

## **Engaging Students Beyond Just the Experience: Integrating Reflection Learning Into Sport Event Management**

**Gina Pauline**  
Syracuse University

Sport management as an academic discipline requires a balance of theory and practice through endowing students with knowledge, critical thinking skills, and expertise (Cuneen & Parks, 1997). Professionals call for students being “prepared” for the demands of the sport industry through the acquisition of a quality education and a significant amount of hands-on experience before entering the work force. Researchers have recommended utilizing experiential pedagogical strategies to not only provide the hands-on engagement but also to challenge students to use their knowledge for the public good (e.g., Bruening, Madsen, Evanovich, & Fuller, 2010; Chalip, 2006; McKelvey & Southall, 2008; Pauline & Pauline, 2008). It also supports the recent trend to educate students in the world beyond the confines of the college campus. Boyer (1996) noted engaging outside the confines of campus will not only give students hands on experience but also, cultivate a student’s cognitive and moral development, which is often underestimated in higher education.

Specific to sport management, the Sport Management Program Review Council, as well as the Commission on Sport Management Accreditation (COSMA), has identified experiential learning projects as a critical element in student preparation for sport industry careers (COSMA, 2012; McKelvey & Southall, 2008). While sport management educators have embraced the concept, not enough emphasis has been placed on fostering the student’s cognitive development through experiential learning. This may be due to the lack of resources available for educators to use as a template within sport management. Beyond the student development, forces within higher education have created an environment where assessment measures and evaluation tools are becoming more vital, further supporting the need to measure the outcomes from engaged pedagogical techniques (Williams & Colles, 2009). In bridging the call for assessment measurements along with the limited availability of resources required to support experiential pedagogical strategies, the purpose of this article was (a) to describe a sport management experiential learning process that incorporates reflective learning within the context of a sport event management course; and (b) to investigate the learning outcomes utilizing this process.

---

Pauline is with the Department of Sport Management, Syracuse University, Syracuse, NY.

### **Literature Review**

From an epistemological perspective, experiential learning aligns with constructivism, which posits that learners construct meaning from their experiences (Doolittle & Camp, 1999). John Dewey is arguably the father of experiential learning. A central tenet to his philosophy was, “... amid all uncertainties there is one permanent frame of reference: the connection between education and personal experience” (Dewey, 1938, p.25). Experiential learning has long been recognized as an effective pedagogical strategy, allowing students the opportunity to practice a skill set in a real-world environment, thus advancing their knowledge in a discipline (Dewey, 1938). An examination of literature characterizes experiential learning in two ways. The first set of theories focuses on the process of experiential learning (Dewey, 1938; Kolb, 1984); the second set of theories relates to the context in which experiential learning takes place (Dale, 1946; Joplin, 1981). Rogers (1969) asserted the following five elements are present in experiential learning: (a) direct, personal involvement, (b) learner initiation, (c) pervasiveness, (d) learner evaluation, and (e) the essence is meaning. Kolb (1984), inspired by the work of theorists such as Lewin, Dewey, and Piaget, proposed a four stage cyclical model for experiential learning, whereby experience is transformed through reflection into knowledge and learning. Kolb’s experiential learning model is presented in *Figure 1*. Highlighted in this model are two

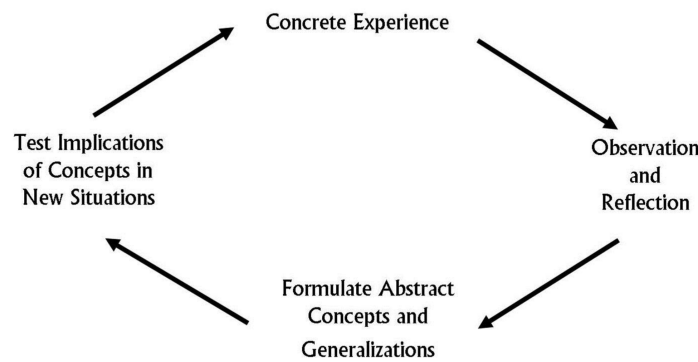


Figure 1 — Kolb's Experiential Learning Model

complimentary dimensions: grasping information and then transforming that information (Kolb, 1984). Kolb asserted that the learning process can begin at any stage. In the “concrete experience” stage, the learner has direct interaction with the phenomenon being studied. Following the model, the next stage is “reflective observation,” where learners reflect on what they experienced. During this stage, information is transformed through intention. Kolb describes intention as a cognitive process in which the learner mentally breaks apart the experience and internalizes the information. During the “abstract conceptualization” stage, learners grasp the information through comprehension by forming rules, generalizations, or hypotheses about the phenomenon being studied. Like the previous stage, this stage is cognitive in nature and can occur in the physical absence of the phenomenon. The final stage is “active experimentation,” which is characterized by the learner testing the rules, generalizations, or hypotheses formed in the previous stage. Kolb noted that during this stage information is transformed by extension, which again involves direct interaction with the phenomenon.

