Exploring Student Volunteers’ Challenges and Learning in a Sport for Development Program

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Introduction
Over the last two decades, sport for development (SFD) has gained traction within governmental and non-governmental organizations and in academia. Despite the growing interest in SFD, the study of volunteers, and in particular college student volunteers working with SFD initiatives, has been neglected. The few studies conducted with SFD volunteers have examined motivation and retention (Welty Peachey, Lyras, Cohen, Bruening, & Cunningham, 2014) and social capital development (Welty Peachey, Bruening, Lyras, Cohen, & Cunningham, 2015). Within an experiential learning environment for college students, there has been a lack of studies specifically examining challenges faced when student volunteers are tasked with designing and implementing a program, how they endeavored to overcome these challenges, and how this process contributed to student learning. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to examine student volunteers’ experiences in a student-led SFD program and how these experiences facilitated learning.

Theoretical Framework and Literature Review
Experiential learning theory was utilized to frame this study. Experiential learning theory refers to learning as “the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience. Knowledge results from the combination of grasping and transforming experience” (Kolb, 1984, p. 41). Experiential learning differs from service learning in that experiential learning does not have to be a credit-bearing educational experience (Bringle & Hatcher, 2015; Bruening et al., 2015). This was the case in the present study, where college students voluntarily gave of their time and energy to design, implement, and evaluate a local, child-focused SFD initiative without receiving college credit.

Kolb’s (1984) experiential learning framework highlights the importance of incorporation of concrete learning experiences and abstract generalization, integration of theory and practice, and resolutions of potential conflicts in the learning process. The practical applications of the framework to real-life situations can present a number of challenges. For instance, when a learner confronts a complex situation where the nature of work is changing rapidly, he/she may not be able to resolve conflict between opposing ways of dealing with the situation (i.e., conflict between concrete experience and abstract concepts or between observation and practice). Therefore, it is imperative to directly explore the learning that results from this form of volunteering (Schugurensky & Muendel, 2005).

Volunteers play a vital role in non-profit organizations (Cnaan & Goldberg-Glen, 1991). Specially, volunteers are indispensably important to the sustainability of SFD organizations (Welty Peachey, Cohen, Borland, & Lyras, 2011). Welty Peachey et al. (2015) found that volunteers participating in a multinational SFD event acquired the opportunity to establish future collaborations and expand their knowledge through bridging and bonding social capital. Also, volunteers learned how to better work with youth, different methods of training techniques, and cultural understanding (Taylor & Morgan, 2017; Welty Peachey et al., 2015). Volunteers in a student-led SFD program would likely face challenges, especially since they are involved in the design and implementation of the program. Therefore, drawn from the aforementioned literature, this study addressed the following research questions:

RQ1: What were challenges faced by student volunteers in a student-led SFD program?

RQ2: What strategies did student volunteers use to overcome these challenges?
RQ3: How did these challenges, and experiences in attempting to overcome them, influence student volunteer learning?

Method
Research context and participants. Students from a large Midwestern University in the US designed and implemented an Olympic-themed SFD initiative at a local Boys and Girls Club in fall 2016. This program built off two previous month-long initiatives offered in spring 2015 and 2016, also designed and implemented by students. The Club daily serves hundreds of children and youth, many from disadvantaged neighborhoods. To address needs of the Club to build positive character in children in 3rd to 5th grade, student volunteers designed a semester-long program employing physical/sport, cultural, and educational activities. The program had 30 participants and was held twice a week for 90 minutes each session.

After Institutional Review Board approval and consent, an email was sent to all 12 student volunteers involved in designing and/or implementing at least one of the three programs, and eight consented to take part in the study (female=6). Two were alumni, one a Master's degree student, and five undergraduate students. Five out of eight students majored in leisure and sport-related studies.

Data collection & analysis
Data were collected via personal interviews with study participants that took about an hour on average. A semi-structured interview guide developed from experiential learning theory (Kolb, 1984) was used to identify challenges, strategies, and learning processes of student volunteers. Audio recordings were transcribed verbatim. Two authors used a priori, thematic coding (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014) followed by open coding (Corbin & Strauss, 2008) to independently code all transcripts, and then met to compare codes and interpretations through multiple discussions to come to common agreement (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). These initial codes were then folded into categories and overarching themes. To ensure trustworthiness, regular debriefing and member checks were utilized (Creswell, 2012).

Findings & Discussion
Preliminary findings indicate there were two broad types of challenges – challenges encountered during the design of the program and challenges faced during its implementation. To illustrate, the challenge of “unpredictability” emerged during the design phase, as one participant mentioned: “You would plan something and you would think it would go one way and it would go completely different or the kids didn't like what you planned.” A method to overcome this challenge was: “We need to have more content or we need to have a back-up plan in case this doesn't work or isn't going according to plan.” Learning occurred as volunteers worked to overcome design challenges: “I think that was one of the things that I took away from it, one sort of lesson I took away from the experience was just getting a sense of how much planning has to go into it,” and “you have to learn when things don't work out, you need a few backup ideas.” In terms of implementation, the challenge of “kids” emerged, as participants mentioned that children would not listen to them. One participant said: “I think pretty much the basic challenge was just getting them all settled down and to listen to you.” Volunteers tried to overcome this challenge by “incorporating the staff from Boys & Girls Club” to help with control and discipline. Nevertheless, volunteers learned that “to keep their attention . . . it can be hard. It's a challenge, but it's worth it in the end. Because then you really get to know them.” Theoretically, this study is important because it extends experiential learning theory by examining student volunteers’ experiences outside the classroom and how addressing and overcoming challenges facilitated learning and greater understanding (Hamilton, 1980; Reeve, Hall, & Kalkman, 2014). Practically, this study suggests that the process of experiencing and overcoming challenges enhances student learning, and thus, supervisors should not necessarily seek to remove all obstacles for students in design and implementation. Indeed, student volunteers might be more committed to the initiative and return as volunteers through engaging in this problem-solving process (Hustinx, 2008). Student volunteers found a way to overcome the challenges faced, and consequently, develop learning which could not have happened just in a classroom context. Future research directions will also be explicated during the presentation.