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Authentic Assessment in the Sport Management Curriculum: A Case Study

Abstract

Authentic assessment refers to evaluating tasks that closely resemble ‘real world’ situations. Zeigler and Bowie (1995) identified laboratory experiences as experiential learning avenues for the effective ‘real world’ preparation of sport management students. A survey of students favorably indicated that they were able to develop higher levels of learning due to the addition of the laboratory component. These levels of learning included: application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation of sport management specific scenarios. Thus, by combining lecture with a laboratory component through which a student could be authentically assessed, a synergistic ‘real world’ sport management learning environment was effectively created.

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Typically, university student learning has taken place through the constructive alignment among instruction, learning, and assessment (ILA). Lecturing, followed by student note taking and memorization, leading to test taking would be an example of the traditional ILA pedagogy (Biggs, 1996). In this model, students passively received information and acquired knowledge yet were not able to relate with circumstances where it would be used (Barr & Tagg, 1995; Huba & Freed, 2000).

However, recent educational goals have tended to put more emphasis on developing competent students and potential employees rather than the traditional ILA teaching-centered paradigm (Gulikers, Bastiaens, & Kirschner, 2004). Birenbaum (2003) recommended that the ILA alignment focus more on learning and competency. He suggested that a learning approach be more reflective in nature, utilizing active knowledge building with assessment to be more contextualized, interpretive, and performance based. Within this context, the objective would be for the student to gain higher-order thinking progressions and the accompanying capabilities rather than mere fact based knowledge and fundamental skills.

The purpose of assessment, then, evolves from being cumulative to functioning in the promotion and enhancement of student learning (Gulikers et al., 2004). However, this way entails a different avenue of assessment since standardized, multiple-choice tests are not suitable for this type of assessment (Segers, Dochy, & Cascallar, 2003). To be effective, the assessment should include authentic tasks and contexts as well as additional assessment techniques to resolve whether student learning or development has occurred.

Defining Authentic Assessment

According to Torrance (1995), authentic assessment implies a performance based approach in which the assessment tasks designed for the students “...should be more practical, realistic, and challenging than what one might call ‘traditional’ paper-and pencil tests” (p. 1). While others define the authenticity of assessment as the relationship between the thinking demands of the assessment and the situation that students could encounter in their professional lives (Lajoie, 1991; Savery & Duffy, 1995). In this way students are provided opportunities to incorporate knowledge, skills, and attitudes (KSA), as well as the capacity to apply those KSA’s to new situations (Van Merriënboer, 1997).

For this case study, authentic assessment was defined as creating and providing written scenarios that required the students to use the same amalgamation of KSA’s that they would need as a professional sport manager. It is an obligation on the part of the instructors to develop appropriate authentic criterion situations. No matter how thoughtful and applicable the provided scenario might be, all may be for naught if the students do not perceive it to be authentically based.

Meaningful learning is experiential and permeated with critical reasoning (Burley & Price, 2003). Authentic assessment incorporates experiential learning as it requires the student to construct the knowledge involved in solving complex cognitive processes (Burley & Price, 2003). Instead of increasing the evaluation of ‘correct’ answers, the student is obligated to connect cognitive objectives with social skills and attitudes. Tools that can be successfully implemented when using authentic assessment include: evaluations of case studies, self-assessments, simulations, and open response questions (McLellan, 1993). In essence, authentic assessment connects theory to practice in authentic settings.

Application of Authentic Assessment to Sport Management

Five general areas of competencies identified by Zeigler and Bowie (1995) as being important to development of future sport managers were: (1) personal skills (personal philosophies, values, and mission statements); (2) interpersonal skills (self-concept, communication and leadership styles); (3) conceptual skills (management theory, external and internal environments, organizing, staffing, directing, and controlling); (4) technical skills (team-building, priority development, legal aspects); and (5) conjoined skills (policy development, ethical decision making, and strategic market planning). The relevancy of these items are evident in the more recent standards set forth by the National Association for Sport and Physical Education (NASPE)/North American Association for Sport Management (NASSM) (2000) sport management program content area standards.