Examining the literature within experiential learning, specifically the work of Kolb, and more recent work, reflection is a critical element in a student's learning experience (Ash & Clayton, 2004; Kolb, 1984). However, the value and understanding of reflection to experiential learning is limited (Ash & Clayton, 2009). Dewey (1938), one of the early champions of experiential learning, provided a strong foundation for reconceptualizing reflection, defining it as the “active, persistent and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it and the further conclusions to which it tends” (p. 6). When reflection is used appropriately, it can *generate* learning, *deepen* learning, and *document* learning, producing tangible expressions of new understandings for evaluation (Ash & Clayton, 2009). Actively and continuously reflecting on experiences facilitates learning, and an experience that is not reflected upon can result in unrealized learning. The more rigorous the reflection, in experiential learning the better the learning outcomes (Eyler & Giles,

1999). Reflection can be generated through the utilization of strategies such as: critical feedback, questioning, critiques, guided exercises, and suggestions from other students (Rando & Menges, 1991). Ash and Clayton (2009) developed the DEAL model for critical reflection to assist with not only encouraging student learning but also development. The DEAL model consisted of three sequential steps: (a) description of experiences in an objective and detailed manner; (b) examination of those experiences in light of specific learning goals or objectives; and (c) articulation of learning, including goals for future action that can then be taken forward into the next experience for improved practice and further refinement of learning. Within their model, Ash and Clayton (2009) provided the specific student prompts that should be given to guide higher order reasoning and critical thinking. The structure of the model allows it to be applicable to settings across various disciplines including sport management.

Specific to sport management, while the necessary curriculum has been defined by accrediting bodies such as the Commission on Sport Management Accreditation (COSMA), educators have been called upon to integrate experiential learning (Spence, Hess, McDonald, & Sheehan, 2009). Petersen and Pierce (2009) noted that experiential learning creates a strong link between sport organizations and the academic curriculum while simultaneously providing students with highly valued experiences by those making hiring decisions. Course projects designed through this teaching methodology have been noted in content areas such as sport marketing (Pauline & Pauline, 2008), sales (Irwin, Southall, & Sutton, 2007; McKelvey & Southall, 2008; Pierce & Petersen, 2010), and event management (Walker & Lim, 2007).

As experiential learning has been integrated into sport management, researchers have presented models for engaged learning. Southall et al. (2003) used the work of Kolb's experiential learning cycle to create the meta-discrete learning model. The model synthesized theory into practice for internships and practica within sport management. The purpose was to connect the academy with the sport industry for student engagement; however, it did not go beyond describing the roles of each of the

stakeholders (e.g., practitioner, faculty member, student). Southall et al.'s (2003) work was later applied to the Pentagon of Sports Sales Training (PSST) model developed by Irwin et al., (2007). The PSST model deconstructed the "arbitrary and unnecessary" disconnect between sport industry practitioners and faculty members by having practitioners serve as instructional leaders alongside the faculty member. Furthering the framework, Pauline and Pauline (2008) elaborated the process within the context of sport sponsorship activation by not only showing the connection between the students, client, athletic department, and sponsor but also, describing the academic project components through a step by step process. Pauline et al. (2008) also discussed the specific benefits for each of the stakeholders involved in the learning experience.

Within each of the aforementioned models and processes, the emphasis was placed on building the relationship with the client and the sport management experience the students garnered rather than their cognitive development. Reflection and the student cognitive development was not considered for experiential learning within sport management. Furthermore, the examination of student learning outcomes has been limited, yet has been called for (McKelvey & Southall, 2008). Pierce and Petersen (2010) sought to fulfill this void by measuring learning outcomes in their quantitative examination of the change in students' perceptions of sport sales as a result of completing an experiential sales program. The researchers found that the expectations of a career in sport sales significantly decreased after while their perception of skill level and preparation for a sports sales career did not significantly change. Pierce and Petersen (2010) recommended future research examine the student's individual growth. Implementation of experiential learning will continue to remain a challenge for educators because of the limited presentation of effective structures that guide students through meaningful strategies to evaluate the learning outcomes (Ash & Clayton, 2004; Boud, Keough, & Walker, 1985; Daly, 2001; Jowdy & McDonald, 2007; Papamarcos, 2002). The next section describes the Sport Management Experiential Learning Process, which is intended to fulfill this void.

## Sport Management Experiential Learning Process

Based on the limited emphasis on the students development in experiential learning and the emphasis on active learning projects by both researchers and COSMA accrediting standards, developing an experiential learning process applicable for sport management educators was a logical response. It also supports the call within higher education to generate written products that can be used for formative and summative assessment of student learning (Ash & Clayton, 2004). As a result of synthesizing existing theory and research (e.g., Ash & Clayton, 2004; Kolb, 1984), *The Sport Management Experiential Learning Process (SMELP)*, was developed and with the

intent to be used within the context of a semester long sport management course project.

*Figure 2* presents the SMELP along with the timeline and specific prompt questions designed to encourage critical reflection at each stage. The prompt questions that student responded to at each stage were adapted from Ash and Clayton (2009). Journal entries were used for the prompt questions throughout the semester to "not only document information but also describe a person's reflection on ideas, concerns and beliefs" (p. 696), thereby providing rich text data for analysis (Tryssenaar, 1995). Students submitted their journal entries to a digital drop box utilizing Blackboard, an online educational course management program (Blackboard, 2012). The rationale of asking students to write and submit the reflective journals through Blackboard was to ensure the students can do so at their convenience. They were provided a deadline but it would also allow their responses to not be limited by classroom events or other students. Ho (1997) suggest that reflective activities do not necessarily need to be completed within class time, as allowing it to be done outside provides more time to engage in reflection. This also aligns with the existing literature on the student's connection to technology usage. Students were encouraged to review their previous entries before writing the next entry. The researcher read their entries and gave them minimum responses, as to encourage them to continue to write and develop their critical thinking skills. These responses were designed to avoid influencing the students' ways of reflection. The following sections outline each stage of the sport management experiential learning process which was piloted with a sport event management course. Event management is the process by which an event is planned, prepared, and produced (Silvers, 2003).

### Precourse assessment

During the first week of class, students' were asked to provide the instructor with a description of their prior sport management experience and coursework, as well as what they were hoping to gain from taking this course. This was completed to provide the instructor with a better understanding of the students' background relative to the overall course.

