

There is More to Life Than Sport: Debating Popular Culture to Develop Critical Thinking Skills

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Paul Cook's research examines consumer culture, human interaction, marketing, pedagogic practice, and identity construction.

Contemporary universities are compelled to produce efficient graduates who comply with the dominant hegemony, instead of the autonomous critical thinkers envisaged by pioneering pedagogic philosophers such as Dewey and Freire (Tabensky, 2023). However, in an era of diminished opportunities, AI, culture wars, and information saturation, graduates who can combine theoretical knowledge and advanced critical thinking skills with a global outlook and multicultural awareness are more attractive to international sport organizations (Cook, 2022). In this article, I adopt a story analysis approach to reflect upon the co-creation of a learning environment designed to enhance Sport Management students' critical thinking skills and their employability. We began by adopting Freire's (1970) critical pedagogy framework to co-produce a series of debates enabling first-year students to explore and resolve contentious popular culture issues. The initial response was unenthusiastic, sports management students asked why they were debating global politics and popular culture. However, through constant encouragement, we achieved the desired pedagogic outcomes where first-year students quickly progressed from information takers to critical thinkers with global awareness.

Keywords: Critical Pedagogy, Critical Thinking, Learning Environment, Employability, Debate

1. Introduction

Management is a profession which is perceived as ineffective by 73 per cent of the workforce (Chartered Management Institute (CMI), 2023). This is unsurprising given that only 18 per cent of managers have had an opportunity to receive any formal training, the remaining 82 per cent are accidental managers promoted for demonstrating proficiency in unrelated competencies (CMI, 2023). With little experience or knowledge to draw upon, untrained accidental managers adopt practices associated with New Managerialism (Davies, 2003).

These practices include assuming the power of control, bullying staff, only valuing what can be audited by other accidental managers, and conforming to whatever is politically favourable to their career advancement (Craig, Amernic & Tourish, 2014; Davies, 2003; Heller, 2022). According to Davies (2003), the most significant concern associated with the rise of New Managerialism is the demise of critical thinking required to ruminate strategically, have empathy, challenge existing knowledge and find innovations.

It is not just accidental managers who are denied opportunities to develop critical thinking skills. Sotiriadou and Hill (2014) lament that management students are rarely explicitly taught fundamental critical thinking skills. Therefore, as Tabensky (2023) asserts, universities, as the training ground for qualified managers, no longer produce critical thinkers. Due to political interventions and efficiency initiatives, critical pedagogies are disregarded in favour of focusing on delivering the core curricula to service the utilitarian demand for compliant management graduates who meet the ideological requirements of the dominant hegemony (Heller, 2022; Sotiriadou & Hill, 2014; Tabensky, 2023). This is problematic for future sport managers. The world is complex and messy (Zakus, Malloy & Edwards, 2007), with sport organizations being among the most complex (de Schepper, Sotiriadou & Hill, 2020). Consequently, sport management teaching must provide students with the types of complex and messy stimuli they will encounter in the workplace accompanied by bespoke opportunities to perform and practice critical thinking and critical reflection through social interactions where personal behavioural and emotional skills are developed in conjunction with broader cultural and social awareness (de Schepper et al., 2020). Zakus, et al., (2007, p. 23) advise that for sport management students to become authentic critical thinkers with the ability to critically reflect, they must be allowed to challenge the ‘ontological, epistemological and axiological assumptions’ employed to create a priori knowledge, to assess ethical and moral structures, and to reflect upon what their core and weak values are. However, supporting

students to become critical and reflective thinkers is wasteful if it does not meet and enhance a workforce need, and afford the students an advantage in the competition for the most desirable sport management careers (Cook, 2022; Zakus et al., 2007). Hence, Dan Hughes, whose firm BridgeAbility advises several English Premier League clubs, agents and players on how to succeed in transfer negotiations, contextualization of critical thinking as an essential sport management and graduate skill provides an astute relationship between classroom and professional practice (Henson, 2023):

Being able to see the differing perspectives and circumstances on both sides is key to predicting if a deal might be possible and, if so, at what price. That is the first fundamental thing. An ability to step outside of your world and look at the other party's pressures, problems and opportunities. Seeing the negotiation from their viewpoint changes everything.

