

LIGHTING UP THE SKY: EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING AT A NCAA CHAMPIONSHIP EVENT

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Faure, C.E. and Ray, B.M. Experiential learning is a critical component of sport management student learning and one that can transform the learning process. Not only are students able to apply classroom-acquired knowledge into practical situations, they are also provided the opportunity to build professional networks. Those networks could then assist students upon graduation when they enter a highly competitive job market. This study chronicles the capstone experiences of a group of undergraduate sport management students who were invited to work at a NCAA Championship event, the 2021 Big Sky Conference's Men's and Women's Basketball Tournaments. Using Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory (ELT) as a framework for understanding, we aim to show how the experience produced optimal learning outcomes for a group of undergraduate sport management students. Specifically, we aim to show how our students benefitted by the contextual application of existing knowledge, through the acquisition of new knowledge, by experimenting with new knowledge, and from a unique opportunity for professional networking.

Key Words: higher education, student learning, sport management, capstone project, internship, professional networking, service learning, Experiential Learning Theory, Social Learning Theory

INTRODUCTION

While the exact origin is unknown, Irish poet William Butler Yeats is often credited for writing one of the most inspirational passages about teaching: *Education is not the filling of a pail, but the lighting of a fire!* Summarizing the applicability of Yeats' words to higher education, one learning theorist said,

College instruction should not be about dribbling drops of knowledge that students collect as they move from course to course. It should be more like gathering kindling, letting students play with matches, encouraging them to take risks and hoping that some of the materials burst into flames and become lifelong interests. (Strong, 2013, para. 2)

Implementing capstone projects that consist of experiential learning is one way we faculty can ignite the *fire* inside our students. Deluca and Braunstein-Mincove (2016) recommended the incorporation of mandatory hands-on learning activities to "help bridge the gap from academic to industry" (p. 9). Birmingham, Neville and Makopoulou (2017) also examined the values of experiential learning. They noted one of the biggest advantages of such opportunities was that students could experience professional life in a controlled setting while also obtaining academic credit. Most collegiate sport management programs offer their students some type of experiential learning opportunity (Masteralexis et al., 2011). Internships and practicums are common culminating capstone activities. Brady, Mahoney, Lovice and Scialabba (2018) explored the value of such experiences. Among the benefits mentioned were (a) providing

students with daily professional experience in a work environment, (b) allowing students to engage in the practical application of the theoretical understanding gained in the classroom, and (c) allowing students to demonstrate their capabilities to a potential employer while gaining invaluable experience prior to fully entering the field.

Background

The design for our students' experience originated in 2019, when the Big Sky Conference (BSC) began hosting its men's and women's basketball tournaments at CenturyLink Arena, a 5300-seat multipurpose arena, in downtown Boise, Idaho. Because the tournaments' location was reasonably close to our Pocatello campus (approximately 240 miles), we reached out to the Director of Championships (DC) for the BSC in December of 2018 to inquire about the possibility of having our students be involved. Feedback was positive, and we worked collectively over the next three months to develop appropriate job assignments and descriptions for our students based on our sport management program's curricula. Our goal was to enhance the students' existing knowledge base in several key areas, especially with the development of sport leadership and management skills. We also wanted to stress the importance of service learning, which has been described as "a form of experiential education where learning occurs through a cycle of action and reflection as students seek to achieve real objectives for the community and deeper understanding and skills for themselves" (Wolpert-Gowron, 2016, para. 1).

Academically, the sport management program (SMP) at Idaho State University (ISU) is housed in the College of Education and within its Department of Human Performance and Sport Studies. Students in our program receive broad-based instruction in general kinesiology-related subjects (e.g., foundations of physical activity and sport, anatomical foundations, movement theory, first aid and sport safety) during their first year in our program. After they complete this foundational core, students advance to a sport management-centered curricula that targets four objectives: (1) an understanding an appreciation of the sport setting (courses target

activity performance techniques, coaching methodology, sport psychology, and sport sociology); (2) the development of sport leadership and management skills (courses target organization and administration of sport programs, sport law, sport facility and event management, sport marketing, and sport communication); (3) an understanding and interpretation of the general business (courses target accounting, human resource management, individual and organizational behavior); and (4) the completion of a 135-hour internship in a sport management setting.

Athletically, ISU is one of eleven members of the BSC, a NCAA Division I athletic conference headquartered in the Salt Lake City, Utah area. Members of the *Big Sky* include schools from eight western states: Arizona, California, Colorado, Idaho, Montana, Oregon, Utah and Washington. Annually, the BSC hosts post-season championship tournaments in all 16 of its sports (seven men's and nine women's) in various pre-determined sites across the conference's geographic footprint.

When we designed our capstone experience, the BSC's DC leaned heavily on our suggestion to utilize the students in areas we felt they were curricularly prepared: risk management, marketing, and logistical operations. We discussed with him previous class assignments the students had engaged in, like conducting a comprehensive risk management assessment at a live sporting event and planning a game-day marketing and creating/delivering promotional activities at an ISU athletics event. We also explained to him the theoretical knowledge and organizational skillsets we felt our students possessed. He created job descriptions based on our recommendations. He gave our students official titles: *Team Liaisons*. While in Boise, the students would report directly to him. Selingo (2016) highlighted the reality that most college students (about 65%) will either *wander* or *straggle* after graduation because they are uncertain about their chosen career path. Those students who become *wanderers* tend to drift through college, while *stragglers* procrastinate the completion of their degree programs. Both groups need mentorship and job exposure (Selingo, 2016). Understanding this, our collective goal was to encourage our students to

experience as many facets of the tournament management experience as possible throughout their week in Boise. We also wanted them to work alongside as many BSC staffers as possible in an effort to glean professional guidance. Thus, we agreed that students would not be limited to a single assignment but would instead rotate jobs throughout the week.

