Full Length Research Paper

Experience that matters – community based learning and sport management

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Described in this article is how sport management curricula can offer unique, real-world learning experiences and corresponding student learning gains, when grounded in community based learning (CBL). To achieve these ends, this study was designed to explore how to best execute CBL in sport management, informed, in part, by analyzing the lived experiences of students who were required to develop their understanding of community needs and resources, as well as devise and execute plans to meet these needs, in order to successfully complete the course. Students’ structured reflections of their discipline-specific CBL course and changes-in-self were assessed using rigorous qualitative analysis to detect emergent themes. Results indicated students’ self-reported professional, interpersonal, and intrapersonal gains in relation to how the course was taught/specific pedagogical practices. Competencies subsumed within these categories included learning how to effectively fundraise, learning to negotiate the challenges of group work and team dynamics, cultivating critical thinking and leadership skills, and cultivating self-as-professional. These data inform how to derive the unique impacts of service learning in sport, including the opportunities it presents for students to cultivate professional skills often reported to be under cultivated among recent graduates. Thus, results of this study fill a gap in the literature regarding how to foster student preparedness for “real world” experiences, and serve as model of how faculty and administrators can successfully integrate CBL in experiential sport management coursework.

Key words: Community-based learning (CBL), sport management, high-impact practices, fundraising, cultivating pre-professional skills in CBL coursework.

INTRODUCTION

Community based learning (CBL) is a pedagogical practice that, in the context of this study, was integrated with sport management curricula, providing undergraduate students with opportunities for engagement in service learning through both volunteer efforts and internships. As noted in the literature, internships require a collaborative effort between student, institution, and agency for academic credit; perhaps not surprisingly, research indicates that volunteerism through CBL is no less valuable in its ability for students to bridge theory...
and practice (Mooney and Edwards, 2001). Required of all CBL courses is the explicit integration of student learning outcomes and pedagogical practices likely to foster students’ ability to make reasoned decisions, address civic concerns, and operate according to higher stages of moral development (Eppler et al., 2011). Given these benefits to students, as well as the value of contributing university students’ time and talents towards meeting community needs, recommendations for the expansion of CBL have been cited since the late 1960s (Corey, 1972).

As alluded to above, the rewards derived from CBL coursework to both faculty and cooperating agencies are equally impactful. As faculty attempts to create an environment ideal to students’ learning, partnering community organizations are often the beneficiaries of substantial human resource needs such as labor, support, and consultation (Swanson, 2001). For example, over the course of their six-year partnership, students from a midsized public university in the Southeast have raised over $200,000 for local families affected by neuromuscular disease. Given the quantifiable outcomes of the community partner, the focus of this study, to be described in detail below, is to explore the perceived benefits of the CBL approach in an attempt to better assess student-learning outcomes and add to the literature base by better understanding of CBL pedagogy.

More specifically, the benefits of CBL have been reported broadly, ranging from civic engagement to the cultivation of more sophisticated moral reasoning. In addition, suggested course-based projects have been reported (Lee et al., 2016); however, the student participants’ perceived learning gains associated with participation in those projects remain unclear. Thus, this study fills a void in the literature by providing clear directions and parameters for the enactment of CBL project-based learning in sport management, empirical evidence regarding the specific competencies and benefits reported by student participants, and structured reflections that can be used as both pedagogical tools and assessments.

**Workplace-relevant student learning outcomes**

Sport management academic programs have long emphasized the value and significance of experiential learning within the curriculum (Sauder and Mudrick, 2017; Eagleman and McNary, 2010; Parkhouse, 1987). Recent evaluation of sport management students’ preparedness indicates the need for opportunities for practical experiences, embedded into sport management curricula prior to pre-professional experiences (DeLuca and Braunstein-Minkove, 2016). In addition, site supervisors generally noted that interns – who did not participate in CBL – from the university where this study was conducted, lacked professional skills such as adaptability, resourcefulness, and accountability. In addition, supervisors of interns, again from the university where this study was executed, cited students’ general lack of leadership qualities, which are experiential competencies oft developed through practical applied learning.

