ATTITUDE OF GAMING EMPLOYEES TOWARDS PROBLEM GAMBLING: HOW IT AFFECTS THEIR LEARNING AT AN AWARENESS TRAINING

Ms. Lisa M. Bybee

Index: Adult learning, Training evaluation, Problem gambling

Abstract: The purpose of this study: Analyze the efficacy of a problem gambling training class to train adult learners and determine whether the attitude of this sample towards problem gambling affects their ability to learn about this issue. A survey instrument was designed by the author. The researcher used frequency distribution, crosstabulations, and linear regression to analyze the collected data. The survey sample consisted of adult gaming employees in Las Vegas who attended compulsory problem gambling awareness training.

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this study is to analyze the efficacy of a problem gambling training program to train adult learners and to determine whether the attitude of this sample towards problem gambling affects their ability to learn about this issue. The survey sample consists of adult gaming employees in Las Vegas who attended a compulsory problem gambling awareness training class.

Importance of the Study

This study will first endeavor to discover whether the attitude of trainees towards problem gambling affected their ability to learn the objectives presented in the class and second evaluate the training program. The program offered by the Nevada Council on Problem Gambling is the first of its kind in Las Vegas outside of a casino or hotel property.

Problem gambling has been a controversial topic of debate among gaming proponents and opponents for at least 15 years and has become a more politicized issue in Nevada, and other states with legalized gambling, during the past few years. Indeed, it has been difficult for interested parties (clinicians, the gaming industry, the general public, and people with gambling problems) to come to an agreement on just what problem gambling is.

The pre-test occurred at the beginning of October. Ten completed surveys were obtained. Because the responses were acceptable – no questions seemed to pose any problems – no part of the survey was changed. As a result, these 10 surveys were added to the 45 that had been collected by December. Thus, a total of 55 useable surveys were obtained with a response rate of 100%.

Hypotheses

1. Do women have a different attitude towards this training than men?
2. Will attendees with no prior exposure to problem gambling training retain more information than those attendees who have had prior problem gambling training?
3. Do people with positive attitudes retain more information than those with negative attitudes?

The study used a convenience sample. The survey sample was restricted to gaming employees in Las Vegas who attended a compulsory, off-site problem gambling awareness training.
Review of Related Literature

The review of literature is divided into the following six parts: Background (problem gambling and an outline of the Nevada Council on Problem Gambling’s Awareness Training Program); Problem Gambling; Adult Learning; Attitude Measurement; Training Program Design; and, Training Evaluation. Only the Background section is included here.

Background

In 1931, Assembly Bill 98 was passed legalizing gambling in Nevada. During November 1998, a gaming regulation was passed requiring gaming establishments to address problem gambling. The debate over just what problem gambling, or compulsive gambling, or gambling addiction really is has raged among clinicians, the gaming industry, the general public, and people with gambling problems for years. While gambling as a recreational activity has been widely practiced and accepted, problem gambling has remained a difficult issue to define and address for all interested parties.

The journey to the regulation’s passage and implementation was recorded by one of the city’s newspapers – the Las Vegas Sun – and revealed much about the volatility of the issue and the opinions of various groups inside Nevada. A June 1998 article discussed the 12th National Conference on Problem Gambling. Medical professionals, executives from the gaming industry, and anti-gambling representatives met in Las Vegas over three days to discuss problem gambling. It was noted that such a large and varied gathering would not have occurred a few years before. Dr. Howard Shaffer presented results from earlier research that studied underage gambling and gambling addiction among teens (Thompson, 1998).

By September of 1998, the gaming industry in Nevada was feeling the pressure of a study being conducted by a federal commission – the National Gambling Impact Study Commission – studying problem gambling nationwide. The general feeling of Nevada casino operators and gaming interests was that they needed to address problem gambling issues themselves before some other legislative body intervened (Wilen, 1998).

In November 1998, the Nevada Gaming Commission and the State Gaming Control Board passed a regulation that addressed problem gambling in 4 ways: 1.) all gaming properties, with restricted or unrestricted licenses, are subject to the regulation; 2.) the help-line number (1-800) has to be posted in gaming areas; 3.) employees who work in gaming areas are required to be educated about the issue and trained how to assist customers who request information; and, 4.) gaming properties must discontinue sending casino marketing information and issuing credit to customers who request it (Regulation 5.170, 1998). The Nevada Council on Problem Gambling is the recognized provider of problem gambling awareness training available to gaming properties.

The gaming industry revealed publicly that it acted to pass legislation quickly, the night before a scheduled visit in Las Vegas of the federal Commission, and eight months before the results of their study were released (Wilen, 1999). By May 1999, casino operators had begun to suggest that all of the controversy surrounding problem gambling and the need for recently passed legislation had been overstated. The high incidence of problem gambling in the local and general population and personal bankruptcies in Las Vegas were the result of growth, not gambling (Strow, 1999).
In June of 1999, the month that the federal report’s results were to be made public, gaming interests, while applauding themselves for passing the regulation, went out of their way to point to several studies which suggested that the percentage of problem gamblers in the general population was very small (Wilen, 1999). The very next day Steve Wynn, casino magnate and influential gaming industry persona, commented that the results of the federal report would prove to be harmless to the gaming industry and, instead, would help to promote the industry as a financial powerhouse and economic savior of many communities and states in the country (German, 1999).

One week after Wynn’s comments, on June 18, 1999, the National Gambling Impact Study Commission released the results of its research. Among the highlights of the Commission’s recommendations under the problem and pathological gambling section: “contract with a state-recognized gambling treatment professional to train management and staff to develop strategies for recognizing and addressing customers whose gambling behavior may strongly suggest they may be experiencing serious to severe difficulties” and “…respectfully and confidentially provide the customer…with written information that includes a state-approved list of professional gambling treatment programs” (NGISC Report, 1999).

The national press commented on the events unfolding in the gaming industry as the result of the Commission’s report. Overholser (1999) pointed out that, while important, the report seemed to take a soft approach to the spread of gambling nationwide due to the Commission’s membership including an influential Las Vegas CEO. By the end of June 1999, the local press began to profile famous individuals who had suffered from gambling addiction – in order to put a familiar face on the issue (DiMeglio, 1999; Arnold, 1999).

It is in this atmosphere of mistrust – on the part of some in the gaming industry who believe that it was forced to regulate itself and gambling opponents who believe that the spread of gambling nationwide is responsible for the problem – that the Nevada Council on Problem Gambling began to offer its problem gambling awareness training to employees of Las Vegas gaming establishments.

**Nevada Council on Problem Gambling’s Training**

The problem gambling training class offered by the Nevada Council is presented to class attendees in 75 minutes. An outline of the program’s objectives, given to attendees at the beginning of the class, is reproduced below:

I. Introduction and Objectives
II. Defining Social and Problem Gambling
III. When the Fun Stops video presentation
IV. Impact of Problem Gambling
V. Solutions for Problem Gambling
VI. Summary and Review
VII. Quiz

(Source: NVCPG’s When the Fun Stops participant handout, 1999).

Class attendees are told throughout the introduction that the training class is 75 minutes in length – something the Council states to trainees in order to reassure them that their time commitment is relatively short. The length of the video, 28 minutes, is also given to attendees at the beginning of the class. Finally, the quiz to be given at the end of the class is presented as an integral part of their attendance since its completion will allow the Council to give each participant a card signifying that an individual took the class.
The first objective of the training is to explore the definitions of problem gambling and social gambling— their differences and similarities. Next, the warning signs of problem gambling are covered. This section is designed to further separate social gambling’s aspects from problem gambling’s symptoms. The When the Fun Stops video is then shown. The video uses three recovering problem gamblers and their stories, along with a noted problem gambling therapist, Dr. Hunter, to present the issues of the training in a sensitive yet reality-based format. The phases of problem gambling are presented in the video in order to give structure to the experiences of the three individuals profiled. Following the video presentation, the impact of problem gambling on the individual, family, friends, and co-workers is described.

Solutions to problem gambling, i.e., support groups available to the public, the hotline number, and professional resources, are then given. A review of the individuals in the video, how they resolved their gambling addiction, availability of treatment, and the importance of knowing the difference between problem and social gambling is presented. Finally, after more than an hour, the role of the gaming employee is reviewed. They are to know where brochures and information—especially the hotline number—are posted in the workplace; that there exist support groups for those who ask for help; and, not to approach customers about this issue.

Class attendees are then given time to complete the Council’s quiz. It reviews the basic objectives and information presented in class. The attendees are told not to view the quiz as a pass/fail test of their knowledge of problem gambling since the trainer will go over each question with the class and provide the correct answers.

Summary

Women were more interested in taking the training class than men and they responded positively to the seriousness of the issue from the beginning. The results for hypothesis one indicate that women may be more positive towards the training because they view the training as an opportunity to learn about a social issue.

Women may have a more positive attitude towards the training because, traditionally, they have had more personal contact with gambling patrons through their jobs at gaming establishments. In addition, the fact that half of the women answered “very interested” and “interested” suggests that their interest to learn about problem gambling is associated with their perceived social roles in the workplace.

The results for hypothesis two indicate an automatic response to survey questions in that those who had previous training were more likely to have responded that they had “learned little that was new” from the training. These respondents may have thought they knew all they needed to know about problem gambling due to their prior job training or personal experience. This suggests that their attitude towards the training and confidence in their knowledge prevented them from learning something new.

