

Risky Business: Applying Risk and Crisis Communication Principles in a Field Trip Setting

Dr. Cara Lawson
200 Agricultural Administration
2120 Fyffe Road
Columbus, OH 43210
614-292-6909
lawson.182@osu.edu

Nicole Volk
200 Agricultural Administration
2120 Fyffe Road
Columbus, OH 43210
614-292-6909
volk.97@osu.edu

Introduction / Need for Idea

Using experiential education as a teaching approach helps students make connections between education, society, and life (DeMartini, 1983). While it is not a new approach (Knobloch, 2003; Roberts, 2006), experiential learning provides a foundation for profound learning by connecting experience with theory and classroom instruction (Bringle & Hatcher, 1999). In this vein, short-term experiential education opportunities that offer a real-world perspective can be implemented through field trips (Scarce, 1997), a strategy that lends itself well to crisis communication preparation.

To prepare for a potential crisis, crisis communication managers must first identify and assess potential for risk by exploring and diagnosing vulnerabilities that exist within businesses and organizations (Coombs, 2021). The field trip enables an atmosphere of risk assessment, which can be used to pinpoint and prioritize potential risks to ultimately develop a crisis communication plan (Irlbeck, 2023). Field trips also allow students to engage with stakeholders, whose perspectives are key to consider when developing a crisis communication plan (Veil & Husted, 2012). Additionally, the observation of risk provides a scenario for students to practice the crucial skill of drafting potential crisis responses, a key element of a crisis communication plan (Coombs, 2021; Ozanne et al., 2020). The field trip experience provides students a chance to observe and strategize for potential risk and crisis in an actual business or organization and allows students to apply many elements of risk and crisis communication.

How it Works

An end-of-the-term field trip was selected to allow students to apply concepts discussed throughout the semester during an agricultural issues communication course. Subject matter should guide field trip topics and locations (Scarce, 1997), and given the course focus on risk and crisis communication needs for a fictional food company during the semester, the instructor and students brainstormed food-oriented locations that were easily accessible to students. As choice plays an important role in intrinsic motivation to learn (Evans & Boucher, 2015), together, the students and instructor selected [Market], a 148-year-old landmark with merchants, farmers, and bakers offering local and fresh products. Before the field trip, students were provided with details including the date, address, where to meet inside [Market], and information on carpooling and parking. Students were instructed to bring a writing utensil and optional funds for shopping. They were also reminded of the activity objectives, which focused on assessing potential for risk and crisis, and developing a potential crisis response.

At [Market], students met at the previously identified location and received a worksheet and instructions for their risk and crisis field trip experience. Students were instructed to visit at least three vendors in [Market] and identify one risk or vulnerability for each. After identifying the risks, students were instructed to create messages for social media to potentially be used should the risk elevate to a crisis (Ozanne et al., 2020). After students completed the risk diagnosis and drafted their social media messages, the class debriefed as a group what they observed and the approaches they took when crafting a crisis response. The activity sheets were collected, and participatory grades were issued. Students unable to attend the [Market] field trip were offered the option to complete the activity by visiting food company websites of their choice.

Results to Date

A survey was distributed to the students to collect feedback on the learning experience. Ten of 15 students attended the field trip to [Market] and all attendees completed the survey. Taking a field trip off-campus to a consumer-facing business allowed the students to practice both identifying potential risks and writing potential crisis responses (Ozanne et al., 2020). Students indicated via survey response that the field trip was an enjoyable and creative learning activity. Specifically, students said they appreciated the chance to recognize real risk and apply the classroom content in a different setting (Coombs, 2021; Irlbeck, 2023). Some students also mentioned their eagerness and preparedness to apply their risk and crisis communication skillsets to their future careers. Students who completed the survey indicated they approached looking for risk and vulnerabilities at [Market] by reflecting on class activities and assignments, talking with their peers/classmates, observing potential risk issues on-site, considering potential social media issues, and considering the perspectives of stakeholders (Veil & Husted, 2012). Overall, students reported the location was very convenient due to its short distance from campus, but also noted some difficulty with parking and local construction in the area.

Future Plans / Advice to Others

The instructor organized the field trip without communicating with [Market] managers. While [Market] is a public, consumer-facing business, a few students reported some vendors appeared to be nervous as students took notes without clearly communicating about the class activity. It is recommended that the instructor contact the business manager or representative to let them know about the field trip and the nature of the students' tasks. At the same time, it is recommended the instructor prepare the students to better engage with the employees and other stakeholders to promote mutual partnership and learning. Students should be encouraged to ask questions about what they see as risks to determine a more precise level of risk based on stakeholder insights (Veil & Husted, 2012).

Selecting a convenient location is also key to the success of an experience like this. The instructor offered to drive students, and other students carpoled. Locations should be varied to encourage and maintain excitement about the experience (Evans & Boucher, 2015) and to determine locations that enable the application of course content (Scarce, 1997). It is recommended this experience take place at the end of the academic term to allow students to apply content from throughout the semester. The worksheet and instructions provided a roadmap to applying content in a new location, and the social media activity encouraged students to practice drafting crisis responses. This activity took place in the spring semester of 2023, and the instructor plans to provide another similar field trip opportunity in the spring of 2024.

Costs / Resources Needed

Aside from minimum transportation costs for some students and the optional market purchases, there were minimal costs associated with this experience. Time was a needed resource, as the instructor needed to plan the field trip experience and allocate time within the course schedule. The instructor also needed to create field trip objectives and a worksheet for the students to use as a guide, and copies of the worksheet were needed on-site.

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