

Engaging the millennial generation in sport management experiential learning

Introduction

Sport management as an academic discipline requires a balance of theory and practice by endowing students with knowledge, critical thinking skills, and expertise (Cuneen & Parks, 1997). Within sport management, industry professionals continue to call for students being “prepared” for the demands of the industry through the acquisition of a quality education and a significant amount of hands on experience prior to entering the work force. The academy has also recognized the need such that COSMA (Commission on Sport Management Accreditation) standards call for practical and experiential learning as a relevant component of all sport management programs, including within the area of operations and event management (COSMA, 2010). The success of sport management programs preparing students accordingly for the demands of the industry will in part be evaluated through the work of recent graduates (Danylchuk & Boucher, 2003).

It is further complicated by the learning needs and expectations of students categorized as the millennial era generation (1980-2002). Terms such as sheltered, entitled, technologically savvy, and unwilling to pay their dues have been used to describe the millennial generation (Nicholas, 2008). Lecturing has become almost non-existent within the college setting, causing a need for faculty members to be creative in their delivery of course content (Hersh & Merrow, 2005).

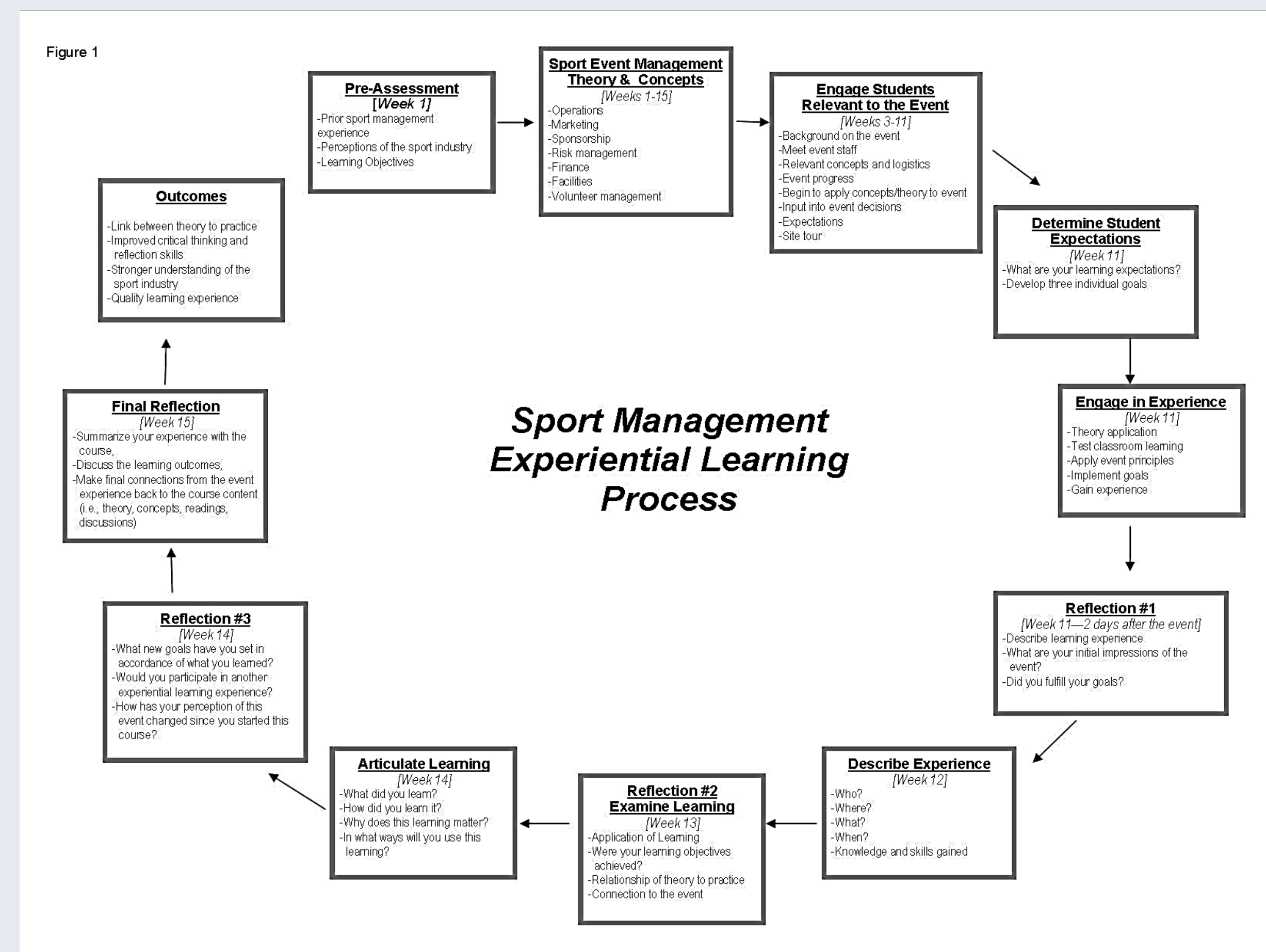
Experiential learning has long been recognized as an effective pedagogical strategy, allowing students the opportunity to practice skill sets in a real-world setting, thus advancing their knowledge in a discipline (Dewey, 1938). Experiential learning theory (ELT) draws on the work of prominent 20th century scholars notably John Dewey, Kurt Lewin, Jean Piaget, William James, Carl Rogers and others-to develop a holistic model of the experiential learning process (Kolb, 1984). ELT defines 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). Learning through experience occurs when a “student learns by actually doing or performing real-world tasks while engaged in a formal structured field experience” (Schneider & Stier, 2006).

