Critical perspectives in sport management teaching: Insights, challenges, and looking forward

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The sport management literature has echoed and reinforced calls for a critical approach to management (Amis & Silk, 2005; Frisby, 2005). Within the critical paradigm, management is analyzed as an influential social construction, which has been produced and reproduced through the largely uncontested mantra of business schools and managers. For example, management decisions are often presented as reflecting employees’ needs. Critical management studies, however, propose that these needs are presented by management in a way that only conventional management can satisfy, for example promotion and appraisal systems that favour specific outputs over others (Townley, 2003). In this way, the pursuit of profit and other quantifiable goals are valued, while social justice issues such as cultural, environmental, values based, ethical and equity concerns are often marginalized (Alvesson & Willmott, 2003; Jermier & Forbes, 2003; Meyerson, & Kolb, 2000; Singer 2005). Critical approaches therefore question, and present alternatives to, taken for granted assumptions about dominant management practices and their centrality within organizations. Approaching management from a critical perspective may enable alternative considerations to be valued.

Sport management has developed to reflect and reinforce management convention, largely focusing on outcomes-focused, profit-orientated approaches (Frisby, 2005). There are, however, increasing numbers of advocates of critical research and practice within sport management (Edwards, 1999). To date, there has been little discussion of challenges and opportunities presented by adopting such an approach within sport management education. The purpose of this round-table is therefore to offer, discuss, and examine the potential for critical perspectives to inform sport management education.

In order to work towards this purpose, the round-table will address both conceptual and practical considerations for adopting a critical approach within sport management teaching, drawing on the critical management education literature (Frost 1997; Huczynski, 1994; Zald, 2002). The round-table will provide a number of perspectives, being international in composition with presenters from New Zealand, Canada, and the USA. Multiple academic backgrounds are also represented by business school, human kinetics, sport management and sociological interests. Each presenter has utilized varying degrees of critical perspectives within their teaching. The round table will be framed by the critical paradigmatic approach of insight, critique, and transformative redefinition (Alvesson & Deetz, 2000), addressing the following questions and issues.

Firstly, each presenter will provide insight by discussing how they define critical sport management education. They will describe their own teaching context and the features that constitute a critical approach within that context. For example, competitive funding for high performance athletes is a relatively new feature of sport in New Zealand. It is presented by the national funding body for sport, Sport and Recreation New Zealand, as an effective funding mechanism and is routinely accepted as such by students. Yet, from a critical perspective, the processes by which such funding is allocated, the punitive nature of its removal if athletes fail to be competitive against better resourced athletes on the international stage, and the broader effects of such funding on other areas of sport are problematic. This context provides an interesting departure point for teaching discussions.

Further insight will be offered as presenters consider the challenges of, and opportunities evident in, incorporating a critical perspective in developing a sport management courses and curriculum. For example, they will outline the strengths and weaknesses of locating critical perspectives within the regulations and culture of their own university departments. In the USA, a business orientation tends to prevail within sport management programs. Moreover, these programs face an increasingly challenging environment, one in which schools of business are becoming relevant players in sport management as programs move to schools of business (e.g., UMass), partner with schools of business (e.g., Ohio University), are created in schools of business (e.g., Central Florida), and courses in sport management are offered by elite business schools (e.g., Wharton, USC, Stanford, Columbia, UCLA, MIT). We will examine how this environment influences the receptivity of a critical approach to sport management among program faculty and administrators and how a critical perspective can add value to student education within this environment.

Presenters will engage in critique and reflection as they outline concerns such as the accessibility of literature on critical theory and management. This literature can be challenging for students who are not used to negotiating the sociological language, concepts, and assumptions prevalent within critical management studies. Yet, it is central to the maintenance of academic rigour.
within the field (Amis & Silk, 2005; Hinnings & Greenwood, 2002).

Acknowledging and challenging taken for granted assumptions about management are central to a critical framework (Alvesson & Willmott, 2003). The presenters will discuss this philosophy in relation to both their students' and their own assumptions about management. For example, providing students with the skills to employ the 'best person for the job' may be a key objective in teaching human resource management courses. How often, though, do students and academics actively reflect on their own assumptions with regard to gender, race, disability, and educational background, in deciding what constitutes 'best'?

A central position of critical management studies is the desire to work 'with' not 'on' organizations (Alvesson & Deetz, 2000). The presenters will discuss some of the considerations involved in developing this aspect within their teaching. For example, the practicalities of gaining access to sport organizations will be addressed. Specifically, the complex issue of outlining the potential benefits of students' critical projects to managers, weighed against the potential deterrent in 'critical' terminology will be discussed. Furthermore, the development of assignments that are meaningful both for undergraduate and graduate students and the organizations in which they might work or volunteer will be considered. Students and educators need to carefully negotiate how projects and reports from a critical sport management perspective will be received and acted upon.

Finally, presenters will be challenged to critique their own practice and to ask whether critical education perspectives have a place in sport management curriculum development, given the success and ubiquity of conventional management and its "door-stopping, jaw dropping textbooks [in which] managers are presented as carriers of rationality and initiative." (Alvesson & Willmott, 2003, p. 8). If critical perspectives do have a place in sport management, then attendees will be asked to contemplate what this may look like in current and future contexts of sport management.

The critical process ends ideally with transformative redefinition based on insight and critique. With regard to the conference theme, we cannot guarantee 'good sport' but we hope to work towards 'better sport' through the process of this round table. Namely, the round-table will serve as an introduction to critical management studies for those who may be considering its adoption. For those who are in the process of utilizing a critical approach, there will be ample opportunity to discuss common ideas and challenges within the teaching context. The international and academically diverse representation of the round-table will ensure a wide variety of teaching contexts in which to contemplate the critical approach. There will be an opportunity to network and share ideas and practical tips with other educators who value the critical paradigm and want to consider its inclusion within sport management. An important objective of the roundtable is to engage all in attendance. With this in mind, substantial time is planned for interaction and open discussion.

References: