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Public Health Professionals Must Engage The Public. Communications Training Is Key

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I write about global health, infectious diseases, and equity

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(FromBackL) World Health Organization (WHO) Health Emergencies Programme Director Michael Ryan, WHO ... [+] AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES

For a while, Covid-19 turned all journalists into health journalists. Equally, it pushed scientists into science communication. Today, even as we face new challenges, from H5N1 bird flu to outbreaks of

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measles, the need for good communication and public engagement remains paramount. This means scientists, especially those in public health, will need to acquire skills in communication and advocacy.

During the Covid-19 pandemic, I taught epidemiology courses for journalists around the world (see my previous [post](#) for the key takeaways). This year, I had the opportunity to [teach](#) media, communication, advocacy, and diplomacy to public health students. The experience was eye-opening.

Why communication matters for public health

We live in an era of unprecedented misinformation, disinformation, and outright antiscience aggression. Fake news travels faster than true news. The public is getting more information from Whatsapp, TikTok and social media than trusted health agencies and scientists. In fact, WHO considers the anti-vaccination movement among the 10 biggest [threats](#) to global health. The fact that we are seeing outbreaks of measles and whooping cough in 2024 is a sad testament to this threat.

Bad science, populist politics, and poor communication, are eroding public faith in science. We also learned, the hard way, that even the best science can be overridden by politics and vested interests. There is no assurance that good science will automatically inform policy decisions, and there is no guarantee that good policies will actually get implemented. An tragic [example](#) of this know-do gap is how the United States lost well over 1 million people to Covid-19, despite the nation's wealth, vaccine stockpiles, and scientific expertise.



Communication training for public health students

Public health practitioners need to learn how to directly engage the public, how to engage with the media, write op-eds, give interviews, speak at public meetings, and how to write policy briefs for policy makers. They should also learn about how to simplify public health messages, organize public health campaigns, and use social media. Skills like advocacy and diplomacy can be learnt - they go a long way in influencing the public as well as policy makers.

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In my course, students learned to write media releases, write and publish op-eds, craft policy briefs aimed at policy makers and politicians, practice mock TV interviews, prepare public health posters, and deliver short speeches aimed at the public or policy makers.

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In addition, they learnt about podcasts, narrative storytelling, effective use of social media, planning and execution of advocacy campaigns, strategies to tackle misinformation, how to communicate uncertainty, and about the importance of diplomacy in global and public health.

Student grades were entirely based on practical work, not on theory or exams. Everyone had to submit media releases, op-eds, policy briefs, public health posters, and deliver short speeches in class.

Lessons and learnings

Based on my learnings, I offer a few tips for public health programs and teachers like me.

First, invite journalists and media experts to teach in your public health courses. They bring immense value with their lived experience in journalism. I was very fortunate to have an amazing group (see acknowledgements) of journalists and media experts teaching in my course. Without them, the course would not have worked. Ideally, a good public health communications course would have two co-directors - a journalist and a public health expert. Collaboration between schools of public health and schools of journalism can do wonders.

Second, emphasize *practice*, not theory. There is plenty of theory around knowledge translation, but public health students today need much more than theory. They need to actually do things. They need to actually engage the public. My students showed me that when given the right skills, they are capable of putting it to good use!

Because my course required students to write and pitch op-eds, they ended up successfully publishing almost 10 op-eds during the



semester, on diverse topics such as the need for Covid-19 [boosters](#), safety on [subways](#), fighting [islamophobia](#), [eating disorders](#) among boys and men, Florida's plan to import [medicines](#) from Canada, [food insecurity](#) in Canada, [long Covid](#), [climate crisis](#), and [fluoridation](#) of water.

Some students published their pieces after several rejected pitches. It taught them the importance of perseverance. Students also learnt how to deal with editorial feedback and revisions. Some students were invited to do media (TV) interviews because of their topical, published op-eds. Some students wrote op-eds even after the course ended - they took their learnings beyond the course.

Third, teach students advocacy, not just communication.

Because advocacy can help them translate research into action. To be impactful, invite professionals who actually do advocacy campaigns to speak to your students. I was, again, fortunate to have professional advocates teach my students. Students learnt about famous advocacy campaigns like AIDS [activism](#), as well as contemporary examples (e.g. advocacy on Covid-19 vaccine equity). They also learnt about the perils of [single-issue advocacy](#).

Fourth, teach students about diplomacy and its vital role in advancing public health. Global health [diplomacy](#) “is a process of multi-actor engagement that can shape the global policy context influencing health or position health in foreign policy negotiations.” The ongoing, protracted, and faltering [pandemic accord](#) negotiation is a good example to illustrate why negotiation skills are important.

Lastly, teach students how to deal with misinformation and disinformation. The rise of anti-science, eloquently summarized by Peter Hotez in “[The Deadly Rise of Anti-science](#),” is a scary phenomenon. With science under attack, scientists have little choice but to tackle disinformation by directly engaging the

public. Publishing in scientific journals is important, but not sufficient. In addition to skills like [prebunking and debunking](#), public health professionals will have to learn about developing and maintaining trust.

In conclusion, knowledge translation today is far more messy and complicated than what we normally teach in schools of public health. We need to prepare public health students for the real world they will graduate into, a world rife with populist politics, polarization, anti-science, and a tired, weary public that has lost trust in science. Simply put, there are too many know-do gaps in global and public health. Good communication, advocacy, and diplomacy can help bridge some of the know-do gaps, and give public health students skills to become change-makers. “I had been struggling with finding a way to effect change as a public health practitioner beyond research and this course has given me some direction,” is how one student put it. Personally, I wish I had learnt about communication and advocacy years ago, when I first trained in public health. I am now learning, by teaching.

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