



Measuring student outcomes: An assessment of service-learning in the public relations campaigns course

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ABSTRACT

This study assesses the effectiveness of service-learning in the public relations capstone course by measuring perceived student learning outcomes. An assessment instrument is proposed and tested via a longitudinal survey of students ($n = 210$) enrolled in the public relations capstone course at a large southeastern university. Results support a general service-learning assessment instrument for public relations education that includes measures of practical skills, interpersonal skills, personal responsibility, and citizenship, as well as discipline-specific functional, creative, and research skills.

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1. Introduction

Over the past decade, educators have recognized the value of service-learning to the mass communications discipline, and use of service-learning approaches in public relations coursework is widespread (Panici & Lasky, 2002). In fact, it is commonplace for the public relations capstone course to incorporate service-learning, generally in the form of student work performed for real clients who need strategic communication services (Benigni & Cameron, 1999). However, minimal research has investigated student perceptions of their service-learning experiences (Corbett & Kendall, 1999, p. 66), and researchers have not addressed service-learning outcomes in a systematic fashion nor developed consistent tools to assess them (Toncar, Reid, Burns, Anderson, & Nguyen, 2006). This study attempts to overcome limitations in public relations education by presenting a service-learning model for the capstone course and assessing the effectiveness of the model in producing desired student learning outcomes. In addition, this study seeks to demonstrate support for a service-learning assessment instrument appropriate for general application in public relations education.

2. Service-learning as pedagogy

Service-learning is “a form of experiential education in which students engage in activities that address human and community needs together with structured opportunities designed to promote student learning and development” (Jacoby, 1996, p. 5). Many studies support the efficacy of service-learning in producing desirable student outcomes (Reising, Allen, & Hall, 2006). Research suggests that benefits to students include personal and interpersonal development, social responsibility, and improvements in academic learning (Eyler, Giles, Stenson, & Gray, 2001). According to Gray, Ondaatje, and Fricker (2000), service-learning boosts critical thinking skills, improves integration of theory and practice, and helps students clarify career goals and develop skills to succeed in the workplace, including team-building and interpersonal communication skills.

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Professional programs are particularly well situated to provide students with service-learning opportunities. “Where skill acquisition is an integral part of education, service learning provides a real-life context in which students practice what they learn” (McCarthy & Tucker, 2002, p. 630). In fact, many communication programs now utilize service-learning as a standard curricular component because educators recognize that it provides students the opportunity to apply communication principles in a practical context (Corbett & Kendall, 1999). Panici and Lasky (2002) found that most mass communication departments at 190 universities incorporated service-learning into the curriculum, and public relations courses were among the most likely to include service-learning. “Public relations courses present an excellent opportunity for incorporating many service learning techniques, since they frequently engage students in class discussion, class presentations, and other active learning techniques” (Silverman, 2007).

The campaigns course provides the ideal service-learning environment. As the capstone course, it has a significant responsibility to both students and the profession (Benigni & Cameron, 1999). “As public relations education has shifted from being a variant of a liberal arts degree to training for a profession, the campaigns course must supplement the skills training for the technician role with managerial values and skills” (p. 50). Future practitioners must possess real-world communication and business skills. They must demonstrate the ability to develop strategic communication plans based on substantive case studies, sound secondary and primary research, and appropriate theory. Thus, students in the campaigns course need to experience real organizational situations in order to more effectively manage publics and develop communication strategy as professionals.

2.1. A public relations capstone course service-learning model

The public relations capstone course examined in this study illustrates how service-learning can serve the needs of students, faculty, the university, and the community. In 2003, public relations faculty formed a partnership with the university’s community engagement office, which initiated a program to identify local organizations with communication problems to serve as clients for the class each semester. Students in the course form teams and conduct secondary and primary research, develop a strategic communication plan, and create a series of tactical elements for clients. To date, the course has served more than 72 organizations, mostly non-profits. Teacher evaluations suggest that students derive benefits from the course and feel more prepared to enter the profession after completing it; however, formal assessment is needed.

This study seeks to develop a general service-learning assessment instrument for use in the public relations capstone course. According to Coombs and Rybacki (1999), “assessment has become a buzz word in public relations programs as higher education tries to quantify its contribution to society” (p. 55). Assessment of learning outcomes is difficult, but it is compounded by the reality that “few systematic empirical attempts have captured the scope of benefits that service-learning experience may provide to students” (Toncar et al., 2006, p. 223).