However, it is not just management students who suffer due to the demise of opportunities to engage in critical thinking; no academic subject exists in a societal vacuum. Accordingly, Van de Noort (in Adams, 2024) warns universities against becoming echo chambers where staff and students conform to the identity politics favoured by the dominant hegemony instead of confronting alternative ideas and pedagogic approaches. Likewise, Freshwater (2024), argues that the core purpose of universities is to encourage the types of critical thinking which are the antithesis of identity politics and culture wars. Thus, beyond the managerial context of this article, critical thinking is emerging as an increasingly rare and important twenty-first-century graduate skill to respond to ongoing and emerging struggles to (mis)inform public opinion.

The history of culture wars extends back centuries; however, in the era of social media and AI-generated content, they have more reach. Culture wars generalize, perpetuate oversimplistic single-issue assertions, spread misinformation, and create echo chambers

(Anjeh & Doraisamy, 2022; Pilgrim, 2022). The purpose of a culture war is to inflame the binary divisions inherent in identity politics (Rojek & Turner, 2001). Accordingly, culture wars disempower critical thinking by making people afraid to present opposing opinions (Anjeh & Doraisamy, 2022; Pilgrim, 2022). Remarkably there is broad agreement from binary opposite right- and left-wing political commentators that universities need to be brave and defiant by enabling their students to debate contentious culture war issues from a critical perspective (Adams, 2024; Dilworth, 2022). Yet, almost half of British universities do not have debating societies where students can learn, develop and reflect upon the social dimensions of their critical thinking skills (Dilworth, 2022).

Nevertheless, it is not just political interventions and willing or grudging compliance with the dominant hegemony that has resulted in the overall decline of critical thinking (Wells, 2023). Due to work and social commitments, contemporary students no longer have the time to practice critical thinking skills, such as reflecting, taking time to listen and respond, problem-solving, and seeking contrary perspectives (Wells, 2023). Therefore, if critical thinking is not initiated at university, students are unlikely to develop and learn these skills elsewhere. Consequently, whilst the decline of critical thinking skills impoverishes society, it also presents an opportunity for innovative professors and motivated students to adopt pedagogies in co-created learning environments to develop critical thinking skills which provide an advantage in the competition for professional-level careers (Cook, 2022; Zakus, 2007).

Earlier studies identified the benefits of a scaffolded assessment approach (Sotiriadou & Hill, 2014; Woodward-Kron & Remedios, 2007), and reflection upon work-integrated learning (WIL) experiences (de Schepper et al., 2020) to enhance critical thinking learning opportunities in the existing curricula. However, in addition to the adoption of scaffolded assessments and WIL experiences, we sought opportunities to facilitate the development of critical thinking and reflection skills in the type of bespoke learning environment suggested by

de Schepper, et al. (2020). Our chosen pedagogical approach was a series of debates, which Alén, Domínguez & de Carlos (2015) summarised as a teaching method that motivates students individual and collective active learning, research, analysis, and social interactions. The purpose of this article is to revisit the contemporary rationale for enabling critical thinking, highlight the diminishing time and space available in higher education to participate in these activities, and discuss opportunities and barriers to engaging in the debate of contentious popular culture issues.

2. There is More to Life Than Sport

The context for our study is a transnational education partner institute in Spain. The Barcelona campus functions as a Sport Law and Business School delivering a variety of year-long master's level programmes and our three-year BSc (honours) Sport Management programme awarded by Northumbria University. The BSc students are the only undergraduates on campus. They study the same English language Sport Management programme as the UK-based students, having met identical language proficiency and prior qualifications admission criterion. All the programmes in Barcelona are managed and taught by academics Hodgson and Garner, 2023) define as 'tri-professionals' due to their knowledge and skills as sport industry practitioners, experienced professors, and academic or industry researchers.

