Missing in Sport Management Education: Empowering the Teacher, Empowering the Learner

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As human beings, our greatness lies not so much in being able to remake the world as in being able to remake ourselves. Mahatma Gandhi

Teaching is one of those crafts that can easily be taken lightly and its importance and breath of impact can often be unacknowledged and misunderstood. Especially because many of us, during our student career, have been exposed to some ‘not good’ teachers that we really do not know what good teaching looks like, feels like, what it can provide and what difference it can make for learners, for teachers themselves, as well as, for the industry (in our case, the sport industry). The fact that almost anyone, with or without training, can present information in front of a group of students further clouds issues around teaching quality; while at the same also contributing to the creation and reinforcement of a growing group of disempowered teachers and learners in many academic disciplines including sport management.

Felder (2004), states that “college teaching may be the only skilled profession for which systematic training is neither required nor [many times] provided—pizza delivery jobs come with more instruction” (p.41). Often, a brand new Ph.D. joins a program and is told what class he/she will be teaching and off he/she goes teaching for the first time without much preparation. In the absence of instructional and pedagogical training most, in similar situations, attempt to teach the way they were taught. If we think further about this situation, their professors, for the most part, did not receive any pedagogical training either. So, in a way, most university professors are literally doing the best they can with the limited exposure to good teaching they have had and the limited training they have received. From that point of view—not bad! But it could be much better, especially given the wealth of knowledge pertaining to effective teaching and learning, from both experience and the research currently available.

In many universities professors have very few incentives to improve their teaching and learn alternative teaching methods—as illustrated by reward systems that are generously tilted toward research achievements. Additionally, in many cases students themselves resist new ways of teaching and learning. Many do not seem very motivated or engaged, and do not look forward to being placed in a position outside of their own comfort zone. It is as if professors must work with ‘uninterested clients’ or, in other words, ‘clients’ that even though they are investing a substantial amount of resources towards their education, for the most part, have low expectations. Consequently, these two forces (i.e, the system and the students’ attitudes) create a very challenging situation for the professor/teacher. What is a professor to do in such a situation? How can he/she find the motivation to improve his/her teaching when the system does not require it and the students do not seem to want to be challenged?

Felder (2004) notes that even though many professors probably would like to be great teachers and may initially have a genuine concern for their students, given the priorities put in place by the system, its reward systems, students attitudes’ and the number of work hours available in a day, many end up settling for ‘being adequate’.

Recent scientific advancements in areas such as cognitive psychology and neuroscience have provided insights and explanations into how human beings learn and function. These advancements and insights may directly influence pedagogical methods, technics and tools in several ways. In some instances, they help explain behaviors that otherwise may occur as disruptive in the classroom; for example, research on attention span provides explanations for the lapses in students’ attention after a certain period of time, in other words, it explains why students ‘doze off’ at certain times during our classes. Once aware of this information, teachers can then plan, develop and teach their class accordingly, instead of ‘taking it personally’ and feeling powerless or frustrated when students ‘doze off’. In other instances, the findings may encourage new pedagogical practices to be adopted. For example, a teacher may choose to add a kinesthetic component to her teaching based on recent research in cognitive psychology that has offered insights into the role of gestures in learning and its influence in how the learner thinks. These are just two examples; others will be identified and further discussed.
This presentation is designed to fulfill several specific purposes: 1) increase individual and collective levels of awareness regarding 'what is so' about the experience of teaching and learning among sport management 'teachers' and learners; 2) facilitate a guided process that will allow participants to acknowledge the gap between the ‘teachers’ that we are and the teachers that we really want to be and, through that facilitated acknowledgment process generate the opportunity to gain access (both individually and collectively) to new creative ways of thinking on how to go about bridging that gap; 3) introduce relevant findings and advancements from other research domains, such as cognitive psychology and neuroscience, that inform and provide support for the use of specific pedagogical tools and/or new empowering perspectives that, if adopted by teachers, could provide an empowering paradigm shift in their teaching and how they relate to it; 4) identify and discuss two specific tools (supported by both experience and research) that can be effectively used to empower the teacher, and two specific tools that can be used by teachers to empower the learners; 5) have participants experience first-hand accelerated learning (which is a highly engaging and experiential methodology that the presenter will use throughout the entire session); and lastly 6) continue to deepen the inquiry regarding how to best leverage good teaching and learning in sport management.

At the individual level, the concepts/materials covered in this presentation have the potential to positively impact and influence how participants 'see'/'feel' and choose to relate to teaching and their role as a teacher. Additionally, participants will leave with specific, simple and usable tools that will allow them to 1) empower themselves in their role as a teacher and, 2) empower the learners in their classrooms. These tools, if implemented, have the potential to enhance quality of teaching. If several professors in the same sport management program adopt some of the proposed empowerment tools and perspectives shared in this presentation then the potential for impact on teaching quality compounds, and what is possible when that happens is a palpable, positive and empowering 'teaching paradigm' shift at the level of program—yes—paradigm shifts at the program level usually take a group of colleagues committed to very similar values and holding similar intentions. So, if that is what you are wanting to create go ahead and bring a colleague or two! Finally, by being directly exposed to, and actively engage in accelerated learning first-hand, participants will have an opportunity to identify and experience new skills and ways of thinking that they can then use in their own classrooms to engage their students.