While these areas are related to the confines of sport management, the integration of these principles are imperative to provide the student with an active learning opportunity. According to Fischer and King (1995), authentic assessment instruction should go beyond finding the right answer, it needs to encompass why decisions were made, interrelations that are evident, and how the students solved the problem. Since authentic assessment values the process of thinking beyond the box (Birenbaum, 2003;
Without authentic assessment in the sport management curriculum, students may successfully pass the class through passive means. While this may secure a high grade it may prevent the student from being adequately prepared for a future sport management position. The result may lend credence to the assertion of Bridges and Roquemore (2000) that “… historically, over 98 percent of all first time managers in all types of organizations are placed in their first supervisory jobs without being trained to manage first” (p. 9).

There are several options to implementing authentic assessment through active learning in sport management curriculums. The most prevalent method involves using time during a traditional lecture to divide into groups and apply information through debate, case study analysis, or other techniques. Another option provides for one lecture class every week or two to be designated for case study analysis, debate, etc… Although these options contain elements of authentic assessment, there is often a restriction of adequate information and time to authenticate real world scenarios.

One option (and the focus of this case) that can address time and information limitations is a distinct laboratory component that accompanies weekly lecture sessions. Laboratory learning not only can create a sense of independent learning but an increase of self-reflective capabilities for the student (Bickman, 2000). In the lab component, students were asked to analyze, synthesize, and evaluate sport management related “real life” scenarios, through case study discussion, debate, role playing, and simulation. Essentially, the students integrated the information given in the previous lecture class(es) in the laboratory setting. Since the students were usually in groups of no more than three, the opportunity for collaboration through dialogue and an exchange of ideas was available.

Student Feedback
Students were authentically assessed during four undergraduate sport management classes at a large University in the southwestern part of the United States during a recent academic year. The method used to implement authentic assessment was a weekly two hour laboratory component coinciding with two hours of traditional lecture. A questionnaire was developed to qualitatively determine the effectiveness of the authentically assessed laboratory. The questionnaire was given to three experts who unanimously agreed that the questionnaire measured what it was purported to measure, thereby establishing face validity (Patten, 2000).

Seventy-eight of eighty-eight students in those classes volunteered to complete a short, open-ended questionnaire. All responses were completely anonymous. The students were asked to report their perceptions regarding their understanding of the: (1) purpose and context of the laboratory section; (2) the process of communicating and collaborating with others; (3) creative thinking for problem solving of complex situations; (4) importance of learning to learn; and (5) application of theories to basic sport management concepts presented in lectures as provided in the laboratory component. These categories replicated the skills previously mentioned by Carnevale et al. (1990) and McCormick (1993) as being important for a person to flourish in management.

Understanding the Purpose and Context of the Laboratory Component
According to Gielen, Dochy, and Dierick (2003), one of the primary reasons for using authentic assessment is to determine the impact on student learning, otherwise referred to as consequential validity. Consequential validity illustrates the intended and unintended effects of assessment on student learning (Dochy & McDowell, 1998). According to Gibbs (1992), student learning significantly relies on the assessment as well as the student perceptions of the assessment requirements. However, effective student learning may not be accomplished if they sensed discrepancies existed between the lecture based information and the assessment (Segers et al., 2001).

Seventy (90%) of the students understood the purpose of the authentic assessment component. Many of the comments received revealed that the students felt that the scenarios provided were authentically based and that the information, provided by lectures, connected well with the scenarios. Additionally, a significant number of the students responded that they were able to relate the sport-management based areas to other general topics thus providing a greater insight. This would be referred to as an unintended effect of the assessment in that the students were never required to apply their “answers” to other topical areas.

Process of Communicating and Collaborating with Others
Authentic assessment competency concept stresses that students need to acquire social competencies such as communication and collaboration (Birenbaum, 1996). Guilkers et al. (2004) stated that if real situations require collaboration, the assessment should also include collaboration. The sport management environment is appropriate for collaborative learning approaches as there is often an emphasis on group interaction. If students passively accept the information from the instructor, they very well may become “… prepared to acquire knowledge later in a work environment that stresses personal initiative and collaborative work” (Useem, 1995, p.23).

Fifty-four (69%) of the students agreed that the process of communicating and collaborating with other students was well presented and available in the lab setting. Some students commented that this aspect forced them to consider the viewpoints of others when completing the task. Other students indicated that by collaborating with others, they were required to look at and understand different view points thus allowing them to better understand the need for appropriate communication in collaborative efforts.

