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Developing a geographies of sport module using an active blended learning approach

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ABSTRACT

This article reflects on the author's experience of developing a standalone geographies of sport module that is taught using an active blended learning (ABL) approach. The article argues that an ABL pedagogy is an effective way of teaching meaningful sports geography to undergraduate students. It discusses how the approach allows a diverse range of relevant topics to be included, incorporating both "human" and "physical" geographies, and enables a personalised approach to learning. Teaching the geographies of sport provides students with opportunity to cement and enhance their understanding of fundamental geographical concepts whilst applying them to sports case studies that can be adapted to the interests of the student cohort. That is not to say that teaching of sports geographies comes without challenges, and this article reflects on some of those encountered. Most significantly, how to ensure that the module content is appropriate for final-year undergraduates as the body of dedicated geographical literature on sport is still comparatively limited.

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Introduction

Sports geography is arguably a now well-established sub-field, with consistent research being conducted in this area since John Bale's (1989) seminal text (for further details on the work that preceded this publication, see Bale & Dejonghe, 2008). Yet, dedicated teaching of sports geography, particularly amongst undergraduates, continues to be comparatively sparse. By reflecting on the development and delivery of a standalone geographies of sport module, this article will consider some of the key opportunities and issues encountered in the specialist teaching of this topic. The potential of this teaching, alongside the challenges that need to be negotiated, will be discussed.

In the preface to the first edition of Bale's (1989) *Sports Geography* textbook, he notes that defining texts on sports studies were based on what was being taught in different academic disciplines. It was acknowledged that geographers were contributing to teaching (and research), but not in a substantial or consistent way. Over the last 30 years, it is clear that geography, particularly what would be

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considered human geography, has diversified its contribution to sports research (Wise, 2015), but the transfer of this research into teaching continues to be sporadic. Koch (2016a p.2) suggests that the field of sports geography continues to lack the coherence that is seen in sports sociology, for example, where there is less persisting stigma about the professionalism of studying sport (Dear, 1988). This may be the reason that the geographies of sport module that will be discussed here remains quite unique, as highlighted at a Teaching the Geographies of Sport session at the RGS-IBG Annual Conference in 2018, where contributions suggested that dedicated teaching, particularly in the UK, is limited. This article will share experiences of teaching this module and use these to provide some reflections and recommendations for the future of teaching sports geographies.

Materials and methods

To address the aforementioned aims of this study, the discussion will be reflective, drawing upon qualitative data gathered from feedback from formal student module evaluations and quality assurance processes. The discussion will utilise principles of autoethnography to implement a critical reflexive approach to teaching practice (Wilkinson, 2020, 2019) and use this to share experiences of teaching sports geography. Drawing on these data, the discussion will be presented in three parts. First, introducing the active blended learning (ABL) pedagogical approach to learning and teaching. Second, it will discuss the content that is included in the module, the implication of these choices and what is subsequently excluded. The third section will reflect on some of the opportunities and challenges encountered when teaching sports geographies.

Context of the module

At the University of Northampton (UON), an optional third-year module, entitled Geographies of Sport, has been taught for the past 6 years. It is available to any student registered on the BSc Geography programme. Typically, the student cohort comprises most students who would consider themselves human geographers, as well as those to whom the sport topic area appeals. The average class size is around 15 students. The module is taught solely by the author in classroom-based sessions that last 2 hours and is assessed through two coursework assignments. An outline of the module and its content can be found in Table 1.

Table 1. Topics and themes covered with their allocated teaching time.

Introduction to the Geographies of Sport (2 × 2 hours)
Imaginative Geographies of Sport: Communities, E-Sports and Geopolitics (3 × 2 hours)
Sport and Globalization (3 × 2 hours)
Sport, Migration and Mobility (2 × 2 hours)
Sports Mega-Events (2 × 2 hours)
Sport and the Body (4 × 2 hours)
Sport and the Environment (2 × 2 hours)
<i>Additional class time used for skills and assessment workshops, individual tutorials and (virtual) field trips</i>

