre
Queensland
9726
Australia

anne.lane@griffith.edu.au

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