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# Effective Strategies for Discussing Social Unrest within Sport Management Classrooms

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*Abstract:* The purpose of this article was to explore effective strategies for discussing social unrest within sport management classrooms. The authors explored the intersection of sport and social justice because social inequalities are often replicated in sport. The next area of focus for this article was exploring techniques to address sensitive conversations in the classroom. One of the techniques discussed was the Instructional Conversation, which is a form of a debate-based lesson that grows students' theoretical and philological skills through directed discourse where all students are held responsible for participation. The final area of exploration was the use the debate format to better understand social issues in sport. Debates are widely viewed as arguments in which two contrasting sides converse or argue from different positions along with reasons supporting their decision.

**Keywords:** sport management, inclusion, social justice, classroom debate

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## **EFFECTIVE STRATEGIES FOR DISCUSSING SOCIAL INJUSTICE WITHIN SPORT MANAGEMENT CLASSROOMS**

A major focus of the field of sport management since its inception as an educational field has been placed on preparing the next generation of practitioners that can lead in the ever-changing sports industry (Sutton, 1989; Perry, 2017). In addition to this focus, the intersection of sport and society has grown as sport continues to serve as a microcosm of society. The merging of sport and society today has resulted in a myriad of events including the creation of new social movements, the transformation of athletes to activists, and sport organizations becoming more aligned with supporting social justice initiatives. Due to these changes witnessed in practical sport management settings, an increased need for professors to include learning activities that challenge students to progressively think about equity in the sports industry is critical in preparing students for future employment.

However, openly discussing personal views on race and other social topics can be challenging within the classroom setting for professors as well as students. Students can be apprehensive of completing racially or socially focused activities in the classroom because they do not want to be perceived as being racially insensitive. Students of color can also experience a level of discomfort and vulnerability during classroom discussions and feel powerless when they represent a racial demographic group that experiences discrimination in society. This feeling of discrimination can also be experienced in classrooms during discussions and learning activities. Moreover, students of color can feel as if they carry additional pressure by being viewed as the voice for their demographic (Whit, 2016). For instance, an African American may feel as if they are speaking for all African Americans if the group is not well represented in the classroom. Whit (2016) suggests that when exploring controversial social topics in educational settings, professors can experience students dissociating themselves from the inequality, violence, or oppression that they are discussing.

Given the current impact of the social climate in America, the purpose of this article is to provide techniques in which sport management instructors can effectively discuss race and social injustice within sport management classrooms to prepare students for the profession. An overview of the merging between sport and social action and information surrounding strategies that sport management professors can implement to push the conversation related to race and social injustice in sport forward in the classroom will be provided. The essay concludes with discussing the use of the classroom debate format to address social issues related to sport.

### **The Intersection of Sport and Social Justice**

Sports have a long history of being used as a platform to advance equality and to protest social and racial injustice. According to Henry and Oates (2019), commercialized sport in the United States has long been a stage for athletes to contest racial tension and social grievance. However, racism continues to permeate professional sport leagues like the National Basketball Association (NBA) as well as society (Agyemang & Singer, 2014). Historically, sport figures such as Jack Johnson, Muhammad Ali, Billie Jean King, Branch Rickey, and Jackie Robinson have been sport activist and are noteworthy contributors that have pushed forward the idea of inclusion through sport. However, the connection between sport and activism has not always been received well by fans, players, and leaders of sport organizations.

Colin Kaepernick's decision to kneel during the national anthem in 2016 ultimately resulted in the end of his playing career in the National Football League (NFL). Predecessors like Craig Hodges and Mahmoud Abdul-Rauf met similar consequences in the NBA for their stance of opposing social injustice and using sport as a platform to protest. The impact of Kaepernick's decision to forfeit his career in support of his stance on social injustice and police brutality impacted sport management professors as his actions were a teachable moment to evaluate how practitioners in the field can best manage sport organizations during times of social unrest. Sport figures who use their platforms to advocate for social and/or political causes often find themselves criticized in the public eye. Professional athletes can also feel marginalized for speaking out against social issues (Coombs & Cassilo, 2017, Kaufman, 2008). Previous literature has discussed the connection between sports and equality, however limited research has investigated the best practices to critically discuss race, racism, and social injustice in sport management classrooms.

More recently, the deaths of unarmed African Americans captured on video and released to the public has resulted in social movements such as Black Lives Matter (Coombs & Cassilo, 2017). These deaths have also occurred within the communities of a large portion of athletes in sports today. As a result, many athletes on all levels of sport and even prominent professional players have become more cognizant of the increased social tension and have participated in peaceful protest in and around sport settings. When athletes in the NBA returned to competition during the COVID-19 pandemic, players from teams engaged in various displays of solidarity to protest acts of social injustice that occurred. The displays included wearing game jerseys that included social justice messages, kneeling during the national anthem, and athletes refusing to play after the police shooting of Jacob Blake. In addition to the peaceful protest that occurred in the NBA, other athletes, and leagues, such as Major League Baseball (MLB) and tennis player Naomi Osaka postponed games and withdrew from competition respectively (Cohen, 2020; Denyer, 2020). With injustices that evoke a wide range of reactions by the public continuing to occur at a steady rate in society, professors must employ effective strategies that allow students to build on their knowledge of the impact of social injustice on the field of sport management.

