Reflections on twenty years of practicum, partnership & practice

Andrew J. Martin
School of Sport & Exercise, Massey University, New Zealand

Twenty years ago the development of a sports management program at Massey University was then the only one in New Zealand. Professional rugby was still a couple of years away. Kit McConnell, Head of the 2011 RWC and Tournament Director for the IRB, was a Masters student back then. He indicated that the academic staff were doing something new – and special. For me, there was a good balance between having enough structure and learning about the elements of the industry and having freedom within the curriculum to explore what interested me (cited in Massey University, 2011, p. 15).

This paper provides an auto-ethnography related to the author’s extensive involvement and self-reflection on leading the development of work based experiential education sport management and coaching related practicum programs at Massey University, for the purposes of developing further WIL understanding (Martin, Rees & Edwards, 2012), particularly in the sport context (Martin, Fleming, Perkins, Wiersma & Coll, 2010). The research is interpretive in nature and philosophy and employs a collective case study methodology across different educational contexts. The implications are for reflective practice (Fleming & Martin, 2007), pedagogy development (Coll et al, 2009), and graduate attributes (Fleming, Martin, Hughes & Zinn, 2009).

Keywords: Reflective practice, pedagogy development; graduate attributes

Introduction

Despite the best intentions of academics to enhance graduates’ employability within classroom settings, Bates (2008) and Cranmer (2006) indicated that the limitations consistently produce mixed outcomes. Furthermore it has been argued that work-integrated curricula (Patrick, Peach, Pocknee, Webb, Fletcher & Pretto, 2008) and applied learning experiences (Schwartzman & Bouas-Henry, 2009) positively affect graduates in the transitional stage into employment (Cranmer, 2006) and as on-going professional development (Leberman & Martin, 2005).

Massey University offers applied learning programs in real world community and industry contexts across business, education, science, humanities and creative arts degrees in related colleges. The aim of these courses is to embed applied learning opportunities increasingly across the curriculum, maintaining qualification relevance and opportunities for research partnerships and staff professional development. The paper provides the background that influenced the sport management practicum course design and gives examples, through participant observation, of the development of these courses over the past two decades (1992-2012).

The reflective practitioner

Auto ethnographies or narratives of self are highly personalized accounts for the purposes of developing sociological understanding (Ellis & Bochner, 2000; Martin, 2008; Sparkes, 2000). The current research presented in this paper, which draws upon the experiences of the author, was interpretive in nature and philosophy (Erlandson, Harris, Skipper & Allen, 1993; Lincoln & Guba, 1985), and employed a collective case study methodology (Bassey, 2003; Stake, 2008). It allowed the researcher to gain an in-depth understanding of the issues of interest and to explore meaning from a number of angles and across different sport management education contexts (Merriam, 1998). The qualitative research process involved participant observation (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008; Guba & Lincoln, 2005) and highlights aspects of learning as I developed as a reflective practitioner (Schön, 1987) involved in coordinating practicum programs. A cyclical process of personal reflection on action is central to the process of experiential learning (Boud, Keogh & Walker, 1985; Kolb, 1984; McNiff & Whitehead, 2001).

This paper provides critical self-reflection to relive the author’s journey (Martin, 2008) of two decades of research into pedagogical aspects of applied experiential learning in sport management (Foster & Dollar, 2010), which involves participant observation of double semester undergraduate, postgraduate and distance based practicum courses. This paper also gives examples of how these applied experiential learning approaches have assisted graduate employability.
Background/context

All Black coach, JJ Stewart had visited Ireland in the 1970s and was impressed with their Rugby coaching program. When he became a member of the Massey University Council in the 1980s he lobbied for an initiative in rugby and, more generally, sport coaching. At the same time the changes from amateur to professional sport were happening in New Zealand, so any formal University initiative aimed to support the development of professionalism. There was a need for a sport coaching program, but also one that would train individuals to manage the various sports organizations, which at the time was unique in the New Zealand tertiary sector: At the beginning of 1992 the first six papers in sport management and coaching were offered with most of the initial coaching teaching material coming from the American Coaching Effectiveness Program (ACEP), which later expanded into the American Sport Education Program (ASEP). There was a major within the Bachelor of Business Studies in sport management and coaching as well as undergraduate and post graduate diplomas. A practicum component was an integral part of the program.