For these reasons, participants in this study were required to work in communities, assess the needs of their non-profit partners, evaluate different ways to solve a variety novel, “real-world” issues, adapt their approaches by engaging in “reflection-in-action,” and work effectively in groups (Schön, 1983; Furco, 2003). That is, students were provided with the opportunity to practice learned skills and theories in one or more authentic setting/s. As per research on CBL, the researcher conducting this study also expected that students involvement in this project would foster their critical thinking, communication and problem-solving skills (Conway et al., 2009) – all central learning outcomes in the author’s university. It was the researchers hope that additional student learning gains to participants of this study – of relevancy to post-baccalaureate job placement – would include an enhanced sense of social responsibility, increased awareness of career opportunities, and industry work experience that will fortify students’ resumes/portfolios (Melaville et al., 2006; Conway et al., 2009).

**Theories that undergird pedagogical practices in experiential sport management learning**

Due to the centrality of experiential learning in Sport Management, Dodds and Bochicchio (2011) explained the key variables that affect the degree to which internships learning is of value to student participants. These include a) the intern; b) the internship coordinator (in this case the course instructor); c) the host organization; and d) the sport management program, as well as e) the university in which the program is housed. Specifically, levels of cooperation between the sport management student/intern with his/her community partner, facilitated by his/her course instructor is associated with interns’ ability to meet, and potentially exceed, class-based student learning outcomes.

Of equivalent relevancy is anchoring experiential learning in corresponding theories of learning and teaching. Brown et al. (2018) have advanced this research, as it pertains to applied learning in Sport Management, by drawing upon the epistemic beliefs and corresponding practices defined by Dewey (1933), a theorist whose seminal work on experiential learning remains markedly pertinent today. Emblematic of his endorsement of authentic learning is a quote by Dewey (1933):

> First, in reference to material already learned, questions should require the student to use it in dealing with a new
problem rather than to reproduce it literally and directly. For the former operation demands the exercise of judgment by the pupil and cultivates originality even in dealing with things already well known by others. (p. 266)

In addition, salient to experiential learning, according to Dewey (1933), is:

1. for students to answer questions germane to the issue at hand, not their teachers’ a priori objective/s;
2. to facilitate students’ learning by immersing them in “real world” situations that necessitate their continuous re-examination of ideas;
3. to foster student reflection through the provision of structured prompts that require students to re-conceptualize what they know and are able to do; and,
4. for students to explain what they have learned as well as how these new ways of perceiving the world inform their pursuit of new, yet conceptually congruent endeavors.

The pedagogical principles enumerated above guided the execution of this CBL experience in Sport Management. Also of tremendous benefit, in the context of this class, was that in order for students to actualize their fundraising goals they had to observe and attend to important, yet sometimes discomfiting aspects of their fundraising efforts (Ornstein and Hunkins, 2004). There was simply no other way for them to construct alternatives that were more likely to yield success. As such, Sport Management students’ inquiry was not divorced from learning – a problem emergent, some of the time, among students learning content didactically --, rather it was intrinsic to the process of learning and continual adaptation (Huitt and Hummel, 2003). As a result, the cultivation of creativity, and habits of mind associated with nimble thinking/capacity when confronted with problems, were likely to have been associated with the intentional structuring of the experiential learning opportunity that will be described in this paper.

CBL in sport management

As alluded to above, sport management is a discipline well suited to achieve real world applicability combined with CBL (Jones et al., 2008). As such, the integration of experiential, community-based learning (CBL) courses in sport management has increased due to theorists emergent understanding of the uniquely rewarding nature of these curricula in fostering students’ commitment to service, perspective-taking ability, professional dispositions, and civic engagement (Cairney and Breen, 2017; Kolb, 2015). Research indicates that cultivating these competencies is important, not only due to the salience of students’ engagement in civic activities, but also due to their often under cultivated “soft skills” such as adaptability, resourcefulness, leadership and accountability – all required for success in the workplace and beyond (DeLuca and Braunstein-Minkove, 2016).