### Sport event management theory and concepts

Throughout the fifteen weeks of the semester, the instructor taught the students the principles of sport event management. The course focused on a critical understanding of designing, planning, and controlling sport events. *Table 1* includes a weekly breakdown of the course topics. Course structure consisted of active learning techniques such as discussions, guided group exercises, and cooperative problem solving assignments. Beyond the engagement with the event and reflection process which accounted for 40% of their grade, students also completed two exams (40%) and three written case

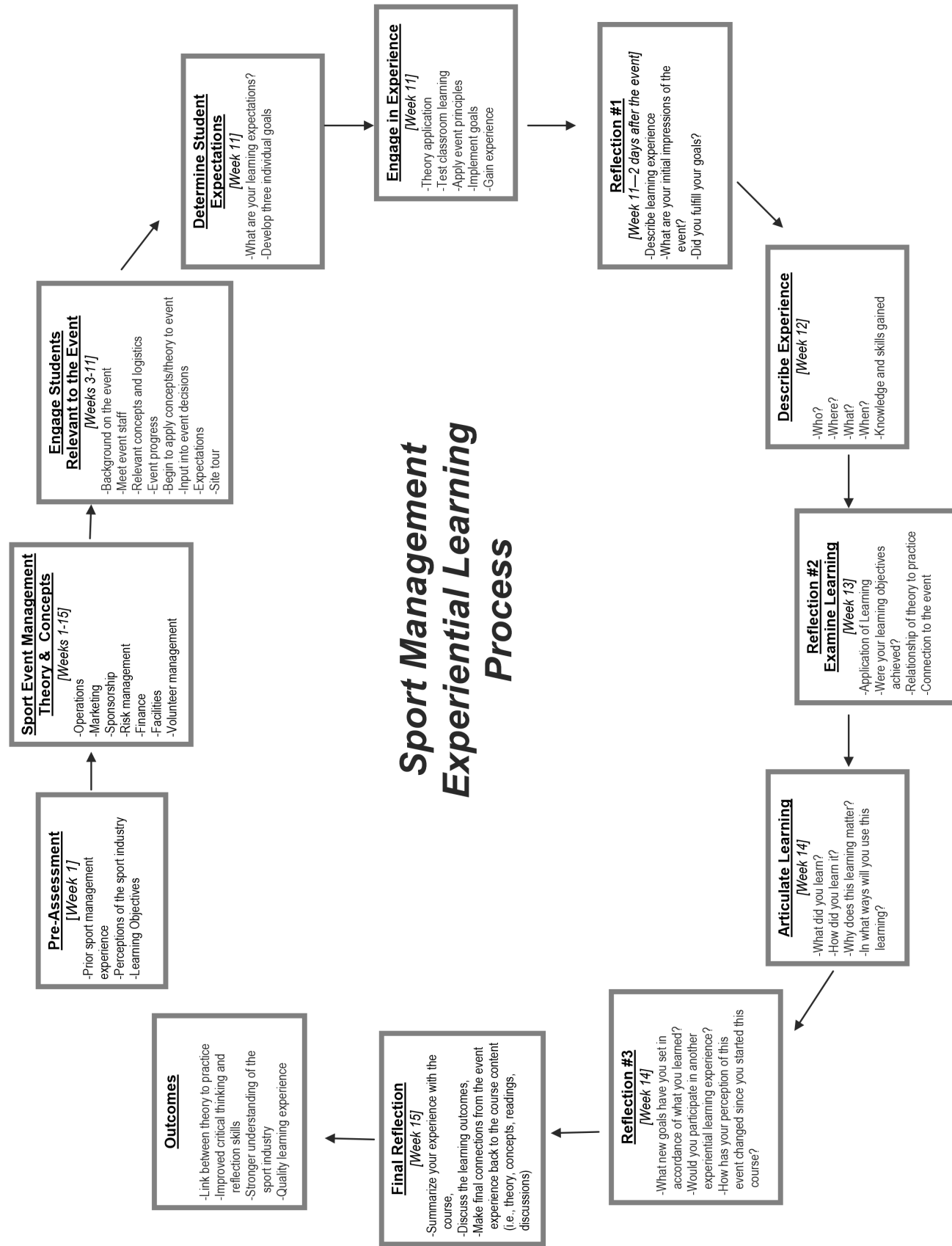


Figure 2 — The Experiential Learning Process

study assignments (20%) during the semester. For the reflection exercises, used in the sport management experiential learning process, students were graded on the completion of the assignment not on the actual content. *Table 2* provides the learning objectives for the course as well as the project.

### Engage students relevant to the event

Throughout the semester students were engaged with one major sporting event. The event was selected based on proximity to the institution (within 5 miles), the scope of planning required to stage the event, instructor's partnership with event organizers, as well as timing of the event relevant to the course schedule. The sporting events the students worked with included: Mirabito Outdoor Hockey Classic, Harlem Globetrotters, and Monster Jam. Event staff began coming into class during the third week of the semester and approximately every other week for the rest of the semester. The instructor shared with the event staff the course schedule to make sure the material they were covering in class aligned with the scheduled course content. The interaction with event staff provided the opportunity to meet and cultivate a relationship with the

event organizers, understand event operations through the implementation of an actual event, and be directly involved in the staging of a major event. One week before the event, outside of the scheduled class time, students received a tour of the event site and training for their responsibilities. The tour reviewed course content allowing students to see the applicability of the material that they had learned.

### Determine student expectations (Pre-event)

In the class two days before the event, students were asked to develop three individual goals for their event involvement and also to list their learning expectations. These were submitted and reviewed by the instructor. The instructor reviewed them for the purpose of feasibility of the student's role at the event. For example, if a student said they wanted to be in charge of the media operations at the event, this would not be an accurate expectation. Rather, they could be involved with the media and be assigned specific responsibilities within this segment. The students learning expectations were then summarized and shared with the event organizers.

