Embrace the “Roller-Coaster” Ride of Student Experiential Learning: A Longitudinal, Phenomenological Assessment of the 2016 Final Four and 2017 Super Bowl

David W. Walsh, University of Houston

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Relevance and Literature Review
Experiential learning opportunities, like internships or practicums, are cornerstones for sport management programs (COSMA, 2016). They are commonly viewed by both academics and practitioners as crucial for preparing sport industry-ready students (Cunningham, Sagas, Dixon, Kent & Turner, 2005; Sotiriadou, 2011). Despite this shared view, the success (and subsequent value) of experiential learning opportunities vary widely with persistent challenges. These challenges consist of gaps in perceptions of career expectations (Mathner & Martin, 2012), clear strategic decision making tools (Odio, Sagas, & Kerwin, 2014), type of experiences (Cunningham et al., 2005), and psychosocial forces and technical skills (Barnes, 2014). Further, experiential learning outcomes are inextricably linked to the social, emotional, and cultural contexts in which it is delivered (Boud, Cohen, & Walker, 1993). Thus, designing a program that combines theoretical knowledge acquisition, realistic job training, and the ability to reflect upon the experience may contribute to better prepared students and longer career retention rates (Cunningham et al., 2005; Pauline, 2011).

Experiential learning theory is a holistic learning process rooted in human development as espoused by many theorists like Dewey, Piaget, and James, particularly via the process of change and adaptation in people (Kolb, 1984; Kolb & Kolb, 2008; Elder, 1994). Through this lens, people learn via a cycle of facing and overcoming internal and external conflicts, navigating a constant iteration of dialectically opposed styles of reflection and action, feeling and thinking (Kolb & Kolb, 2008). Creating an environment based on this theory requires a design that is process-based (Light & Dixon, 2007). Hence, students can focus on their ability to learn and re-learn sport management concepts while testing practical applications (Kolb & Kolb, 2008; Pauline, 2011). Research advocates combining experiences in an environment that is both “inside and outside the classroom” before students leave a university setting to maximize experiential learning (e.g., Southall, Nagel, LaGrande, & Han, 2003).

With so many different types of settings students could experience, additional research on understanding these environments is necessary to assess how experiences translate to learning. The type of setting being investigated is unique in that students are learning theoretical knowledge in the classroom as well as applying this knowledge in a practical field setting through the planning and execution endeavors of two major sporting events over two years: 2016 Men’s Final Four and 2017 NFL’s Super Bowl. Thus, this research seeks to understand if this unique setting can promote learning development and assuage the adaptation process students experience as part of their career and professional transformation.

Method, Data Analysis, & Results
Limited by short-time frames, assessing experiential learning processes has proven difficult. To overcome this difficulty, a course was designed that followed a cohort of 35 students in both theoretical and practical learning settings in Houston, TX with the 2016 Men’s Final Four and 2017 NFL’s Super Bowl. A longitudinal, hermeneutic phenomenological assessment (Ajjawi & Higgs, 2007; Munhall, 2012; Van Manen, 1997) over four time intervals in two years examined the learning experiences (and adaptation) of 15 students (10 females/5male) from the course. This was used to understand the meaning of the lived experience of the students, appropriate given that learning is a process that is situated and implicit. Data was collected using purposive sampling (Patton, 1990) through four semi-structured interviews and 28 reflection logs for each student. The instructor also contributed via field notes, bi-weekly reflection diaries, and embedded observation (Munhall, 2012). Data analysis was guided by a six-step procedure: (1) immersion, (2) understanding, (3) abstraction, (4) synthesis and themes, (5) illumination and illustration of phenomena, and (6) integration and critique (Ajjawi & Higgs, 2007). The hermeneutic circle was used to iteratively examine the micro and macro experiences of the students in the course (Ajjawi & Higgs, 2007;
Bontekoe, 1996). Kolb’s (1984) experiential learning theory was applied as a sensitizing framework to help guide the coding and incorporate the four modes of experiential learning theory (cf. Harrison, Umberson, Lin, & Cheng, 2010). Results revealed three phenomena: (1) the roller-coaster journey, (2) new experiences challenge perception of hopeful reality, and (3) social support to reconcile self. Meaning, students’ new experiences with the course and the mega-events created cognitive dissonance with their expected role, causing an internal struggle that needed to be confronted. Students actively compared their experience with others (e.g., classmates, mentors) and/or their already held assumptions about their expected experience. This difference and fluctuation between expectation and reality created an opportunity for students to adapt, and they often sought social support for guidance toward a resolution. For example, students learned their roles and responsibilities, validated their feelings with professors, and/or reaffirmed their sense of belonging within the class structure via social interaction, helping them learn from the struggle of the experience. (Note: results reported at this time are through one year. All phases will be completed by the conference).

Discussion/Implications
The results of this research inform us on the experience of students living through an active, practical setting for an extended period. In addition, it underscores the components (e.g., social support) necessary to enhance the learning process within an experiential learning setting. This is important in two ways: (1) to improve sport educators’ ability to deliver realistic environments as well as increase the ability to transfer theoretical knowledge, and (2) train a quality student workforce that can contribute to the objectives of sport employers. Preliminary evidence supports Kolb’s (1984) theory concerning learning as a process that includes a dialectical interplay between a student’s expectations (i.e., thinking) and experience (i.e., action). However, previous studies suggest that a gap in expectations and reality (e.g., Mathner & Martin, 2012) has negative consequences. In contrast, this research argues that these gaps require a resolution that actually promotes learning and development. This is supported by a Hegelian expression that, “any experience that does not violate previous held assumptions/expectations is not worthy of an experience” (as cited in Kolb, 1984, p. 29). In other words, learning depends upon these gaps in order for students to recruit the necessary resources to adapt (Hobfoll, 1989) and thus, grow. Instead of having anxiety and fear for the inherent conflicts of learning, academics and practitioners should embrace the “roller-coaster” and infuse the inherent dips with resources to re-catalyze the learning and development process. This research posits that to be fully conscious of the entirety of the “roller-coaster” (i.e., experiential learning process), opportunities should be longer in order to appreciate the entire “ride,” not just a part of it. By using a longitudinal assessment, this study illuminates possible new curriculum designs and pedagogy tactics (e.g., social interaction, active experimentation) that would support a longer student experiential learning setting.