In keeping with all-day Spanish university timetables and the philosophy and employability-oriented culture of the Sport Law and Business School, the BSc students had requested additional development opportunities to enhance their career prospects. Aware that many of them have established vicarious relationships with sport teams and players, which is consistent with the emotive and clannish nature of sport (Beverland, 2009), we avoided asking our first-year BSc students to discuss the tribalism of sport or management as a profession. Instead, we challenged the students to critically think about contentious global issues at play in

popular culture, and then engage in a debate. The critical thinking debates supplemented a social issues module, which is limiting by being framed within the Western-centric theories and assertions of a priori assumption taught in the politicized context of Western sociology (Rojek & Turner, 2000). Therefore, our purpose was to prompt the students' motivation to become unbounded curious learners who adopt a holistic deep meta-learning strategy to critically explore a topic where they have limited prior knowledge (Biggs, 1987).

As discussed elsewhere (Cook, 2022), we aimed to co-create a learning environment where students critique theoretical knowledge and develop can-do competencies. Menger (1871/1976) explained that scarce objects have greater marginal utility and subjective value than common commodities; therefore, having an opportunity to acquire critical thinking skills would be advantageous in the competition for the most desired career paths. To achieve this aim, we adopted Freire's (1970) critical pedagogy approach. In contrast to the limitations of Western-centric sociology and New Managerialism, Freire (1970) proposed that accepting dominant ideas restricts societal advancements. Thus, Freire (1970) advocates a deep learning approach where students challenge existing knowledge through transformative dialectic interactions. It is through these types of critical pedagogy dialectic and dialectic interactions that students develop critical thinking skills leading to finding creative solutions, implementing innovative ideas, and hastening societal advancement (Costello, Brunner and Hasty, 2002; Serrano, et al., 2018; Zakus et al., 2007).

As mentioned previously, our learning environment was a Law and Business School at the partner university, where debates are fundamental to the practice of teaching law. We chose this partner and learning environment because it provided access to a motivated and internationally diverse cohort. Furthermore, our partner's approach to learning helped us to provide local access to the type of student debating society offered as an option at our home institution. The student's demand for and willingness to engage in extracurricular activities

provided the flexibility in the programme required to perform supplementary critical pedagogy activities. The cohort was first-year BSc Sport Management students from seven countries; therefore, they brought diverse personal and societal experiences. As Woodward-Kron & Remedios (2007) findings reveal, linguistic and cultural diversity creates the challenge of classroom discourse and presents an opportunity to enhance cultural awareness. Initially, the cohort anticipated that they would experience what Freire (1970) conceptualized as a banking model of education, where the students are passive vessels waiting to be filled with a priori knowledge. However, with our commitment to critical pedagogy and transformative dialectic interactions, we sought to achieve more than merely banking our knowledge and world views into passive student's minds. Thus, we encouraged the students to engage in co-creating an experiential learning environment that enabled them to set their own goals and actions and to own the knowledge they had acquired and critically analyzed. To enhance their experiential learning and authentic enquiry-based learning we assisted the students to use the resources available at the Law and Business School. When preparing for their assessments and extracurricular activities, we encouraged the students to network with the sport lawyers, managers and agents who frequently visit the campus. Seeking advice from prominent sport legal and managerial professionals provided real-world insight into how critical thinking and balanced reasoning are vital in their professions; thus, demonstrating a connection between academic theory and professional practice.

We began our supplementary critical thinking debates by asking the students to form two groups. Then we presented the students with a research topic drawn from popular culture, asking each group to create an evidence-based argument which supported or opposed a viewpoint on the weekly topic; subjects included the war in Ukraine, Britain's withdrawal from the European Union, the emergence of misogyny influencers, and the purpose of the Eurovision Song Contest. As we anticipated, the majority of students had not given more than passing

