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Sport Social Hub: Using the Power of Collaboration to Develop Hands-On Social Media Competencies

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This paper introduces Sport Social Hub, a collaborative, multi-institutional social media exchange inspired by the Commission on Public Relations Education's (CPRE) emphasis on key knowledge, skills, and abilities (KSAs) in public relations education. Sport Social Hub engaged students from four universities in topical, sports-themed assignments. These assignments involved creating memes, analyzing historical and contemporary sports photographs, profiling industry professionals with infographics, and developing engagement contests. The paper outlines how Sport Social Hub addresses CPRE's recommended KSAs within social media, collaboration, and creative thinking. Utilizing social media platforms as pedagogical tools, Sport Social Hub aimed to enhance students' social media competencies, promote collaboration across institutions, and develop relationships in a virtual environment. The paper provides an overview of the assignments, each assignment's objectives, and the connection to CPRE's Fast Forward report. Assessment and feedback mechanisms are explored, highlighting the positive impact on students' social media competencies, networking with industry professionals, and the sense of community fostered through online engagement. While acknowledging the limitations and challenges, the authors propose Sport Social Hub as a model for educators seeking to integrate collaborative, hands-on, and crowdsourced approaches in their pedagogy to prepare students for the evolving landscape of communication careers.

Keywords: *Curriculum and instruction, educational assessment, evaluation, and research, public relations and advertising, social media, sports management, sports studies*

Creating topical, sports-themed memes. Conducting an analysis of historical and contemporary sport photographs. Making a connection with an industry professional and profiling them with an infographic. Developing a contest to promote engagement with your audience. Collectively, these four assignments comprised Sport Social Hub, a pandemic-inspired, multi-class social media exchange hosted during the spring semester in 2021. The multi-institution exercise, which began with an open-ended plea to an academic Listserv, resulted in a semester-long collaborative assignment that engaged students at four institutions. The individual assignments can be adapted; the participating schools can change. But the spirit that underpins Sport Social Hub provides the foundation for an approach to pedagogy that can be modified and leveraged by instructors at any institution—providing hands-on, crowdsourced instruction and assignments

to grow communication competencies. The exercise also has practical implications because of the imperative that both students and faculty members collaborate to bring Sport Social Hub, bringing both learning and pedagogical best practices to life.

In 2018, the Commission on Public Relations Education (CPRE) released “Fast Forward: Foundations and Future State. Educators and Practitioners,” reporting on the current state of public relations education and the Commission’s recommendations. In the CPRE Report, certain knowledge, skills, and abilities (KSAs) in teaching were brought to the forefront as the most desirable for new hires. While sport public relations and communication can be a component of disciplinary areas of sport management, sport administration, sport marketing, and sport leadership (COSMA, Spring 2022), utilizing the KSAs from the CPRE report is a useful exercise to include in a program

outcomes assessment process. The following paragraphs provide an overview of the project, outline the four sought-after areas, and expand on how Sport Social Hub was used to expand, test, and assess students. After reviewing the ways Sport Social Hub connects to the CPRE's Fast Forward report, this paper suggests an approach that can be adopted or adapted to develop social media competencies, collaboratively, in a range of academic disciplines, making the approach valuable long after the end of pandemic restrictions.

Sports Social Hub Overview

The use of social media platforms in a range of academic disciplines has rapidly matured as pedagogical best practices have emerged (Greenhow & Askari, 2017; Joosten, 2012). Students are encouraged to use the platforms to enhance their job opportunities, post-college (Jones et al., 2008), to engage in class material in real-time (Tyma & Pickering, 2015), and play a role in knowledge transfer and students' attention to key concepts (McFall & Morgan, 2013). In addition to developing greater proficiency with the platforms, the use of social media as a de facto professional network underpins much of the impetus behind the adoption of social media assignments in the classroom (Sacks & Graves, 2012; Sanderson & Browning, 2015). Despite the reservations some faculty members share about loss of control from conducting social media-enabled class projects, Manning and colleagues (2017) suggest embracing the disruptive technology in collaborative education. They propose, "Technologically enhanced and innovative assignments have the potential to stimulate student interest and critical-thinking skills by presenting new experiences and active learning opportunities via participatory education" (Manning et al., 2017, p. 45). Specifically, both passive (observational) and active collaboration is a precursor for success in the semester-long assignment and can help fortify students with durable skills to take into professional workplaces.

