Expanding Experiential Learning in Sport Management Curricula

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One way in which a sport management curriculum can enhance student learning is to integrate experiential learning models into the program content. Effective models should stimulate a student’s “vertical development” (Jowdy, et al., 2008) as well as lateral development (Cook-Greuter, 2004; Fisher, Rooke & Torbert, 2003) and help students make the leap from textbook concepts to real-world applications.

Kolb (1984) describes the process of experiential learning as “Knowledge created through the transformation of experience” (p.41). It is through this experience that students move through a series of processes including 1) encountering concrete experiences; 2) deal with experiences through reflective observation; 3) ask questions and form generalizations through abstract conceptualization and 4) answer questions or solve problems through active experimentation.

While traditional pedagogical techniques are often necessary to deliver academic content, many have argued the need to foster an environment in which students are engaged in the application of content, critical thinking processes, and problem solving. Jowdy (2008) suggests it is particularly necessary in a sport management curriculum, to prepare individuals to lead in the dynamic world of sport. Jowdy, suggests experiential learning is one way to stimulate a student’s “vertical development,” which is portrayed by one’s evolution, maturation, or transition to more complex action logic (Cook-Greuter, 2004). It is theorized that when students are actively engaged in an experiential learning process, students think more critically and take more responsibility for their own learning and development. Indeed, experiential learning has become an important component of many sport management programs.

This presentation will highlight the evolution of a unique and strategic initiative to test Kolb’s (1984) experiential learning model. Faculty in a large undergraduate sport management program recently developed a series of experiential learning engagement opportunities across levels of the sport management curriculum. Students engage in 3 experiential learning experiences as they matriculate through the curriculum. As sophomores, students engage in experiential learning activities that involve lateral development this experience is one in which learning outcomes are based upon a student’s acquisition of knowledge, engaging in situations to experience a variety of stimuli to assess current behavior and critical thinking levels and gain skills that deepen their current perception of reality (Cuneen & Sidwell, 1993). In their junior and senior years, students are engaged in activities that enhance both lateral development and vertical development. Students engage in developing, planning, implementing and evaluating two types of events. The first of these is the development and implementation of sport marketing and promotions working with the university’s athletic department. The second involves planning, marketing, implementing and evaluating a community based event working in conjunction with local community recreation events. Furthermore, a fourth experiential connection can occur if a student desires to apply for and subsequently get accepted into The Sport Operations Education Program (SOEP), a semester-long program that systematically partners sport management students with the intercollegiate athletics program. The presenters will highlight how students matriculated through the experiential learning process including each of the four areas identified in Kolb’s model. Discussion will also include a preliminary assessment and reflection of the process inclusive of students, program faculty, and athletic administrators.

Through the experiential learning initiative, the presenters will attempt to answer the question: Did we laterally and vertically develop our students? For example, Manners et al. (2004) found their participants experienced vertical development when they were exposed to content that was “disequilibrating, personally salient, emotionally engaging and interpersonal” in nature. The presenters will discuss their experiential learning process, assess the student learning outcomes, and reflect on the success of the initiative. Through an open discussion, the presenters will explore the necessary components of using the experiential learning process to make the leap from theory to practice, and take a sport management curriculum from good to great.