**Table 1 Sport Event Management Semester Schedule**

Week	Subject
1	Introduction; Course overview Sport event management-emergence, overview, basic terminology, types of sporting events
2	Defining and developing objectives, strategies, and tactics
3	Budgeting (costs and revenue streams)
4	Soliciting and selecting host cities and venues
5	Planning for the sporting event: Scheduling, organizational structure, staffing
6	Venue and event marketing
7	Activating the sport marketing plan
8	The role of media in event management
9	Engaging the community
10	Setting up for events: What does it take to get a venue ready for an event?
11	Working with the consumers (guest management, ticket sales, hotel management)
12	Working with the consumers (continued)
13	Risk management
14	Event day operations
15	Post event: recognition, settlement, and the next steps

**Table 2 Learning Objectives**

1	To integrate sport event management knowledge and skills acquired during the semester into one sporting event.
2	To understand the dimensions of a sport event and its role in the host community.
3	To develop problem solving, critical thinking, and management skills relevant to the sport industry.
4	To reflect upon and critically evaluate the learning experience throughout the semester.
5	To work directly with sport industry professionals to garner a better understanding of the industry.



### Engage in experience

Based on a list provided from the event organizers, students had the opportunity to select which sector they preferred to be involved with on the day of the event (e.g., logistics, media relations, marketing, ticketing, and customer service). Students were on site at the event for approximately eight to ten hours.

### Reflection #1

The first stage of reflection occurred immediately following the event; however, as the event was on a Saturday students submitted it through Blackboard with a deadline of three days after the event. They were asked to write approximately a 500 word journal entry to begin decompressing their learning by answering questions relative to their learning experience, perceptions of the event, and goal fulfillment.

### Describe experience

Learning from experience was further articulated one week postevent when students were asked to describe their experience utilizing the four w's: (who, what where, when), and address the specific knowledge and skills developed from the event itself. Once the students completed this exercise, the instructor provided a more in-depth class discussion on how to critically evaluate their learning experience. The event director returned to class the week following to thank the students for their efforts, gain constructive feedback, and discuss their experience both the success and areas for improvement.

### Reflection #2

Two weeks after the event, students were asked to further examine their learning over the course of the semester through the utilization of Ash and Clayton's DEAL model (2009) critical reflection questions. The following guided questions were provided: (a) describe the application of learning from the course materials to the actual event; (b) discuss whether they achieved their learning objectives; (c) discuss the relationship between theory and practice; and (d) describe your connection to the event. Once students completed this task, the instructor gave feedback relative to the process not the content in an effort to enhance their learning.

### Articulate learning

Integrating the DEAL model (Ash and Clayton, 2009), the next step which occurred toward the end of the semester (week 14), was to have students further articulate their learning. This required them to use hierarchical thinking. Students were asked: (a) what did you learn? (b) how did you learn it? (c) why does this learning matter?; and (d) in what ways will you use this learning? The instructor again collected the students' reflective journals to ensure they were responding to the prompts.

### Reflection #3

Approximately one month after the event, students completed a third reflection relative to the learning experience utilizing the following prompts: (a) what new goals have you set in accordance with what you learned from this experience?; (b) would you participate in another sport management experiential learning experience?; (c) how has your perception of this event changed during this process?; and (d) what are your perceptions of working in the sport industry after this experience?

### Final Reflection

The final stage was a culminating reflection paper, five to seven pages in length completed at the conclusion of the semester in which students were asked to summarize their experience with the course, speak to the learning outcomes, and make connections from their experience with the event back to the course content (i.e., theory, concepts, readings, discussions).

## Method

### Sample

The purposive sample was collected from students enrolled in an undergraduate 300 level sport event management course. Over the course of the three semesters, 70 students were enrolled. Sixty-two students consented to participation in this study; however, only 55 completed all the exercises that were part of the sport management experiential learning process. All the students were either sport management majors or minors. Eight students were juniors and the remaining 47 were seniors. The class met twice a week for an hour and twenty minutes for 15 weeks. Eight to ten hours of additional class time was spent working directly at a large scale sporting event.

### Data collection

Utilizing the *Sport Management Experiential Learning Process*, presented in Figure 2, as a guide, research participants completed each stage of the process (a pre-course assessment, preevent assessment, three reflective journals, final reflection paper). The specific prompts that were provided are shown in Figure 2 under each step in the process. Reflective journal assignments were used for data collection as journal writing represents a rigorous documentary type (Janesick, 1998). All four journal assignments were submitted through Blackboard. The average number of words using the prompts provided in each entry was 200–275.

### Data analysis

A grounded theory approach was used to explore the content of the data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). According to grounded theory, the aim of analyzing qualitative data are to produce a systematic detailed summary of themes

and to link these together under a categorical structure. Grounded theory gives emphasis to rigor from the early stages of design through analysis, thereby providing the researcher with specific procedures (Patton, 2002). By using grounded theory, the expectation was that common themes would emerge from an analysis of data and journals using the constant comparative method (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Data collection using grounded theory requires flexible and open discussions so that concepts emerge naturally (Daengbuppha, Hemmington, & Wilkes, 2006; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Again, responses to the journals and final papers resulted from prompts given by the instructor and were based on the experiences the students had in the course, with the event, as well as their ability to connect those experiences to course content and then their reflection on their learning. The researcher completed a classic content analysis (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005) using preliminary open coding. Axial coding, or identifying causal relationships was then used among the data within each theme (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Data were then organized within the more specific *a priori* subthemes.