Results and discussion

Teaching the geographies of sport through ABL

In line with institutional pedagogy, this module is delivered through an ABL approach. In brief, this pedagogy combines the principles of active learning, where teaching is collaborative, practical and task-oriented, and blended learning, where independent, typically online, preparation and follow-up works are used to enable a deeper learning experience during the face-to-face teaching time (for a more detailed discussion about ABL, see Armellini and Padilla Rodriguez (2021), and for its application, see Lomer and Palmer (2023)). The adoption of ABL at UON has not altered the amount of classroom time allocated as is sometimes the case with blended learning approaches (Moore & Gilmartin, 2010). To prepare for a class, students are asked, for example, to read an introductory chapter or watch an online video that introduces a theory or concept. This means that during face-to-face sessions, a much shorter theoretical “lecture” is required and time can instead be spent on ensuring thorough understanding and applying new knowledge to practical tasks. Additional follow-up tasks are then set to ensure deep learning is achieved; in this module, it often involves students engaging with a more complex academic paper to apply and/or evaluate content from the classroom-based learning.

Whilst it is widely acknowledged that sport has the potential to be inclusive (Schaillée et al., 2019), it has the potential to be polarising, and this is observed annually when students are required to select their modules for the following year. Each year, there are students who immediately pick this module given their own interests in playing or following sport and those who have little, or no, prior interest. It is worthwhile noting that anecdotally this is often generalised by stating during module choice tutorials that they have no interest in football (soccer), so they do not think they will enjoy the module.

However, sports geography is a diverse sub-field and has the potential to appeal to most people, provided there are opportunities for personalisation (Whalley et al., 2021), and differentiation of learning (Revell & Wainwright, 2009), which is easily enabled through ABL. When teaching commences each year, the first task that students complete is to introduce themselves and their background in sport, as a participant, supporter and for what sports and/or teams. This information is then used to tailor discussion (Armellini et al., 2021) and case studies that are utilised for teaching. The use of practical tasks and consistent student interaction to cement learning in the classroom allows students to draw upon their own interests and experiences to exemplify the theories or concepts being taught. Incorporating this level of personalisation would be more challenging were the module being taught using a more traditional lecture format, as opposed to ABL.

As would likely be expected in a specialist final-year module, the curriculum makes extensive use of research-led teaching. However, what is more significant is the opportunity to embed research-based teaching in this module (Healey et al., 2003; Walkington et al., 2011). Research-based teaching is advocated in an ABL approach as it lends itself to interactive learning. It creates additional opportunities for personalised learning by providing students, either individually or as part of a group, to undertake research on a sport of their choosing, for example, to investigate a particular issue or concept. This approach can be used to integrate peer-to-peer learning (Deakin et al., 2012) with these case studies and then being shared amongst the whole cohort (Moore & Gilmartin, 2010).

to introduce students to a much wider range of examples than would otherwise be possible. This diversity is praised by students with feedback including comments such as “I enjoy the amount of case studies as they help gain a better understanding of the content” (Module evaluation 2021–22) that attests to the benefits of this ABL-enabled approach.

In this module, the research-based learning is extended into the assessment strategy (Godlewska et al., 2019), with the second assignment being based on a topic of an individual student’s choice where they must undertake secondary data analysis of media articles. This assignment is linked to the sport and the body topic where, amongst others, students explore issues related to gender, race and dis(ability) and how these play out in sport. Specific examples of research projects completed by students in recent years include “Result dependent representations of Raheem Sterling”; “Media representations of differences between physical and neurological disability in sport” and “Comparisons between male and female athletes in the US WWE Wrestling medias”. These exemplify how students have been able to bring in both their own personal sporting interests and, in many cases, undertake research on issues related to the body that reflect their own identities.

Further reflecting on the assessment strategy, the first assignment is an essay. Despite being a “traditional” assessment, it is frequently referred to by students as the “most challenging assignment I’ve ever done” (Module evaluation 2021–22). This perception is mirrored in the grades awarded, but reflecting on the performances across the multiple iterations of this module, it in fact allows a clear distinction to be made between students who are effectively demonstrating achievement of final-year learning outcomes, about critical application, analysis and evaluation of geographical knowledge, and those who struggle with these skills. ABL classroom-based tasks have been adapted in order to further support students and provide opportunities for formative feedback. The results of these changes suggest that there is a relationship between engagement and performance. The students who attend regularly and engage with all elements of ABL benefit, when compared with those who engage less effectively and sometimes approach the module with the attitude that they have a good sports knowledge so will naturally perform well.