Fourteen students elected to participate in the week-long experience in 2019. That first year, we recruited students from across our SMP rather than from a single class. Twenty-four students participated in 2020 (most were seniors enrolled in our *Sport Facility and Event Management* class), although the experience was cut short when the tournaments were cancelled mid-week due to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. After each year, we understood more about ways we could strengthen the experience for the students, both by preparation inside the classroom and at the venue. Our students' professional demeanor during the experience, too, provided justification for increasing future students' job responsibilities.

We were fortunate that the DC shared our vision for this capstone activity to be primarily *educational* and not just a vehicle for his organization to acquire free labor. As such, he inspired key colleagues, including the BSC's Commissioner, Associate Commissioners, and various school athletic directors to agree to be accessible to the students and amenable to mentoring them throughout the week. It was important to the DC that our students understood the importance of neutrality as a tournament official. Thus, they were forbidden from wearing any of our own university's colors or branded apparel. Instead, they were each provided with two BSC-branded pullovers that were laundered nightly for the students.

We did incur additional cost to facilitate the experience, but we made every attempt not to pass that cost onto our students. Our students traveled a considerable distance to participate and would need lodging. Administrators at the BSC stressed the importance of us adhering to the Conference's *one head, one bed* policy expected of member institutions when traveling with student-athletes. In 2019 and again in 2020, the BSC agreed to provide 50% of the costs related to hotel accommodations and they also

provided the students with meals. Through internal university grants, we secured the remaining amount. Students were responsible for arranging their own transportation to/from Boise. Our university Provost designated the activity as an *official* student academic activity that required travel. Because of this designation, our students qualified to have their class absences excused under the stipulations outlined in the Idaho State University Official Student Absence Policy (2020). Our students were responsible for (a) notifying their other instructors in writing at least two weeks prior to our trip, (b) completing any work missed during their official absence, and (c) making up all examinations that were administered during their official absence. As the trip's sponsoring faculty, we also provided official documentation to those other faculty notifying them of our trip and assuring them of its educational value relative to the students' major.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING

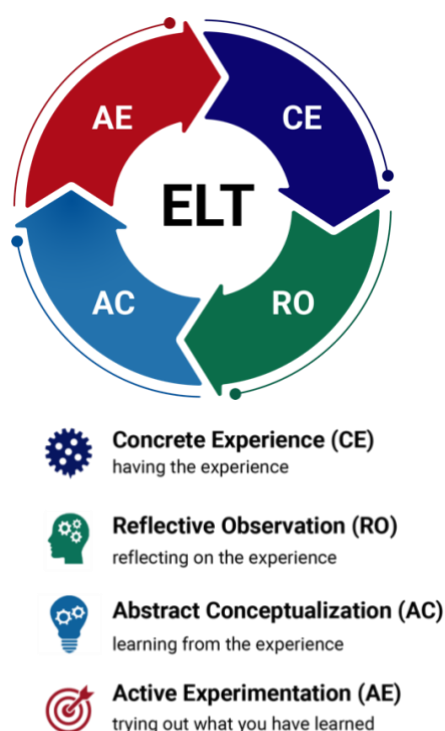
The theoretical foundation for this project is grounded in an understanding of David Kolb's (1984) work on experiential learning. Kolb researched experiential learning extensively in the early 1980s relying heavily on John Dewey's (1910,1938) philosophy of pragmatism, wherein experience is used to solve problems. Additionally, Dewey (1933) wrote of the necessity of reflection as a key component of learning. Similarly, Kurt Lewin's (1948) theory of democratic leadership, which advanced the idea that democracy cannot be imposed on groups but rather must be experienced to be learned---and to exist, provided a foundational influence on Kolb's work. Jean Piaget was another influence. Piaget (1936,1945) developed the concept of knowledge construction (i.e., constructivism) via experiences. Out of his understanding of these theorists' earlier works, Kolb theorized that, "Learning is the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience" (Kolb, 1984, p. 38). His Experiential Learning Theory (ELT) cycle is classified by four stages (*Figure 1*) and four separate learning styles. Students may enter the ELT cycle at any stage. However, in order for experiential learning to result in effective student learning, Kolb said it was essential

for students to progress through all four phases of the cycle (McLeod, 2017). Kurt (2020) later clarified that students might prefer some components over others. For example, while a student may depend heavily on

concrete and reflective experiences, he/she may choose to spend less time on the abstract and active stages (Kurt, 2020).