Inspired by the desire of four instructors to insert interactivity into pandemic-limited classrooms, Sport Social Hub brought together classes at four

universities located in the Eastern United States, ranging from R1 doctoral institutions to teaching focused public universities. Building upon suggestions from O'Hallarn & Strode (2020) who tested the benefits of a partnership between sport management classrooms through a classroom exchange facilitated by the Twitter hashtag #ODU2ODU, the Sport Social Hub was designed to utilize multiple social media platforms, encourage the development of different communication competencies, and encourage more interactivity between participating institutions (Stensland et al., 2022). Each instructor brought their expertise in a facet of media or social media communication, designing a collaborative assignment that was given to all four class cohorts. Together, students at the four institutions spent the Spring 2021 semester working in a highly collaborative fashion, at a time when classrooms nationwide were still limiting in-class activities because of the pandemic. This process was facilitated by the professors' teamwork, but also the use of a hashtag (#sportsocialhub) and an open source "wall" of interactivity, created through free, open access, file-sharing website—The Wallrus. These affordances helped foster a spirit of camaraderie and connection as students worked through the challenging assignments together.

CPRE KSAs

Knowledge

Within the knowledge section of the CPRE Report, two characteristics can be justified through our Sport Social Hub and the assignments. One characteristic reads *data analytics and insights*...understanding the analytics but being able to interpret the data and draw insights. This was a forced part of the LinkedIn assignment when students were asked to interview a practitioner (research), and then create an infographic based on that interview (interpret data and draw insights) to share with others. A student comment on the teaching evaluations read, "I had a 45-minute interview with my practitioner. That took some thinking on how to get all that good information on one infographic and have it make sense." The second characteristic within the Sport Social Hub that connects to Fast Forward

was *cross-cultural and global communication*...having or developing a global antenna, a ‘global sensitivity filter.’ Because students posted their content to the interactive content wall, The Wallrus, which would be seen by students at other institutions, many of whom would never meet the original poster, great care was needed to develop memes and select pictures that could be interpreted differently outside each student’s own university bubble.

Skills

The Sport Social Hub and its interconnected assignments honed many communication skills throughout the semester. *Collaboration* was the preeminent requirement (and skill-developing methodology) of Sport Social Hub, as students were tasked with collaborating with colleagues at sport communication classes throughout the Eastern United States. The assignments included feedback requirements, so students were incentivized through an assignment to look at the work submitted by others, broadening their understanding of approaches taken to completing the assignments. Because of the public nature of the assignment display, students were also encouraged to develop confidence in their approach to developing this visual content—from memes, to infographics, to Bingo boards. In their reflections, some students expressed how they were daunted by the challenge initially but empowered by what they found on the wall of interactivity. Specifically, one student wrote, “The Wall where we all put our assignments for all universities to interact was really cool. Amazing how we all are in different classes at different schools but have a similar mindset with these memes!”

The collaboration also evoked students to be *good listeners, adaptable, and sensitive to individual and cultural differences*. Speaking to the trait of adaptability, instructors were able to witness students adapting throughout the semester as some assignments warranted flexibility when working with professionals within the field. For example, interviews with professionals for the LinkedIn assignment sometimes failed to happen due to professional schedules changing or non-

responsiveness. Students were forced to learn how to adapt when schedules or deadlines of professionals shifted to reasons beyond their control, but deadlines for class assignments remained intact.

Abilities

One ability within the CPRE Report reads, *conducting research and analyzing the data*... going beyond reporting the numbers to identifying the implications. In the LinkedIn assignment, students were asked to interview a practitioner (research), and then create an infographic based on that interview (analyzing the data) to share with others. Through this assignment, students reflected on their conversation with the practitioner, determined the story they wanted to tell through their infographic, and identified various ways to present the information to their peers (i.e., text, color, graphics, statistics). A challenge students faced with this assignment was determining which information was most beneficial to include on the infographic considering the length of the interviews. Overcoming the difficulty of selecting, summarizing, and organizing the information to serve its’ intended purpose allowed the students to increase their learning autonomy and develop abilities such as “critical thinking, information literacy, digital and visual literacy, research skills, creativity, and communication” (Jaleniauskiene & Kasperuniene, 2023, p. 202).

