Governing Bodies Of Sport As Knowledge Brokers In Sport-For-All Communities Of Practice

Willem, Annick[1]; Girginov, Vassil[2]; Toohey, Kristine[3]

[1]Ghent University, Belgium; [2]Brunel University, London, United Kingdom; [3]Griffith University, Gold Coast Campus, Australia

E-mail: annick.willem@ugent.be

Aim

Delivering Sport-for-All is a major issue for sport organizations worldwide. One of the challenges is situated in the knowledge intensive and diverse character of the Sport-for-All sector with highly dispersed knowledge creation and sharing processes involving numerous practitioners and policy makers (Girginov, Toohey, & Willem, 2015). Communities of practice are social learning spaces allowing for knowledge creation and sharing in such sectors, if communities are well enhanced by knowledge brokers. The community of practice lens will therefore be used to examine the Sport-for-All field as social learning spaces, with a particular focus on governing bodies of sport as knowledge brokers.

Theoretical background

The concept of a community of practice (CoP) introduced by Wenger, in the 1990s, is a well-developed and frequently used framework for explaining social learning and knowledge sharing among practitioners working within a common practice. A CoP consists of three elements, namely a domain of knowledge, which defines a set of issues (e.g. sport participation), a *community of people* who care about this domain and the shared *practice* that members are developing to be effective in their domain (Wenger, 2000). Communities can exist within organizations but mostly transcend organizational, national and geographical boundaries and can even exist virtually. The knowledge and learning processes in the communities are enhanced by knowledge brokers (Conklin, Lusk, Harris, & Stolee, 2013). Regional, national and international governing bodies of sport might assume this knowledge brokering role based on their formal mandates within Sport-for-All CoP. However, CoPs are learning spaces and not management or policy tools, a warning that has been mentioned frequently as a critique to the concept of CoP (Li, Grimshaw, Nielsen, Judd, Coyte, & Graham, 2009). Therefore, the CoP is used here as a lens to: 1) explore its usefulness for analysing the Sport-for-All delivery; and 2) study the broker's role of leading organizations in the communities in three national and one international settings including England and Flanders (i.e., Sport England and Sport Flanders respectively) and Australia (i.e., Australian Sports Commission), and the international Sport and Development Platform.

Method

Data on Sport-for-All communities of practice were collected in these four cases by interviewing key people in the communities, analyzing the virtual knowledge repositories, collecting web-based monitoring data by using Similarweb, and by systematically monitoring knowledge brokers' official websites used to inform and enhance the communities. These websites were monitored using the analytical tool of Wenger and Trayner (2013), who identified the different functions of websites in CoPs, namely two incremental functions informing and networking, and three strategic ones 'capacity building, community building and advocacy'. For the purpose of this research, we added the categories: problem solving, performance, and accountability. Data were used to interpret the role of governing bodies for sport in leveraging the knowledge creation and sharing processes in the Sport-for-All CoPs. Hence, the focus was on the role of the governing bodies and not the social learning process in the CoPs as such.

Results and discussion

The knowledge processes in the CoPs shaped the development of Sport-for-All delivery and policies in the different countries. Results indicated the existence of Sport-for-All communities of practice with a clear role for the governing bodies as brokers in those communities for sharing knowledge, exploration, and knowledge creation. However, the governing bodies of sport were not using their potential as knowledge brokers and CoP enablers to their full extent and in this way were not fully enabling the capacity of the Sport-for-All communities in each of the four cases. Websites were mainly utilised for informing and networking, but even for those functions many possibilities were not yet exploited. The strategic use of websites, for building community capacity and advocacy, was limited in all of the four cases. Furthermore, the governing bodies strongly favoured a top-down approach to knowledge dissemination and promoted a normative perspective by establishing standardized knowledge and practices for delivering Sport-for-All. They also tended to 'manage' the CoPs, and without exception, failed to promote strategic interactions

within the CoP that would allow for a greater diversity of approaches, transparency and instant exchanges. CoPs can be powerful tools for crossing institutional boundaries in Sport-for-all because of the social learning processes and accountability that is felt by the practitioners in the community. However, this can only occur when the role of the governing bodies is in facilitating rather than in managing the knowledge and learning processes. Hence, governing bodies of sport should focus on supporting the communities by taking a more strategic approach and using new media tools and let the CoP standards emerge instead of determining them.

References

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