Figure 1

Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory cycle



Our framework for this project was also influenced by the work of Albert Bandura as ELT bears some similarity to Bandura's Social Learning Theory (SLT). Of interest for this study, Bandura (1986) suggested that learning was a cognitive process that took place in a social context. Bandura (1986) stressed the importance of observing, modeling, and imitating the behaviors and actions of others. Positive and negative reinforcement (which can also be external or internal) of learned behaviors and actions is also important to the learning process. Bandura (1977; 1986; 1997) repeatedly found a student will replicate actions or behavior they believed would lead to a positive response. However, the response would not matter to the student unless it matched the student's individual interests and needs. Lave & Wenger (1991) used SLT to challenge the notion that learning is simply the reception of factual knowledge

Kolb (1984) describes learning styles based on the individuals' stage immersion. Rather than examining concrete experiences by the actions taken, *Diverging* learners (CE and RO stages) tend to assess them from various perspectives. They value feelings and take an interest in others. Individuals who prefer this learning style tend to enjoy tasks such as brainstorming ideas and working collaboratively in groups. *Assimilating* learners (AC and RO stages) emphasize reasoning. Assimilators are able to review the facts and assess the experience as a whole. They tend to enjoy designing experiments and working on projects from start to completion. *Converging* learners (AC and AE stages) enjoy problem solving as an approach to learning. Convergers are able to make decisions and apply their ideas to new experiences. Unlike Divergers, Convergers tend to avoid people and perceptions, choosing instead to find technical solutions. *Accommodating* students (AC and AE stages) are adaptable and intuitive. They tend to use trial and error to guide their experiences, preferring to discover the answers for themselves. They are able to alter their path based on the circumstance and generally have good people skills.

or information. Instead, they contended that students learn best by being part of a team that actively engages in practice rather than by memorization. Central to SLT is the belief that "a person's intentions to learn are engaged and the meaning of learning is configured through the process of becoming a full participant in sociocultural practice" (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 27)

The context described by Bandura (and subsequently by Lave and Wenger) has key similarities to Kolb's learning cycle. First, both theories call for students to learn by doing. Second, both ELT and SLT stress the importance of students being able to recall and apply classroom concepts to real workplace scenarios. Third, both theories cite the value of student reflection (Bandura, 1997) as a key component of learning. Therefore, an understanding of the role of reflection informs our work as well.

Jerome Bruner (1960) added that reflection “is central to all learning” (p. 13) and that the range of reflection varies from the simple to the complex. Experiential learning provides opportunities across the learning cycle to reflect on learning as something of meaning that can then be carried across time, even as new information or perceptions shape one’s future understanding of what is known (Pauline, 2013).

Purpose Statement

We believe that experiential learning can transform the learning process (Kurt, 2020; Kolb, 2015). Thus, the purpose of this paper is to describe how a week-long capstone experience at a NCAA championship event, the 2021 Big Sky Conference’s Men’s and Women’s Basketball Tournaments, helped to produce optimal learning outcomes for a group of undergraduate sport management students. Using Kolb’s Experiential Learning Theory (ELT) as a framework for understanding, we aim to show how our students benefitted in multiple ways: through the contextual application of existing knowledge, through the acquisition of new knowledge, by experimenting with new knowledge, and from a unique opportunity for professional networking.

METHODS

Participants and Sampling

As in previous years, senior sport management students from Idaho State University were invited to take part. Because of the ongoing pandemic, restrictive attendance guidelines, and the need to implement additional physical distancing precautions, only 10 students were allowed to participate in 2021. Students were selected based on (a) their academic status as a senior in the undergraduate SMP at ISU, (b) the students’ career interest to work in collegiate athletics, (c) faculty recommendation, and (d) the students’ availability to travel to the event location (approximately 250 miles from our campus) and work throughout the entire week. Selecting students who had already fulfilled a majority of their course curricula was key to ensure students had a solid theoretical foundation in sport management.

Procedures

As *Team Liaisons*, our students were tasked with serving as team hosts, assisting with risk management and in-game marketing and promotions, and media relations. Instructionally, we used our *Sport Facilities and Event Management* class (a senior-level class) to prepare the students for this experience. Job descriptions already existed, but they did need to be tweaked for 2021. We knew it would be particularly challenging given the fluidity of COVID-19 and the NCAA’s guidelines on creating a safe sport environment amidst the global pandemic. The DC worked closely with his supervisors to create a plan to use our students. That plan adhered to both the NCAA’s guidelines and those recommendations set forth by the BSC’s *Health and Safety Committee*. Ticket sales at the tournaments were limited to only parents or direct family members of participating student-athletes. Therefore, some job duties that our students had previously performed, like those related to external marketing and fan engagement, were eliminated. The students inherited other tasks, like cleaning and disinfecting team areas. Because our participation number was forced to be smaller in 2021, our students would be challenged on some job assignments (like ushering teams and managing post-game press conferences) to work independently rather than in pairs or small groups like they had been able to do in years past.

To combat role ambiguity, training for our students began six weeks prior to the actual event. When possible, we contextualized textbook readings and classroom discussion in the *Sport Facilities and Event Management* class by relating it to NCAA tournament operations. For example, in class we reviewed the importance of sponsorships. Learning objectives called for the students to be able to define and distinguish between different levels of sponsorship, determine what a good sponsorship fit might be, write sponsorship proposal letters, and create a sponsorship agreement. While our students’ assignments were simply for practice, we used the tournaments as a catalyst. The lessons culminated when BSC administrators shared insight about their process of securing sponsorships for the basketball tournaments. They even shared their actual

sponsorship agreements with our students. We also invited the marketing director of the tournament's title sponsor to address the class and explain to them what his organization was hoping to gain from the partnership. While in Boise, our students were able to witness the activation strategies.

Three weeks prior to the tournaments, five junior and senior administrators at the BSC, including the DC and Senior Woman Administrator, joined our class via *Zoom*. The goal of this videoconference was to introduce the students to the organizational hierarchy of the BSC and to familiarize the students with the job duties of each professional. Students were provided with a brief history of the BSC, its role in the NCAA governance process, information relative to the conference championship site selection process (including how Boise was selected as the host site for basketball), and logistics surrounding championship operations (e.g., venue selection and preparation). We provided the students with a *Team Liaison Manual*. Students were assigned to review the manual in preparation for their jobs in Boise. Two weeks prior to our trip, the DC hosted a mandatory in-service for our students. He reviewed, in detail, the students' job descriptions and the specific duties they would be expected to perform. Items such as appropriate dress, time demands, behavioral expectations and COVID-19 protocols were also addressed. The in-service lasted two hours. A week prior to departure, students were provided their hotel and room assignments. Students were expected to arrive in Boise, the tournaments' site, by noon on Sunday, the day before the women's tournament started, to assist with court and facility setup and facility/community branding. They were required to test negative for COVID-19 prior to departure.