Another ability in the CPRE Report of note is *connecting the dots*. In the Picture This assignment, students connected history to modern day through photography and photojournalism. Students selected photos of the same subject from two different time periods and conveyed a visual story to the viewers through an Instagram post. This assignment required students to not only recognize the power of visuals in attracting and maintaining audiences, but also understand the influence digital technology has had on the photojournalism industry (Mortensen & Gade, 2018).

Other abilities like content *creation, storytelling, writing, and clear graphic and verbal communication* can all be found within the Sport Social Hub as well. Teaching evaluations confirmed this. One student

stated: “I love sports but was hesitant to do PR Sports Marketing class because I wasn’t confident creating all these graphic design things like meme’s/infographics/Bingo cards. Turns out, there are lots of free tools you showed us, and it was my favorite part of the class.”

Sport Social Hub Assignments

By reimagining the classroom during the pandemic disruption, the Sport Social Hub provided students with an online gathering place which facilitated community and togetherness. Specifically, the Sport Social Hub featured four, interconnected assignments, each developed by a different faculty member. Assignments were each designed to promote hands-on learning of key concepts of social media best practices. The assignments were:

- Meme Me Up Scotty—Each student created a meme connected to a sporting hero “local” to their institution or region, posting it on Twitter;
- Picture This—Students found thematically connected historic and modern sport news photographs, and created Instagram content analyzing each image;
- Don’t be the Weakest LinkedIn—Using LinkedIn, students contacted a sport industry professional, conducting an informational interview, which they turned into an infographic, posting to the platform; and
- Single and Ready to Bingo—Students created a “bingo board” of tasks that students could complete to encourage social media engagement with their university, posting that board to the social media platform of their choice.

Each assignment in Sport Social Hub was the primary responsibility of one instructor, though it was implemented at all participating classes within each institution. The primary instructor provided a list of learning outcomes (see Table 1) for each assignment, which were adopted and adapted by the other instructors.

Table 1

Learning Objectives for Collaborative Assignments

Name of Assignment	Learning Objective
Meme Me Up Scotty	To use creativity and pop culture knowledge to make internet content that could potentially go viral
Picture This	To look at historical and contemporary sport photographs analytically, considering which media or platform would be most effective for distribution of the content
Don’t Be the Weakest LinkedIn	To connect and maintain a mutually beneficial relationship on social media with a sports practitioner; To use multimedia design tools to create content to showcase their industry contact
Single and Ready to Bingo	To consider the audience in creating impactful social media

The main objectives of the meme assignment were to use creativity and pop culture knowledge to make internet content that could potentially go viral, the challenge facing every social media content producer in a crowded online environment. The Instagram photo analysis assignment was created to prompt students to look at historical and contemporary sport photographs analytically, considering which media or platform would be most effective for distribution of the content. The LinkedIn infographic assignment had two primary objectives: a) get students to connect and maintain a mutually beneficial relationship on social media with a sports practitioner; and b) use multimedia design tools to create content to showcase their industry contact. The final assignment tasked students with creating a bingo board specific to their institution that could be used by the university or its athletic department as social media engagement content. The objectives of

this assignment were to make students consider the audience in creating impactful social media content.

Universally, the objectives of the entire Sport Social Hub assignment included: a) injecting an element of interactivity into the four, pandemic-limited classes; b) learning and practicing social media skills students could use in a professional setting; and c) developing relationships with classmates and across institutions through the use of connected social media technology and the wall of interactivity between classrooms and through free open-source social media display platform the Wallrus. The hashtag #sportsocialhub also helped facilitate this cross-classroom connection, because of the utility that hashtags offer in connecting the conversations of strangers in a range of social media platforms (Murthy, 2013).