The aim of analyzing qualitative data are to produce a systematic detailed summary of themes and to link these together under a reasoned categorical system. In doing so, recognizing that multiple methods are inherent in qualitative research (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005), the researcher triangulated the data using the journal entries and the final paper. The researcher first conducted an individual analysis in which all entries for a particular student over the course of the semester were examined to identify changes in the written language that represented progression in their level of reflection. The examination of individual entries was then combined to determine themes across all students. The analysis produced a set of categories within each of the themes. The researcher examined the internal relationships between categories and associated themes, in terms of the connections made by the students themselves. During the process, themes and concepts surfaced in the style of grounded theory (Freeman, 1998). From here, all data were entered into a composite matrix to assess any additional trends (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The matrix not only assisted with interpreting the data but also, provided information about the impact of the background of the student to his/her experience in the class (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

### Validity and reliability

Having established categories of reflection from the data, the researcher also took the evidence of their validity and reliability into consideration as readers may question the conclusions drawn from this study. Allright and Bailey (1991) noted “both objectivity and subjectivity” have their respective roles in data analysis (p.63). The aim of the study was to not only offer a comprehensive process for a course project but presentation of the data in a format that illuminated students’ thoughts, ideas, and meaning through the experience.

## Results

In examining the data from the utilization of the sport management experiential learning process, the outcomes could be divided into four main themes: (a) personal development; (b) learning gains; (c) professional growth; and (d) identifying reflection as a new way of learning. Attributes derived from this experience were diverse as students illustrated both similarities and differences. 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 that is most representative of their responses (Creswell, 1998).

### Theme # 1: Personal development

The first theme identified was the personal development of the students over the course of the semester. Personal development occurred as students progressed from apprehension to confidence in their abilities. In the assessment before the event, words such as anxiety, nervous, reservations, and anticipation were used. In the beginning of the semester, one student who was academically 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 her excitement about the experience. “This course truly made me feel confident in my abilities. I didn’t know what to think at the beginning of the semester but I now know this is where I want to be.” Another student, a communications major noted, “Honestly, I have no idea what to expect because I have not been involved with sport events before. However, I am still very excited and determined to do my best with this course and event.” Upon being engaged in the event, the student recognized the complexity of planning a sport event and his limited exposure. Students were also able to see human/personal error and the imperfections that occur. “To be truthful, I know that I will make mistakes in my future career. Everyone does and I am no different. You learn from your mistakes.”

As the semester progressed and students volunteered at the sporting event, a growing sense of confidence and mastery began to emerge among the participants. This was evident in the responses of those that had introverted personalities as well as outgoing individuals. Students felt they were “forced to grow personally” and “mature” to complete the requirements for the course, including working specifically at the sport event. One student pointed out, “When we learned about this event, I never thought

that it would be able to occur or I would be able to assist in the efforts. It was a major accomplishment.”

At the end of the semester, students proceeded to understand the value of their experience to themselves as individuals. The students related how they had gained a level of self-knowledge that had not occurred in their previous academic work; “I feel that from taking this course, more than any other I have taken, I have learned to appreciate my education but also, the necessary skills and knowledge needed to work in this industry (final paper).” Students expressed the following personal attributes in their final paper: self-confidence, enthusiasm, articulation, critical thinking, reflective learning, and independence. One female student noted her change in perspective about the experience after the second reflection.

At the time I was working and left the event, I was exhausted and a little upset on how everything was so chaotic but now looking back at the event, I can't be any happier to be a part of a such an event and be able to experience it. I realized it is an opportunity where you get to see what kind of person you are made of because everything gets thrown at you so fast and in all different kind of manners and you have to have the ability to react quickly and professionally to please the customer.

Not all students were excited about the use of experiential learning in the course. A third student was very forward with his negative thoughts on being involved with an event. “I am trying to keep an open mind but I will concede that being involved with an event and onsite for 6:00 am on a Saturday and my general disdain for hockey is hindering my excitement.” In the journal entries that followed, the student continued to express his discontent for the project. After the event the student noted his limited learning.

The ability to learn from this experience was diminished by having to be given a miniscule role at the event. This should not be expected by college junior and seniors majoring in sport management. I would have valued this experience much more if I had been able to have a more direct role in the event operations. On top of everything there is, I hate the sport, so it is hard to get excited.

## **Theme #2: Learning gain (Acquisition of content knowledge related to course objectives)**

The next theme identified was the acquisition of knowledge related to course objectives. This encompassed learning and understanding of course content (i.e., readings and assignments) from the deeper meaning students 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 semester 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. Students also saw the connection between the course material and their engagement in the actual event. One senior noted:

This experience has impacted my learning by providing me a chance to see and undergo first-hand what we learn in the books in class. This was truly a learning experience, especially since I seem to retain information a lot easier when learning hands-on.

Another student commented on the unpredictability of sport events. “This event was a perfect example of how sports can be very unpredictable and how people need to adapt to change.”

Students also felt that they were more motivated to learn the course content. A junior commented in her journal, “having the opportunity to be involved with a large scale sporting event pushed me towards achieving mastery over the class material.” Satisfaction was associated with being part of a unique one—time event, access to industry networks, and application of classroom material. They also appreciated having the connection to the event staff which is evident in the response, “Having the event staff come to class on a regular basis was very beneficial to learning overall course content.” They typically expressed their excitement and appreciation for an opportunity to both gain insight into the sport industry and to develop and enhance skills in relation to teamwork, communication, event operations, and knowledge of the sport industry. Students also were able to dissect the event and learn from the obstacles. “Through the presentation by the event staff as well as the course readings, I was able to develop a pretty clear idea as to what the event would entail as well as understand the course material much more.”