Over the course of the seven consecutive days our students were in Boise, they assisted with the management of 20 games. On average, each student worked 12-hour days. Because the men's and women's tournaments took place at the same facility, a single day's work schedule was as long as 18 hours, with as many as six games taking place on a single day. Like other sport managers across the NCAA, our students were charged with taking proactive measures to mitigate the impact and spread of the spread of the COVID-19 virus. The BSC designated our

students as *Tier Two* staff members (a NCAA designation), meaning they would come in close contact with *Tier One* individuals (players, coaches and select administrators) and would be expected to maintain reasonable physical distance and wear face coverings at all times. Like the participating student-athletes and coaches, our students were tested daily for the COVID-19 virus. If a student were to test positive (none did), he/she would be quarantined in a separate hotel room until he/she was able to return home. At the conclusion of each workday, the DC huddled with the students collectively to review discuss any incidents or problems that may have occurred and offer the students' guidance. Students were also given their job assignments for the next day.

While we, as faculty, attended the tournaments with our students in 2019 and 2020 in a supervisory role, we were unable to attend in 2021 due to pandemic-related restrictions. The students knew the DC was their *boss* for the week and they were responsible for reporting directly to him. We communicated daily with our students and with the DC by phone and by email to ensure the students were meeting expectations. We also relied on one of our graduate students in Athletic Administration to supervise the students' behavior in our absence. She had previously participated in the experience as an undergraduate student and was completing a semester-long internship with the BSC, so we were comfortable with her in that leadership role.

Because of limited resources caused by the pandemic (including loss of revenue caused by pandemic-related restrictions on ticket sales at the tournaments), the BSC was unable to provide the amount of funding we received the first two years of our involvement. The Dean of our College of Education (COE) felt the educational value of the experience warranted the additional expense and she agreed the COE would cover approximately 70% of the hotel costs. The BSC was able to cover the remaining amount, and they again provided the students with their meals and with BSC-branded apparel.

Data Collection

Reflective practice allows experience to be converted into learning (Dewey, 1933; Knowles et al., 2014). It can help students become more self-aware and feel more comfortable addressing challenging situations (Anderson et al., 2004). Pauline (2013) also asserted the value of reflective assignments into the experiential learning process. She stated the “students developed the ability to progress from ‘noticing’ or ‘making sense’ to ‘making meaning’ from their experiences” (p. 10). Tacit knowledge, or that which a student learns through experience rather than traditional academic means delivered in the classroom setting, is bettered by reflective activities because it can help students alter future behavior (Cropley et al., 2010).

During the week of the tournaments, we asked our sport management students (SMS) to journal about their experiences. Additionally, after the tournaments ended, we asked them to complete a survey as an additional way to reflect upon their experiences. In the survey, we asked our students to summarize, (a) what they learned from engaging in the experience, (b) how their sport management/athletic administration courses had prepared them for the experience, (c) any challenges they encountered, (d) the opportunity they had for professional networking, and (e) if and how the experience reinforced their desire to work in the sport management industry. Additionally, we sought feedback from the BSC administrators who supervised our students at the event. We wanted to know how well the students performed their job duties, the value of their contribution in terms of the overall success of the championship event, and we wanted to know their thoughts on how we, as faculty, could improve our preparation of students who choose to engage in the experience in the future.

Data Analysis

Because our approach to this study was qualitative, we used a process of open coding to reduce the amount of data we acquired through the students’ reflections and from the post-event survey (Sang & Sitko, 2015). Open coding has been described by Strauss and Corbin (1990) as a necessary first step. Hence, our goal here was to sift through the dozens

of pages of raw data we had obtained and condense it into manageable chunks of useful information. We followed up the open coding process with axial coding. Axial coding calls for researchers to investigate the relationships that exist amongst concepts and categories (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1990;). To do this, we grouped our students’ responses according to their applicability to three pre-determined (a priori) themes consistent with Kolb’s theory: (a) contextual application of existing knowledge, (b) acquisition of new knowledge, and (c) experimenting with new knowledge. A fourth theme, (c) professional networking, was added a posteriori. While it may not be directly related to Kolb’s work, socialization and networking has been noted by many other scholars as a significant benefit of experiential learning (Bandura, 1997; Deluca & Fornatora, 2020; Odio et al., 2014; Sattler & Aichen, 2021). As we read (and re-read) the students’ reflections and responses, we highlighted remarks we felt provided evidence of each of those themes. Biddle, Markland, Gilbourne, Chatzisarantis, and Sparks (2001) suggested that readers be provided with an opportunity to evaluate and interpret interview data in a way that is most meaningful to them. Therefore, the findings of this study are presented using direct quotations and are parsed using theoretical descriptions of each theme.