Teaching sports geography using a fundamental concepts and topic approach

This module is structured around fundamental geography concepts and components, for example, space, globalization and the environment. This extends learning from earlier in the degree and ensures students maintain a geographical focus on their work rather than prioritising sports case studies. The risk of this has been highlighted in quality assurance processes when an assessment moderator noted that poorer-quality work (awarded grades <55%) tended to have a sports journalism style as opposed to a critical geography focus. This issue exposes the first key challenge encountered in teaching sports geography and will be addressed in more detail.

Sports geography is still developing as a sub-field and has a limited literature base, and the research and scholarship that do exist are diverse in focus (Wise & Kohe, 2020). Consequently, as with any taught module, it is necessary to consider what content can be incorporated and what is ultimately excluded from the module. Whilst personalisation can overcome some potential exclusions, the diversity of what can be considered sports

geography, as demonstrated from this collection, necessitates choices to be made regarding the final content. In this module, the material covered is focused on what would be considered professional sport as opposed to drawing upon research that would be categorised as recreational sport or participatory exercise or physical activity.

I have reflected on this distinction every year when updating and adjusting the module content, as student feedback would suggest that there are elements of teaching that can be more easily grasped when linked to experiences of personal participation. For example, there was a class discussion about how identity, specifically the appearance of the body, can lead to inclusion/exclusion from sporting activity; in this case, how comfortable individuals feel using communal changing rooms. In a one-to-one tutorial, a female student, of South Indian ethnicity, conveyed to me how reflecting on her own personal experience of this allowed her to more fully understand the wider issues being taught on the relationship between sport and the body. This example suggests that there may be benefits to more extensive incorporation of participatory sport research into the curriculum to enhance student engagement and learning of the content. Consequently, it demonstrates that deciding on the module content of any dedicated sports geography module is challenging and necessitates difficult decisions to be made.

To demonstrate this, the module content has evolved with every iteration of teaching. Sports content has been adapted to suit student preferences, and the theoretical and conceptual content has been amended based on personal evaluation on how successful content has been in both delivery and reception, as well as to reflect emerging themes in the geographical literature. The module initially covered the relationship between nationalism and sport, but for a variety of reasons, this dedicated session was removed and much of the content was spread elsewhere. Geopolitical issues are often the focus of discussion from the sports media, for example, the Qatari hosting of the Soccer World Cup in 2022 and the significance of “sportswashing” through LIV Golf and soccer team ownership. Likewise, national identity and communities in/through sport are incorporated into the classes on imaginative geographies (see [Table 1](#)).

New additions to the module content have occurred because of topical sports discussions, emerging geographical debates and issues subject to wider academic interrogation. One of the overarching inclusions considers the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on sport (Waite, 2022). Related to this has been the rising significance of digital spaces (Ash et al., 2018) in sport, both for fans and athletes, as well as esports coming to the forefront of public interest (Jenny et al., 2017). These latter additions have proved to be particularly popular with students, with them initiating lively, but divisive, debate amongst the cohort during classroom activities.

Opportunities and challenges to teaching sports geography as a specialist module

Over 6 years of teaching this module, I have encountered numerous challenges, some of which have been hinted at previously in this piece. There are three key challenges that are likely to require negotiation by anyone planning to teach sports geographies as a standalone module. First, despite being a growing sub-field, the literature base that can be explicitly considered sports geography is limited. Whilst there is much relevant literature in allied disciplines, it can be challenging to demonstrate sufficient academic rigour for a specialist final-year module. Student feedback and their performance in

assignments would reiterate this challenge, with students sometimes struggling to produce the quality of work required for a good pass at level 6 because of difficulties in sourcing relevant and appropriate academic literature. A geographical education requires students to develop critical thinking and applied skills (Lin, 2022), and talking about sport provides students with an ideal opportunity to articulate how everyday issues can be understood using academic theory. As noted previously, this is primarily addressed in this module by using sport to critically explore fundamental geographical concepts, so a broader range of geographical work can be incorporated into formal assessments.

This issue relates to the second challenge, which is where a dedicated sports geography module should be positioned in an undergraduate programme. Conventionally, specialised modules, based on the research expertise of the staff, are found in the final year of a degree programme. However, this is not always the ideal placement, partly due to the literature base issues discussed earlier, but because it may come too late in the programme. Sports geography is a popular independent dissertation topic; in the years since the module has become established, typically 5–10% of dissertation projects at UON would be broadly considered sports geographies. This raises questions as to whether students would be better prepared for this if the taught content was covered at level 5. One solution that has been used to partially address this at Northampton is to embed sports geography into other parts of the programme at levels 4 and 5, including using sports case studies to introduce theories in development geography and exploring understanding notions and scales of community through sports examples.

