Changing the Conversation: Athletes, Power-Dynamics, and Well-Being

Stacy Warner, East Carolina University
Gareth Jones, Temple University
Todd Fraley, East Carolina University
Christine Wilson, East Carolina University
Michael Catalano, East Carolina University

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Effective communication is an essential life skill and fundamental to an athlete’s professional preparation, and has also been linked to professional success (Rubin et al., 1990). Yet because of perceived power-dynamics, many athletes may feel uncomfortable initiating difficult conversations with faculty, coaches and/or administrators. Following U.S. trends, many athletes lack knowledge and training on how to communicate difficult issues (Bolton, 2009). Although the changing social environment means many athletes are electronically connected via social media, in-person conversations remain intimidating, especially when relational power dynamics are considered (McCornack, 2016). Issues from playing time to serious health concerns can be better addressed if they are confidently communicated.

Although communication skills are vital, finding the time, expert resources, and appropriate manner to train athletes is challenging. Immersive simulations have become widely recognized as a useful tool that provides a unique opportunity to practice complex skills (Bogost, 2010; Straub et al., 2015). Given communication skills are essential to addressing most athlete issues, it is paramount to understand how this technology can be utilized to improve athletes’ communication. Thus, the purpose of this study is to create and test the efficacy of an immersive simulated experience designed to help athletes with initiating “difficult conversations”.

Method

A quasi-experimental design was utilized to test the efficacy of the immersive experience. Fifty student-athletes were assigned to the treatment group and completed three immersive simulation experiences. Participants interacted with an avatar on a large screen on playing time, financial problems, stress and anxiety, and/or life after sport issues. The avatar role was someone with power in the situation (i.e., coach, potential employer, professor). Next, fifty student-athletes were assigned to a control group. Both groups completed a pre-survey to assess their ability to deal with “difficult” scenarios, and a post-survey will be sent in mid-November (3-5 weeks after the pre-test). Pre-post survey measures included General Self-Efficacy (Chen et al., 2001), Interpersonal Communication Competence (Rubin & Martin, 1994), Unwillingness-to-Communicate (Burgoon, 1976), and Cognitive Flexibility (Martin & Rubin, 1995) scales. Post-survey open-ended questions on the impact of the experience also will be included.

Along with descriptive statistics, the analysis will include a series of generalized linear models with repeated measures to test for significant changes in interpersonal communication, unwillingness-to-communicate, and cognitive flexibility. This approach will test for within-subject differences from the pre- to post-test, while controlling for salient between-subject factors (e.g., gender) and covariates (e.g., self-efficacy).

Expected Results

Post-test results are expected to demonstrate that athletes who participate in the immersive simulation experience will report significantly higher interpersonal communication and cognitive flexibility, and lower unwillingness-to-communicate than the control group. Finally, multivariate regression models will assess the associations between key variables, and how these associations change from the pre- to post-survey. Data collection is 50% completed with both the control and treatment groups having completed the pre-testing and treatment phase. Post-test surveys are expected to be completed by December 1. Overall, this quasi-experimental project has the potential to impact athlete welfare through enhancing athletes’ communication skills via an innovative and emergent training tool.