RESULTS

Contextual Application of Existing Knowledge

Kolb (1984) believed that a person could not learn simply by observing or reading. Instead, the person must be fully engrossed in the activity as a hands-on participant. This is the crux of Kolb’s *Concrete Experience (CE)* stage. Kolb (1984) said that in order to maximize the effectiveness of the *Concrete Experience* stage, students must be able to involve themselves fully, openly, and without bias in new experiences. Harris (2019) added the importance of *contextually rich* concrete experiences. He wrote, “experiential learning is conceptualized by educators and scholars as a process in which learners are immersed in learning experiences that contain the fullest contextual information possible” (p. 1066).

Our students learned about their job expectations before going to Boise, and once at the

venue, they demonstrated their readiness. When they arrived at the venue a day prior to the start of the tournaments, they were issued work credentials and then given a tour of the facility so that they could orient to the layout. After this brief orientation, our students helped to transform the venue into a basketball facility (it is typically used for hockey during winter months) by “setting up and putting down court tape” (SMS-2), organizing the locker rooms and team rooms, sectioning off spectator areas for each team, and preparing tournament pass lists.

Experiential learning works best when it provides students with the opportunity to apply what they know (Kolb, 1984; Kurt, 2020). Throughout the week, ours were expected to use their *Sports Law* class training to “identify and minimize any potential risks” (SMS-9) at the venue. Duties ranged from clearing court debris, such as wiping up any wet spots or moisture on the court or sweeping the court floor, to locker room and courtside security. One student understood the magnitude of his responsibility saying, “we worked as a team to provide the highest level of safety for staff, athletes, and coaches” (SMS-3). Content taught in our SMP’s *Sport Marketing* class also was recognized. Students noted their duties to help brand the courts with BSC and sponsor logos (SMS-1; SMS-2; SMS-4; SMS-6; SMS-8). Theming the arena as a championship venue had a notable impact on the students. The BSC even provided each student with Big Sky-branded apparel to wear each day. This was especially exciting for our students as it reinforced their role as members of the BSC’s team (not as students). Our students also reported being actively involved with “helping with in-game promotions” (SMS-2), with “writing game scripts” (SMS-7), and by “putting signs up around town” (SMS-4). They also practiced customer service, meeting and escorting teams to their locker rooms or team area once they arrived at the facility. Team liaisons continued to serve as the primary point of contact for each school’s Director of Basketball Operations throughout the week, to assist with any team needs that arose. Our students took initiative to implement green strategies, too, by setting up recycling stations for disposal of plastic bottles.

Because of COVID-19, the need for regular and prompt cleaning and disinfecting of surfaces was critical. It was a duty charged to our students, and they understood its importance and its relevance to overall risk management. They also understood the importance of their jobs in relation to the flow of the overall event, like sanitizing the fan seating areas before and after each game. SMS-7 acknowledged, “It was important that I had everything on my end completed in a timely manner because I had other people relying on me to do so.”

Often, our students described some of their jobs as “little” (SMS-1; SMS-2; SMS-3; SMS-4; SMS-8), but that did not mean our students viewed them as unimportant. SMS-5 stressed this saying, “every role you play in an event is valuable.” Others agreed. SMS-3 addressed the importance of the “little things:”

I loved being able to pay attention to details of wiping off the backboards, putting the spotlight on the players during the player introductions, getting the players to the locker rooms and filling up the fridges with Gatorades. They may be little things, but I saw that they are important things. It all just made me appreciate this industry.

SMS-4 was impressed with the variety of work he was asked to do and how that work contributed to the overall success of the tournaments:

We learned a lot about the little tasks that need to be done at the tournament. I had several different roles [throughout the week: team liaison, ball person, stats assistant, stats runner, and I even helped with ticketing. We helped stock fridges and set up signage As a stats assistant and stats runner, I was able to learn more about the analysis of a game. There were a ton of little details that helped make the tournament so great and flow smoothly.

Experiential learning bridges the gap between theory and practice (Bower, 2013; Diacin, 2018). Our students were able to see first-hand how their curriculum prepared them to be sport managers.

Students commented most on the practical application of information they acquired in their *Sport Facility and Event Management* course.

This experience really helped me to understand what we talked about in the classroom. For example, in my Facilities class last week, we were talking about organizational culture and job stress. Even though I was only a part of the Big Sky team for a week as a nonstandard worker, they made me feel like I was an important part. We learned in class that you need to really appreciate your volunteers. I was always treated with respect. They seemed genuinely thankful for the work I did. I felt like a part of the team. (SMS-5)

Within Kolb's *Reflective Observation (RO)* stage, students are allowed to note any inconsistencies between experiences and understanding (Kolb, 1984; McLeod, 2017;). The goal of this stage is for the student to recognize any inconsistencies that might exist in their knowledge and the experience and to personally review those situations and find meaning. Sato and Laughlin (2018) summarized the process of learning and the value of reflection in that process:

Foundational experiences provide opportunities for observation and reflection. Reflection leads to new ideas or modification of old ideas. Changing ideas lead to new implications and form the basis for experimentation. The process of actively testing ideas through experimentation creates new experiences and the cycle continues. Ultimately, the continual process of experience, reflection, thought, and action creates new knowledge.

Our students were able to apply existing knowledge, but they also saw the value in how that application could lead to more knowledge. SMS-1 wrote, "I learned so much this week. I learned that a lot more things go on behind the scenes than what I originally thought." SMS-3 said he had worked at "a lot" of sport events previously and even completed a

135-hour internship in a Division I athletic department, but that those experiences paled in comparison to the immersive experience he received in Boise. He wrote about being involved in "every aspect" of tournament management and seeing things from "a totally different perspective." He said the week-long experience reaffirmed his career choice. Summarizing the experience, he reflected, "I learned that I absolutely love college athletics. I have seen that from my other internship experiences, but this was my first opportunity to [work in] college athletics for 7 straight days for 15-18 hours a day."

