Case of Cases: Applying Kolb's Experiential Learning Model to the Case Teaching Method

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Sport management education employs many diverse methods and styles to prepare students for careers post-graduation (Atwater, Borup, Baker, & West, 2017). The practical nature of the field lends itself to highly experiential methods such as internships, service-learning, and projects with practitioner contact (Odio & Kerwin, 2016; McDonald & Spence, 2016). This trend also shapes the classroom, with educators utilizing role-playing, guest speakers, and case studies to breathe life into the classroom experience. Each of these methods individually comes with benefits, but a consistent learning environment for the student requires careful and continual alignment to maximize benefits. Speakers at this presentation will elaborate on one such alignment of case study use with experiential learning theory.

The case study method has long been used in higher education (Ellet, 2007) and has been particularly useful in helping students understand specific situations (Morse & McEvoy, 2014). Sport management educators have embraced case studies, as evidenced by the success of the Case Studies in Sport Management journal. However, the case study teaching method as it is often employed is incompatible with a theoretically complete experiential learning model.

Experiential learning programs are commonly based on Kolb’s (1984) experiential learning cycle. This theory describes learning as a cycle of concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation. As a cycle, this model depends on each stage being linked to stage that follows, without a defined beginning or end (Kosnik, Tingle, & Blanton, 2013). While case study use in the classroom can map to each step in the cycle (e.g. experiencing the case through reading, reflecting on the case, conceptualization of key case elements, and planning actions to resolve main problems within the case) (Kreber, 2001), it most often only links “planned” actions to the “true” actions taken by, or experiences of, the real-world case subjects. The cycle fizzles out rather than continuing (McCarthy & McCarthy, 2006).

To complete Kolb’s (1984) experiential learning cycle in the context of cases studies in the classroom, the presenters devised a pilot program using a series of cases each focused on organizational behavior concepts. Four fictitious cases were written, covering the following organizational behavior topics: (1) mission, vision, and core values, (2) group dynamics, (3) change management, and (4) power and politics. Each case was written with the potential to elucidate all four concepts. This allowed the instructor to choose any of the cases as the subject for that week’s lesson and, most critically, use previous learning as a direct influence on the experience of the current week’s case.

This pilot model was repeated for a total of four semesters. Initial instructor observations include: (1) most student groups develop progressively more complex solutions as they proceed through the cases; and (2) groups that fail to apply the lessons from the first case to the second case were able to successfully perform this task in subsequent cases after receiving feedback from the instructor. Student feedback is generally positive, and presenters will share several keys to successful implementation based on observations and feedback.