



Three Pillars of Teaching Sports Production

Susan Cardillo
University of Hartford

For the past three years I have been teaching sports production in Connecticut. I mention the state because it happens to be one of the best places for working in sports production. Connecticut is the home of ESPN headquarters as well as NBCSports, CBS Sports and the WWE.

When I began teaching sports production, I decided to reach out to these organizations to introduce myself and find out what they were looking for in early career employees. I developed relationships with each organization with the premise that I will teach what they need incoming employees to learn.

This paper will discuss the three pillars that have proven to be the core learning objectives for teaching sports production so that they can work in the world of sports production.

Learning objectives exist to provide a focused mindset for students engaging in the content (Mitchell & Manzo, 2018). Giving students specific areas of focus allows for perspective as they work towards completion of the course. The three pillars to follow should be learning objectives in any sports production program.

Three Pillars:

1. Knowledge Agility
2. Competencies – Skills & Tools of Storytelling
3. Professionalism & Communication Skills

Knowledge Agility:

Knowledge agility is the first area that any sports production organization will want from an incoming employee. There are the four major sports: football, baseball, basketball and hockey. The student should have a strong current understanding of these sports and be able to give very specific answers to questions

about at least two of them.

Teaching sports knowledge has several facets. First students should be consistently watching sports shows, recaps and games. They should be following the influencers on social media. One lesson I use in class is that I give an assignment for each student to come into class prepared with a story about a recent sporting event that they think the class will know nothing or very little about. This can also be done in an online format as a discussion.

The agility part of knowledge is the willingness to learn new sports or being able to do the research and deep dive into a sport you are less familiar with. Here we do an assignment where I give the student a sport outside their comfort zone, and they must research and create a story around that sport.

“Agility is characterized as deriving from a balance of both the physical ability to act (*response ability*) and the intellectual ability to understand what to act upon (*knowledge management*)” (Dove, 2003). This agility is most important for sports production as student need to learn how to develop intellectual abilities to perform the physical tasks of producing sports.

Competencies – Skills and Tools of Storytelling:

Although it seems obvious that knowledge of sports would be imperative to work in sports production as knowledge of theatre would be a prerequisite to working in the theatre. But as much knowledge as you might have in sports, you cannot expect to work

in the field without learning the skills and tools of storytelling. After all, sports production is an entertainment/journalism industry and both entertainment and journalism are based in storytelling.

There are two areas of sports production we will consider for this pillar. First there are the skills and tools for live production and then the skills and tools for packaged work. Some of these tools are similar but some are very different.

Live Production

Live production work consists of tools like cameras, graphics, audio, replay and streaming tool.

The skills that go along with these tools are as follows:

1. Learning how to use a camera to follow a particular sport. These skills will differ from sport to sport. Basketball is a much faster-paced sport than baseball, but the ball is much smaller in baseball, so it might be harder to follow with the camera. Having three cameras to teach these skills would be ideal. A wide shot of the entire court/field, and two cameras that follow close-up action and direction from your director. A good way to start students on camera is with the wide shot, so they can listen to the direction in the headset and learn what the other cameras are doing. Next the student should sit in the trailer/booth and watch a game being called by the director so they can learn strategies and shot styles. They will then be ready for a follow camera, with the goal of moving to technical directing and then directing.
2. Audio is the simplest tool to learn in the trailer/booth. It is a great place to start students to learn the flow of the game and what the other positions are doing. Based on whether you are working with color and play-by-play talent, the audio becomes more complicated, but it is still a quick learn for most students.
3. Graphics is an important skill for sports production students to learn as there are many jobs out there requiring graphics for live production. Xpressions (Ross product) is a good tool to use since you could have it in either a trailer or a TV studio, so it can be taught outside the game. Teaching to create and use the bugs, bumpers, lower-thirds and graph-

ic overlays are essential to working in sports production graphics. Live graphics are an essential element for keeping viewers engaged and updated.

4. Replay or Play-back: Replay is also a skill that gets students hired after college. We use 3 Play and Mira Replay Systems. This can also be taught in either the trailer or a TV studio with playback capabilities. Becoming fluent at replay is a skill that will truly benefit a student for working with major production organizations.
5. Streaming Tools: Understanding the streaming capabilities of your school's athletic events is an important part of the skill set students should have on their resume for work in sports production. We currently use Hudl but some schools have a Youtube channel that takes care of their streaming. Whatever the tool is, students should understand how it works, and they should be able to discuss it in an interview.

Beside live production, sports production organizations want entry level employees to be skilled with the tools of packaged productions. These tools consist of camera, tripod, mics and editing equipment.

These skills should be varied between cutting game day footage into a sports news short to creating feature stories about athletes through interviews and b-roll.

Professional and Communication Skills:

Just like sports themselves, when it comes to sports production, teamwork is everything. Even a small sports production, crew will consist of 8 individuals. Each of these crew members are wearing headsets with microphones. Learning good communications skills is imperative to a successful production. Teaching proper headset etiquette is important for both TV studio and trailer work.

Knowledge for headsets/trailer:

- Speaking clearly and concisely
- Identifying yourself by role when speaking (Camera 1, Audio, Graphics)
- Voiding unnecessary talking (speak when spoken to by the director)
- Using appropriate volume levels
- Adhering to established communication protocols like "ready" or "go" to indicate key moments in the production.

- The director should be ensuring everyone on the headset is aware of the current status and next steps.

Understanding professionalism in sports production is sometime overlooked as a part of the student's education. Students will be working with many high ranking and/or celebrity talent and there must be discussion and learning on how to approach and deal with these situations. Understanding that familiar or street language is not appropriate when dealing with producers. Using first names is only appropriate when you are told to call someone by their first name. Students must understand that they are representing the production company and must act accordingly. Most importantly students should understand that most sports production entry level positions, called a freelancer, are a testing ground to see if you are someone they want to work with long term. There are 25 people in line waiting for your job should you not communicate and act professionally. Almost all entry level positions with ESPN, NBC Sports, CBS Sports and WWE start as freelance positions so entry level employees are on a trial basis, and they must prove that you are worth keeping. Recently the hiring manager from one of these companies told me that as much as he like having recent graduates come in knowing the tools and skills needed, it is ultimately the "likability" factor that keeps people around and moving up within the organization.

At its core, sports broadcasting is a crew of dedicated professionals who use technology to tell stories, highlight moments of triumph, and giving athletes – from the biggest names to the lesser-known stars – the chance to shine.

References:

- Dove, R. (2003). Knowledge management and agility: Relationships and roles. In: Holsapple, C.W. (eds) *Handbook on knowledge management. International handbooks on information systems*, vol 2. Springer, Berlin, Heidelberg. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-540-24748-7_14
- Mitchell, K. M. W., & Manzo, W. R. (2018). The purpose and perception of learning objectives. *Journal of Political Science Education*, 14(4), 456–472. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15512169.2018.1433542>

Dr. Susan Cardillo is an Assistant Professor of Digital Media and Journalism at the University of Hartford. Her area of research is Short-form, Interactive and Micro-Documentary for Social Awareness and Change. She has a BA from the University of Arizona, a MS from Quinnipiac University and a Doctorate from Colorado Technical University.

© Susan Cardillo, 2025. Licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Non Commercial-ShareAlike 3.0 Unported License.