Acquisition of New Knowledge

Within the *Abstract Conceptualization (AC)* stage, "reflection gives rise to a new idea, or a modification of an existing abstract concept" (McLeod, 2017). In this stage, the learner develops theories to explain their experiences. Recurring themes and problems give birth to new ideas and new solutions. SMS-7 understood the value of not always following a template. He wrote, "when you are in the thick of it you get to learn from trial and error." SMS-3 was another who recognized how he had developed additional preparedness:

As great as learning in a classroom is, I have learned that it is difficult to know exactly how everything in [managing] athletics until you are participating in it. I was able to see why communication skills were so important between both the marketing side of things with fans, as well as with our interactions between staff and players. I was also able to see how important getting facilities ready and putting everything in the right place. I recognized how important good organizational management skills were as well, as everyone around was able to instruct us effectively and allowed to gain as much experience as possible with the tasks at hand. (SMS-3)

Deluca and Fornatora (2020) studied experiential learning in relation to the perceptions of students. They found the experiences to be "eye opening" (p. 146) because they were exposed to areas they

previously had not considered. Though they knew in advance what their work expectations would be, our students were not prepared for the physical and mental exhaustion they would experience. With 20 games spread across six days, the students experienced “long days and sleepless nights” (SMS-4). After one 16-hour day, SMS-7 wrote that he was proud of himself and his classmates because even with 16-hour workdays, they had “worked tirelessly to get everything done that needed to get done” that day. At the end of the week and feeling “exhausted,” SMS-2 said by working so many hours, she realized “burnout in this industry is real.” SMS-3 said he learned to cope with his exhaustion by “mak[ing] sure that I did everything I could to stay involved in the day and never think about how long I had worked, but rather look forward to the next task that I could be a part of.” SMS-5 had her own way of dealing with the long days. She wrote,

In the middle [of the week] when we had long days, I felt like I had moments of growth where I was exhausted and at times having a hard time dealing with my peers just because we had been together so much, but I was able to bring it back in and look at the bright side.

Physical exhaustion was experienced by many of our students, result for many, but the excitement of the opportunity still trumped being tired:

Normally I do not even look forward to an 8-hour workday with whatever job I do and that is with getting paid as well, this was unpaid, and we worked ridiculously long days, my feet were sore, and I loved every second I got to be a part of it. (SMS-3)

Experimenting with New Knowledge

Within Kolb’s *Active Experimentation (AE)* stage, the student applies their ideas to the world around them to see what happens (Kolb, 1984; McLeod, 2017). It is in this stage that learners take risks and implement their theories. By doing so, they find new ways to improve their skills and knowledge base. SMS-10 acknowledged that he “learned how to think on [his] feet and problem solve on how to provide a

better experience for coaches and student-athletes.” Bandura (1997) advised that students who have opportunities to engage in applied learning or problem-solving in their university education may develop increased levels of self-efficacy, too. This, in turn, can lead to increased motivation. SMS-6 said she had to be a “ready learner” with every task she was given. A couple of our students commented on not having a significant amount of experience with the sport of basketball, in particular. They admitted to being “a little uncomfortable at first” (SMS-2) assisting with game statistics or acting as the officials’ time out coordinator but that “everyone helped [him] figure out how to do those positions” (SMS-5). A student assisting with in-game promotions recalled, “with a lot of giveaways available, I had to be very strategic on how to give them away . . . but I was able to find a way to do this, and it created an even more fun fan environment towards the end of the week” (SMS-7). COVID-19 protocols were established, but the fluidity of various circumstances necessitated adaptations, at times. When one winning team did not vacate their locker room on schedule after their game, it resulted in that team missing its scheduled COVID testing time. Ensuring the teams were escorted to the test location on time was one of our students’ obligations. Reacting to the situation, SMS-9 said he had to react quickly with a solution so that two teams “didn’t run into each other at testing.” He said he communicated by radio with a test site coordinator and elected to stage the team in an adjacent room until the test site was cleared.

Dealing with human emotion was an unexpected challenge for several of our students. SMS-9 explained that towards the end of the men’s tournament, “we had some players and coaches break down and I found it hard to communicate at times with them.” SMS-6 added, “I found it challenging when I would see athletes and coaches crying after their losses. As a neutral party, I did not really know how to help or if I really could.” One of our student’s jobs was to find and escort coaches and specific players to media room immediately after games. This particular student also had to ensure locker rooms were cleared quickly so that they could be cleaned for the next team coming in. SMS-4 wrote

about a particularly challenging situation he encountered:

One of the last few games a student athlete had a mentally tough time and we could hear screaming and punching of walls in the locker room. This athlete and basketball staff were emotional, and I did not know how to handle the situation at first but then I assessed the situation and came up with a plan and was able to be a part of de-escalating the situation and get the team and coaches where they needed to be.

Some students said they got emotionally invested, too. SMS-5 said watching the “highs and lows of teams” made being a team liaison “more than a job.” Others agreed. Several cited the thrill of watching the respective champions cut down the nets as a highlight. “Knowing we played a part in that,” SMS-8 said, “made it feel like we had won, too.”

Professional Networking

Bandura (1997) suggested that learning was a cognitive process that took place in a social context. Additionally, relationship building is a key outcome of experiential learning (Deluca & Fornatora, 2020). Gauthier (2018) also encouraged college sport management students to seek volunteer opportunities and to build professional networks.