notice to the contemporary topics of debate. They acknowledged that consistent with the banking model of education (Freire, 1970), they had been passive information takers happily accepting the version of reality presented to them through various news agencies. Now confronted with a problem-posing education challenge to solve, the students were informed that to avoid culture wars and single-issue politics, which are the antithesis of critical thinking, we emphasized the need to prepare a balanced argument which anticipated counterarguments. To support the development of critical thinking skills related to real-world challenges, the students were encouraged to question versions of reality asserted by the dominant hegemony related to each topic. For example, the source of their evidence, whose voices were represented, and whether the information accessed was unbiased needed to be evaluated (Rojek & Turner, 2000). Consistent with Freire's (1970) notion that all education and communication are inherently political, we encouraged the students to seek evidence from a diverse range of sources including academic literature, broadsheet newspapers, web-based resources, and news broadcasts – an approach replicated in the development of this article. In addition, due to their diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds, we asked the students to self-reflexively consider what subjective opinions and insights they may have unconsciously conveyed in their argument. Our aim, as discussed by Zakus et al. (2007), was to help the students explore their ethical and moral choices as they worked towards becoming authentic thinkers with professional integrity. To demonstrate the benefits of critical thinking to provide a balanced understanding, we challenged the students to reflect on the potential for personal unauthenticity when they were presenting a one-sided argument that may not have aligned with their values. For instance, students reflected that defending misogyny or questioning the democratic decision of a Western nation was a challenge they had not expected in the first year of a sport management degree.

We scheduled the debates for 2 hours in non-teaching sessions, but they frequently overran due to the student's willingness to explore each topic in-depth. Each group presented

their evidence and listened to counterarguments. We encouraged and expected the listeners to be non-judgmental and respectful of their opponent's argument until it was their opportunity to present a counterargument. This ensured that they were open to innovative ideas and ways of interpreting information rather than trying to use the disempowerment tactics consistent with a culture war. In practice, the debates took the form of informal conversations about popular culture issues, rather than academic debates where finding a winner is more important than finding a solution. Our strategy was to provide a room and an evidence-based focus for the conversations students would naturally engage in with their peers. As the contentious popular culture issues were ongoing, the students could not find answers in a textbook – as they would when authoring a critical essay. Instead, these active agents and critical thinkers were required to analyze and interpret evidence from a variety of sources before suggesting new theoretical possibilities and practical resolutions to the contemporary issues they had identified.

Consistent with Freire's (1970) critical pedagogy approach, students and professors performed as co-learners rather than the latter adopting the role of authoritative distributors of knowledge. Post-debate we reflected on the one-sided arguments presented. The students had challenged existing structures of power, accepted theories, and ways of learning, and now critical pedagogy required us to reflect and act (Freire, 1970). Thus, reflection was important because we wanted the students to understand the politics of bias inherent in adopting a one-sided position that disregards context, complexity, and contradiction (de Schepper et al., 2020; Freshwater, 2024; Rojek & Turner, 2000). Throughout the debates we co-produced the notion that we (professors) were not there to teach students how to manage (in the New Managerialism sense); instead, we were there to support the student's developmental journey into becoming managers and reflective practitioners.

3. Results and Discussion

The students' response to the critical thinking debates was mixed. They questioned why we had asked Sport Management students to debate global politics and popular culture when they had expected a banking model of education. However, as Bérubé and Gendron (2022) suggest, they quickly understood why critical thinking and adopting a balanced approach is vital to reflective management practitioners who are accountable for the consequences of their actions.

In subject-specific seminars, competencies uncharacteristic of first-year undergraduate students emerged as a result of the critical thinking debates. The students had the confidence to challenge findings reported in peer-reviewed studies. The types of broad assertions and sweeping generalizations, Rojek and Turner (2000) assert are unquestionably accepted in some disciplines, were fact-checked, challenged, and rejected. For example, a Foucauldian analysis of coaching practice which suggested that sport coaches were a danger to their participants was rejected as biased and unrepresentative. The students initially suggested that only low-level coaches were likely to dangerously misuse their power. When challenged with examples of high-profile coaches convicted for offences against participants, the students used online resources to evidence the prevalence of dangerous coaches. Using evidence from a reliable source they established that less than two per cent of coaches were accused or found to have dangerously misused their power. In the first year of study, many students would accept the findings of a peer-reviewed paper as mere information takers. However, now there was a desire to find evidence and engage in critical thinking. Later in their academic journey, they may discover that Foucault self-critiqued and revised his concept of misused power. Furthermore, these future managers are likely to use evidence to target specific forms of abuse and marginalization rather than responding to sweeping generalizations.

Beyond the classroom environment, a noticeable outcome of the critical thinking debates was the students' willingness and ability to engage in conversations on a broad range

of contemporary topics. Even in the most relaxed student-staff relationships, a generational gap is present when discussing popular culture. However, our BSc Sport Management students understood contemporary issues (beyond the confines of sport) and adopted a balanced and empathetic standpoint informed by critical thinking. This enabled them to network, at a level beyond their stage of study, with the guest speakers and industry professionals they were taught by.