A conscious effort was made to achieve close relationships and joint high performance coaching programs with various sporting codes, as well as rugby, and to produce New Zealand based teaching material (Collins, 2000; Collins & Jackson, 2007; Leberman, Trenberth & Collins, 2006, 2012; Trenberth & Collins, 1994; 1999). As rugby went professional in 1996, the jointly awarded New Zealand Rugby Union (NZRU) and Massey University Certificate in Rugby Coaching provided a unique professional qualification at the time. The certificate consisted of the highest level NZRU rugby coaching practicum integrated with more theory based coaching papers. The coaching practicum required a season’s critical reflection of training sessions, player and game analysis. In 1999 the Sport & Rugby Institute was built on the Palmerston North campus to provide a purpose built educational facility for rugby and other sporting codes. Team building programs were also developed in conjunction with the NZRU and Outward Bound (Chu, Leberman & Martin, 1998).

Within ten years the program had attracted in excess of 200 equivalent full time students, of whom more than 20% were postgraduate, and also had the first PhD enrolments. As sport related academic programs developed across the University, a management and coaching major in the Bachelor of Sport & Exercise was also added and a School of Sport and Exercise has subsequently been formed.

My interest in the development of applied experiential learning strategies in sport management is through a coordination and facilitation role of the practicum courses since 1994, in particular my research focus on communities of practice range from sport management, coaching, outdoor education and work integrated learning contexts.

Method/approach

Ethnographic case study

This paper is based on an ethnographic case study involving participant observation (Sturman, 1997). My involvement as coordinator of a number of practicum courses means that I am an integral part of the research process and cannot easily be removed from it. Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2003) indicate that participant observation is central to every case study, with the researcher being part of the group or the activities that are observed (Yin, 2009). It also allows a holistic interpretation of the phenomena being studied (Cohen et al., 2003).

Credibility, transferability and ethical considerations

The use of participant observation in this sport management case study allows myself, as the researcher, to experience, observe, and be part of the applied experiential learning process. The descriptive account of the methods of course design and activities provide a greater insight and understanding of the sport management practicum experience. My prolonged involvement aimed to increase the study’s credibility. Being a participant observer of a number of practicum courses in a variety of contexts importantly gave me an increasingly greater perspective of the phenomena and variables involved (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This involvement also acknowledges my potential biases, but it should be noted that I have no vested [financial or otherwise] interest in positively reporting the programs. Ethical considerations of interpretive/ethnographic research, such as issues of confidentiality, anonymity and informed consent, are situational and contextual (Mauther, Birch, Jessop & Miller, 2002), “sharpens the senses, and ultimately refines and enhances the quality of the endeavour” (Fetterman, 1998, p.146). The nature of interpretive and case study research seeks to form a unique
interpretation of events rather than produce generalizations. Transferability, the interpretive equivalent to generalisibility, is enhanced here by the provision of a ‘thick’ description (Merriam, 1998).

**Results/ discussion**

**Sport management practicum**

Feedback from sport management graduates in the Bachelor of Business Studies between 1994 and 1999 indicated the value of the practicum, with the whole course of study being important to respondents, rather than the applied part as a stand-alone component. However, it was the overall business context within which the major is situated (the six sport management major papers are 25% of the business degree), which proved most helpful to respondents in their employment positions (Martin & Leberman, 2005). The course assists students in understanding various aspects of business philosophy or theory (e.g. finance, marketing, economics), but also provides links to practical or real life sport contexts and situations.

The 3rd year capstone and postgraduate practicum requires students to undertake 180 hours of project based work within a sport organization during a double semester period. The use and development of critical reflection strategies throughout the program helps them learn how to think in different ways – potentially outside the square. They are primarily encouraged to develop skills by following Gibbs (1988) and Moon’s (2000) stages of reflection involving analysis, evaluation and planning future action. The level of critical reflection is also impacted by prior experiences (Boud, Cohen & Walker, 1993). For undergraduate students, the practicum may provide more personal development (self-confidence and self-esteem) opportunities and an initial stepping stone to employment. Whereas postgraduate and distance based students often value the opportunity to enhance their professional development through the reflective process (Leberman & Martin, 2005).

