

Title: Improving Integration of Capstone Literature in Socio-Cultural Dimensions of Sport

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Summary: To inspire more critical reflection over course texts, a health, sport, and exercise sciences professor revises out-of-class assignments and in-class discussion to require students to engage with the texts throughout the semester rather than just in the final paper.

Background

Socio-Cultural Dimensions of Sport, HSES 830, is a discussion-based graduate course designed to engage students in an in-depth analysis of the socio-cultural aspects of the sporting field. It is required of all graduate students in the health, sport, and exercise sciences program. The course, taught in the fall semester, has a typical enrollment of approximately 15 students. We meet once a week for two and a half hours.

The major goal of this course is to increase critical thinking about the role sport plays in society and the “deeper meanings and stories associated with sports” (Coakley, 2007, p. 4). In order to be successful in the course, students must also be able to:

- Identify the positive and negative impact sport has on individuals, organizations, and institutions;
- Write substantial, in-depth research papers that are consistently formatted and documented according to APA guidelines; and
- Engage in civilized, respectful discussions and disagreements about course topics.

This course covers various issues related to high school, collegiate, and professional sports. The course content is arranged topically, with discussion topics ranging from the commercialization of sport to the roles race, religion, gender, and sexuality play in sport. The majority of class time is typically devoted to small or large-group discussion of the week’s designated topic.

I assess students’ understanding of the course material through a series of short-answer quizzes over the required readings given throughout the semester, six brief response papers, and a final research paper (discussed below). The response papers are spaced throughout the semester and require students to critically analyze context and policies. Each student is also required to lead discussion once during the semester.

Students are required to prepare for weekly discussion by reading articles posted to the course Blackboard site. In addition, there are two required texts for the course: *Our Boys* by Joe Drape and *The Last Shot* by Darcy Frey. *Our Boys* describes the experiences of a successful high school football team in Smith Center, Kansas, as they navigate the retirement of their legendary coach and the graduation of an exceptionally talented class of senior athletes. In *The Last Shot*, Frey follows four gifted inner-city high school basketball players in New York as they use their skills to escape their troubled home lives. Students must read these capstone texts in preparation for their final paper, comparing and contrasting key aspects of the books’ settings and content.

While the papers have been fairly successful overall, I sensed that the students were not deriving as much value as possible from these capstone texts. Though students generally enjoy the books, asking them to read 600 pages for the sole purpose of writing one paper seemed like an unreasonable demand. I also wanted to give students the opportunity to display their understanding of these texts in other contexts, such as in-class discussions and shorter response papers. Put simply, I wanted students to get more out of the texts than just one paper.

This led me to think about ways I could refigure the roles the two books played in the course in order to maximize student engagement and understanding. When developing my course schedule for fall 2014, I decided to integrate the readings throughout the semester rather than requiring them solely for the final research paper. In my redesigned course, students are required to have portions of the book read in preparation for various class discussions. They also have the opportunity to integrate the knowledge gained from these required texts into their shorter response papers. In doing this, I hoped to give students the opportunity to discuss and debate issues presented in these texts during class time, allowing them to add to their classmates' (at times competing) perspectives and interpretations. I also wanted students to engage with the material through discussion, because as they enter the workforce, they will need to be able to discuss (not just write about) the issues covered in this class. I assessed the effectiveness of my course redesign by examining students' performance on the quizzes and the extent to which they were able to integrate the readings into their papers and discussions.

In all, I believed this change would greatly improve the quality of the graduate class. Both required books are relevant to nearly every topic we discuss throughout the semester, and my goal in implementing them throughout the semester was to add to the in-class debate, quality of response papers, and breadth of viewpoints in the final response papers. Finally, the option to read the books in the last couple weeks was not available, which I hoped would increase the understanding of the material in the books and add value to their use.

Implementation

I implemented my changes in fall 2014. The general discussion-based structure of the course did not change. A typical class period consisted of me presenting students with a series of topics or discussion questions, followed by time for students to address these topics in small groups or as a class. In addition to participating in class discussion, each student was asked to lead discussion once during the semester. Several times throughout the semester, I invited guest speakers (including journalists and professors from other universities) to speak to the class via Skype. Students seemed to appreciate the unique perspectives these guest speakers provided, as well as the opportunity to ask them questions.

In my redesign of the course, the assignments and in-class discussions were reformulated to inspire critical reflection on the two required course texts, Joe Drape's *Our Boys* and Darcy Frey's *The Last Shot*. Previous iterations of the course asked students to engage with these texts only for the final paper. Though previous students typically performed well on this paper, I felt that the books were not being utilized to their full potential. The way I had organized the class allowed students to put off reading the books (600 pages total) until the end of the semester, which encouraged procrastination and discouraged close reading. By requiring students to read portions of the texts to prepare for class discussions and preliminary assignments throughout the semester, I hoped to encourage deeper engagement with the texts.

