

IIS – Teaching guide consultancy track

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Introduction

In the Communication Science Master's course "Shaping society", the interplay is studied between private organizations (e.g. corporations), public organizations (e.g. governmental organizations), and the media in shaping and strategically influencing the public debate on issues. With the IIS grant, We developed a consultancy track from scratch that runs alongside the theoretical part of the course. In the consultancy track, students work in groups on a case to outline actor positions and strategies to reflect on how key actors aim to shape society. Based on their critical analysis, they give practical strategic communication advice to the client. More specifically, students are expected to develop a professional consultancy attitude and to acquire the corresponding skills, such as making theory-informed analyses of practical problems and using academic insights to give evidence-based recommendations that are appropriate for the practical situation.

Description of the consultancy track

In the consultancy track, students apply the principles and theories of issue arenas, public affairs/lobbying, and public sector communication to a practical consultancy case. The main goals are to acquire professional consultancy skills and to learn to apply scientific insights to practical cases. Three organizations will each sponsor an issue from their daily business, for which they ask strategic external communication advice. Students will work in groups to dive deep into the issue and the issue sponsor. Prior to starting the consultancy project, students will fill out a consultation styles preference test that helps identify the role they typically take on in a group. This will later on serve as a basis for reflection on the acquired competencies. Based on desk research and (social) media analysis, the groups will draft a professional report to eventually give practical advice on how to manage the issue strategically from a communication perspective. Finally, they pitch their ideas to the client in a final presentation. To develop their consultancy skills, a consultancy skills trainer will coach student groups in client relationship management and pitching. In the aftermath, students reflect individually on their own role, collaboration, and decisions taken in the group.

What kind of case/issue?

This depends on the issue sponsor but can apply to all sorts of public issues as discussed in the course (e.g., climate change, vaccination, work pressure, privacy, etc.). There will be three organizations sponsoring an issue and student groups will work on either one of these.

Key moments for preparation for the lecturer

- Contacting possible issue sponsors/clients from own network, best 2-3 months in advance
- Sending a brief description of to do's and what they get in return

- Discussing the issue/case with the client to evaluate whether it is (or can be made) feasible for the course
- Arranging introduction meeting where the lecturer holds an interview with the client that is recorded and made available to the students for an overview of the issue and organization
- Fixing meeting dates with the client from the beginning to facilitate planning for all sides.
- After the course: brief feedback conversation

Key moments and deliverables for students (in chronological order)

- 1) Composing groups (about 4 students) and organization/issue selection, taking into consideration the student's group role inventory.
- 2) An intake meeting with the client (to be recorded; the consultancy skills trainer will give feedback on students' client relationship management skills).
- 3) If necessary: intermediate contact moment with the client.
- 4) A draft client meeting to discuss the results, including a pitch to the client, covering the strategic communication advice based on the analysis. The consultancy skills trainer will provide feedback.
- 5) A final client meeting to discuss the results, including a pitch to the client. (group work, included in the report grade).

Deliverables for the consultancy track

A report of ca. 4.000-5.000 words including the issue analysis and results (group work, 30% of final grade).

The grade for the final client meeting is included in this grade (10%).

A reflection paper (ca. 2.000 words; individual, 20% of final grade).

(The individual take-home exam counts for 50% of final grade.)

Note by the lecturers: In terms of time spent and effort, the consultancy track could deserve a larger share of the final grade. The regulations within our Master's programme do however not allow us to include group work for more than 30% of the final grade.

Materials

The instructions and grading schemes/rubrics can be found in the appendices. Please note that these will be adapted for the next academic year. For the most up to date version, you can send us an e-mail.

Appendix I Instructions for the consultancy report

Students will give strategic communication advice based on in-depth issue analysis. This analysis follows the issue arena model (Vos et al., 2014) and includes desk research, client interviews, as well as qualitative content analysis of corporate communication and media. The paper (group work) should be structured as follows:

- Executive summary (max. 300 words), to be written after completion of the recommendations
- Brief overview of the results and recommendations; should cover all highlights from the client's perspective.
- Introduction (max. 300 words)
- Brief introduction to the organization and case, including a central question
- Issue analysis (max. 1.500 words). The issue analysis will address each of the four issue dimensions:

I. Issue-related aspects

Analysis of issue sponsor and its issue = desk research + intake talk with client

II. Actors

Drafting an issue map – how is the issue situated within the broader societal discourse (other/past related issues)? Which stakeholders are connected to the issue?

Prioritization of the most relevant stakeholders

A qualitative content analysis of corporate communication from the most relevant actors

III. Places of interaction - Identifying arenas of issue discourse

Which channels do these actors use? Which policy level applies?

IV. Course of the debate

A qualitative (social) media analysis on the issue linked to the actors and the channels they use

- Conclusions of the issue analysis (500 words)
The conclusions should bring together the results from all four issue dimensions, rather than merely repeating the analysis. The conclusions should be related to the whole issue and the implications for the client.
- Recommendations/Strategic communication advice (max. 1.500 words)

The strategic communication advice should give recommendations to the client on how to deal with the issue, from the perspective of strategic communication. The recommendations should be evidence-based (so, build on the theories and insights that have been discussed in the course), creative, feasible, and fit the needs and situation of the client, based on your assessment of these aspects during your interactions with the client. In terms of formulation, they should be concise.