In summary, students’ philanthropy, through CBL, is one of the most modern forms of experiential education (Kane and Author, 2013; Ahmed and Olberding, 2008). If graduates lack the practical skills that will equip them to contribute meaningfully in the workplace, then understanding the exact nature of what students learn through CBL experiences and how this occurs -- particularly in sport management -- is important. Thus, the aim of this study was to examine aspects of a sport management CBL course wherein student teams created, implemented, and executed fundraising plans for a local nonprofit’s annual fund – more specifically a special event within the organization’s larger annual campaign. As a mechanism for modeling this course as closely as possible to the rigors of “real life,” student fundraising plans had to include at least five fundraising strategies and execution required strategies and methods for approaching various markets (that is, individuals, corporations), timelines, financial (budget) and human resources.

METHOD

A qualitative content analysis design employing secondary data from a sport management course informed the findings. As a requisite of the sport management major, Development and Fundraising in Sport (SPM4516) is designed to provide a comprehensive overview for fundraising, donor relations, non-profit, and sport-related sales professions. The course provides broad exposure to the nonprofit sector, with specific focus within the sport context. Students develop an understanding of fundraising operations and cover topics including but not limited to: fundraising models, donor motivation, donor relations and retention; digital fundraising; event management, and donor research and analytics.

The introduction of CBL component to the SPM4516 was twofold: (1) the author is employed emphasizing service learning, evidenced by their status as a Carnegie-Foundation institution, and (2) given the growing popularity of sport focused fundraising events, the CBL project requires students to execute an annual fundraising initiative for a local nonprofit.

CBL fundraising project

To execute this fundraising initiative, students were asked to create, implement, execute, and evaluate a resource development plan for a local non-profit organization. As noted previously, students were required to execute a minimum of five fundraising strategies learned through anchored instruction. Due to the experiential, authentic nature of this project, it was expected to offer numerous learning benefits to the students including specific subject matter knowledge, career development and job skills, leadership skills, networking opportunities, critical thinking skills, and real world hands-on experience.

Over the course of two consecutive spring semesters, students in the course formed six member teams and were assigned an eight-week CBL project. All teams worked with the Muscular Dystrophy Association (MDA) in a large, urban city located in the southeastern United States. The partner organization provided an overview of expected student outcomes during the semester, including implementing, executing, and evaluating a resource development plan for the MDA’s annual Muscle Walk.
As part of the course, students were asked to reflect on their experiences as well as their own personal growth and professional development. Final reflection papers totaling 300 pages of text served as the content for this research. All participants provided signed consent for sharing their final reflection paper. The final reflection prompt asked students to reflect on the totality of the CBL experience, how they integrated their subject matter knowledge into the fundraising experience, and what they learned about themselves in terms of both personal and professional growth. The final reflection prompt provided students with the opportunity to make connections between the course content and their CBL experience.

Importantly, the theoretical basis for the project adhered to the principles of good practice in CBL. These include providing students with multiple means for demonstrating competence; providing students with opportunities to condense and describe what they learned; and, offering students frequent feedback on their progress – both formally and informally (Melaville et al., 2006).

Participants

In total, 146 students enrolled and completed the course over two consecutive academic years. Eighty-two percent of sample participants were males and eighteen percent were females. All respondents were sport management majors, and of these 79% were in their junior year of study and 21% were seniors. While it may appear that male students were overrepresented in this sample the distribution is representative of sport management enrollment nationally – with female undergraduate enrollment at or below 20% (Hancock and Hums, 2011; Jones et al., 2008).

Data analysis

This study employed rigorous qualitative research methods to uncover the nature of participants—in this case, juniors and seniors in higher education – experiences with a community-based learning course within the realm of sport management. To assess students’ learning, the authors and two additional coders retrospectively evaluated the reflection papers. We applied grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) to the reflection paper data and believe it is important to note that unlike quantitative work which often tests existing theory grounded theory is driven by the data. As Patton (2002) points out, “in-depth information from a small number of people can be very valuable, especially if the cases are information-rich;” further, the “validity, meaningfulness, and insights generated from qualitative inquiry have more to do with the information richness… than with sample size” (p. 244-245).