### **Techniques to Address Sensitive Conversations in the Classroom**

As the field of sport management continues to adjust to changes within society, university faculty recognizes the need to communicate complex social dynamics with students. To this end, the techniques of instructional conversation, effective communication, and cultural sensitivity can assist professors in discussing difficult topics in sport management classrooms. Instructional conversation is a form of a discussion-based lesson that develops students' conceptual and linguistic skills through guided discourse where all students are held accountable for participation (Goldsmith, 2013). Instructional conversation provides the foundation for effective communication. Communication is defined as a process by which information is exchanged between individuals through a common system of symbols, signs, or behavior (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). Effective communication is one of the most basic and crucial skills utilized in the university classroom. Effective communication enables students to share feelings, views, and philosophies as they relate to topics of discussion. While effective communication may seem simple and superficial, it entails a vast amount of attention to and consideration of body language, eye contact, summarizing, paraphrasing, and responding which are significant to a professor's capacity to not only effectively communicate but also to garner effective communication from students.

Body language is important to consider because the gestures, movements, and mannerisms by which a person communicates with others can give the indication of discomfort. Visual contact with another person's eyes is another way for instructors to notice if a person is uneasy or feels discomfort during a conversation. It is very important that conversations are reinforced by summarizing details of what has been communicated; this element helps to promote effective communication by ensuring clear understanding. Paraphrasing is another key element of effective communication because it allows conversationalists to provide conversation using different forms of expression. Finally, the element of responding is vital to the process of effective communication because it allows conversationalists the opportunity to be heard and, ultimately, provide valuable insight to the conversations.

Another widely used approach to address sensitive conversations in the classroom is Cultural Sensitivity. Culture can be conceptualized and defined differently depending on one's worldview and one's needs as a researcher and scholar (Tillman, 2002). To effectively meet the challenges of an increasingly diverse population of learners, academics must employ a student-centered approach to teaching and learning that not only relays instructional content, but also engages students in authentic activities that elicit disciplinary discourse to construct knowledge (Anderson, 2007). Culturally sensitive professors approach both ethnicity and position of the individual. The use of culturally sensitive research approaches can be a catalyst for educational change (Kershaw, 1992). It is vital that university faculty maintain awareness for elements of sensitivity, inclusion, and objectivity during academic discussions.

### **Using the Debate Format to Better Understand Social Issues in Sport**

Social unrest, controversies, and other issues associated with sport and the surrounding community has increased significantly over the past decade. High profile cases and significant media coverage has brought various social issues to the forefront. The repetitive nature of various issues with the absence of consequences has led sports professionals and athletes to become more engaged. The sport industry is immersed within its local community and diverse, while at the time has a global and corporate presence (Guinness & Besnier, 2016). Within sport sociology and ethics courses, topics surrounding social issues are discussed as a part of the curriculum. Within other courses, current issues within sport discussions and case studies are presented. Incorporating the issues into other course subjects could be effective if presented through the debate format.

A debate is an exchange of arguments in which two opposing sides discuss or argue from different standpoints along with reasons supporting their decision (Liu & Sukavatee, 2019). Tessier (2009) noted that active learning environments along with the incorporation of debates within course format would improve student critical thinking and analytical skills. The classroom debate has a positive effect on students' learning environment and encourages them to become more engaged and informed citizens. Social unrest and social issues often bring out various points of views, divisiveness, and argumentative behaviors. According to Wolla (2018), the strength in having debates comes in the form of being able to present both sides of the argument in a controlled environment. Faculty members must encourage open dialogue, set parameters, and effective methods for reducing bias. As a result, we will gain more insight into the credibility of sources, identifications of assumptions, noting inconsistencies, and revealing the relevance of various points within the argument (Kennedy (2007).

Various social issues and unrest surrounding the sport industry would be related to inclusion and exclusion. When we explore this topic, we see that it incorporates the denial and lack

of resources, rights, service, participation associated with relationships, and activities that are available within our society (Haudenhuyse & Theeboom, 2015). Sports encompass various factors related to economic, social, cultural, and policy differences associated with inclusion and exclusion. In addition, the reach that it has is powerful due to how individuals imagine themselves and their surrounding communities (Guinness & Besnier, 2016). The use of debate within sport management classrooms can foster the desire of future sports leaders' interest in the welfare of their communities during challenging times.

### **Conclusion**

Evidence of society impacting sport can be found throughout history. Recent examples of this dynamic include social justice messages worn on NBA jerseys, professional teams refusing to play after a nationally publicized police shooting of an African American man, and social demonstrations during the playing of the National Anthem at sporting events. As a result, professors in the field must critically explore society and race with students in various learning environments. This practice promotes an increased awareness of social injustice and career preparation. However, factors such as unshared personal experience, bias, and other differences contribute to the difficulty of having substantive conversations on these topics. Effective strategies include instructional conversation, effective communication, cultural sensitivity, and critical debate. With these strategies professors can empower students to have meaningful learning experiences involving critical topics.

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