In addition, the way in which respondents with or without previous training responded to questions about what they learned at the training, as noted in the high response rates for “learned little that was new” and “did not learn anything new”, could mean that respondents really do not know if they learned anything new about problem gambling from the training since they do not know the outcome of their efforts. These responses may also be due to the compulsory nature of the training.

The results for hypothesis three indicate the sample’s attitude towards learning about problem gambling. Those respondents who were “very interested” and “interested” in the training at the beginning, had more positive answers for “did you learn something new” and “is problem
gambling a serious issue” suggesting their positive approach to the training influenced what they learned.

Participation in adult education is driven by several factors including employment status. In other words, respondents were at this training because of their employers (or potential employers) not because they wanted to become more knowledgeable about problem gambling. The necessity of performance feedback from the instructor, and for instructors to take into account prior experience when designing curriculum, are vital parts of the adult learning process.

In both regression models “how interested are you in this class” is a significant independent variable. This was expected since the crosstabulation results showed a positive correlation between interest in the class and “did you learn something new”.

What matters more: Age, gender, previous training, or attitude? The regression analysis shows that attitude – responses to “interest” and “opinion” questions – is the variable that is the most significant for this sample.

CONCLUSION

The author’s experiences at the Council’s training sessions suggest that the approach to the training by the Council illustrates its desire to get its message across to participants in the shortest time possible in order to minimize the frustration (negative attitudes?) that attendees may have towards attending the training. The length of the video, 28 minutes, is also given to attendees at the beginning of the class – possibly for the same reasons. The desire to train attendees in the shortest amount of time is cost-effective but are the content and organization of the class sacrificed in the process?

While the presentation of objectives follows a paradigmatic training format one major element to teaching adults successfully is left out completely: active participation of class attendees. Although the Council would argue that this element is not possible to include due to time constraints, participation is an essential aspect of adult learning methodology. Furthermore, the use of a quiz that does little to test the newly acquired knowledge of participants might very well neutralize any actual retention of information because the trainer provides the answers for the adults and still gives a reward for their efforts (the card). The review of literature shows that this goes against the tenets of adult learning theories and training design. Adults must have a stake in their learning and must be able to show themselves and others what they have learned in order to feel successful.

The purpose of the Nevada Council’s training is to increase gaming employees’ awareness of problem gambling issues in compliance with a recently passed gaming regulation. Is the training successful using this as a criteria? In terms of adult learning methods, the training falls short as suggested by the lack of trainee participation and the testing of acquired skills. The training is a success when training design is considered since the objectives of the training are stated clearly at the beginning of the class and the class format is structured around the stated plan. However, the end of the class deteriorates into a last minute attempt to have attendees remember just one thing – the problem gambling telephone number. This suggests to attendees that the earlier part of the training (the phases of problem gambling, the personal devastation it causes) was not as valuable or important for them to know as a telephone number.

What makes this topic, problem gambling, provocative is that people have difficulty accepting that the pursuit of the intangible product of gambling – entertainment – can have a deleterious effect on a person. The passage of a problem gambling regulation, whatever the
motivation, and the existence of the Nevada Council on Problem Gambling’s awareness training classes are positive signs that the gaming industry is committed to addressing this issue.

REFERENCES


DEFINITION OF TERMS

The following definitions are from various sources including the Nevada Council on Problem Gambling’s informational brochure and training class handouts:

Problem gambling: General term used to describe a disorder whereby an individual is unable to stop gambling on their own. They cannot limit the amount of time or money spent gambling. They gamble to the exclusion of other activities and the end result is often financial bankruptcy, depression, and suicide. Same thing as pathological gambling, compulsive gambling, and gambling addiction. Differs from social gambling.

Social gambling: Gambling activity that is for entertainment purposes. The gambler limits the amount of time and money gambled and gambles for social distraction. How the majority of the general public gambles.

Compulsive gambling: Another term used by people who are in treatment for gambling addiction. The same thing as problem gambling.

Pathological gambling: The term used by the medical community for problem gambling. Also refers to gambling addiction. Typically used by lay people, i.e., the press and general public.

Gambling addiction: The term that “problem gamblers” use to describe their gambling problem. Typically used by those who are in treatment or post-treatment.

Gambler’s Anonymous: Also referred to as GA. This is a free treatment organization for problem gamblers. The phases of the program follow the “12 Step” method used by Alcoholic’s Anonymous.

Convenience sample: A population sample that is not randomly chosen.

PLEASE NOTE: A complete copy of this thesis, including tables, literature review, sample survey, and recommendations can be obtained from the author.

CORRESPONDENCE

Ms. Lisa M. Bybee
E-mail: Lmbyb@aol.com
11 Calimo Circle
Santa Fe, New Mexico
87505