Purpose of the study

The purpose of this study was twofold. The first purpose was to present the sport management experiential learning process. The second part will provide the results of the qualitative research conducted utilizing this process.

Sport Management Experiential Learning Process

As active learning projects have been deemed a critical element in student preparation for sport industry careers, by both researchers and COSMA accrediting standards, developing a process for educators to utilize that incorporates the work of previous theorists (Kolb’s experiential learning theory; Ash & Clayton’s reflective learning model) appeared to be a logical response to align with the professional and academic needs. It also meets the call of sport management standards to generate written products that can be used for formative and summative assessment of student learning.



Methodology

Participants (n=70)

The purposive sample for this study was comprised of students enrolled during three different semesters in an elective 300 level sport event management course.

Data sources

Utilizing the model presented above each student enrolled in the class completed a pre-course assessment, pre-event assessment, three reflective journals, participated in four online discussions, and wrote a final reflection paper.

Data analysis

The underpinnings of this study are based on grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The researcher read and re-read the text data from each student prior to noting initial impressions, frequency of occurrences and deciding upon themes. Segments of data were then grouped under similar codes and examined again for overarching themes.

Results

The analysis of the data is based on a content analysis of the journals and attempts to categorize how the students reflected upon their experience. In examining the journal data with the utilization of a guided experiential learning process, it was found the thing the students reflected upon could be divided into four main themes. They were: (a) personal development, (b) learning gains (acquisition of content knowledge related to course objectives); (c) professional growth; and (d) identifying reflection as a new way of learning. Since it is impossible to share each individual student’s thoughts, in presenting the results of the study, the researcher selected quotes and rich description (Creswell, 1998) that is most representative of their responses.

(A) Personal development

Personal development occurred among the students as they progressed during the course of the semester from apprehension to confidence in their event abilities. In the beginning of the semester, one student who academically was mediocre, stated: “I am a little nervous about working with event staff and the actual event. I am not really as comfortable as I would like within this type of setting so I hope that is something I will gain during the semester and from this experience in general.” The same student at the midpoint in the semester noted, “I am getting more comfortable in being around the sport industry. I am starting to see myself working in this industry upon graduation.” At the conclusion of the semester, the student stated their excited about the experience. “This course truly made me feel confident in my abilities to work in sports. I didn’t know what to think at the beginning of the semester but I now know this is where I want to be.”

(B) Learning gains

The next theme identified was acquisition of knowledge related to course objectives. This encompassed students understanding of course content (i.e. readings and assignments) from the deeper meaning they found in connecting course material with the context of the sport event. Students described the opportunity for application and the acquisition of knowledge from theory to practice. As students moved through the experiential learning process and were asked to describe their experience in detail, sport event specific terms such as: event impact, sponsorship activation, risk management, economic impact, event evaluation, request for proposals, stakeholders, and event strategy were mentioned consistently. This was particularly apparent several weeks after the event. A junior noted, “having the opportunity to be involved with a large scale sporting event pushed me towards achieving mastery over the class material.”

Results (continued)

(C) Professional growth and development

Professional growth and development was also a consistent theme. The students identified the progression in their professional behaviors during the semester. One female stated, “This experience has helped me grow as a person. I now understand how I would handle difficult situations in the future.” Another noted, “I feel very confident in my abilities to be involved with an event, including the unanticipated challenges.” Students also recognized the value of complementing their academic studies with hands-on experience for a career in the sport industry. Typical comments included, “The most important thing you can do is get experience- the piece of paper (diploma) is important but without the experience who will hire you?”

(D) Identifying reflection as a new way of learning

The students that reported on the value of the reflective nature of the experientially based sport management class noted increased learning through the application of theories. Identifying reflection as a new way of learning, ¾ of the students within this study reported the greatest impact of reflection was a new approach to critical thinking that enabled meaningful and deep learning which impacted multiple areas of their lives. One student explained, “I would say I learned more in this class because of the reflective nature.” Another student said: “We heard several times in our class how reflection was making meaning from experiences. Once I really got that, I started look at this class and learning in a totally different way. I need to remember to reflect and make meaning from each experience.”

Discussion

This experience had a positive effect on the students’ professional development and the ability to reflection upon learning experiences. The students confirmed not only the practical application but also the depths of the connection they made to the academic component. This research contributes to the growing body of evidence that experiential pedagogy which incorporates reflective learning in sport management courses enhances student learning in, while also improving the connection between theory and practice.

Future Research

Future research is needed to test the applicability of the process into the context of other sport management courses. It is also recommended that a true control group to draw comparisons of student achievement and retention of content with a course that does not have an experiential component.