Investigation of the facilitated reflective strategies utilized in the Sport Management Practicum at Massey University, and also the Sport and Recreation Cooperative at AUT University, New Zealand illustrated the value of critical reflection to students’ personal learning, professional growth and increased self-confidence. The research reviewed the processing of their ‘reflection in action’ and ‘reflection on action’ (Boud et al, 1993) over the period of their work placement through a document analysis of their reflective journals. Student feedback illustrated the skills learnt, the value of linking theory to practice, and the positive nature of their practicum experiences as professional preparation for careers in the sport industry (Fleming & Martin, 2007).

McGregor’s X and Y theory (1960) relates to Maslow's hierarchy of needs (1962) in how human behaviour and motivation in the workplace assists in maximizing output. In relation to Theory Y, as a supervisor I aim to create the most symbiotic relationship between the supervisors and student, which relates to aspects of self-actualization and self-esteem (Maslow, 1962). The importance of managing and communicating both students’ and supervisor’s expectations is emphasized in the induction process (Martin & Leberman, 2005). Students are encouraged to be increasingly proactive rather than reactive, demonstrating initiative and adding value to the organization; aiming to move beyond the student persona and doing just a good (grade C) or very good job (B), but towards producing an outstanding professional performance (A) that adds value to the organization, takes work away from the supervisor and exceeds expectations. It is often through the support and advice of peers, supervisors and the development of industry networks, and the achievement of an A grade in the practicum paper, that provides the opportunity of immediate post practicum paid positions. Top students are often subsequently employed in their practicum organization or by previous graduates of the same program in other sport organizations.

**Personal & professional development**

My interest in applied experiential learning programs also led to changing an existing management development course, the Action Learning Management Practicum (ALMP), a 3rd year undergraduate program at Massey University from 2002 to 2004. It provided an outdoor experiential education for-credit course where, as facilitators, we used a more holistic model of course design (Leberman & Martin, 2005). The initial 5-day course integrated a range of physical, social, creative and reflective activities. The benefit of post course reflection (Leberman & Martin, 2004) was highlighted from data gathered from open ended questions about the course impacts and key factors in achieving these impacts sent to participants two weeks and again six months after the 5-day course. Reflection on the whole experience often draws parallels to organization and management theories. It provides a means for developing the whole person as advocated in the management education literature (Boyatzis & McLeod, 2001; Gray, 2007). These practicum experiences highlight that personal and professional development of managers often cannot be separated (Leberman & Martin, 2005).
Although intended, but not always explicit, pedagogies that aim to integrate theory and practice have been found to be implicitly or indirectly fostered by a variety of means (Coll et al., 2009). In the sport management context (Martin, Fleming, Ferkins, Wiersma & Coll, 2010), the principal means for fostering integration of on- and off campus learning is by assessment via, for example, reflective journals and assignments/reports post-placement (Hodges, 2011). This integration mostly consists of reflection-on-action (Schön, 1991), after the learning activities, and is primarily orientated towards personal growth for younger (aged 18-21) undergraduate students, and professional development for (older) distance based or postgraduate students.

Graduate feedback has indicated that to enhance employability in the sport and recreation industry, work integrated learning programs need to be designed so that students are provided with opportunities to facilitate the development of various competencies. In this context, attributes that are highly valued include the ability and willingness to learn/enthusiastic participation (passion for sport), the use of initiative/ self-sufficiency, and personal organizational skills. Success in this industry relies on relationship building/ developing professional networks as well as teamwork and cooperation. Developing attributes such as strong oral and written communication skills, self-confidence, and customer relationship management (Fleming, Martin, Hughes & Zinn, 2009) highlight once again the importance of both personal and professional development throughout the practicum experience.

Conclusions/ implications

Drawing upon the experiences of the author/researcher, this ethnographic case study has allowed the development of an in-depth description of practicum course design across different sport management education contexts. Being an integral part of the research process, has allowed the researcher to be engaged in the group and activities that were observed. Whilst this paper has provided a personalised account, issues of credibility, transferability and ethical considerations have been addressed.

The findings from my participant observation, research, and prolonged involvement with the practicum courses over the past two decades suggest that these applied experiential learning experiences enhance graduate attributes and provide a point of difference that employers’ value. The examples provided have illustrated the importance of integrating a variety of reflection opportunities over time to enrich curriculum and program design, which the ever expanding field of experiential learning in sport management worldwide needs to increasingly embrace. A defining feature of these applied learning practicum experiences is praxis (Bates, 2008; Kolb, 1984), which links scholarship, critical thinking, research, and theory with practice.

References


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