Problem Based Learning for the Sport Management Classroom

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Leaders and managers in the sport business should be proficient in skills such as communicating, working in groups, seeking information and problem solving. Horch and Schütte (2003) found that German sport managers rated organizing, setting objectives, analyzing, seeking and passing on information and problem solving as important job activities (p 73) while Light and Dixon (2007) make the case for learner centered, constructive approaches to sport management education.

Problem Based Learning (PBL), which originated in the 1950s and is typically credited to the work of medical educators at McManus University in Canada in the 1970s (Barrows, 1996), appears to be a good approach for the sport business classroom. PBL is a process where students work in small groups are given a problem or “trigger” as a basis for inquiry (Wood, 2003). Triggers can be in the form of written scenarios, video clips, newspaper articles, journal articles or data. The problem serves as the platform around which learning occurs. PBL follows a well-defined and structured process where the group first familiarizes itself with the problem by identifying and clarifying unfamiliar terms, defining the problem, and “brainstorming” to discuss the problem and possible approaches based on the prior knowledge of the individuals in the group. After the group is familiar with the problem, they propose tentative solutions and formulate learning objectives. Each of the group members privately researches and gathers information on each of the learning objectives and then shares their private study results with the rest of the group (Barrett & Moore, 2011; Hung, Jonassen, & Liu, 2008; Kilroy, 2004; Woods, 2003). The process can end there or can finish with a group presentation and/or written product or some other final product or assessment.

The approach was originally designed as a response to criticism that traditional teaching and learning methods fail to prepare medical students for solving problems in clinical settings, but was later implemented in a wide range of disciplines throughout higher education and K-12 education starting in the 1990s (Hung, Jonassen, Liu, 2008). As an example from outside of medicine, the Ohio University Masters of Business Administration (MBA) program started implementing a problem-based learning curriculum in the 1990s in responses to reports in the popular press and from executive advisory boards that their graduates lacked important communication and leadership skills and were trained on esoteric, theoretical information that had little to do with the business world (Stinson & Milter, 1996). Similarly, it could be valuable for sport management pedagogy to focus on a process such as PBL that embeds learning exercises in authentic tasks anchored in the contexts students can expect to see in professional practice (Hung, Jonassen, Liu, 2008).

Undergraduate sport management students often have little problem calculating and working with numeric exercises used to introduce them to important sports business concepts such as analyzing financial statements and ratios, risk and uncertainty, and the time value of money, but they can struggle with interpreting their results or even understanding why the concepts are important. As a response to this observed problem, the authors sought out pedagogies in an effort to successfully present these important skills and concepts in a way that provides meaningful context while allowing students to practice and develop competencies that prepare them for the sport management profession. The original focus was on learner centered approaches and the PBL approach was adopted after consultation with and encouragement from the university’s Center for Teaching Excellence. Implementation began in early 2014 and is ongoing. Some of the attractive aspects of PBL that led to its implementation are that the activities more closely mirror professional practice and allow students to develop useful generic skills and attitudes, that it is an active learning/learner based approach, that it fosters deeper learning, and that it allows students to activate prior knowledge and build on existing conceptual knowledge frameworks to enhancing learning (Wood, 2003). An additional attractive aspect was the opening of a new state-of-the-art library on the Liberty University campus in January of 2014 that includes an active learning classroom that features group workstations and
collaborative technology. The library is also has numerous group work rooms equipped with collaborative technology as well.

The authors will report on the overall implementation process of the PBL approach as well as the challenges and successes. Some of the key issues to be addressed are, redefining the role of the teacher in the classroom, creating effective problems or triggers, the logistics of the classroom, student assessment, and reorienting and motivating students to the necessity that they be active participants in each meeting.

Further developments in the overall implementation will also be discussed to include incorporating problems that encompass more than one class. This will be implemented during the spring of 2015. As an example, students simultaneously enrolled in sport marketing and sport finance could be assigned a “problem” that involves assessing the desirability of partnering with two or three potential sponsors identified in a scenario. In assessing the potential partners, the need for ways to evaluate both the marketing fit and the financial strength of each partner should arise, which should lead to questions of how organizations carry out these evaluations, research into how the evaluations are done in professional practice, and then students actually carrying out the assessments and determining the most desirable sponsor partner. The ideal result, then is rather than hearing about financial statements and ratio analysis from the lectern as a prelude to working through abstract problems, student groups will independently arrive at the need for such assessments, research how they are done, and work through the analysis that helps them determine which partner has the greatest financial strength and wherewithal to devote the necessary resources for sufficient sponsor activation that best promotes the sport property.

References