Assessment and Feedback

Working off a common assignment description, each of the four participating faculty members was responsible for implementing and assessing the four Sport Social Hub assignments in their own classrooms. Individual tailoring of the assignments by instructors included rewriting each assignment description to match the “fit” of each institution, grading work that was submitted according to the academic standards of instructors’ particular departments, and allotting what percentage of the grade each assignment of Sport Social Hub was worth. This is an especially important aspect to the collaboration. Mindful that the classes were at different academic levels, and the institutions involved ranged from doctoral R1 research institutions to regional teaching universities, the instructors tailored each assignment to meet their students where they are. In some cases, instructions were more detailed and programmatic. In others, assessment was more rigorous. The spirit of each assignment was reflected similarly, but each instructor was empowered to use a culturally and pedagogically appropriate approach for their student population.

Despite this individual approach to each assignment at each institution, informal and formal

collaboration within Sport Social Hub was encouraged and promoted among instructors (before and during the semester) and students, particularly through the publicly accessible wall of activity that members of the four classes populated with content. Informally, students provided comments and likes/shares/retweets on clever and well-constructed posts by peers in their class and participants from other universities, a process that was employed with great effect by a handful of students in the four sport communication classes. The students also, and this was noted in the feedback received at the end of the assignment, borrowed ideas when they saw them used by other students on the interactive content wall. In addition to this organic exchange, the instructors embedded an incentive component, providing bonus marks for the best public posts for each assignment.

Because this was the first time any of the instructors had worked on a collaborative exercise of this scope, end-of-semester feedback was collected, compiled, and analyzed from each of the four classes. Comments received from student participants in Sport Social Hub were largely positive and provided empirical evidence of the learning outcomes having been met. The overwhelming majority of participants felt this was a valuable learning exercise that should be continued in some form. Specifically, the student responses could be broken into three broad categories 1) development of social media competencies and creative content generation; 2) networking with sport industry professionals in an online environment and 3) creation of a sense of community through online engagement between students and faculty members alike.

Development of social media competencies and creative content generation

Students mentioned the Sport Social Hub wall of interactivity at The Wallrus, and the individual assignments provided a unique way to learn and practice competencies essential to social media. From a general perspective, students expressed their appreciation for having to use different social media platforms (i.e., Twitter (now known as X), LinkedIn, and Instagram). One student wrote, “We had to learn new skills for each assignment and be strategic with

the type of information we posted on the different platforms.” Another student explained how graphic design was incorporated into each assignment, and they “liked how we were able to be creative and learn how to use graphic design in a variety of ways.”

Other comments focused on the individual assignments and students discussed benefits they gained from each. For example, one student mentioned the difficulty they faced creating memes to post on Twitter, “I originally thought the assignment was going to be a cakewalk, but I struggled with the balance of appropriate/funny.” Another student mentioned how they gained a greater appreciation for social media managers who create content on behalf of a larger organization. “There are so many things that need to be considered. So many people interact with [sport] team accounts, and you never know how a meme will be interpreted.”

The LinkedIn assignment required students to use multimedia design tools to create an infographic to showcase their industry contact. Feedback indicated students enjoyed learning how to present information in a clear, concise, and attractive manner. One student noted, “This assignment was the most valuable to me. I got to network with a digital media manager from [Professional Team], and I learned how to create an infographic. I thought it was a cool way to show [the digital media manager] what I learned from him about his job.” There were also some criticisms and suggestions for improvement related to the content creation of the infographic. For example, one student stated, “It was a bit difficult to decide what I should include on the infographic. I had pages of notes because the informational interview was long.” Other students mentioned how they wished the instructors provided more information on infographics, such as describing their purpose. Students expressed they felt instructors believed students to be more familiar with this way of presenting information than their current level of skill and experience.

Networking within the Sports Social Hub

Student responses related to the Sport Social Hub mentioned the benefit of networking with sport

industry professionals during a time when sports were paused or canceled due to pandemic restrictions. Generally, students mentioned how these assignments allowed them to engage with industry professionals that they otherwise may not have connected with, since sport professional development opportunities (i.e., conferences, career fairs, symposiums, internships, etc.) were limited or nonexistent during this time. Students also discussed how the shift to online learning had made them more comfortable interacting in an online environment, and the assignments allowed them to become more familiar with video conferencing tools and programs.

