Bikes as Bridges: Participatory Action Research, the Contact Hypothesis, and Sport-Based Service Learning

M. Katie Flanagan, Florida State University
Tarlan Chabardovali, Florida State University
Melanie Dammel, Florida State University

Teaching/Learning - Teaching strategies/methods (Community Sport)
20-minute oral presentation (including questions) Thursday, June 1, 2017 11:40 AM
Abstract 2017-028 Room: Wilson

At a time when the national media’s discourse is often emphasizing differences among community members, innovations in sport management curriculum can contribute to a movement that aims to diminish perceived differences and embrace diversity. This presentation provides an example of how a combination of Participatory Action Research (PAR), Allport’s (1954) Contact Hypothesis, and Sport-based Service-Learning can create a catalytic learning space.

In recent years, Florida State University’s Department of Sport Management—through its research and outreach-focused Center for Sport, Health, & Equitable Development (SHED)—has established a number of partnerships with service organizations throughout the North Florida region to utilize sport to address social inequalities, health disparities, and build capacity within local communities. Two of those partners are the Kearney Comprehensive Emergency Services Center (the Center), a resource center serving individuals experiencing homelessness and the Tallahassee Bicycle House (BH), a cooperative bicycle repair shop.

While furthering our partnership with each organization, a sport-based service-learning project emerged that connects FSU Sport Management Students, Bikes, and Individuals Experiencing Homelessness. The presentation will address the implementation of the project, assess challenges, highlight successes and provide suggestions for scaling such a project to other settings.

Drawing on our three-year partnership and empirical research (see McLeod et al., 2016) with the Center and BH, we applied for the 2016 NASSM Service-learning Grant to purchase and install a bicycle repair station at the center and enhance the bicycle literacy and maintenance efforts at BH serving the Center’s clients. The impact of NASSM Service-Learning Grant on students and clients alike are a focus of the presentation.

Student involvement in the project stems from the course, “Diversity in Sport,” which incorporates service-learning to facilitate learning outcomes such as a better understanding different populations and a movement toward inclusivity. Through reflection and action, students are encouraged to connect theories and concepts discussed in the course curriculum with their service-learning project experiences. Verbal and written reflections are completed by students throughout the course. This presentation includes a sample of the student reflections.

The theoretical foundation and impetus for this project draws heavily on Participatory Action Research and Allport’s (1954) Contact Hypothesis. Reardon (1998) proposed Participatory Action Research (PAR) as a way to ensure that community needs are met through service-learning programs. PAR is premised on creating solutions to problems identified by ordinary members of a community. More specifically, solutions are created in resident-researcher partnerships, with researchers adopting a facilitator role in the creation of actionable knowledge (Frisby, Reid, Millar, & Hoebear, 2005). When residents are actively involved in all levels of PAR, strategies are more likely to be well defined, gain citizen support, and be sustainable (Reardon, 1998). PAR also has benefits for students: learning action research methodology, gaining hands on experience in resolving problems, learning about the realities faced by certain communities, and acquiring experience in collaborating across academic and institutional boundaries (Reardon, 1998). In an experiential learning environment such as service-learning, students find themselves surrounded by people that are different. In their journal reflections and via class discussions, they grapple with discomfort alongside current events and diversity theories. One theory that grounds this project and manifests into
praxis through this project is Allport’s (1954) Contact Hypothesis.

Developed over 60 years ago, the contact hypothesis suggests that contact between different individuals (i.e. college students and individuals experiencing homelessness) under the right conditions (sport-based service-learning) will reduce prejudice. Through classroom lectures and experiential learning, students who participate in service-learning projects at the Center and BH interact with people that are different from them and develop more informed ideas about individuals experiencing homelessness. This presentation provides evidence supporting Allport’s contact hypothesis and demonstrates the use of sport management curriculum as a catalytic learning device.