To overcome this, Toncar et al. (2006) developed and evaluated a scale that measures student perceptions of service-learning experiences. Known as the SELEB scale, the instrument contains items that measure four underlying experiential dimensions—practical skills, interpersonal skills, personal responsibility, and citizenship. According to Toncar et al. (2006), “the scale is useful in evaluating the quality and effectiveness of service-learning initiatives from the perspective of the students involved” (p. 123).

2.2. Purpose and hypotheses

The purpose of this study is to assess the effectiveness of service-learning in the public relations capstone course by measuring perceived student learning outcomes. The SELEB scale (Toncar et al., 2006) is used to measure four service-learning benefits. To test the validity and reliability of the instrument for use in public relations education, the following hypotheses are tested:

H1. Student perceptions of service-learning benefits will be high ($M > 5$ on a 7-pt. scale) in the public relations capstone course.

H2. Student perceptions of service-learning benefits predict perceived effectiveness of the public relations capstone course.

In addition, public relations discipline-specific learning benefits are assessed and the following hypotheses are tested:

H3. Student perceptions of discipline-specific learning benefits will be high ($M > 5$ on a 7-pt. scale) in the public relations capstone course.

H4. Student perceptions of discipline-specific learning benefits predict perceived effectiveness of the public relations capstone course.

This study also examines the following research questions:

RQ1: What learning benefits are the best predictors of perceived course effectiveness?

RQ2: Are there differences in student perceptions of experiential learning outcomes due to gender, team position, or client type?

3. Methodology

A questionnaire was created to quantitatively assess student perceptions of six experiential outcomes of the capstone course. Four service-learning benefits – practical skills, interpersonal skills, personal responsibility, and citizenship – were measured with items adapted from the SELEB scale. In addition, items were created to measure two discipline-specific learning benefits—public relations technical skills, and public relations managerial skills. Three open-ended items also were included to gather qualitative data to aid statistical interpretation and identify underlying themes present in student responses.

3.1. Participants

Participants included 210 undergraduate students enrolled in the public relations capstone course at a large southeastern university during a six-semester period from 2007 to 2010. All participants had completed a minimum of four prerequisite public relations courses. Students were asked to voluntarily complete a self-administered questionnaire during the last week of the semester. All responses were anonymous.

3.2. Instrumentation

To measure service-learning benefits, an instrument was developed using items replicated from Toncar et al. (2006). Twenty items were measured on a 7-pt. scale preceded by the statement: Please indicate how well your advanced public relations class project has provided you with the following educational experience with 1 being “not at all” and 7 being “very much so.” In addition, 11 items measured public relations discipline-specific learning benefits. These items represent both technical and managerial public relations skills and reflect the objectives of the course. The items were measured on a 7-pt. scale preceded by the statement: Please indicate how well your class project has provided you with the following public relations experiences with 1 being “not at all” and 7 being “very much so.”

To measure perceptions of overall course effectiveness, students were asked to provide an overall assessment of their learning experience in the course using a 7-pt. scale from 1 (*not effective*) to 7 (*very effective*). In addition, students reported gender, age, team position, and client type. Finally, the following open-ended items were included to inform understanding of the quantitative data: (1) Please describe the experience of working with your group on this project, (2) Based on your experiences with this project, briefly describe what you learned about public relations campaigns, and (3) Based on your experiences with this project, briefly describe what you learned about social responsibility.

3.3. Data analysis

Data were analyzed using IBM SPSS 19 for Windows®. A $p \leq .05$ significance level was used for all statistical tests. Prior to hypothesis testing, the dimensionality of the items was assessed using maximum likelihood factor analysis following the procedures outlined in Green, Salkind, and Akey (2000). Cronbach's alpha was used to determine the internal consistency of items loading on the rotated factors, and the items were combined to create composite measures for hypothesis testing. To test H1 and H3, means were examined. Linear regression analysis was used to test H2, H4, and to inform RQ1. To inform RQ2, a series of one-way ANOVA tests were conducted.