Related to specific assignments, students discussed how the LinkedIn assignment allowed them to expand their professional network and gain valuable information on specific career paths related to sport public relations, digital media, and communications. One student mentioned how the informational interview made them want to follow a similar path. “I’d always thought I might want to get into PR because image and reputation management have always interested me. After speaking with [the public relations director], I am even more excited, and he told me to reach back out when the COVID pause was over.” Other students expressed discontent with the assignment and many experienced difficulties finding a sports professional to interview. One comment read, “Worst assignment. I reached out to so many people and never heard back from anyone. The instructor should have provided us with people who were willing to help.” Another student described how they felt uncomfortable reaching out during that time knowing many individuals had lost their jobs or were no longer working consistent hours due to the pandemic. These negative comments, in a roundabout way, provided the instructors validation of their approach. Certainly, networking and professional communication connections are challenging, as anyone working on sales leads, marketing and promotion, and other outward-facing communication jobs can attest. The LinkedIn assignment provided a low-stakes way for students to experience that challenge firsthand. It should be noted that the authors disagree, vigorously, with the student who wanted this assignment to be made

easier through instructors finding the professional contacts. The authors agreed finding the professional for the student would rob this assignment of its real value—promoting networking and bravery within aspiring sport communication professionals.

The Bingo board was a way for students to create an interactive initiative that could get fans to connect, identify, and engage with the university, athletics department, and brand partners during a time without live sporting events. Comments mentioned how the assignment gave them another opportunity to network with industry professionals and learn about the athletic department or university to create the square challenges for the Bingo board. One student discussed how they connected with an individual in marketing, learned about a new initiative the athletics department created (i.e., [university mascot] Carryout Challenge), and incorporated it into their Bingo board. Another student discussed how the assignment helped him stay connected with his fraternity brothers during the semester of fully remote learning. “Loved the Bingo board assignment. Mine focused on the theme of ‘The lonely college student stuck at home.’ My fraternity brothers and I actually did the challenges and competed against each other virtually.”

Creation of a sense of community through online engagement between students and faculty members

Finally, student comments related to the individual assignments of the Sport Social Hub alluded to online engagement and the creation of a sense of community during a time when social interactions were limited. In general, students enjoyed the concept of the wall of interactivity, but many wished there was more interaction between the classes at the four institutions. For example, some students mentioned how they felt more comfortable interacting with students from their own university as they had more in common. However, student feedback also indicated participants did like, even passively, being able to view peers’ work posted to the interactive wall.

Despite the assignment being designed with the least amount of required interactivity, student comments related to the ‘Picture This’ assignment, which addressed the importance of impactful images in sports reporting, helped students think about the impact of a strong photograph on social media engagement. Students said they enjoyed learning about the impact images can have when communicating with an audience. One comment read, “It was interesting to think about how powerful photos are. They can speak for themselves and tell stories without words.” Other student responses mentioned how selecting two photos for the assignment allowed them to learn about unfamiliar athletes and situations. “This was my favorite assignment. I’m kind of a history buff, so I liked scrolling and seeing the photos other students selected.” Similarly, another student mentioned, “I liked going through the wall and seeing the other posts. Right now, the world is hard. Lots of uncertainty and negativity. It was nice seeing all the positive sports images throughout the years.”

Comments also mentioned how they enjoyed the Twitter (now X) assignment because of the humor involved in the memes. Students described the positive engagement with the wall of interactivity for this assignment and one comment specifically mentioned “laughing out loud” at some of the Joe Burrow memes that were created. Conversely, students felt the Bingo board assignment did not promote the same level of interaction and engagement. One student discussed how the challenges were too specific and required background knowledge of the university/athletics department, which made it difficult to interact with boards created by students at the other universities. Another student suggested adding an interactive component to the assignment, “It would have been really cool if we could have taken one of the boards and actually competed against each other to complete the challenges.”

Assignment Reflections

While the assignments that comprise 2021’s Sport Social Hub are detailed and highly specific, the key value that the assignment provides is in the

approach, one which the authors believe retains relevance despite the end of the “lockdown” portion of the pandemic. The CPRE’s Fast Forward report addresses specific competencies that students can practice, and hopefully master, to set them up for success in their career, including creative thinking, social media management, and especially collaboration. The value for instructors in taking part in Sport Social Hub is their exposure to a variety of approaches for assignment design, scaffolding, and assessment. Each of the participating faculty members has used variations of these assignments in subsequent semesters, incorporating lessons learned to refine the pedagogy going forward.