The final challenge that I have had to negotiate whilst running this module relates to the appeal and interpretation of the module by students. It has already been noted that there is a tendency amongst students to assume that the module will be focused on soccer and as such will not appeal to those who have little or no interest in this. However, one of the benefits of teaching sports geography is the ease with which the relevance of formal teaching can be seen in the real world. One of the most positively evaluated activities that is incorporated into teaching activities is the opportunity for students to bring media articles of interest to each class and to discuss their geographical significance. Not only does this activity stimulate discussion amongst students, but it can also cement prior learning or introduce new, diverse, ideas and topics. The reception of this activity by students is consistently raised in evaluation feedback such as “there was always stimulating conversations [that were] interesting and relevant to current events” (Module evaluation 2021–22). This activity has proved to be a successful way of demonstrating the relevance of sports geography teaching (and could be easily adapted to teach a wide range of geographical issues) to ensure that the call by Hill et al. (2018) for relevant teaching and learning is achieved.

The opportunity for students to use examples from sport to grasp geographical theories and concepts is one of the greatest strengths of sports geography. It demonstrates how it can be valuable both in dedicated teaching and in supporting wider geographical teaching and learning. To provide an example of a “lightbulb moment” from a student on this module, the student explained how shortly after a class on imaginative geographies and communities, they attended a Premier League football match. This was an “away” fixture, and before the match, they were in an unfamiliar pub; however, the student quickly found themselves engaged in comfortable conversations with others discussing both the upcoming match and the previous performances of the team. When recounting

this experience, the student realised how the situation exemplified the theories we had covered in the classroom regarding how through sport you can belong to a community of fans, which can exist at multiple scales and in multiple spaces, through shared interests. Whilst there are many leisure and cultural activities that could be used to discuss these concepts, it is likely that most students will be able to identify with sports examples, whether they be about specific teams or a team that is representing a nation state at global events such as the Olympics.

Conclusion

In the early days of my PhD studies, I recall being told that I should frame my work as being in the sub-field of the *geographies of sport* as *sports geography* would not convey sufficient rigour and respectability within academia. Whilst this comment has stuck with me over the last decade or so, there is arguably now a sufficient body of “critical geographies of sport” (Koch 2016b) to mean that there is no longer a need for such a distinction to be made. Yet, for a variety of reasons, it seems that dedicated time and space for the teaching of sports geography are still rare.

This article has used student feedback and autoethnographic reflections to present experiences of teaching and learning the geographies of sport at an undergraduate level. In general, student feedback has been positive, with a diverse range of students stating that they have enjoyed engaging with the module and the associated academic scholarship. This can be partially attributed to the extent to which the ABL approach has enabled personalisation of the module content and for students to shape their own learning experience. Considering ways in which teaching content can be adapted to suit the needs of individual students or class cohorts is the primary recommendation I would make to readers considering teaching sports geography.

It is important to recognise that a wholly ABL approach is not always practical or suitable, depending upon the spaces (Graham et al., 2017) and technologies available, alongside the nature and size of the student cohort (Korson, 2022). The student and self-evaluation of this module would suggest that incorporating elements of the approach, into lecture–tutorial-based teaching, would aid successful delivery of sports geography teaching. The opportunity for personalised learning, cementing and enhancing understanding of fundamental concepts and the scope for critical application and evaluation of theory demonstrate the value of an ABL-based approach to studying sport to deepen geographical learning.

Positive feedback should not mask the fact that there are challenges in this teaching. Three key challenges were presented in the previous section: the volume of dedicated literature, the timing of teaching and creating a module that appeals to a diverse student body. Despite the module having run for 6 years, I continue to encounter and reflect on ways to overcome, or at least mitigate, these challenges. At present, whilst this module remains unusual in undergraduate teaching, there is little in the way of precedent for teaching sports geography. As the body of research continues to grow and interventions such as this symposium emerge, it is likely that best practice sharing can develop amongst those teaching in this area. Ultimately, this should help the sports geographies sub-field to develop as more students, and thus future researchers and teachers, can be engaged at an early stage of their studies.

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Disclosure statement

The autoethnographic nature of this manuscript means that there is no formal dataset underpinning this paper which can be made available.

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