Creative Thinking for Problem Solving of Complex Situations
In addition to collaboration and communication, effective authentic assessment incorporates cognitive competencies such as problem solving and critical thinking (Birenbaum, 1996). These assessments are intended to develop the students’ critical thinking capabilities as well as to allow them to create inventive, actionable ideas. While test taking may only reveal the individual’s test taking ability, authentic assessments require students to think in a critical manner to solve authentically-based problems.

Seventy-five (96%) of the students agreed or strongly agreed that the laboratory sessions fostered creative thinking for problem solving.
solving of complex situations. The activities that the students answered often required them to investigate the root of the problems and create strategies that may be utilized as a sport manager. While some indicated that the problems were unrealistic or unlikely to occur, a larger number of students reported that the problems were probable occurrences in sport management.

Importance of Learning to Learn

Forty-seven (60%) of the students indicated that they gained a greater appreciation of the importance of learning to learn. Specifically, these students reported that the importance of understanding personal values, ethics, and adaptability was acquired or reinforced through the lab component to a greater extent than through the lecture only method. Moreover, these students reported a better comprehension of the global view needed in sport management as well as a desire to continue to learn overall due to their lab experiences. As a result, the addition of the lab module appeared to satisfy the suggestions of the Business Higher Education Forum (1997) which reported that methods of helping students acquire or reinforce required personal traits, including ethics, adaptability, self-management, global consciousness, and a passion for life-long learning were needed for the development of successful managers.

Application to Sport Management Theories

One of the primary areas that Zeigler and Bowie (1995) identified as a need in the preparation of future sport managers was being able to bridge the gap between the presentations of sport management theories to their application. For the employment of authentic assessment to be effective in applying the theoretical framework, the assessment scenario should be similar to the complexity found in real-life situations (Guilkers et al., 2004). This requires the students to become actively involved in their education. This, hopefully, will “…. stimulate lifetime habits of thinking, to stimulate students to think about HOW as well as WHAT they are learning” (Brown & Ellison, 1995, p. 40).

Fifty students (64%) agreed or strongly agreed that the authentic assessment component was effectively applied in combination with the traditional lecture method. In particular, they revealed that by learning the course content through authentic assessment, they would be able to preserve the knowledge gained for a longer period of time than by the lecture method solely. The authentic and problem solving nature of the scenarios were deemed to be very valuable to them.

Discussion

Based on the above favorable student comments and other positive qualitative feedback, the implementation of the laboratory component to the undergraduate sport management class was a success. Action oriented strategies were used by relying on authentic assessment as the foundation of learning in the laboratory. For instance, the reliance on strategies such as role-playing, debate, simulation, and discussion were keys to implementing an enhanced level of learning. However, before the addition of the lab, traditional lecture was the method of delivery. According to Hitch & Youatt (1993), “… when knowledge is measured, the lecture is as efficient in delivering information as any other method” (p. 113).

Although knowledge is vital to learning, adding the laboratory component to traditional lecture incorporated higher levels of learning through authentic assessment. Students may have difficulty comprehending only oral communication. They may better understand when given a chance to debate a concept or role-play a scenario. The use of these higher level action oriented strategies used in the lab allowed students to view problems and situations from different perspectives and points of views (Hitch & Youatt, 1993). Simply lecturing produced one dimension of understanding while role-playing, debate, and simulation provided another. By combining lecture and lab a synergistic sport management learning environment was created that more authentically assessed student learning.

One explanation for the positive student feedback and the synergy created by combining the lecture with a lab is seen in Blooms Taxonomy (1956). According to Bloom (1956) there are six levels of educational objectives. The first two lower levels of learning, knowledge and comprehension, were elements existing before the implementation of the lab. Knowledge can be referred to as recalling, remembering, and recognizing, and can involve defining terms and recalling facts. Comprehension conveys student understanding and explaining and can involve description, providing examples, or explaining how. Both of these aspects and their assessment tools (test, papers, class discussion) were used extensively before the authentic assessment was implemented.