Best Practices of Implementing Assignments

Versions of multi-institution, collaborative assignments such as Sport Social Hub can be created in a range of disciplines, incorporating an array of assignments aimed at developing social media competencies. However, there are best practices learned by the faculty members involved in this exchange that should be incorporated in any collaboration. The first, and most intuitive, is the need for sharing and communication between faculty members as the assignments are created, deployed, and assessed. Each participating faculty member encountered challenges with timely completion of assignments, with a relative lack of interactivity between students, and with confusion about the individual assignments despite the detail of the directions. The faculty members involved in Sport Social Hub communicated regularly through a group email chain, addressing any issues quickly to not affect the flow of the assignments.

Additionally, students participating in Sport Social Hub were frequently unsure what to do on the assignments, despite detailed instructions being provided. Empowering a way for students to collaborate, as well as see the others’ work, helped students understand what was expected through a crowdsourced approach. Sport Social Hub relied on a hashtag to make class content searchable on the social media platforms and required students to post their completed assignments to The Wallrus, which

resulted in hundreds of examples of submissions that students could use as inspiration. These interactive affordances could be better integrated into the assignment assessment, to extrinsically motivate students to take part in active collaboration. Finally, the instructors in Sport Social Hub were struck by the lack of some skills within class cohorts, especially skills that are marketable in today’s communication landscape such as elementary graphic design. Consideration to accessibility should be given when assigning work that might be brand-new to students in the classes, so that the assignments of Sport Social Hub become a key to unlocking competencies that students can use in their careers.

The practical implications of this assignment are in two main areas. First, industry best practices have stressed to higher education institutions that employers want graduates with established skillsets that they can employ in professional settings, but also adaptability so new employees can “figure out” their positions as they go, adding value to their organization more quickly. Every assignment in Sport Social Hub emphasized upskilling in some area, but also encouraged students to demonstrate creativity through experimentation and collaboration. While it is unlikely that students will make funny memes for a living (unless they work for the social media team of the Los Angeles Chargers) thinking creatively, being conversant in pop culture, and being able to optimize technology to make an impact are competencies that would help a new employee in any position.

The practical implications for faculty of this assignment are in creating a methodology through which best practices and creative ideas are shared. Sport Social Hub was an ad hoc creation, built around one semester for four, very similar classes. However, it demonstrates the value of a resource—whether an online information exchange, web forum, or some other connective tool—to generate economies of scale in classroom approaches. We *wish* a resource such as this existed for our own professional networks.

Limitations or Challenges

As educators administer the multi-class Sport Social Hub assignment, they should be mindful of limitations and challenges which may occur during the implementation of the assignment. Key lessons from the Sport Social Hub include:

The need for clear, concise instructions and resources for each assignment:

- As the class sizes and the format of instruction may vary between the participating institutions, each instructor needs to be clear and concise when communicating information and providing supplemental resources for the Sport Social Hub. This is especially important in larger asynchronous courses, as some assignments were easier to monitor students' progress than others. For example, it is recommended instructors have multiple check-ins for the longer LinkedIn assignment to help monitor the progress of solidifying a sport professional to interview, conducting the informational interview, and creating the infographic.

Rubric development:

- Instructors individually tailored the Sport Social Hub assignments to fit within the academic standards of their universities which included grading work and allotting a percentage of the grade to each assignment. Limited collaboration occurred between instructors in relation to rubric development. While it is important for faculty to develop their own rubrics given the scope of the course and academic standards of their university, it could be beneficial for the instructors to discuss the rubric elements together to ensure the learning objectives are adequately assessed.

Lack of creativity:

- The assignment was structured to encourage collaboration across four institutions in an online space. The wall of interactivity allowed students to use #sportsocialhub to view each other's assignments to promote a spirit of camaraderie and connection. As stated in the end-of-semester feedback, students appreciated the engagement of the Sport Social Hub and enjoyed connecting

with others in an online space. However, the lack of creativity on assignments increased as deadlines drew near, and students tended to mimic other work they saw posted on the wall. Instructors should encourage students to submit their own work by illustrating the value of each assignment and highlighting the transferrable skills to various job positions in the sport communication and public relations field.

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