

Conceptualizing and Questioning In Undergraduate Sport History

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Teaching is very much like research in at least one important way. As does the investigator, the instructor has the responsibility for “making sense” of the material. This “making sense” means binding behaviors, attitudes, and beliefs into classes, tying together, drawing conclusions - putting, in other words, various kinds and difficulty levels of information into “containers.” Depending on the form and complexity of the information involved, these “containers” may be descriptive, analytic (or explanatory), or synthesizing propositions.

In history, any one of these three forms of “containers” of information differs from generalizations of knowledge in science. For example, a concept in science, whether “hard” or “soft” science, is a “transferable explanatory principle.” It is a collapsed summation of some aspect of reality which can be applied to different situations regardless of time and space and which is therefore predictive. A concept in history, however, is not transferable and predictive for the simple reason that history treats the unique, the particular. Historical concepts capture the meaningfulness of the unique, the particular, in the past of human experience.

Descriptive concepts define or “name” types of activities and experiences. In terms of both time and endeavor, they are one-dimensional representations. They result from the collapsing of discrete bits of information about a particular segment of time. They generalize the “what,” the historical product or process. Because of their nature, descriptive concepts function in two primary ways in an undergraduate class. First, they focus the students’ learning and help them to formulate a “sense of”, to capture the “essence” of a mass of details. Second, they are helpful when one wishes to isolate and to highlight change over time, particularly lengthy periods of time. By encapsulating the “what” - only on this occasion, the “what” that changed (or did not change) over time - one can simplify the change without misstating its major characteristics.

No matter how thoroughly descriptive concepts help students to organize information, the fact remains that there is only so much that these “containers” can convey. This limitedness is, however, a valuable asset, and it may even underlay a third function of these forms and generalizations, that of raising questions.

To answer many of the questions raised in the process of describing the “what” of sport, one turns to the explanatory, or analytic, conceptualizations. To some extent, to be sure, this is a somewhat misleading term, for even in descriptive concepts some explanation has occurred by virtue of the fact that one selects and orders characteristics as he or she derives the generalization. But the notion of explanatory conceptualization is used here to treat the “how” and “why” questions which accompany the description of the “what”.

The final step in the “making sense” of the history of sport involves the third form of generalization, the synthesizing proposition. This pulls together description and explanation of change (or the lack of it) across time. It is the most complex notion which “contains” conclusions about what happened, how it happened, and why something happened across an entire period, across several periods, or across the whole of American

history. Synthetic propositions or generalizations would answer such broad, “loaded” questions as “what was the colonial sporting experience really all about,” or “what was the relationship, the connection, of this era to the sporting culture of the early nineteenth century,” or “what was it about the late 19th century and the Progressive era which really ‘set up’ the ‘golden age’ of the 1920?” The process of synthesizing also enables, and perhaps even encourages, us to treat the old problem of historical periodization. New syntheses may reduce our dependence on traditional politics-dependent periods, themselves generalizations of experience, as we actually discover that the facts and explanations within the sporting experience do not “fit.”