The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly: Challenges of Experiential Learning in Sport Management Classes

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Introduction and Literature

Teaching methodologies within higher learning have constantly evolved over time. While traditional practices (i.e. lectures, tests) still dominate most classrooms in higher learning, many faculty members have utilized new practices to engage their students. In particular, modern efforts have often focused on deemphasizing textbook memorization and listening to long lectures, in lieu of more “hands-on” or immersive experiences. Ranging from creative exercises in the classroom, to community service and volunteering, these efforts to engage and enthuse students have often been termed experiential learning (Kolb, 1984; Felicia, 2011). In an attempt to develop a framework to evaluate experiential learning, Kolb (1984) recognized four key stages of learning: Having a concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation. Defined as “learning through reflection” (Felicia, 2011, p. 1003), or learning through specific experiences or activities, experiential learning has gained in popularity in the 21st century. This is not to suggest faculty have diminished the value of learning content or evaluating knowledge retention in the classroom. Instead, experiential learning has served as a way to implement acquired knowledge through practice and engagement, or to fully learn new skills (Haynes, 2007).

Regarding the field of sport management, several scholars have highlighted the synergy between experiential learning and student success. Specifically, educators have suggested sport management programs implement these experiences in an effort to enhance the students’ potential for success (Pate & Shonk, 2015; Southall, Nagel, LeGrande, & Han, 2003). Initially, these efforts in sport management mainly consisted of requiring internships with sporting organization. In recent years, research efforts have aimed to assess outcomes and impact in these classrooms in a plethora of settings such as the influence of service-learning endeavors (Bruening et al., 2014, 2015), implementation and success of events (Bowers, 2013; Pate & Shonk, 2015), community volunteer impact on student-athletes (Bruening et al., 2014, 2015), and student perceptions in sport for social change initiatives (Cohen & Levine, 2016). While these previous studies have focused on the positive impacts of experiential learning, few have highlighted the difficulties or negative occurrences within an experiential learning based course. Considering the first-hand experience of the authors of this paper and the paucity of research on the topic, there is seemingly a need for further assessment of the challenges of executing a successful experiential learning curriculum along with recommendations for future implementation of the endeavors. Thus, the purpose of this study, guided by Kolb’s (1984) experiential learning cycle, was to critically assess the outcomes and impact of an experiential learning class in an effort to highlight strategies to enhance future classroom efforts. Specifically, this study aims to:

R1: Reflect on positive student experiences and highlight strategies to further enhance the aimed objectives of the class.
R2: Reflect on students whom provided negative feedback or had a negative experience and highlight strategies to better engage this population of students in the future
R3: Provide recommendations for future faculty within sport management on methods to optimize an experiential learning class for all students

Method

This research consisted of exploratory qualitative methods aimed to allow students to critically assess the outcomes and impact of the classroom setting in a reflective manner throughout an entire semester (Creswell, 2012; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). As highlighted by Bringle and Hatcher (1997), “Reflection activities direct the student’s attention to new interpretations of events and provide a means through which the community service can be studied and interpreted” (p. 180). In an effort to explore the outcomes of this experiential learning class, data collection entailed...
reflective journaling by the students and one-on-one interviews with the first author, who was not directly involved with the class project. All 26 students (11 females and 15 males) who enrolled in a required "Event Management" master level course took part in this study.

Before the class began, eight students were randomly selected and took part in a semi-structured interview to gain perspectives of their expectations of the class and knowledge of the curriculum. Given the active involvement of the second and third authors as members of the actual class, observational data was included as secondary data. However, these observations (e.g. class discussion, debates, presentations) were heavily scrutinized by the external author as these were subjected to the observers' biases. At the completion of the semester, students were required to complete a reflective journal assignment, which included sample questions such as:

- At the start of the class, how excited/motivated/engaged were you to work on the events for this class?
- As the semester progressed, how did your motivations for working with the event/organizations change?
- How would you describe your levels of investment in the projects throughout the semester?
- What could have been done by the professor to increase your levels of investment and motivation? What recommendations would you suggest?

The students were not told these journal assignments would be utilized towards an assessment of the class to avoid influencing their writing (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Cohen & Levine, 2016). In the end, nearly 200 pages of student reflections and observational data along with eight audio hours of data were collected throughout the Spring semester. Guided by Kolb’s (1984) experiential learning cycle, data were analyzed using Thomas’ (2006) recommendations for inductive data analysis. Specifically, each author extensively read the transcripts and journals. Then, data that specifically addressed the purpose and research questions of this study were identified and coded. Trustworthiness was achieved through triangulation, consulting with disinterested individuals not involved with the project, and through member-checking with students in the class (Creswell, 2012).

Findings and Discussion
Our findings highlight key factors that yielded positive and negative outcomes of a sport management experiential learning classroom. In addition, our results emphasized strategies to minimize negative outcomes and optimize the student experience in these class settings. Specifically, positive factors included: (a) passion for the cause or event, (b) Investment in the mission, and (c) classroom environment. Beyond positive aspects of the class, key negative themes emerged: (a) lack of investment, (b) apathy or lack of caring, and (c) classroom dissension. In addition, the data revealed key strategies for experiential classrooms to succeed: (a) increased communication among all stakeholders, (b) promote skill and team development, (c) allow student input on initial strategic decisions, d) increased professor oversight of classroom activities.

Theoretically, this research highlights Kolb’s (1984) experiential learning cycle and underscores key factors that enable or interfere with the four stages of learning. The implications suggest the structure and implementation of the classroom are vital to enabling all four stages of the learning cycle and thus producing a positive experience for each student. Practically, this study is one of the first in the sport management field to depict an experiential learning classroom in a critical manner along with provide strategies for improving future iterations of such classes.