The value of experiential learning was mixed among the students. For the majority of the students, adjectives such as fun, interesting, hands-on, and practical application were used repeatedly to explain the learning. A junior reported, “Experiential learning stays with you much longer than anything you learn from a textbook or having a professor teach you.” Some students, who had limited prior exposure to the sport industry, didn't feel as strongly about their experience, more so with the event itself than the actual assignments. One junior stated, “I would not work at the event again. It was freezing outside. I had more money on me than I have ever seen in my life and none of it was mine. This was a big tease.” Another student who had a limited understanding of the reality in working within the sport industry commented, “If I worked at this event again, I would only do it again if I got to work more on the sport side. I want to be with people who work for the event or the athletes themselves.”

An unexpected outcome was the students' perspective of the learning objectives. Interestingly, they not only felt they fulfilled the ones outlined by the instructor, but also, commented that they should have done more work



to enhance their learning. One senior stated, “I think I was being too broad with the objectives. I could have learned so much more had I spent more time understanding the course material.”

Going forward if I am ever involved in such an event, I will be sure to do extensive research beforehand. Having some sort of an idea of what the event will look like makes it much easier to evaluate it and determine exactly where the event coordinators succeeded and where they could have improved.

By the conclusion of the course, the students developed new individual goals that were more in line with not only strategies to enhance their critical thinking skills but also to learn more about the intricacies of the sport event industry. A senior stated,

The event context definitely helped me learn the course content. I made sure I read the material right away. Plus putting the content into a real world event served to reinforce the learning even more. I found that I knew the material much more when it came time for exams because we experienced it firsthand.

Another student had a similar experience of understanding the connection between theory and practice:

We learned about the theory and elements associated with event management from the instructor and event staff but seeing and learning about the actual application was critical to putting things together. We got to see the culminating impact of everything along the way throughout the semester.

Students also recognized the change in their perceptions of the course and event as a whole. One senior noted,

While I had no desire to be part of this event as I hate hockey and the cold, I can now see the value of this. Right after the event, I still had a negative outlook; however, now that we have spent time reflecting, discussing the event, and relating the classroom material to the event, I truly see the value of this once in a lifetime opportunity. I wish I would have recognized this earlier as I would have learned even more than I did.

Beyond the individual benefits, the students recognized their role in supporting the event for the community, “It was good to see that the work we put into the event had a positive effect and benefited the community. I feel like I did something positive for the community too.”

### Theme #3: Professional growth and development

Professional growth and development among the students was also a consistent theme. The students recognized 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?” For many of the students they came to the class with limited or no experience in sport event management. The outcome was an opportunity for them to understand the realities of the industry. Students came to the realization that the industry requires “long hours of monotonous tasks” and “no down time to watch the event.” One junior summed up his revelation of working in the sport industry by stating: “It isn’t about sitting in an office daily, making the big bucks, working from 9-5, or being a spectator.” Students also grasped the role of customer service and communication within the sport industry. “I realized that I need to work on my communication skills as I spent the entire time talking with fans at the event. You can’t ignore their needs or they won’t come back to your events.” Along those lines, another student stated, “I realized that I have to work on my communication skills. I am generally a shy person and this event showed me that you have to be able to communicate or the event won’t happen. Overall, by the end of the semester students were enlightened as they exclaimed, “I have changed” and could identify specific changes in their own professional growth. As they grew during the course of the semester it helped them to identify their professional strengths and areas that they need to improve upon.

### Theme #4: Identifying reflection as a new way of learning

Reflection was recognized as a means to learn information outside of the sport event management class. Students reported the greatest impact the reflective nature of the course offered was a new approach to critical thinking that enabled meaningful and deep learning throughout their lives. One student explained,

“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.”

They also understood the value of reflection such that it was different than previous learning environments. “This was a way different experience than any of the other sport management classes I have taken. I really learned in a whole new way. I wish more classes would use journals.” Another student commented, “I never thought about making meaning from an experience until it was discussed in class. I never even used a journal before but this course helped me to understand the rationale.” The same student went on to explain how she had “never been

in a class that was so valuable. I rolled my eyes when I saw structured journal reflections in the description but it turns out that this has been so applicable to life.” This student further explained that the opportunities for structured reflection provided in the course had a positive impact on her learning.

Students articulated the value of utilizing the written exercises to progress through the experience. “The journal assignments made me continually reflect on the experience I was having throughout the semester.” In relation to the final paper, “It pushed me to critically think about new material and relate it to my experience.” Reflection brought a level of personalization to the learning. In doing so, students mentioned the learning was more “worthwhile”, “individual”, and “meaningful”. Students saw reflection as a means to recognize “areas of improvements and strengths” in themselves.

Beyond the learning that occurred within the course, several noted the positive impact that reflection for future learning experiences. One reported, “I am so thankful I learned about the concept of reflection. It took me about half of the semester to really get why reflecting on what you do is so important.” A second student supported this perspective, “After this class I think I will journal more often. I was negative about it at first but once I felt more comfortable with it, it made sense. It turned out to be a good thing.” Within the final essay, the same individual commented on the challenge the final paper brought. “I struggled with the final paper we had in class. It was a good struggle. When I got done, it was rewarding to see the learning that I had accomplished over the course of the semester.”

## Discussion

Sport management scholars have reiterated the need for students to engage beyond the confines of the college campus to not only provide engagement but also to foster their personal and professional development (Chalip, 2006). In the current study, the results indicated that the sport management experiential learning process can be a very effective, meaningful, and simplistic tool for faculty members to use to increase student engagement, professional growth, personal development, and content knowledge. It can take considerably more time and energy to organize than traditional pedagogy but the long term benefits are tremendous considering the impact properly implemented experiential learning and critical reflection can have on a student. Reflective pedagogies have the potential to dramatically facilitate and extend significant learning when implemented (Eyler and Giles, 1999).