Appendix II Grading scheme/rubric consultancy report

Max. 10 points

<p>Introduction Brief introduction to the case and organization; central question</p>	Max. 0.5 pts
<p>I. Issue-related aspects Smartly identifies and describes the scope of the issue for the issue sponsor while delineating it from the broader (e.g., industry-wide, national, European, global) discourse</p>	Max. 0.5 pts
<p>II. Actors Contains an issue map that shows the interconnectedness of the issue to other topics and the actors that had, have, or will have a stake in the issue. Shows a sensible prioritization of stakeholders and description of the key actors. The qualitative analysis of the corporate communication material draws on a well-chosen sample or population of content, is conducted empirically by at least two group members, and leads to insights that can be used for the other dimensions</p>	Max. 1 pts
<p>III. Places of interaction The issue arenas, their scope, and their interconnections are described and related to the actors</p>	Max. 0.5 pts
<p>IV. Course of the debate The section details the relevant population for the media content analysis and describes how and why the relevant sample is drawn such that it reflects the key actors and issue arenas. The content analysis is conducted empirically by at least two group members. The results inform the issue-related aspects (I) and relate to at least the places of interaction (III)</p>	Max. 1 pts
<p>Conclusions The section is intelligently structured such that it brings together the results from all four issue dimensions. It is not a repetition of the findings from data analysis, but goes beyond in that it offers conclusions that relate to the whole issue and the implications it has for the issue sponsor</p>	Max. 1 pts
<p>Recommendations/strategic communication advice The recommendations build on the analysis of the four dimensions and the conclusions drawn in the previous section. Substantively, they build on the theories and insights that have been discussed throughout the course. They are evidence-based, creative, feasible, fit the needs and situation of the client. They are concise and can be practically applied</p>	Max. 2 pts
<p>Look & feel of the report The report is well structured and joyful to read. The formatting and language use reflect awareness and familiarity with the client and its situation. It uses visualizations, is written in accessible (not too academic) language, easy to access, and appealing in design</p>	Max. 0.5 pts
<p>Final meeting to discuss the results with the client: quality of the pitch Clear and well-structured information, interesting, easy-to-follow, professional tone</p>	Max. 1 pts
<p>Final meeting to discuss the results with the client: relationship management Openness, responsiveness, quality of the interaction</p>	Max. 1 pts

Appendix III Instructions the reflection paper

Writing this paper helps you to explicate, understand, and stimulate your learning process in the consultancy track. In this paper, you will use the prompts/questions as formulated by Ryan & Ryan (2013) to reflect on your learning process. The prompts are associated with several levels of reflection that “[...] increase in complexity and move from description of, and personal response to, an issue or situation, to the use of theory and experience to explain, interrogate and ultimately transform practice” (Ryan & Ryan, 2013, p. 245). The reflection paper should be structured allowing the following line:

Reflection on the initial situation (max. 600 words)

Describe your previous experiences with consultancy, or, in a broader sense, operating as a communication professional in a work situation (e.g. during your internship). Focus on relationship management: which skills did you already have and facilitated an adequate relationship with supervisors/clients, and which skills need further development? Briefly describe the outcome of your role inventory as well.

Reflection on the intake meeting OR Reflection on the final pitch/discussion of the results with the client (max. 600 words)

Choose one key moment/issue that occurred during the intake meeting or the final pitch/discussion of the results with the client and that you would consider as a learning moment. Reflect on the interaction with the client – if relevant, including group dynamics – with the help of the questions in table 1. In your reflection, also discuss to what extent the coaching helped you to further develop your consultancy skills.

Reflection on the group dynamics (max. 600 words)

Choose one key moment/issue that occurred during the group work in the consultancy track. Reflect on the interaction within the group with the help of the questions in table 1. Include the outcome of your role inventory and the outcomes of your group members’ role inventory in your reflection.

Conclusions (max. 300 words)

Highlight your main learnings during the consultancy track and formulate personal ‘lessons’ that could help you in future professional situations.

Table 1 Prompts for the reflective scale (adapted from Ryan & Ryan, 2013)

Level	Questions to get started
Reporting and Responding	Report what happened or what the issue or moment involved. Why is it relevant? Respond to the moment by making observations, expressing your opinion or asking questions.
Relating	Relate or make a connection between the moment or issue and your own skills, professional experience, or discipline knowledge. Have I seen this before? Were the conditions the same or different? Do I have the skills and knowledge to deal with this? Explain.
Reasoning	Highlight in detail significant factors underlying the moment or issue. Explain and show why they are important to an understanding of the moment or issue. Refer to relevant theory and literature to support your reasoning. Consider different perspectives. How would a knowledgeable person perceive/handle this? What are the ethics involved?
Reconstructing	Reframe or reconstruct future practice or professional understanding. How would I deal with this next time? What might work and why? Are there different options? What might happen if ...? Are my ideas supported by theory? Can I make changes to benefit others?

Appendix IV Grading scheme/rubric reflection paper

Max. 10 points

Reflection on the initial situation Detailed and personal reflections on own prior experiences, by choosing relevant moments, and a self-critical evaluation of the own skills based on the role inventory	Max. 2.5 pts
Reflection on the intake meeting OR Reflection on the final pitch/discussion of the results with the client This section should cover all four levels for reflection (see table 1 in the instructions). The descriptions and situations should be described and analyzed in a detailed, thorough manner reflecting your personal experiences, and show a reflective, self-critical attitude	Max. 2.5 pts
Reflection on the group dynamics This section should cover all four levels for reflection (see table 1 in the instructions). The descriptions and situations should be described and analyzed in a detailed, thorough manner, reflecting your personal experiences, and show a critical and analytical attitude	Max. 2.5 pts
Conclusions This section should describe your main 'lessons' in a detailed manner. The lessons should be original, tailored to your personal situation (as indicated by references to the previous sections of your reflection paper), and go beyond generic suggestions	Max. 2 pts
Language and formatting Precision, clarity, readability, layout, spelling, punctuation, and clear arrangement are assessed	Max. 0.5 pts