To that end, four evaluators trained in the use of constant comparative analysis independently reviewed students’ reflections. Constant comparative method is an inductive data coding process used for categorizing and comparing qualitative data (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). Utilizing the open coding process, each evaluator identified global themes, and then further refined thematic data by identifying emergent subthemes therein (Corbin and Strauss 1990). After the initial analysis, all four evaluators met to discuss levels of commonality across broad categories; this allowed for fruitful discussion, analysis and cross-comparison of emergent themes among raters. After sustained deliberation, raters constructed definitions of emergent categories to ensure inter-rater commonality of understanding regarding what constituted specific categorizations. Raters then independently coded transcripts and cited specific exemplars of each category. Cross comparisons of coded data indicated almost complete agreement (that is, 95%), and areas of disagreement were addressed through further discussion. A grounded theory of both what students’ gained from the CBL course, as well as what aspects of the course facilitated this growth, emerged and will be described in the results below (Strauss and Corbin, 1998).

FINDINGS

Recurrent themes

From our analysis, two overarching themes emerged. The first pertains to the value of “real world” experience and the second pertains to how the course was taught. Subsumed within “real world experience” were four subthemes focused on: a) skills cultivated in the “real world”; b) the challenges of working in a group; c) personal growth; and, d) vocational exploration. There was some overlap, in that group work was associated with specific kinds of personal growth, enabling passages to be “double coded” in some instances.

Within subtheme number one, skills cultivated in the “real world” were students’ increased sense of efficacy, their commitment to their community, their increased preparation for eventual careers, and the ways the knowledge they cultivated in this course will be transferrable to multiple contexts. Within subtheme number two, working in a group, was students’ description of the unknown challenges of working with a group, as well as the new strategies they developed to address those challenges, such as building rapport with team members and learning how to delegate tasks. Within subtheme number three, personal growth, was students’ description of the unknown challenges of working with a group, as well as the new strategies they developed to address those challenges, such as building rapport with team members and learning how to delegate tasks. Within subtheme number four, vocational exploration, was students awareness of their strengths, the types of work they may wish to do upon graduation, and their newly emergent interest in working for a non-profit.

Embedded within was an appreciation for how the course was taught. Repeatedly emphasized by student participants was the value of learning by doing – sometimes characterized as “learning by experiencing it.” Thus, the class was deemed by these students to be uniquely rewarding, teaching them skills that they will remember and use in the future.

Explicated in Table 1 are exemplars that illustrate the unique rewards of this CBL course in their voices. Many contain data that span across more than one theme. These multi-thematic data were included intentionally, so the richness and authenticity of their reflections are available to the reader.

In summary, conducting the work of resource development and fundraising was an eye-opening experience, replete with challenges, rewards, professional preparation, and a greater appreciation for non-profit work. Students often used the following phrases:

This project was challenging…
Over the course of the semester, I discovered that I am interested in pursuing a career in the non-profit sector. Working for a non-profit company had never crossed my mind until I took this class. Being able to run my own online giving campaign and putting on a successful fundraising event has shown me that doing this as a career is something I want to do explore.

This class affected me in a way that I never thought it would. I have recently been contemplating on a future job with a non-profit organization. I can see the opportunities that are available in the non-profit sector. I’m grateful that UNF is such a huge supporter of the CBL. With this encouragement, professors and students to get to make a difference in someone’s life and make a difference in our city.
Table 1. Cont’d.

Appreciation for pedagogy (learning by doing)
The CBL project is my favorite assignment since beginning my college education. It is a unique and rewarding method of teaching and learning. The knowledge I gained will remain with me longer than if I had just passively read, or been taught from, a textbook. I was able to directly observe and understand what was happening and what had to be done which is sometimes difficult to properly understand if you have never experienced it.

Doing a CBL project for class has been the most rewarding experience I have had in a college class. It was completely hands-on rather than just reading a textbook and taking a test. We learned, we failed, but in the end we were successful in helping a great cause for our community while adding to our resumes.

I enjoyed coming to class each day and focusing on our project because I was always aware of what was going on, rather than coming to a normal class and just listening to the teacher lecture about non-profits.

