Revisiting Kolb: A Case Study of a Unique On-Campus, Multi-Semester, Developmentally Sequenced Experiential Learning Course

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The Academe and society have never given experiential learning as much attention as they do today. Indeed, most of North America’s more than 300 sport management programs have an experiential learning component as a core experience (Masteralexis, Barr, & Hums, 2011). Institutions are devoting increased attention to the development or enhancement of quality experiential learning endeavors as they seek to capitalize on the “high impact practices” that educational research suggests increase rates of student retention and student engagement (Kuh, 2008). Employers also indicate support for experiential learning, indicating that the best ways to evaluate “a graduate’s level of knowledge and potential to succeed in the job world” include evaluations of supervised internships, community-based projects, and comprehensive, hands-on senior projects (Hart, 2008, p. 1). Simultaneously, discussion flourishes in both the academic and popular press as to the academic worth, legality, and ethics of some experiential learning opportunities, namely unpaid internships (e.g., Coker, 2009; Gargone, 2008; Grant, 2011; Greenhouse, 2010). In short, it may be said that experiential learning is simultaneously being promulgated and critiqued; as such, it is imperative that sport management scholars continue to conduct research into experiential learning to produce best practices.

Despite its established importance to undergraduate and graduate sport management curriculums, programs often limit internship and other experiential education opportunities to either the junior or senior year of undergraduate curriculums (Masteralexis, Barr, & Hums, 2011). Research suggests, however, that earlier exposure to experiential learning can be quite beneficial to career success (Foster & Dollar, 2010; Kelley, DeSensi, Beitel, & Blanton, 1989; Southall, Nagel, LeGrande, & Han, 2003). In response to calls for longitudinal designs of experiential education research (Cunningham, Sagas, Dixon, Kent, & Turner, 2005, p. 54), we examine how introducing experiential education into sport management curriculums earlier in the undergraduate experience in combination with Kolb’s model impacted undergraduate students at a regional university in the Mid-Atlantic region.

Kolb (1984), drawing on Dewey (1938), describes the process of experiential learning as “knowledge created through the transformation of experience” (p. 38). Kolb’s model encompasses an on-going “learning spiral” in which students: 1) encounter concrete experiences; 2) consider experiences through reflective observation; 3) develop generalizations through abstract conceptualization and 4) apply ideas in novel situations through active experimentation (Kolb, 2008). Although the spiral may begin in any of these four areas, it often starts when one encounters a concrete experience (Kolb, 2008). New advances in Kolb’s work have also indicated that metacognition and experiential learning are intimately related (Kolb & Kolb, 2008). While Kolb’s experiential learning theory has sustained critique (e.g. Jarvis, 1995), it remains the basic premise of experiential learning as a pedagogical approach.

Experiential learning as a pedagogical approach is an integral part of a quality sport management discipline, as evidenced by the emphasis it has been given under both the Sport Management Program Review Council and the Commission on Sport Management Accreditation (Foster, Schwarz, & Hatlem, 2009). Further, calls have been made to employ an array of experiential learning endeavors within a sport management curriculum (Foster & Dollar, 2010; Parkhouse, 2001), including both discrete and metadiscrete opportunities (Southall, Nagel, LeGrande, & Han, 2003) and experiences that occur prior to the final semester of college (Foster & Dollar, 2010). There are multiple benefits to an academic program offering a diversity of experiential learning opportunities at various points in a student’s academic career. Further, as noted by Cunningham, Sagas, Dixon, Kent, and Turner (2005), even outcomes of an experiential learning endeavor that initially appear negative (in this case, lower career satisfaction, lower occupational commitment, and fewer intentions to enter the sport management profession) are balanced with positive results like increased career clarity and transferable knowledge, skills, and abilities.

Bearing in mind the importance of providing the high quality academic experiential learning endeavors called for by...
higher education in general, the sport management discipline specifically, and stakeholders such as students and employers, this poster will feature a case study of a private mid-Atlantic regional university’s implementation of Practicum, a four-semester long, on-campus experiential learning course (totaling 120 hours) that is a unique model among sport management programs and that effectively utilizes Kolb’s learning spiral and advances in Kolb’s work to build each semester in a developmentally appropriate, carefully sequenced manner. Students engage in Practicum beginning their first semester in the sport management program (which is usually a student’s first semester of college) and continue with new challenges and opportunities for the next three successive semesters. In order to encourage students’ engagement in the Kolb model, careful structures, processes, and activities are implemented to help students progress through the four phases of Kolb’s model within each semester of Practicum. These structures, processes and activities, along with their connection to Kolb’s model, will be discussed, as well as outcomes data from Practicum.