

APPLICATION AND ASSESSMENT OF LEARNING OUTCOMES IN THE COURSE COMMUNICATION IN SPORT THROUGH CASE STUDIES

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Abstract

This paper presents the learning outcomes and methods of their assessment in the graduate-level course titled *Communication in Sport*. The aim of the course is to familiarize students with the basic elements of communication in sports, various forms of internal and mass communication, and the analysis of the behavior of sports audiences and other stakeholders. Special emphasis is placed on the role of both traditional and new media and technologies in shaping contemporary communication processes in sports. The learning outcomes include recognizing the specific features of sports communication, distinguishing communication at different levels, analyzing and reassessing the behavior of sports audiences, as well as understanding communication capacities and strategies. The assessment of learning outcomes is based on active learning methods: analyses of concrete examples, teamwork, and individual analyses. A key element of the assessment is a task in which students, using the example of a selected sports organization or athlete, present a communication strategy, techniques, and methods of communicating with relevant stakeholders. This approach enables students to connect theoretical concepts with practice and to develop the competences necessary for understanding and improving communication processes in the sports environment. The results show that the course fosters professional knowledge and effective communication among stakeholders in sports.

Keywords: *Sport, communication, communication strategy, learning outcomes.*

1. Introduction

Communication is one of the fundamental activities that is not characteristic only in humans. The study of human communication is conducted by a science called communication science, an interdisciplinary scientific discipline whose goal is to explain the reasons, mechanisms, and effects of human communication (Cerepinko, 2011). Communication science is a field within communication sciences, which belong to the area of social sciences. With the adoption of the Regulation on Scientific and Interdisciplinary Areas, Fields, and Branches within the Area of Social Sciences in January 2024 in the Republic of Croatia, an independent scientific field “Communication Sciences” was established (Pravilnik o Znanstvenim i Interdisciplinarnim Područjima Poljima i Granama NN 3/24, 2021). “Positioning communication sciences as an independent scientific field in the Republic of Croatia represents recognition of the many years of development of this dynamic and methodologically diverse discipline, whose scientific identity was shaped in accordance with changes in the communication and media environment” (Jugo, Milas, & Marinović, 2025).

In Croatia, communication science and communication studies are taught at several universities and higher education units within different institutional frameworks, either as independent undergraduate and graduate study programs, study tracks, or individual courses. At the University of North, the largest integrated university in the Republic of Croatia, with two university centres, Varazdin and Koprivnica, communication science is taught in undergraduate and graduate programs at the Koprivnica University Centre, and as a scientific branch in the graduate program Public Relations at the Varazdin University Centre. Also, in 2018 a university doctoral program *Media and Communication* was launched (<http://www.unin.hr>).

Within the curriculum of the Graduate University Study *Communication Science, Media and Journalism*, an elective course, *Communication in Sport*, is offered. The aim of the course is “introducing students to the basic elements of communication in sport, different ways of communicating in different sports, internal communication within the club and team, communication between clubs, athletes and sports stakeholders, forms of mass communication in sport, and changes in sports communication created under

the influence of the development of new media and technologies” (www.unin.hr/odjeli/komunikologija-mediji-i-novinarstvo/diplomski-sveucilisni-studij-komunikologija-mediji-i-novinarstvo/kolegiji).

This paper presents the learning outcomes and the methods of assessing them in the course *Communication in Sport* at the graduate level. Special emphasis is placed on the role of both traditional and new media and technologies in shaping contemporary communication processes in sport. The learning outcomes include recognising the specific characteristics of sports communication, distinguishing communication at different levels, analysing and examining the behaviour of sports audiences, as well as understanding communication capacities and strategies. In this sense, we propose the hypothesis that the outcomes enable familiarisation with the basic characteristics of sports communication, communication strategies in sport, the behaviour of sports audiences, the influence on them through different forms of communication, and understanding the communication capacities of sport.

1.1. Objectives and methods

The aim of the paper is to analyse the learning outcomes of the course *Communication in Sport*, examine the methods used to assess the achievement of learning outcomes—particularly those based on case studies—and present the process of a communication strategy as the central task for evaluating learning outcomes and applying theoretical knowledge to practical examples. Through the development of a communication strategy, students will identify the roles of traditional and new media in shaping contemporary communication processes in sport, as well as the use of various communication channels and techniques to create effective communication with different sports stakeholders.

