Responding to Difficult Situations through a Teachable Moment

Mark Julien, Brock University
Craig Hyatt, Brock University

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The recent Colin Kaepernick controversy with respect to not standing during the national anthem is a good reminder that sport management professors will often encounter controversy that may lead to intense classroom discussions particularly when these discussions are related to race and social identity. Sometimes a student may use language or make a statement that makes others uncomfortable. The instructor is left with the challenging decision of what to do in this circumstance. If the instructor reacts wrongly, this can escalate the interaction into a negative spiral of anger and frustration thus negatively impact the learning climate. This presentation will focus on one specific incident that occurred in a sport management class at a medium-sized Canadian university, in order to give sport management educators an opportunity to learn how to take an uncomfortable situation and create a teachable moment.

This presentation was inspired by a student comment during a Sport Sales and Promotions class. On the topic of ticket plans, the instructor told how he recently bought a ticket plan to help support a struggling team, even though he had access to free tickets via the school's alumni working in the team's front office. In response, a student called out, “Yes, but you are not a Jew!” The unprepared lecturer had but a few seconds to decide how to handle this situation. When confronted with a student who makes an offensive statement, the instructor has several options including (but not limited to) ignoring the statement, confronting the statement or creating a teachable moment. Each option will be reviewed in turn. There is certainly a temptation to ignore the comment. However, Hughes, Huston and Stein (2011) warn of potentially negative consequences of ignoring what the student said. There is the risk that other students may be upset by the comment and may find it hard to engage in the learning environment. Instructors might also run the risk of looking like they condone the remark if they do not respond in a timely fashion. By ignoring the comment, there is a missed opportunity for the commentator and other students to learn from it.

Instructors may wish to challenge the student by confronting the statement and use a conflict handling style referred to as forcing (Thomas & Kilmann, 1977). By calling the student on their choice of words, they make a strong statement that they oppose this particular turn of phrase. However, instructors interested in establishing a supportive learning climate (Saks & Haccoun, 2016) may risk the discussion between the student and themselves escalating into a shouting match or risk alienating other learners who feel that the incident was dealt with too strongly. This may discourage certain students from future participation in the class discussions.

In this case, the instructor turned the discussion into a teachable moment. Remembering the university’s ongoing campaign promoting a respectful workplace, the lecturer reminded the class that while universities support academic freedom and free speech, everyone must understand that comments that are discriminatory to any individual person or group will not be tolerated at this institution. At that point, the instructor resumed lecturing. White and Maycock (2012) characterize a teachable moment as something unplanned, something spur of the moment that happens, an opportunity to respond to a comment or question by a student. Baker (2004) suggests that teachable moments have the potential to create complex learning opportunities (beyond rote learning), create new possibilities for understanding different points of view, and for students to challenge their preconceptions and assumptions about a topic. Furthermore, while it can be difficult for instructors to think on their feet in the heat of the moment, Kirk and Durant (2010) argue, “it is the teacher’s responsibility to both help students learn something from the moment and care for and protect all the participants, perhaps particularly the student who has generated the hot moment, even though learning about hot topics is often difficult and uncomfortable” (p. 840).

In hindsight, the instructor engaged in some self-reflection and wondered if he could have done more to further engage the class in dialogue. Perhaps there was an exercise or framework that might help. In consultation with a
colleague, it was suggested that educating students via teachable moments could be further explored through the use of Kolb's learning styles framework (Saks and Haccoun, 2016). Kolb's framework focuses on how learners gather and process information. Kolb advocated that each of the four modes of learning could be explored in a sequence. For example, the comment made in class could form the concrete experience. Learners could be given the opportunity to write a short reflection paper that focuses on how the discussion made them feel (reflective observation). The paper could also ask the students to think about the societal implications of such attitudes and how this reflects on the field of sport management and the academic institution (abstract conceptualization). The instructor could then follow up with the students after reading their reflection papers and summarize the comments and perhaps foster further discussion about respectful dialogue in the classroom (active experimentation). This presentation will give participants an opportunity to share their own experiences in dealing with difficult comments in the classroom and their own teachable moments as well as opportunities to comment on how Kolb's model might be helpful to their classroom discussions.