Nonetheless, an unexpected outcome, given the observable development of critical thinking skills, we encountered from the first year of running the debates was that advanced critical thinking skills did not transfer into written assessments. Students were questioning existing knowledge but were relying on subjective personal opinions rather than referring to the sources of evidence employed to inform their debates. Their grades were almost identical to the home cohort who had not participated in these critical thinking debates. Therefore, it appears that when assessed on sport management topics, the students resumed the role of unquestioning information takers. We addressed this lack of joined-up critical thinking in the assessment feedback seminar sessions. Providing feedback and guidance on how to transfer critical thinking into academic writing motivated reflection and action, resulting in a significant improvement in the use of evidence to solve the problems presented in authentic enquiry-based assessments.

3.1 Conclusion

Critical thinking has always been a valuable life skill (Freire, 1970; Wells, 2023). Now in the era of diminished opportunities to engage in critical thinking in Higher Education, exacerbated by the emergence of social media echo chambers, AI, culture wars, and information saturation, these skills are increasingly rare and highly valued (Anjeh & Doraisamy, 2022; Cook, 2022; Pilgrim, 2022). Cognisant that critical thinking is in decline in contemporary universities

(Adams, 2004; Freshwater, 2024; Tabensky, 2023), we sought a generalizable solution by providing opportunities to critically debate popular culture issues. Consistent with our programme of study and to illustrate wider societal issues and benefits, we situated this article in a New Managerialism context. However, our approach has employability and soft skill benefits for students regardless of their programme or place of study. Indeed, we recommend the urgent adoption of our approach in the many universities that do not currently have debating societies. Furthermore, we suggest that developing an assemblage of people with critical thinking skills may lead to the societal benefits envisioned by Freire (1970).

We acknowledge the simplicity of our approach in addressing a complex problem; however, co-creating a learning environment where students have an opportunity to perform critical thinking is a rudimentary requirement for further initiatives. Initially, providing an opportunity to engage in critical thinking did not fully achieve our desired aim of developing a joined-up thinking approach where students carried their newly enhanced critical thinking skills into writing academic assessments. However, as discussed previously, in the second year of study, we witnessed a significant improvement in the BSc students' abilities to analyze evidence and write critically. Due to the variables involved, it is difficult to isolate the effect of the debates on enhancing the students' soft skills, which enabled them to formulate and express impartial and empathetic beliefs beyond their level of study and disciplinary boundaries; however, these BSc students perform with a level of maturity and professionalism that is uncommon in level 5 undergraduates.

This article is not without limitations. From a practical perspective, our cohort was highly motivated, studying in a higher education context that expects all-day teaching, and in the learning environment of a Law and Business School, where debating contentious issues to enhance social good was prevalent. Furthermore, professors were given time to implement the critical thinking debates due to the employability enhancement benefits it afforded. Given the

political interventions by the dominant hegemony, and time and financial constraints students currently face internationally (Adams, 2024; Freshwater, 2024; Wells, 2023), performing critical thinking debates as extracurricular activities face several challenges. Consequently, the transferability of our method will require innovative approaches by motivated professors to overcome external limiting factors.

To further develop our approach, we would suggest the following generalizable recommendations for practice. Firstly, the use of prompts to motivate student learning and engagement in challenging learning practises has a demonstrable effect (Cook, 2022); therefore, the purpose of the debates and the employability enhancement benefits must be communicated clearly to the students. Second, the debates must engage with contentious popular culture issues, but freedom of speech must be balanced with cultural sensitivity to ensure that an inclusive learning environment is preserved. Third, popular culture issues can be introduced into subject-specific learning environments to co-create critical thinking on diverse topics. For instance, a post-graduate marketing seminar diverted into a debate on why flat-earthers are entitled to their beliefs and what their views mean for wider society. Finally, as professors, we should be intrinsically motivated to devote time to helping students develop critical thinking skills as an antidote to the creep of culture wars and New Managerialism approaches into wider society.

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