

Picture this: Using film to identify sport's theoretical underpinnings

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Abstract 181**

In a recent Zeigler Lecture, Wendy Frisby (2006) urged sport management academia to use a more critical lens to reflect on how we do our jobs. She suggested that we look at ways to transform our approaches to carrying out research, teaching and service. As sport-management educators, we must compel our undergraduates to look at sport in more diverse ways so they can become creative and effective as practitioners or professors. This line of thinking should compel instructors to utilize different tools in the classroom so that class time is original, fresh and worthy of students' time. With technology increasingly grabbing the interest of our students, twisting their attention spans in many different directions, the use of film is one way to capture their attention and hold it. One way to make our teaching more relevant to an increasingly diverse classroom is to use carefully chosen films as part of the undergraduate curriculum (Bluestone, 2000). This also enables us to use multimedia methods to make our classrooms and teaching more relevant.

Because sport films are few and far between, we can be reasonably sure that many of our students will be interested in seeing them when they are produced. But instead of watching them for mere entertainment, they can be used to learn about sport in deeper ways. Our students' worlds are inundated with visuals. It is up to us to explain what is ultimately behind those visuals (Mattson, 2007). Furthermore, researchers have suggested that using film to analyze issues in the social sciences may enhance opportunities for critical thinking and active learning (Gregg, Hosley, Weng, & Montemayer, 1995). It might seem contradictory to use a passive teaching tool like film to evoke active learning, but Benjamin (1991) noted that active learning not only encourages a "hands-on" approach but a "minds-on" approach as well. Chaffee (1994) suggested that the first step in critical thinking is thinking actively, which may foster higher-level cognitive skill, so that students can learn to apply and evaluate course concepts.

Using film can also enhance mastering these course concepts through what is known as "connected learning." Connected learning can bridge the disconnect sometimes brought by student diversity in a classroom. The concept of connected learning as described by Belenky et al. (1997) adds a vital dimension to this discussion. Although connected learning approaches encourage many of the cognitive strategies in critical thinking (e.g., active engagement, raising questions, evaluating evidence), they also emphasize the importance of affective experience and personal narrative. Belenky and her colleagues (1997) note that many women and ethnic minority students may feel disempowered by "separate learning," which is characterized by abstract analysis, "objective" observation, and a focus on the mastery of "factual" material. In contrast, connected learning emphasizes sharing ideas, personal experiences, and empathy with others. In connected teaching, sharing one's thoughts about ideas is valued as much as or more than merely presenting factual "knowledge" (Clinchy 1995; Enns 1993). Using film allows for a different connection to be made in the classroom.

Hollywood, and increasingly, independent filmmakers, can be used to make this connection. Sport-film producers have often been unwitting recorders of sport sociology over the years. Films, and most especially documentaries, can illuminate issues in sport. Films about sport can describe its place in society in meaningful ways, often surpassing the power of a well-delivered lecture or a well-written textbook or, at the very least, complementing them. Film can impart to us the history of racism in professional baseball ("The Bingo Long Traveling All-Stars and Motor Kings"), issues surrounding sexist behavior in sport ("A Hero for Daisy," "The Heart of the Game," and "Girl Wrestler"), poor coach and parental behavior in youth sport ("The Bad News Bears") and masculine hegemony ("Friday Night Lights" and "Go Tigers!").

As documents, these films can offer the same sort of insights as novels, speeches and essays (Mattson, 2007). The theoretical concepts in sociologist Jay Coakley's "Sports in Society" textbook lend themselves to interpretation through these visual documents. Coakley uses five theories as his framework to explain sport: functionalism, conflict theory, critical theory, feminist theory and interactionist theory. Film can be used to illuminate these.

The purpose of the current presentation is to show how film can be used to help undergraduates understand theoretical concepts that are often hard to discern through reading comprehension and the traditional lecture. Combining the use of film with discussion and reflection, culminating with an essay that explores sociological implications, undergraduates can utilize film to better understand the various theoretical underpinnings of sport. Functionalism, associated with Emile Durkheim, views society as a set of interrelated parts held together by shared values (Coakley, 2007). One can simply look to a movie like "Rudy"

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to see how the institute of Notre Dame football shapes the values of impressionable Rudy Ruettiger and the values of his Irish Catholic family. Conflict theory, associated with Karl Marx, calls into question the integrity of this "glue" that the functionalists say holds society together, implicating it as a class system where the strong get stronger and the exploited underclass toils in the service of the bourgeoisie. Such exploitation is captured in "Hoop Dreams," as a private high school in the suburbs identifies basketball talent in inner-city Chicago and wisks these young men away to a "better life." Critical theory sees sport as a site where culture and social relations are produced and changed (Coakley, 2007). In "The Heart of the Game," high school basketball player Darnellia Russell enrolls at a predominantly white school and must negotiate cultural and social land mines to bond with her white teammates. In the end, both black and white learn from one another. Feminist theory is prominent in the film as well as Russell and her Roughrider teammates eradicate traditional gender norms at the urging of their unconventional coach. Finally, interactionist theory explains how we use sport to develop our identities (Coakley, 2007). In "When We Were Kings," the viewer can listen to the words of Muhammad Ali and understand how he constructs his identity not only as a boxer, but as a devout religious man and a social activist.

To further explicate the film/sociology teaching tool, we will use "When We Were Kings" as an example. Before screening the movie, students are supplied with a set of discussion questions and given some background on the film. The screening of the movie coincides with the appropriate topic in class, in this case, politics and sport. For this particular movie, the questions/tasks might include: (a) Explain the title of the movie, (b) What do athletes risk when they voice their political beliefs? and (c) Provide a summary of Ali's political views and apply conflict, critical and interactionist theories to these views. Students then watch the movie and take notes. They then write a "movie review" summarizing the film, answering the questions and discussing the film's impact and sociological implications. Feedback is provided on the reviews to give them an idea if they applied the theories correctly and understood the accompanying class discussion on politics in sport. This use of film can augment the instructor's words on the politics and sport and apply what was happening in 1974 to what is happening now.