

Utilizing ethnographic projects within sport management curriculum: A way to bridge the gap between research and practice

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**Teaching
Session 21**

**Saturday, May 31, 2008
9:30 AM - 9:55 AM**

**Presentation (25-minute)
Abstract 46**

It is often noted in the field of sport management that there are large gaps between the ideas presented in the scholarly literature and those implemented through practice (Boucher, 1998; Inglis, 2007). One potential explanation for this disconnect is that of practitioners' lack of experience with and understanding of related scholarly literature and research. As sport management students are our future practitioners, such gaps may also be attributed to an inadequate application of classroom material to practice within sport management courses. For instance, sport management curriculum is most often structured such that students are left to call upon the accumulation of numerous theoretical frameworks, research methods, and methodological, epistemological and ontological paradigms at the end of their coursework, during their degree-satisfying internships (see Cuneen, 2004). Consequently, students are likely not embracing the full applicability of their teachings to the workplace setting nor are they being proactively challenged to do so. Thus, as future sport managers, these students are already somewhat disconnected from theory and research prior to completing their degrees. As this phenomenon will not likely be corrected as students enter the workforce, the existent gaps between scholarship and practice will only grow in breadth.

The aforementioned gap has not gone unnoticed by our most esteemed colleagues in the field. In his Ziegler address, Dr. Robert Boucher (1998) put forth that sport management curriculum had become too reliant on internships and fieldwork for providing hands-on experience to our future sport managers. As such, he stated that "our curriculum needs to be more theoretical and our research needs to be more practical" (p. 80). Nearly ten years later in her Ziegler address, Dr. Sue Inglis (2007) also acknowledged the need to fill this gap, subsequently stating that "explaining our research to students, applying the strongest of academic judgment and rigor to the teaching and learning of the research process, and engaging our students wherever possible will serve us well in producing well-educated, critical thinking students who are ready to enter the workplace in full stride" (p. 6). Thus, it is a recognized necessity that sport management instructors seek to bridge the gap between scholarly research and practice into their classroom teachings. Metaphorically stated, the goal should be to enhance the methodological toolbox that students will be able to draw upon as future sport management practitioners.

Consistent with Boucher (1998), Inglis (2007), and others, we believe if the gaps in student training remain unresolved, students will continue to be disconnected from the current theory and research in the sport management scholarly literature even before they ever complete their sport management degree. It is with this realization that we implemented the use of student ethnographic experiences within two graduate-level sport management courses as a way of helping students understand and observe the courses' subject matter through a lived experience. The rationale behind the ethnography project was threefold: a) to provide students with the opportunity to observe, interpret, and reflect upon the course's subject matter in a real-world setting, b) introduce students to a form of research inquiry that was not quantitatively-based, and c) facilitate the students' ability to engage in naturalistic inquiry as practitioners in the future. Alone, or coupled with other experiential learning techniques (e.g., internships; see Cuneen, 2004; Verner et al., 2001), we believe this innovative teaching strategy has the potential to help alleviate and perhaps bridge some of the fissures between theory and practice.

In this presentation, we will provide an overview of how we went about implementing ethnography projects in a sport management human resource management course and a contemporary issues course. The strengths and weaknesses of the project will be discussed relative to student feedback we received through journal excerpts and interviews from the students in both of the classes. Finally, we will draw upon both of our experiences with using ethnography as a teaching tool to provide some general suggestions and guidelines for audience members who are considering implementing a similar strategy in the courses that they teach.