Our students were given an unprecedented opportunity to network with industry professionals from eight western states. The opportunity was not lost on our students. Each of them wrote about their networking experiences and how they expected the relationships they built to extend beyond Boise. Nearly every student name-dropped while retelling about an inspirational personal conversation they had with junior and senior level administrators and coaches from across the conference. “I asked them questions and tried to pick their brain as much as I could just to be able to gain any knowledge that could be valuable to me in the sports industry,” SMS-10 reflected. A special panel discussion organized by the DC specifically for our students on the final day was mentioned as a highlight for most students. The panel offered advice to our students on how to break

through and succeed in the sports industry. Students commented on how special it was to hear from the Conference Commissioner, athletic directors, and other BSC and school administrators. Two students (SMS-3 and SMS-4) recounted how they sat with one school athletic director (Montana State University’s) and “engaged in a conversation with him for about a half hour just picking his brain.” The students both said the athletic director gave them his personal contact information and encouraged them to stay in touch. He reportedly also told the students to “give him a call” when they were ready for a job and if he did not have a place for them at his school, he would use his connections to help them “land a job” (SMS-3) elsewhere. Students were thrilled to be able to add their new mentors on their *LinkedIn* page, too (students had to set up a *LinkedIn* page in their *Senior Capstone* class). Our students were honored to be invited to a post-event social hosted by the Conference. “It was really fun to be able to connect with the Big Sky Conference staff and to be able to let our hair down a little bit and get to know them on a more personal level after working with them for a whole week,” SMS-6 wrote.

DISCUSSION

Our current study complements the current body of literature as it relates to the value of experiential learning. Young, Chung, Hoffman and Bronkema (2017) found experiences like ours helped students to develop critical thinking and communication skills, learn problem-solving, and encouraged team building. Experiences like this have also been shown to help students “maximize professional development, build professional networks, and gain real-world experience in the industry” (Brady et al., 2018, p. 36). Like other students in other studies, our students could actively apply the knowledge they acquired in the classroom to practical situations (Diacin, 2018). As a result, they are more likely to retain that knowledge and transfer it to similar situations (Kolb, 1984). Also, as Pauline (2013) suggested would happen, they gained self-confidence. Because our students reflected on instances in which they were expected to apply management theory to address fluid situations appropriately and independently, we are confident

that they actively engaged in all four stages of the ELT cycle: Experiencing, Reflecting, Conceptualizing and Experimenting.

Kolb (1984) said that if students are to be effective learners, they must touch all four bases of the learning cycle. First, students must be able to involve themselves fully, openly, and without bias in new experiences. Second, they must be able to reflect on and observe their experiences from many perspectives. Third, they must be able to create concepts that integrate their observations into logically sound theories. Fourth, they must be able to use these theories to make decisions and solve problems. Through their reflections, we see clear evidence of each of our students advancing through the ELT cycle. Divergers expressed comfort observing others, gathering information and then modeling those practices. For example, several students noted excitement when helping to the transformation of the championship venue. This included following the DC's directions on how and where to lay down court tape and place sponsor logos in preparation for the tournament. Expressing satisfaction about being part of the successful completion of the tournament (i.e., being a part of a winning team) was common. Thus, connecting to the experience on an emotional level was apparent. Assimilators were more logical. They watched, sought clear explanations, processed what they learned and designed systematic approaches. Assimilators have been known to crave the most challenging assignments (Kolb, 1984). SMS-7 gushed about his role in writing game scripts and working in the high stress environment of the television broadcast team's. Convergors thrived on the opportunity to put their own theories into practice, often using a trial-and-error approach to problem solving. SMS-4, SMS-6 and SMS-9 all wrote about uncomfortable encounters where coaches and student-athletes were "crying" or "screaming and punching walls" following team losses. Kolb (1984) warned that Convergors would find emotional experiences like these as challenging. Finally, Accommodators took pride in being able to think on their feet and put their skills into practice. As team hosts, some students recounted instances they had to react quickly. SMS-9 talked about how he was forced to problem solve when a team did not vacate their

locker room quickly enough and threw staff and other teams off schedule. Accommodators assumed leadership roles. They showed initiative and did not need to wait for someone to tell them what to do. For example, SMS-3 and SMS-6 both volunteered for additional duties outside their written job description despite their fatigue. Often, this meant taking risks, but the reward of seeing real time results was more than satisfying.

Activities like our capstone project are critical to the learning process. Ours proved to be an impressive outlet for professional networking, as well. The Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) has adopted recommendations made by Kuh (2008) regarding high impact teaching and learning practices. Such practices are purported to increase rates of student retention and student engagement amongst college students (AAC&U, n.d.). Among the recommendations are service learning or community-based learning activities. AAC&U (n.d.) summarized this instructional approach:

In these programs, field-based "experiential learning" with community partners is an instructional strategy—and often a required part of the course. The idea is to give students direct experience with issues they are studying in the curriculum and with ongoing efforts to analyze and solve problems in the community. A key element in these programs is the opportunity students have to both apply what they are learning in real-world settings and reflect in a classroom setting on their service experiences. These programs model the idea that giving something back to the community is an important college outcome, and that working with community partners is good preparation for citizenship, work, and life (para. 11).

We feel fortunate to have found such a solid community partner for our students, ones that truly cared about our student outcomes. We are also pleased that our students embraced the service-learning component of this experience.