I also encouraged students to space out their reading of the capstone texts by coordinating their reading assignments with six short response papers I required throughout the semester, allowing students to see connections between the books and their paper topics. These three- to five-page papers asked students to reflect on the topics we discussed in class, including the future of football in the United States, the role sport plays in socialization, and the importance of sports in secondary education. These papers were designed to lead directly into the final paper. Based on feedback I'd received the previous year, I decreased the number of these assignments from eight to six and increased the point value of each from 25 to 50 points. I hoped the decreased frequency and increased grade incentive would inspire students to put more time and critical thinking into their work. The grading criteria for these papers included categories for inquiry and analysis, integration and application of course material, critical thinking, research, and writing skills.

As expected, many students did integrate material from the books into their response papers, demonstrating that they were not only keeping up with the assigned reading, but also were thinking about it critically enough to apply it to course topics. Students also demonstrated their thinking about the assigned books in class discussion. Finally, students were given a final paper assignment that explicitly asked them to engage with the primary course texts. This final paper assignment did not change with my redesign.

Student Work

The assignments I selected for the course were designed to get students to critically engage with the course topics and assigned readings. I assessed the response papers and the final project according to a common rubric that emphasized in-depth analysis and use of supporting evidence.

Though overall engagement with in-class discussion was lower than it had been in past semesters (for reasons I discuss in the “Reflection” section), the discussions and reading quizzes did indicate that students were keeping up with the reading and enjoying the books. The final course grade breakdown is as follows:

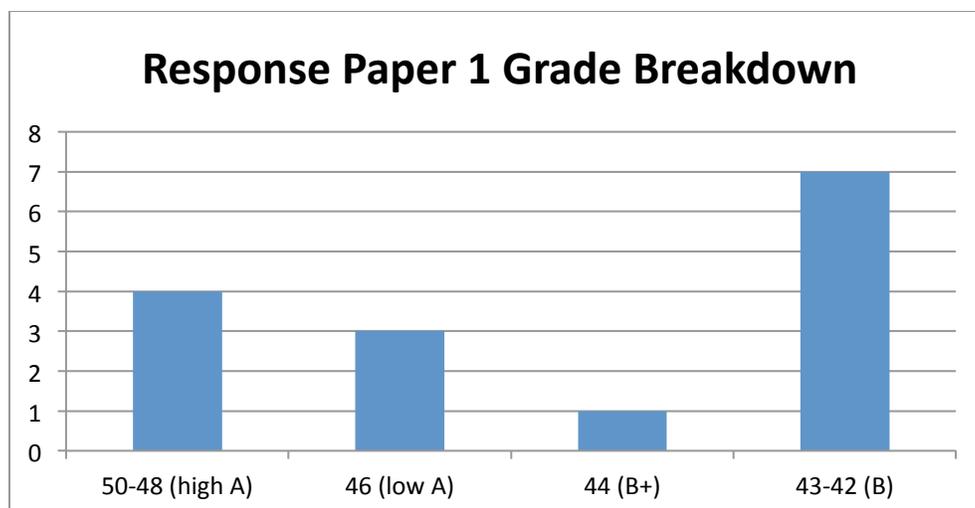
- A: 10
- A-: 2
- B+: 1
- B: 2

This grade distribution is slightly lower than it had been in previous iterations of the course. In the past, the vast majority of graduate students in this course earned a grade in the A range, and B’s were highly unusual. I speculate about possible reasons for this decrease in performance in the Reflection section. Though I was disappointed in several students’ work, the fact that the majority of students received A’s is in line with previous semesters.

Performance on the response papers varied week to week based on the topic, though there were some consistently high and low performers. Unfortunately, several students did not incorporate my feedback on their written work into future papers, which negatively affected their performance.

Response Paper 1

For their first three- to five-page response paper, students were asked to respond to the following prompt: “Based on the readings and videos, outline what you believe are the positive and detrimental aspects of high school athletics. Provide solutions to any issues you identify.” I was pleased with the quality of many students’ work, though several had issues with the quality of their writing and supporting their arguments. The overall grade breakdown for the first response paper was comparable to or slightly lower than previous semesters (numerical scores are out of a possible 50 points):



None of the examples provided here incorporated material from *Our Boys* or *The Last Shot*, though I believe the books informed their thinking about the prompt.

Student A—Response Paper

Student A received a perfect score on this paper. His argument was well-constructed and well-supported. He used secondary sources effectively and cited them properly in APA format. Student A's success on this paper can perhaps be partially attributed to the fact that he'd had me in class before and knew my expectations for written work.