In the current study, by integrating reflection exercises into experiential learning, it minimized the risk identified by Eliot (1943) that one might have had the experience but missed the meaning. This has been a concern of previous researchers within sport management (Southall et al., 2003; Bruening et al., 2010). The

process also maximized the potential of experiential education to nurture learning in its full complexity. Students were pushed beyond just gaining hands-on experience but rather, they were able to interpret complex issues, demonstrate learning, personal growth, professional development, and articulate their thoughts through critical reflection. The results also showed that through integrating the SMELP it reinforced the skill development of students’ progression from understanding concepts and theory, to describing learning, articulating, and critically reflecting (Arnold, Warner, & Osborne, 2006). Students developed the ability to progress from “noticing” or “making sense” to “making meaning” from their experiences. Once the students learned the structure of the course, course content, and got immersed with the event, the reflection process was an eye opening experience for the students to learn about themselves and the course material in a different perspective. Students raised questions throughout the process to improve their learning of course content but also, their own assumptions. This education took place not only in the confines of the classroom time but through firsthand experience with the event staff, at the event, as well as throughout each stage of the sport management experiential learning process.

The use of the SMELP highlighted the opportunity to promote student development. Through the reflective learning process, students were impacted on a personal level, providing them with greater confidence in themselves. Students noticed it within themselves as those that commented on their reserved personalities initially recognized the need to “step up” and mature more than they could imagine to be successful in the course. Students also became more engaged and motivated by the course content. Supporting the work of Kolb, it provided the students with the opportunity to examine change in themselves during the experience as they were presented with challenges.

The integration of the SMELP also had a positive effect on the students’ professional development. They recognized the uniqueness of the reflection aspect of the course and the depth of the connections made to the academic component. The connection was made on a consistent basis between course readings, course content, and the event that they were engaged in. By having the student reflect at multiple stages, this brought them outside of their comfort zone and abilities for understanding not only sport event management but themselves as individuals.

This research contributes to the growing body of evidence that experiential pedagogy which incorporates reflective learning in sport management courses enhance student learning, and their development. Results garnered from this project offer a way to usefully engage with a large sporting event in the local community, increasingly a goal of higher education. Furthermore, by implementing the sport management experiential learning process, the students emerged as more educated individuals through their efforts and better able to function beyond

the university environment (Commission on Sport Management Accreditation, 2012). The presented process is applicable to a realm of courses within sport management such as sport marketing, sport communications, and sport sales as the questions would remain the same and the notion of integrating into an actual business or event specific to the course content.

### Limitations

Due to the nature of the data collection process, a number of limitations must be addressed. First, because the data were only collected at one institution, the results may lack the ability to be generalized to sport management students at other institutions. Second, a primary assumption of this data collection was that the students were honest in their responses regarding the learning experience throughout the semester. Although personal evaluation can be purposeful, this may be a limitation based on the social desirability bias which is the tendency of respondents to answer questions in a manner that will be viewed favorably by others. Along with this limitation is the students' impression that they need to write positive thoughts to get a good grade in the course. The researcher attempted to address this by providing points for participation and not content. This was also listed in the syllabi, reiterated during the course for each journal exercise. A final limitation of this research is the lack of a true control group. While the data from previous semesters of the course offering was obtained, the data collection components did not fully mirror that of the experiential group of students enrolled in the course.

### Implications for practice

The outcomes of the current study call for creating more experiential learning opportunities to integrate critical reflective learning for enhanced content knowledge, critical thinking, and professional development of the learner. Despite the challenges in designing this type of experience for students, the return on investment is significant for the faculty member, sport organization, and student. From an educator's perspective, the time and effort has been well worth it when it becomes apparent the impact of this course, specifically the sport management experiential learning process had on the lives of students.

### Future Research

Future research is necessary to test the applicability of the sport management experiential learning process in other sport management courses. A true control group should also be used to draw comparisons of student achievement and retention of content with a course that does not have an experiential component. In doing so, specific areas to consider examining include: time spent studying and preparing for class and assignments, level of connection among class members, and level of application of

course to work and life beyond the course. Quantitative research would also be beneficial through developing an assessment tool that includes content knowledge and assessment of course specific skills. While experiential learning is not a new pedagogy within sport management, integrating a formal critical reflective process into other content areas, as described in this paper, is necessary to advance the existing literature and in turn, build the next generation of sport industry leaders.