Throughout the literature we were inundated with examples of experiential learning as a critical

component of sport management education. This is partly true because the job market is so highly competitive (Lower-Hoppe et al., 2019; Southall et al., 2003). Already, our capstone experience has produced measurable results. A current graduate student who took part in the Boise experience in 2019 and 2020 was chosen for a prestigious internship at Super Bowl LV. Out of 600 applicants, he was one of 40 chosen to go to Tampa. He credited his experience working for the *Big Sky* as an instrumental factor in his ability to land the highly sought-after job:

What really helped me land this internship was my willingness to volunteer at the Big Sky Tournament. It gave me experience working a large-scale championship event. It also showed the ones overseeing the Super Bowl that I was willing to do what it takes to achieve my career goals in this industry. (T. Harmon, personal communication, April 15, 2021)

Evidence from student reflections, survey responses, student assessments and assures us of the worthiness of this experience. Solicited and unsolicited feedback from BSC leaders in 2021 was also positive. Our students were commended for being “hard working” and “personable” (T. Singletary, personal communication, March 19, 2021). Even the Commissioner of the BSC took note of the students’ work saying, our students were “a tremendous help” and that his organization “couldn’t have done it (sic) without them!” (T. Wistrick, personal communication, March 19, 2021). The year was particularly challenging given the uncertainties surrounding COVID-19. That forced our students to be flexible and adapt to evolving needs. They rose to the occasion. The BSC’s Senior Associate Commissioner wrote us this:

The crew was amazing this year. I love this partnership so much. I told them all they were part of something that the league has never had to do before and hopefully will never have to do again: We played 20 games in six days in the middle of a global pandemic. They can be proud of that for the rest of their

lives. (J. Kasper, personal communication, March 19, 2021).

The most rewarding feedback came from the BSC’s administrator overseeing student-athlete safety:

Let me tell you – I have worked with so many students over the years and I will say this group was so refreshing!!!! I have been really down on students and their teachability, work ethic etc. This group gave me hope for the future. They were the best we have ever had, and I didn’t hear one complaint. They worked so hard on a couple of long days – Wednesday started at 6:30am and we didn’t end until midnight – they got to see the real side of Athletics. They also knew boundaries and stayed in their lane. They were fantastic. I think this was a great experience for them as well as us old guys. You are doing so many things right and it is reflected in your students! (L. Mattice, personal communication, March 19, 2021).

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In his book, *The Ultimate Guide to Getting Hired in College Sports*, Gauthier (2018) suggested that “breaking into the business of college sports requires passion for sports, a strong work ethic, sacrifices, and maybe a little luck” (p. 24). Working with the BSC has undoubtedly exposed our students to each of these things.

Our evidence here supports the work of Odio, Sagas and Kerwin (2014), who highlighted the symbiotic value of partnerships like this amongst all parties involved (e.g., the organization sponsoring the internship, the student intern, and the academic institution). Following the guidance of AAC&U, our SMP aims to continue seeking out and partnering with external groups in an effort to provide our students with additional experiential learning projects. We are confident in our SMP’s ability to prepare top-notch, highly qualified professionals in our field.

We encourage other SMP faculty to seek out experiential opportunities like we had. We realize

that many SMPs across the country are offering similar experiential learning activities utilizing their own university athletic departments. We have found these activities to be valuable, too. But for us, those types of on-campus experiences have paled in comparison to that which our students experienced in Boise. Working for a NCAA, Division I athletic conference at one of their major championships exposed our students to a whole-new-level of sport management, one we simply cannot find in or near our campus town of Pocatello. The pride they felt being part of the BSC team and the tacit knowledge they acquired about NCAA operations was profound. We found the leaders of the BSC to be extremely excited about having our students assist them. BSC staff were not just looking to get volunteers, they truly sought to mentor our students for the week in Boise and beyond.

The instructional commitment of an experience like this is time consuming and challenging, as Deluca and Fornatora (2020) warned it would be. We worked closely with administrators from the BSC for years to fine tune the student experience. Along the way, the BSC staff explained to us their needs, and we committed time in the classroom to ensure our students were prepared. We also spent time searching for and soliciting funding opportunities to make this experience financially feasible for our students. Being able to cover the hotel and meal costs associated the travel was a key part in us being successful in attracting student participants.

We do offer recommendations for those looking to secure similar opportunities. First, it may be easier for other SMP faculty to choose learning sites that are more accessible to their students. Our students were forced to travel a considerable distance and miss other important classes in the process. Some of our seniors were simply unable to make this commitment. While choosing a closer site would be an easier approach, we would not change our approach. We believe traveling to a championship activity away from our campus and working with industry professionals outside our community presented benefits we would not have reaped elsewhere. Our students were excited about being part of a NCAA championship event, and BSC leaders reminded them frequently just how big of a deal that

was. Second, consider how you schedule your students. Our students' workdays were long and grueling, but they were also extremely valuable, and they accurately reflected what sport management professionals regularly experience. We believe our complete immersion approach (i.e., work all day for the entire week) was important to our students' overall understanding of event management. We also felt exposing them to a myriad of job tasks throughout the week rather than having them focus on only one area stimulated their progress through all four phases of Kolb's experiential learning cycle. Therefore, we would not recommend simple rotational block scheduling of students, and we would not recommend having them specialize in one area (e.g., marketing). Finally, consider the financial implications. Sending a classroom full of students across the state (region/country) can be extremely expensive. Because of inflated hotel costs, we incurred about \$6,000 worth of expenses in 2021. We were fortunate to find funding, but internal grants do not offer long-term project sustainability. We are hoping the BSC will continue to find value and fund the partnership in its entirety in the future. However, seeking our own external sponsorship might become a necessity with our hope to continue with this capstone experience.

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