Learning Portals: Identifying Threshold Concepts for Introduction to Sport Management Courses

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Sport management programs prepare graduates to be productive, innovative leaders. It is widely discussed that these graduates should develop critical thinking abilities to enhance their careers (Zakus, Malloy, & Edward, 2007). Zeigler (1994) suggested the need for critical thinking in the curricula of sport management programs and Frisby (2005) argued for its inclusion. Yet, many instructors still use traditional teaching methods. Research has shown that lecture-based learning does not encourage students to develop critical thinking (Duron, Limbach, & Waugh, 2006). Moreover, the traditional lecture-based approaches fail to provide an effective learning environment that may engage technology savvy generations, i.e., millennials (Bolton et al., 2013; Reisenwitz & Iyer, 2009; Yim & Byon, 2017).

A method that enables the students to become critical thinkers is the threshold concept. Threshold concept was first introduced in economics by Meyer and Land (2003). Threshold concept is a fundamental idea and the ‘way of thinking and practicing’ that epitomizes the type of analysis conducted by scholars. Threshold concepts act as critical portals in the development of a learner’s understanding of a subject (Meyer, 2008). Once learned, concepts are less likely to be forgotten because it transforms students’ understanding of a topic (Wright & Gilmore, 2012). Threshold concepts are described as challenging ideas that are central to the discipline and once mastered, students can make transition from a basic to an advanced understanding (Meyer & Land, 2005).

Billsberry, Mueller, Skinner, Swanson, Corbett, and Ferkins’ (2018) suggest the need of threshold concept in sport management education. The purpose of this study was to identify threshold concepts for an introduction to sport management course. Specific research questions are what are the threshold concepts in sport management as identified by sport management faculty, sport industry practitioners, and are there discrepancies between the concepts identified by faculty and field practitioners?

The study utilizes Beech’s (1999) Delphi method procedure. Identification was inclusive of four experts to identify items under the five premises developed by Meyer and Land (2003). Threshold concepts should be transformative, once acquired they should shift perception. Second, concepts should be irreversible. Third, a threshold concept is integrative, students will obtain capacity to expose the previously hidden interrelatedness. Fourth, a threshold concept is bounded, it helps to define the boundaries of a subject area. Lastly, a threshold concept may be counter-intuitive. In grasping a threshold concept, a student moves from common sense understanding to one which may conflict with previous perceptions.

In the second stage, 25 sport management academicians and practitioners will be recruited and tasked to refine the item set through several rounds of online discussions. Two sets of data will be obtained (academicians/practitioners). In the final stage, the concept lists will be compared, and a final comprehensive list will be created. Results will afford sport management professionals with valuable insight on the use of the threshold concept. A better understanding of the concept will enable practitioners to develop more innovative strategies to enhance student learning. Contributions to literature, students, faculty and practitioners, along with implications, will be discussed.