### References

- Allright, D., & Bailey, K.M. (1991). *Focus on the language classroom: An introduction to classroom research for language teachers*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Arnold, S., Warner, W.J., & Osborne, E.W. (2006). Experiential Learning in Secondary Agricultural Education Classrooms. *Journal of Southern Agricultural Education Research, 56*, 30–39.
- Ash, S.L., & Clayton, P.H. (2009). Generating, deepening, and documenting learning: The power of critical reflection in applied learning. *Journal of Applied Learning in Higher Education, 1*, 25–48.
- Ash, S.L., & Clayton, P.H. (2004). The Articulated learning: An approach to guided reflection and assessment. *Innovative Higher Education, 29*, 137–152. doi:10.1023/B:IHIE.0000048795.84634.4a
- Boud, D., Keough, R., & Walker, D. (1985). *Reflection: Turning experience into learning*. London, UK: Kogan Page.
- Boyer, E. (1996). The scholarship of engagement. *Journal of Public Service and Outreach, 1*, 11–20.
- Bruening, J.E., Madsen, R.M., Evanovich, J.M., & Fuller, R.D. (2010). Discovery, Integration, Application and Teaching: Service Learning through Sport and Physical Activity. *Sport Management Education Journal, 4*, 31–48.
- Chalip, L. (2006). Toward a distinctive sport management discipline. *Journal of Sport Management, 20*, 1–22.
- Commission on Sport Management Accreditation. (2012). *Characteristics of Excellence in Sport Management Education*. Retrieved from <http://www.cosmaweb.org/sportmanagement>
- Creswell, J.W. (1998). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five traditions*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Cuneen, J., & Parks, J.B. (1997). Should we serve management practice or sport management education? A response to Weese's perspective. *Journal of Sport Management, 11*, 125–132.
- Daengbuppha, J., Hemmington, N., & Wilkes, K. (2006). Using grounded theory to model visitorexperiences at heritage sites: Methodological and practical issues. *Qualitative Market Research, 9*, 367–388. doi:10.1108/13522750610689096
- Dale, E. (1946). *Audio-visual methods in teaching*. New York: The Dryden Press.
- Daly, S.P. (2001). Student operated Internet businesses; True experiential learning in entrepreneurship and retain management. *Journal of Marketing Education, 23*, 204–215. doi:10.1177/0273475301233006
- Denzin, N.K., & Lincoln, Y.S. (2005). *The Sage Handbook of qualitative research* (pp. 375–386). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc.

- Dewey, J. (1938). *Experience & education*. New York, NY: Collier Books.
- Doolittle, P.E., & Camp, W.G. (1999). Constructivism: The Career and Technical Education Perspective. *Journal of Vocational and Technical Education*, 16, Retrieved from: <http://scholar.lib.vt.edu/ejournals/JVTE/v16n1/doolittle.html>.
- Eliot, T.S. (1943). *Four Quartets*. Orlando: Harcourt.
- Eyler, J., & Giles, D.E. (1999). *Where's the learning in service-learning?* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers.
- Glaser, B., & Strauss, A. (1967). *The Discovery of Grounded Theory*. Chicago, IL: Aldine Publishing Company.
- Irwin, R.L., Southall, R.M., & Sutton, W.A. (2007). Pentagon of sport sales training: A 21<sup>st</sup> century sport sales training model. *Sport Management Education Journal*, 1, 18–39.
- Janesick, V.J. (1998). *Stretching Exercises for Qualitative Researchers*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.
- Joplin, L. (1981). On defining experiential education. *Journal of Experiential Education*, 4, 17–20. doi:10.1177/105382598100400104
- Jowdy, E.J., & McDonald, M. (2007). *The impact of experience based learning on students' emotional competency*. Saarbrücken, Germany: VDM Verlag.
- Kolb, D.A. (1984). *Experiential learning: Experience as a source of learning and development*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Lincoln, Y.S., & Guba, E.G. (1985). *Naturalistic Inquiry*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications.
- McKelvey, S., & Southall, R.M. (2008). Teaching sport sponsorship sales through experiential learning. *International Journal of Sport Management and Marketing*, 4, 225–242. doi:10.1504/IJSM.2008.018650
- Papamarcos, S.D. (2002). The next wave in service learning: Integrative team based engagement with structural objectives. *Review of Business*, 23, 31–38. doi:10.1023/A:1014493927405
- Patton, M.Q. (2002). *Qualitative research and evaluation methods* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Pauline, G., & Pauline, J.S. (2008). Teaching sport sponsorship activation through a client-based experiential learning project. *Sport Management Education Journal*, 2, 19–37.
- Petersen, J., & Pierce, D. (2009). Professional sport league assessment of sport management curriculum. *Sport Management Education Journal*, 3, 110–124.
- Pierce, D., & Petersen, J. (2010). Experiential learning in sport sales: Student perceptions of sport sales expectations, skills and preparation. *Sport Management Education Journal*, 4, 49–59.
- Rando, W.C., & Menges, R.J. (1991). How practice is shaped by personal theories. *New Directions for Teaching and Learning*, 1991: 7–14. doi:10.1002/tl.37219914504
- Rogers, C.R. (1969). *Freedom to Learn*. Columbus, OH: Merrill.
- Silvers, J. (2003). Event management body of knowledge project. Retrieved November 12, 2011 From [http://www.juliasilvers.com/embok.htm#The\\_Definition\\_of\\_Event\\_Management](http://www.juliasilvers.com/embok.htm#The_Definition_of_Event_Management)
- Southall, R.M., Nagel, M.S., LeGrande, D., & Han, P. (2003). Sport management practica: A metadiscrete experiential learning model. *Sport Marketing Quarterly*, 12, 27–36.
- Spence, K., Hess, D., McDonald, M., & Sheehan, B. (2009). Designing experiential learning curricula to develop future sport leaders. *Sport Management Education Journal*, 3, 1–25. doi:10.1299/jpes.3.1
- Strauss, A., & Corbin, J. (1998). *Basics of qualitative research: Techniques and procedures for developing grounded theory* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Tryssenaar, J. (1995). Interactive journals: An educational strategy to promote reflection. *The American Journal of Occupational Therapy*, 49, 695–702. doi:10.5014/ajot.49.7.695
- Walker, H., & Lim, J. (2007, May). *Event management: From the classroom to the real world—a case study*. Paper presented at North American Society for Sport Management conference, Ft. Lauderdale, FL. Abstract retrieved from [http://www.nassm.com/files/conf\\_abstracts/2007\\_1649.pdf](http://www.nassm.com/files/conf_abstracts/2007_1649.pdf)
- Williams, J., & Colles, C. (2009). Assessment of student learning outcomes; The role of internship portfolio in sport management assessment. *Sport Management Education Journal*, 3, 47–65.