In addition, qualitative thematic content analysis was applied to student responses to open-ended items to provide support for the quantitative methodology central to this study. The three open-ended items were treated as distinct discussions. After responses were coded, a list of tentative *in vivo* codes was developed to match text segments (Creswell, 2007). Five or six themes emerged for each question, which for Questions 1 and 3 were interpreted as positive or negative responses. Question 2 divided into three types of responses: functional, creative, or research. Both authors examined responses independently and arrived at similar conclusions about constitute themes.

4. Results

Analysis of demographic variables indicated that, of the 210 students who completed the questionnaire, 13% ($n = 27$) were male, and 87% ($n = 182$) were female. The average age of students was 22 ($\mu = 22.71$, $SD = 2.08$). Of the 193 students who indicated client type, 70% ($n = 147$) worked for not-for-profit organizations and 22% ($n = 46$) worked for corporations. Of the 206 students who indicated team position, 18% ($n = 37$) were account executives, 27% ($n = 56$) were research managers, 18% ($n = 37$) were writer/editors, 17% ($n = 35$) were creative directors, and 20% ($n = 41$) were financial managers/event planners. This distribution reflects the assignment of two research managers per team in semesters with high enrollment.

4.1. Service-learning benefits scale

To test H1, the means for items used to measure the service-learning benefit constructs were examined. Means, shown in Table 1, ranged from 4.37 to 6.06. The statement “understanding cultural and racial differences” produced the only mean below 5.0. The factor analysis of items measuring service-learning benefits, shown in Table 2, yielded four interpretable

Table 1
Mean and standard deviation for service-learning benefit scale items.

Item	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Service-learning practical skills			
Applying knowledge to the “real world”	208	6.04	1.197
Problem analysis and critical thinking	207	6.00	1.091
Skills in learning from experience	208	5.99	1.165
Organizational skills	207	5.80	1.105
Connecting theory and practice	208	5.80	1.249
Workplace skills	207	5.65	1.335
Social self-confidence	208	5.53	1.351
Conflict resolution	207	5.50	1.321
Service-learning interpersonal skills			
Communications skills	207	5.84	1.111
Ability to work with others	208	5.81	1.183
Leadership skills	207	5.66	1.228
Personal growth	209	5.55	1.160
Service-learning personal responsibility			
Ability to assume personal responsibility	208	6.06	1.077
Sensitivity to the plight of others	207	5.44	1.356
Gaining the trust of others	206	5.39	1.467
Development of caring relationships	207	5.31	1.614
Service-learning citizenship			
Community involvement	207	5.31	1.445
Ability to make a difference in the community	208	5.24	1.418
Social responsibility and citizenship skills	208	5.18	1.429
Understanding cultural and racial differences	209	4.37	1.742

All items were measure on a 7-pt. scale.

factors that explained 70% of the item variance. Means for the four composite measures indicated that students perceive they gain the most experience in practical skills ($n = 205$, $\mu = 5.89$, $SD = .99$) in the capstone course. This was followed by interpersonal skills ($n = 204$, $\mu = 5.72$, $SD = .97$), personal responsibility ($n = 205$, $\mu = 5.55$, $SD = 1.19$), and citizenship ($n = 207$, $\mu = 5.03$, $SD = 1.21$). These findings provide support for H1.

For H2, regression analysis indicated that approximately 64% of the variance in overall course effectiveness ($n = 207$, $\mu = 5.95$, $SD = 1.14$) was accounted for by its linear relationship with the service-learning benefit measures, $R = .80$, $R^2 = .641$, $Adj. R^2 = .633$, $F(4, 192) = 85.57$, $p \leq .001$. Both the practical skills measure, $\beta = .638$, $t(195) = 9.384$, $p \leq .001$, and the interpersonal skills measure, $\beta = .279$, $t(195) = 4.131$, $p \leq .001$, were significant as unique positive predictors of course effectiveness. These results support H2.

Table 2
Factor analysis for service-learning benefit items.