Student B—Response Paper

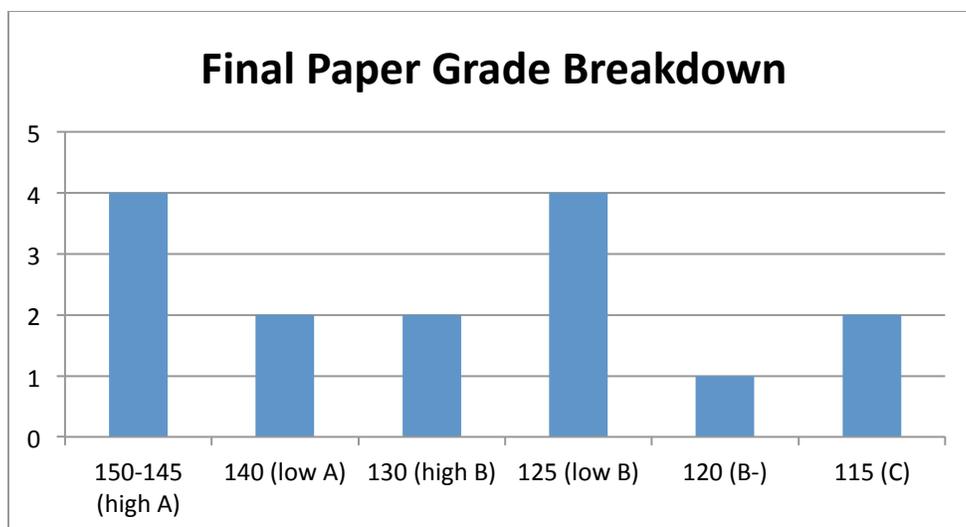
Student B received 46 out of 50 points. His argument construction was strong, though his introduction and conclusion needed improvement. His writing in these sections was too casual and left too many holes where his argument could be debunked. In my written feedback, I advised him to avoid throwaway sentences in these sections and focus on his argument.

Student C—Response Paper

This student received 42 out of 50 points. Though he had some good ideas and strong arguments, these arguments generally lacked support. I advised him to improve this by clearly referencing his own experience and/or the work of other authors to support his opinions.

Final Paper

I did see particular improvement in the final paper, where students were required to reflect on the assigned books. Most students were able to critically compare and contrast the works, put them in dialogue with secondary sources, and apply them to course topics. For many students, this paper was the strongest work they completed for the course. The grade breakdown for this paper was, again, comparable to previous semesters, if not a little lower (numerical scores are out of a possible 150 points):



Despite the low average, I was pleased with the improvement I saw in several students' written work, and I believe the integration of the assigned books throughout the semester enhanced the quality of this work.

Student B—Final Paper

Student B received 145 out of 150 points. This was easily the best paper he submitted for the course. There were a few unsupported conclusions and gaps in his arguments, but overall I was very impressed with his work.

Student D—Final Paper

Student D also received 145 out of 150 points. The paper was really well done overall. My only suggestion in my written feedback was to add a few more sources on the basics of socialization.

Student E—Final Paper

Student E received 140 out of 150 points. Though the paper was well done overall, it jumped around a bit at times and could have used more academic references.

Student F —Final Paper

This student received 130 out of 150 points. Though the paper was generally good, it needed more outside sources to show that the student had a full grasp of the central ideas presented in the books. I also advised this student to include more breadth in terms of content and analysis.

Reflections

Overall, I was pleased with the results of my course redesign. Integrating the capstone texts throughout the semester enabled students to draw on these books during in-class discussions and in their written work, enriching the quality of both. Students made connections between material presented in the texts and the topics we discussed in class, demonstrating that they could apply their knowledge to specific contexts and situations. Moreover, requiring students to read portions of these texts throughout the semester prevented them from putting off the reading until the final project, which improved the quality of the final papers.

While I was pleased with the student work in general, there are also several areas for improvement. Based on my observations and the quality of several students' work, I noticed a lack of student engagement and preparedness that I hadn't seen in previous iterations of the course. Students often did not complete out-of-class assignments, such as preparing discussion questions for guest speakers (a format which, in previous classes, piqued student interest and enhanced quality of discussion). Whereas previous classes often engaged in deep discussion and even heated debate, these students were, in general, more reluctant to engage with discussion topics and express opinions on controversial issues. They did not seem to take the course seriously. The reasons for this are unclear, as I did not make any major changes to the course other than what is outlined above, and those changes resulted in positive outcomes (in fact, I suspect discussion would have lagged even more without the inclusion of the capstone texts).

In addition, though students did draw good connections to the course texts in their written work, the quality of the writing was generally lower than it had been in previous semesters. I noticed that several students made the same errors in most of their response papers and the final paper, despite the fact that I provided feedback on each assignment. This indicates that these students either were not reading my feedback or were not incorporating it into subsequent papers. Again, I can only speculate about the reasons behind this, but I suspect it is connected to the lack of engagement I observed in class. In order to address these concerns, I plan to incorporate the following changes the next time I teach a graduate course:

- I will include points for in-class discussion and participation in the final grade calculations.
- I will require students to turn in preliminary drafts of the final project so I can track their progress, give feedback before the final draft, and ensure that they don't put off the assignment until the last minute.

Though I had previously resisted taking these steps in graduate courses, as I assumed these expectations would go without saying, my experiences in this course suggest that even graduate students benefit from this kind of explicit structure.