



Review

Get real: Using engagement with practice to advance theory transfer and production

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to illustrate that strengthening links with practice through authentic and collaborative instruction, research and professional service, significantly reduces these two gap-enhancing problems and represents an ideal opportunity to apply, test and, perhaps most importantly, generate theory. Authenticity, or connectivity with practice, through the use of practical content as well as interaction, provides a valuable mechanism for enhancing, if not accelerating, knowledge production and transfer. The sport management literature widely supports the merits of experiential learning, as an authentic method of advancing knowledge acquisition. Moreover, while sport academia and sport business may comprise distinct cultures, there is a common purpose for research: an understanding of unique, emerging phenomena. As such, authentic research and learning environments have the potential to yield multiple benefits that include (a) enriching student learning outcomes, (b) fostering healthy relationships with industry, (c) establishing a mechanism for external funding, (d) serving as a platform for scholarship, and (e) challenging faculty to upgrade instructional methods and content; ultimately enhancing professional competency and connectivity of faculty and students alike, and thus, advancing the discipline.

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1. Introduction

Who would have thought that former professional baseball star and noted quotologist, Yogi Berra, would offer insights on the frequently debated topic of connectivity between theory and practice? According to Mr. Berra, "*In theory there is no difference between theory and practice. In practice there is*" (date unknown). There is no shortage of literature supporting Mr. Berra's perspective, as scholars representing a variety of disciplines within the social sciences, including sport management, have addressed the theory – practice gap (Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2011; Shapiro & Wagner DeCew, 1995; Weese, 1995). Some authors propose that the two systems of academia and practice ought to be so fundamentally distinct with different languages, community, standards of research, motivations, and outputs that the chasm cannot be bridged (Grey, 2001; Kieser & Leiner, 2009). However, Danylchuk and Boucher (2003) report that sport management academicians indicated that establishing closer links with sport business constituencies represented one of the most influential steps toward advancing the discipline.

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“We made too many wrong mistakes.” Yogi Berra

Regrettably, proactive, organizational initiatives intended to fulfill this mission have failed. Weese (1995) outlined a number of initiatives for the North American Society of Sport Management (NASSM) to better serve practice. A few years later, a Sport Marketing Association (SMA) Engaged Scholarship Grant, calling for submissions to include a research team comprised of at least one faculty member, a student, and professional, yielded no submissions. More recently, SMA announced a mentor program, where faculty applicants were paired with industry professionals, and two association members indicated interest. For a field often criticized for lack of engagement with industry, these results were more than disappointing as well as problematic for those embracing a philosophy that a primary mission of universities is “access to authentic communities of learning, interpretation, exploration, and knowledge creation” (Brown & Duguid, 2001, p. 203)—a perspective of great value to sport management.

The distinguishable gap between the academy, as representatives of theory, and practice appears to be the result of “knowledge transfer” and “knowledge production” problems (Hodgkinson & Rousseau, 2009; Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2011). Therefore, in this paper, we advocate that strengthening links with practice through authentic and collaborative instruction, research, and professional service significantly reduces these two gap-enhancing problems and represents an ideal opportunity to apply, test and, perhaps most importantly, generate theory.

2. Impacting knowledge transfer and production through instruction

As a means of enhancing student professional readiness, sport management educators are encouraged to implement instructional methodologies that integrate theory into practical application (Bae & Miller, 2011). The benefits of an experiential learning environment provide a compelling case for embedding practice-based content within the curriculum.

Constructivism, a learning theory attributed to Piaget, suggests that learners produce knowledge from experiences, transforming students from passive to active participants in the learning process, a methodology considered to be of greater interest to the 21st century learner (Anderson et al., 2005). In an experiential learning environment such as constructivism, it is important for learners to have access to multimodal ways of experiencing concepts and to be able to use, expand, or adapt the experienced in further experiences (Reich, 2007).

Couched within the constructivist approach, case study, role play, and simulation exercises represent active, authentic learning methods useful for developing innovative means of solving real world problems and keeping students as well as faculty in touch with industry. While keen interest for problem-based learning activities has been reported among sport management academicians (Danylchuk & Boucher, 2003), authenticity of the problem selected for solution is relevant to building a constructivist environment that promotes active, experiential learning (Anderson et al., 2005). A number of authentic, experiential learning opportunities designed with the intent of converting theoretical concepts into meaningful, concrete learning outcomes have been reported to be used by faculty in a range of sport management content areas (Bennett, Henson, & Drane, 2003; Charlton, 2007; Drayer & Rascher, 2007; Foster & Dollar (2010); Irwin, Southall, & Sutton, 2007; McDonald & Milne, 1999; Newman, Irwin, Klenosky & Gillentine, 2003; Pauline & Pauline, 2008; Petersen & Pierce, 2009; Spence, Hess, McDonald, & Sheehan, 2009).

While adoption of the case study method enhances student ability to construct knowledge as concepts learned through lecture come to life and reveal evidence of theory in use (Olorunnisola, Ramasubramanian, Russill, & Dumas, 2003), the authenticity of such activities is further enhanced through personal engagement with industry representatives where real-time cases or client-based experiences are likely to emerge (McDonald & Milne, 1999). Client-based projects are reported to provide a more comprehensive learning experience than other authentic learning exercises (Milner, 1995). As such, experiential learning models have been reported in which sport business staff partner with sport management faculty as instructional facilitators as a means of illustrating the transfer of theory into practice (Irwin, Southall, & Sutton, 2007; Southall, Nagel, LeGrande & Han, 2003). The real-time, personal involvement nature of the client-based setting affords the student an opportunity to uniquely experience the affective component of situational variables associated with the problems and garnering first-hand knowledge of the consequences. Likewise, in their capacity, partnering professionals also serve a critical role as “theory endorsers,” confirming to students that the application of relevant theory has a place in practice.

Conspicuously absent from the aforementioned discussion of experiential learning in sport management is use of the approach within a research methods course. In addition to achieving the previously noted benefits of an experiential learning approach, novice researchers working in an authentic research “lab” garner knowledge and skill in less rigorous, but a more immediate, relevant setting. As such, more informed researchers depart sport management degree programs as the agents of change sought by Parks (1992).

While internship has served as the customary client-based experience critical to the student’s professional development, Verner, Keyser, and Morrow (2005) advocate that faculty should benefit from their role as internship supervisor by leveraging the interaction as an opportunity to keep abreast of industry developments. Developing relationships with frontline personnel allow academicians to observe and interact with those most aware of emerging trends, potential problems, and interesting opportunities as their perspectives, data, needs, and experiences can shed light on emerging developments that lead to theory building. These discussions have the potential of yielding mutually beneficial outcomes of critical interest to scholars challenged by the traditional professoriate expectations: maintaining a focused research agenda; instructional and professional service responsibilities; and, securing external support for such activity.

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