Service-learning benefit	PS	PRESP	IS	C
PS: Skills in learning from experience	.759			
PS: Applying knowledge to the “real world”	.741			
PS: Connecting theory and practice	.694			
PS: Problem analysis and critical thinking	.679			
PS: Workplace skills	.607			
PS: Organizational skills	.505			
PRESP: Gaining the trust of others		.700		
PRESP: Development of caring relationships		.671		
PRESP: Sensitivity to the plight of others		.555		
PRESP: Ability to assume personal responsibility		.474		
IS: Leadership skills			.839	
IS: Communication skills			.689	
IS: Personal growth			.554	
IS: Ability to work with others			.409	
C: Community involvement				.749
C: Ability to make a difference in the community				.723
C: Social responsibility and citizenship skills				.704
C: Understanding cultural and racial differences				.441
Eigenvalue	10.071	1.684	1.319	0.872
Percent of item variance explained	50.4	8.4	6.6	4.4
Cronbach's alpha	.91	.88	.85	.81

Extraction method: maximum likelihood.

Rotation method: Varimax with Kaiser normalization.

Blank cells represent loadings < .40.

PS: practical skills, IS: interpersonal skills, PRESP: personal responsibility, C: citizenship.

$n = 210$, $KMO = .928$, Bartlett's test of sphericity $p \leq .001$.

Table 3
Mean and standard deviation for discipline-specific learning benefit scale items.

Discipline-specific learning benefit	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Public relations technical skills			
Creative expression	207	5.59	1.376
Design skills	206	5.59	1.390
Writing/editing skills	207	5.46	1.325
Written and oral presentation skills	207	5.40	1.364
Event planning	205	4.44	1.905
Public relations managerial skills			
Strategic planning skills	207	6.01	.948
Ability to work with others	206	6.00	1.218
Qualitative research skills	207	5.86	1.150
Quantitative research skills	207	5.75	1.278
Client relations	207	5.64	1.410
Managerial skills	207	5.64	1.386

All items were measure on a 7-pt. scale.

4.2. Discipline-specific learning benefits scale

To test H3, the means for items used to measure discipline-specific learning benefits – public relations technical skills and public relations managerial skills – were examined. Means, shown in Table 3, ranged from 4.44 to 6.01. The statement “event planning” produced the only mean below 5.0. The factor analysis of items measuring discipline-specific learning benefits, shown in Table 4, yielded three interpretable factors that explained 65% of the variance. Means for the three composite measures indicated that students perceive they gain the most experience in research skills ($n = 207$, $\mu = 5.81$, $SD = 1.10$), followed by functional skills ($n = 206$, $\mu = 5.71$, $SD = .96$) and creative skills ($n = 206$, $\mu = 5.60$, $SD = 1.14$). These results support H3.

For H4, regression analysis indicated that approximately 44% of the variance in overall course effectiveness was accounted for by its linear relationship with the discipline-specific learning benefit measures, $R = .662$, $R^2 = .439$, $Adj. R^2 = .430$, $F(3, 200) = 52.064$, $p \leq .001$. The measure of creative skills produced the highest coefficient, $\beta = .386$, $t(202) = 5.547$, $p \leq .001$, followed by the functional skills measure, $\beta = .252$, $t(202) = 3.574$, $p \leq .001$, and the research skills measure, $\beta = .144$, $t(202) = 2.333$, $p = .021$. These results support H4.

For RQ1, regression analysis indicated that the seven learning benefit measures together are significant predictors of course effectiveness, $R = .797$, $R^2 = .635$, $Adj. R^2 = .622$, $F(7, 186) = 46.324$, $p \leq .001$, contributing to nearly 64% of the variance in the effectiveness measure. However, only three items were significant as a unique predictors of course effectiveness: practical skills, $\beta = .548$, $t(192) = 6.839$, $p \leq .001$, interpersonal skills, $\beta = .320$, $t(192) = 4.117$, $p \leq .001$, and creative skills, $\beta = .181$, $t(192) = 2.921$, $p \leq .001$.

For RQ2, ANOVA indicated gender had a significant effect on perceptions of creative skills gained, $F(1, 204) = 8.581$, $p = .004$, partial $\eta^2 = .040$. Specifically, females ($n = 180$, $\mu = 5.69$, $SD = 1.065$) reported significantly higher means for this measure than males ($n = 26$, $\mu = 5.00$, $SD = 1.442$). Similarly, gender had a significant effect on perceptions of practical skills gained, $F(1,$

Table 4
Factor analysis for discipline-specific learning benefit scale.

Public relations discipline-specific learning benefit	Functional skills	Creative skills	Research skills
PRT: Written and oral presentation skills	.707		
PRT: Writing/editing skills	.643		
PRM: Managerial skills	.606		
PRM: Ability to work with others	.555		
PRM: Strategic planning skills	.546		
PRT: Creative expression		.867	
PRM: Client relations		.557	
PRT: Design skills		.518	
PRM: Quantitative research skills			.880
PRM: Qualitative research skills			.668
Eigenvalue	4.955	1.174	1.058
Percent of item variance explained	45	10.7	9.6
Cronbach's alpha	.83	.75	*

Extraction method: maximum likelihood.

Rotation method: Varimax with Kaiser normalization.

Blank cells represent loadings < .40.

$n = 210$, $KMO = .873$, Bartlett's test of sphericity $p \leq .001$.

PRM: public relations managerial skill, PRT: public relations technical skill.

* $r = .65$, $p \leq .001$.

203) = 5.905, $p = .016$, partial $\eta^2 = .028$. Again, females ($n = 179$, $\mu = 5.95$, $SD = .895$) reported significantly higher means for this measure than males ($n = 26$, $\mu = 5.45$, $SD = 1.442$).

Organization type influenced student perceptions of citizenship skills gained, $F(1, 189) = 4.919$, $p = .028$, partial $\eta^2 = .025$. Students working for not-for-profit organizations ($n = 145$, $\mu = 5.13$, $SD = 1.192$) reported significantly higher means than those working for corporations ($n = 46$, $\mu = 4.70$, $SD = 1.074$). In addition, students' team position influenced perceptions of research skills gained, $F(4, 199) = 3.987$, $p = .004$, partial $\eta^2 = .074$, and creative skills gained, $F(4, 198) = 2.996$, $p = .020$, partial $\eta^2 = .057$. Students in the role of research manager reported the highest mean for that skill set ($n = 55$, $\mu = 6.24$, $SD = .927$), and students in the role of creative director produced the highest mean for that skill set ($n = 34$, $\mu = 5.99$, $SD = .990$).

4.3. Qualitative content analysis of open-ended items

In Question 1 of the open-ended items, students summarized their positive or negative group experiences. Analysis of responses revealed four themes: positive experiences, negative experiences, evaluations, and personal development. Positive responses included summaries of the overall experience such as, "it was a wonderful experience;" evaluations of the group such as, "our group worked hard to make sure the client was satisfied;" and statements of personal development like, "I learned a lot about crisis management that's for sure." Students also discussed the benefits of teamwork, and the importance of communication to group work. Overall, students characterized their experiences as more positive than negative; however, students found the experience of working in groups personally challenging and characterized negative experiences in terms of personal frustration. The following response described the painful social adjustments that can occur when friends become colleagues: "I have discovered the lengths some people will go to get ahead, even at the expense of a friendship. I learned that some battles you will just not win so put on a happy face and do the best job you can."

In Question 2, students described what they learned about public relations campaigns. Analysis revealed four themes: research, producing creative material for clients, practical skills, and putting it all together. Students were surprised at the amount of time and effort required to conduct research, and they connected the research process to the success of campaigns. Producing creative materials while working within a budget caused students to think critically, and they appreciated the real world experience of "putting together" every aspect of a campaign.

In Question 3, students described what they learned about social responsibility. Four themes emerged as positive responses: learning social responsibility from clients, general statements about social responsibility, socially responsible behavior, and the benefits of social responsibility. Students discussed their perceptions of clients as role models for social responsibility and how public relations campaigns support clients' worthwhile activities. In general, students claimed everyone has a responsibility to give back to the community, help the less fortunate, and educate community members. On a personal level, students cited sensitivity, respect, tolerance, and helpfulness as socially responsible behaviors. They connected social responsibility to personal and professional development, as well as to activities that inspire action, generate satisfaction, and enhance self-improvement. Negative responses either failed to connect social responsibility to society or demonstrated a lack of understanding of the concept and ranged from characterizations of social responsibility as group responsibility to, "not much" and, "nothing." Specifically, negative responses discussed social responsibility in terms of self and team. One student stated, "I learned that it's important to do your part when you are working on a group project or it can affect other members adversely."