The methodology of the paper is based on a qualitative pedagogical approach. An analysis of the defined learning outcomes and the methods used to assess them is carried out. For this purpose, several methods are applied, such as content analysis, the case study method as the fundamental method for verifying and applying learning outcomes, descriptive and comparative analysis, and pedagogical evaluation for assessing the development of student competencies in the field of sports communication. This methodological framework enables the connection of theoretical communication models with practical examples from the field of sport, as well as the verification of the proposed hypothesis.

2. Communication in sport and strategy in sport

Sport communication is defined as “a process by which people in sport, in a sport setting, or through a sport endeavour, share symbols as they create meaning through interaction” (Hambrick 2017, as cited in Pedersen, Miloch, & Laucella, 2007). As the sports industry grows, so does the research and study of communications in sports. Sports communication research has grown exponentially since the 1980s. This expansion has included the introduction of new sports communication, textbooks, journals, associations and conference (Hambrick 2017, as cited in Abeza, O’Reilly, & Nadeau, 2014). “Overall communication in a sports organization is organized at the strategic level (communications office or department, or “chef”) and the operational level (public relations department or office, within which the spokesperson or “waiter” is located) (I. Tomic, 2011).

When we talk about strategy in sports, it usually refers to achieving certain sports results. Strategy is associated with more elaborate cognitive processes as the decisions made are based on reflection without time constraints. On the other side tactics operate under strong time constraints. (Greghaigne, Godbout, & Bouthier, 1999). Therefore, Greghaigne, Godbout and Bouthier (1999) consider that play action is eventually determined by a strategy that needs to be specified, if not modified, during play. In the context of communication strategy in sport, Z. Tomic (2016) emphasizes the importance of selecting the media that will be used in order to achieve the established communication and organizational goals.

3. Case studies of communication strategy in sport

Students were required to develop a mini communication strategy based on concrete examples of a sports club, organization, or athlete, and to test its goals, implementation, and achieved results. In our paper, we will present two such case studies in which students participated in the design, goal-setting, implementation, and execution of the strategy. As examples, we refer to the communication strategy of the student-athlete Pavle Vujasin, whose main communication strategy goal was focused on rebuilding his sports image. Furthermore, in the context of organizing sports events, we will present examples of the development of a communication strategy for the 4th Sports Games of Students of Northwestern Croatia. The aim of the communication was to increase visibility through the use of social networks with different techniques and communication channels. In both cases, the students achieved this by using various techniques and communication channels.

3.1. Discussion

In both cases, students first set the goals and then used a SWOT analysis to determine the current situation of the organization, project, or, in this case, the event, idea, or individual for whom the communication strategy was being developed. The SWOT analysis provided an explanation in terms of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats. Furthermore, key messages, i.e., the messages to be communicated through the various pre-defined communication channels, were established. To achieve the goals, different forms of social media were primarily used, while traditional communication channels were not neglected. Regarding techniques, in addition to visual and written techniques, audiovisual techniques were also employed. Specifically, in the announcement of the start of the 4th Sports Games of Students, other prominent athletes participated by sending messages via social media. After the implementation itself, an evaluation was conducted for all elements of the communication strategy. A quantitative analysis was performed, showing the number of posts and reactions on social media for each individual post, as well as the increase in followers on social media during the specified period. Additionally, media content was analyzed, showing the number of publications in other media after the implementation.

The results in both presented cases demonstrated that increased social media presence led to a greater number of followers and higher audience engagement in a short period. As observed shortcomings based on the analysis, weaker visibility and fewer publications in traditional media, as well as a lack of additional engagement from various stakeholders, were identified in both case studies.

4. Conclusion

Based on the activities conducted and the results obtained, the hypothesis was confirmed that assessing learning outcomes through the development of a concrete case study enables a deeper understanding of the fundamental characteristics of sports communication, communication strategies, and the behavior of sports audiences, as well as the ways to influence them through various forms of communication. By working on practical examples, students identified the key elements of a communication strategy, defined target groups, and, by applying different communication formats, influenced their engagement. The results obtained, including increased audience engagement, growth in numbers of social media followers, and noticeable differences between the effectiveness of digital and traditional channels, demonstrate that students gained practical insight into the communication capacities of sport and understood the processes of shaping communication strategies. Social media emerged as the most significant communication channel, which was expected given the media habits of the target groups covered by the study.

A number of limitations were also observed, including weaker visibility and limited opportunities for generating publicity through traditional media. Additionally, one of the main methodological limitations was the limited time frame for implementing the strategies, as students had to simultaneously master the theoretical content of the course during a single academic semester. Despite these limitations, the definition and implementation of communication strategies proved to be a successful tool for assessing learning outcomes in the course *Communication in Sport* and represent valuable preparation for the more complex communication challenges that students will face in future professional contexts.

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