This semester, the development and fundraising course, has provided me with a unique experience like none other during my time at UNF. This experience forced us to step into an unfamiliar pedagogical setting, while allowing us to better understand CBL, and learn by doing.

This project made me realize the how challenging nonprofit work is…
My appreciation for the work of nonprofits has changed because of this class…
It was rewarding…
I can use (skills) in my future career…

DISCUSSION

The results of this exploratory study, designed to assess the unique benefits of an authentic problem-based experiential learning, provide important theoretical and practical takeaways on how to best utilize the high impact practice of community-based learning to enhance career preparedness and personal growth of students. Specifically, the findings explicated above indicate that students who partake in community-based experiential learning are provided with unique opportunities to cultivate pre-professional skills (including critical thinking), explore vocational possibilities, and grow intra and interpersonally. These findings are important, particularly in light of the reported discrepancy between the competencies required of those in post-baccalaureate jobs and those learned through undergraduate study in the academy. Specifically, Caplan (2018) reports that students’ undergraduate degree/s are merely a “signal” of characteristics of appeal to employers, yet in no way actually equip students with skills of relevancy for jobs. In essence, he asserts the value of undergraduate education is overrated. Our findings suggest that this does not have to be the case. That is, high impact experiential CBL practices cultivate skills that are transferrable to the workplace and of benefit to communities.

The indictment of the academy’s growing irrelevancy in preparing professionals, reported by Caplan (2018), does not just pertain to philosophy and sociology majors – it also pertains to sport management. Specifically, sport management educators are increasingly cognizant of the gap between traditional curricula and sport industry needs, made all the more concerning given the growing number of programs in the field and the highly, competitive nature of the industry. Researchers (Petersen and Pierce, 2009; Stier and Schneider, 2000) and sport industry reports suggest that professionals are also cognizant of the incongruence of students’ undergraduate training in sport management and the skills required of them in the workplace. Notably, The Sports Business Journal, a leading industry publication, found that 47% of senior-level sport industry executives identified, opportunities for students to work on real-life projects, as the single most important element for the success of a sport management program (Dolich, 2016). Additionally, although 70% of industry executives would encourage his/her child to pursue a career in sports, less than half (43%) would encourage him/her to pursue a degree in sport management. These results led Dolich (2016) to evaluate a number of leading U.S. sport management programs and their faculty. His findings indicated a need for more depth and breadth in instruction – specifically in areas that enhance students’ orientations toward life-long learning, teamwork, self-management, career exploration, and communication. Carefully designed and well-executed CBL projects, such as the one outline in our work, provide students a chance to learn and discover the aforementioned skills.

In closing, our work serves as an example of how community based experiential learning can offer a promising means for providing the rigor at which student’s will be expected to perform during internships and throughout their careers. In their own voices, students who completed this course articulated having cultivated transferrable professional skills, self-efficacy, persistence, and awareness of the “real world.” Likewise, community partners perceived the CBL project as not only beneficial but critical to their annual fundraising efforts and in meeting the needs of those they serve. They are eager to continue the project with future sections of the course.

The practical implications of our work also speak to the importance of addressing students’ preparedness for the
workplace before they commence upon final internships or entry-level positions. In addition, if community based experiential learning projects within sport management curricula address and meet student, community and sport industry needs, then our work serves as an example of how academics (students and faculty) and practitioners can successfully bridge the gap between theory and practice, again, prior to students’ final internship. This will afford students an opportunity to solve real problems and build tangible skills along a more substantive developmental continuum.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

No study is without limitations and this study is no different. Given the small sample size, it is impossible to assert that these findings are reliable and replicable. Notwithstanding, we assert that it is likely that these results will emerge from the implementation of similar learning experiences. To verify this, the authors suggest subsequent validation studies be conducted, as well as studies assessing the efficacy of these approaches through the use of mixed methods – which may entail evaluating student gains by collecting both survey and qualitative data. In addition, it would be worthwhile to conduct studies on the external validity of these learning approaches in contexts throughout the country to determine the degree to which these gains are applicable in a variety of geographic locales with different demographic groups.

CONFlict of interests

The authors have not declared any conflict of interests.

REFERENCES


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