5. Discussion

This study attempted to assess the effectiveness of service-learning in the public relations capstone course by measuring perceived student learning outcomes. Results indicate that service-learning benefits can be assessed using four experiential dimensions—practical skills, interpersonal skills, personal responsibility, and citizenship. Item and composite means indicate that student perceptions of these service-learning benefits are high. All items except the item "understanding cultural and racial differences" produced a mean greater than 5.0, and all four composite means were greater than 5.0. These results suggest that the benefits of service-learning are being realized by students in the course. Although the results indicate that students perceive less experiential gain in citizenship than other learning benefits, the means indicate that the course did provide some experience in that area. This "deficiency" in learning outcomes for the course may be overcome through more frequent class discussions related to how work on strategic communication campaigns builds citizenship—particularly when working for not-for-profit organizations—as well as more instructional emphasis on the role of public relations in society. The finding, through qualitative analysis, that some students fail to connect social responsibility to society provides further support for this instructional modification.

The results indicate that student perceptions of service-learning benefits gained in the public relations capstone course are predictors of perceived course effectiveness. Of the four service-learning benefits examined, the measure of practical skills was the strongest predictor of overall course effectiveness. This finding is not surprising given the nature of public relations practice, which requires specific techniques and skill sets to be effective. Students who perceive they developed these skills in the course are likely to perceive that it was effective. In addition, interpersonal skills were a significant predictor of overall course effectiveness. This finding is intuitive given that the course utilizes group work throughout the semester. Students must hone their interpersonal skills in order to work successfully as a team. Negative team dynamics,

when present, can become the central focus of students and may impede the learning process. Teaching practices should attempt to strengthen student respect for diverse perspectives and hone leadership skills, as well as provide students with strategies for cooperative problem-solving.

The results suggest that public relations discipline-specific learning benefits can be assessed using three experiential dimensions—functional skills, creative skills, and research skills. Item and composite means indicated that student perceptions of these learning benefits are high. All items except “event planning” produced a mean greater than 5.0, and all three of the composite means were greater than 5.0. The event planning item was intended to measure technical skill; however, results suggest students may perceive event planning as an “independent” function that requires both managerial and technical skills, as well as other skills not identified in this study.

In addition, student perceptions of discipline-specific learning benefits gained in the capstone course were found to predict perceived course effectiveness. While all three measures were significant unique predictors of course effectiveness, the measure of creative skills was the strongest predictor. This result could be due to the fact that public relations education currently positions the practice as a research-based business function, which may be perceived as less creative to students. If students perceive that it is the creative strategy behind a campaign that makes it effective, then perceptions of effectiveness in the campaigns course may be tied to exposure to and preparedness in skills that produce creative outcomes, such as desk-top publishing, graphic design, and video production, which should be included in the course.

Female students in this study reported they learned more public relations creative skills and service-learning practical skills than males. This finding could be due to the disproportionate ratio of females to males (nearly 7:1) in this study. Results also indicate that students learn more about citizenship when they work for not-for-profit organizations than when they work for corporations. Furthermore, team position produced increased learning in the skill set related to that position, which seems intuitive. The inclusion of more reflective exercises among team members following each phase of the campaign process may minimize these differences.

Open-ended responses revealed that some students failed to connect social responsibility to society, instead connecting the concept to self and team. This indicates a limitation of the course, as well as a limitation related to data collection. The order of the three open-ended questions included on the instrument may have influenced student responses. The first two questions invited responses related to self and team, which may have carried over into responses to Question 3. The reordering of open-ended questions on the instrument may help overcome this limitation. Regardless, the “superficial” qualitative analysis conducted in this study should be expanded to include inquiry through focus groups, in-depth interviews, and text analysis of reflective writing to better understand student perceptions of social responsibility in general, as well as in the context of the public relations capstone course.

6. Conclusions

This study attempted to overcome a limitation in public relations education by proposing and testing an instrument to assess service-learning outcomes. The results of this study support a general service-learning assessment instrument for public relations education; however, further research is needed. Additional data collection in future semesters is needed to strengthen the findings. In addition, future studies should seek to test the instrument in a variety of public relations instructional contexts, as well as in other universities and academic settings.

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