The other four levels described by Bloom (1956) are application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. These higher levels of learning became evident in the class when authentic assessment was implemented. For instance, the laboratory concept itself is an example of applying ideas learned in the lecture to demonstrate competence in specific sport management areas. One of the quotes from the surveys conveys how the laboratory was successful in adding application to comprehension and knowledge, “I didn’t like it at first but then we were encouraged both in class and in the lab to think “outside the box” and be creative. It amazed me that I could be creative using class notes to solve a problem.” The student was able to apply classroom theory to relevant sport management situations. Also, it was evident that the laboratory touched on the higher level learning domains of analysis and synthesis.

Analysis, according to Bloom (1956), refers to reasoning through analyzing problems or relationships, and distinguishing differences. Synthesis involves the integration of ideas possibly through the combination of two or more concepts or abstract relations. In their survey responses several students were using these higher order learning behaviors. For example one student stated,

Before I took this class, I thought being an AD (athletic director) was easy. But after having to answer the scenarios, I really gained an appreciation of the whole picture that an AD has to contend with. Being from a small high school, I didn’t think beyond that. Now I have a better idea of what I might expect. The laboratory contained several case studies where students (role-playing as athletic director) were confronted with various management situations. As part of the lab, the students needed to analyze relationships, causes and effects, and at times, integrate conflicting ideas into a working solution.
Usually after this process, the students were involved in what Bloom (1956) refers to as evaluation, the final level of higher learning. Essentially, judgments were made regarding the solutions by weighing consequences and attaching value to the possible solution(s). By using all of the domains of learning in Blooms Taxonomy, the laboratory enabled the learners to identify with the overall purpose and experience of the cases, debates, or simulations used. For example, one student’s response personifies this concept, “The teacher said to think of the lecture notes as all the tools we needed to build a house and that the labs were the times that we got to build it. It didn’t make much sense then but after a couple of sessions I could really understand the idea.” Not only was the lab a way to connect with Bloom’s higher levels of learning, it integrated essential skills needed for management success and involved aspects from the Business-Higher Education Forum (1997). Specifically, employing authentic assessment enabled the faculty to restructure their teaching methods that resulted in opportunities for students to apply theoretical concepts to sport management situations thus developing enhanced cross-functional skill sets. These sets mirror the skills of: (a) learning to learn; (b) reading and writing; (c) oral communication and listening; (d) creative and critical thinking and problem solving; (e) personal management; (f) group effectiveness; and (g) organizational effectiveness and leadership that previous researchers (Carnevale, Gainer, & Meltzer, 1990; McCormick, 1993) indicated are essential for success in management.

It should be noted that the results or perceptions of this case study cannot be generalized to a greater population. Nor should the results be construed as authentic assessment being the only means for a sport management educator to actively involved students in the curriculum. Rather the results are meant to reveal how authentic assessment can be effectively utilized within a sport management curriculum.

Future Direction

Although the sport management laboratory experience was successfully implemented, there are elements that need to be refined and incorporated into future improvements. One such area involved evaluation of the process used in authentic assessment in a laboratory setting similar to those used in the exercise sciences. For instance, the students were evaluated in the laboratory based on their completion of several assignments. Typically, these assignments were written and spawned from the debates, cases studies, and simulations. One problem with evaluating only the end product of the laboratory is that the process used to develop solutions is ignored. According to Freeman and Lewis (1998), “… assessing process also enables both you and the student to monitor the quality of learning and to take action as necessary, thus helping students develop more effective approaches to learning” (p. 34). A potential concern of group interaction is the development that members simply accede to the points of a few, thus creating a “groupthink” process. One method to help prevent this process is to develop a rubric. Including categories such as teamwork, contribution, focus on the task, and group effectiveness in the rubric can add depth to the evaluation process. Also, the evaluation of process should include observations, self-reports, and journals/portfolios to create a better more authentically assessed laboratory.

Another element to consider for the future of any sport management laboratory component is teacher learning. According to Darling-Hammond, Ancess, and Falk (1995), by implementing authentic assessment strategies, teachers develop a curricular vision that not only may improve their teaching focus but also how to connect to student learning goals. The process of developing a sport management lab that incorporates authentic assessment requires faculty to learn more about their teaching strategies and the resulting student learning strategies.

Due to the growth of sport management as an academic discipline, educators may consider using authentic assessment in a collaborative manner. In fact, the authors encourage more formalized collaboration in which sport management faculty discuss and monitor their own teaching pedagogy. One way to create this environment would be to develop an academic center for the research and study of sport management teaching pedagogy.

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References


