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Sport Management Taught On-Line: A Discussion

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Abstract

An introduction to the world of on-line courses (distance education/learning) is presented. In addition, the world of on-line learning, as it pertains to sport management, is examined within the framework of (a) pedagogy, (b) finances, (c) assessment, and (d) choosing to transition from the traditional classroom to on-line learning. Pertinent points relative to each of the four categories are presented from the literature. In an effort to stimulate thought and discussion to the subject of on-line learning for sport management programs/courses the authors provide their reactions to the *literature points* by presenting their comments/reactions from a sport management perspective. Sport management professors and administrators are encouraged to critically examine the feasibility of such on-line courses (distance education/learning) within their own curricula while maintaining an appropriate framework revolving around sound theoretical instructional strategies, methods as well as appropriate use of instructional tools, including but not limited to, computers and the WWW.

Key Words: *Innovative teaching, contemporary learning.*

Today we live in an age of ever changing technology with faculty and students continuing to look for new and innovative ways, methods and strategies related to the learning and teaching experience. On-line courses (web-based instruction – WBI) are just one possible alternative for faculty (as well as students) to examine and possibly pursue. And, even within the realm of so-called on-line learning, there are variations in terms of how such courses are organized, structured and implemented.

Effective teaching of sport management courses is of the utmost importance to ensure meaningful student learning. In the current era where technology is progressing at a pace of extreme rapidity it is essential that sport management program directors have the knowledge and ability to make necessary teaching-related technological transitions. Those who have not positioned themselves to incorporate technology –most specifically on-line learning (often referred to as distance education/distance learning)– into their sport management programs run the risk of being considered a program lacking in the versatility of various teaching methods.

Certainly, rushed decisions to transform in-person sport management courses into on-line courses would be less than prudent. It would, however, be equally imprudent to be lacking in the preparation necessary to offer on-line sport management courses should the need arise to do so. Such a need may indeed arise if a stronger link can be made between learning that takes place on-line as an equally effective means of learning than that which takes place in the traditional, in-person sport management classroom. And, a need may also arise if other competitive institutions and sport management programs become actively and successfully involved in distance education/learning. In this eventuality, it may well be the case of *being noticed by one's absence*, if an institution or programs remains exclusively with the traditional classroom approach.

Regardless of arguments for and against on-line learning, all sport management program directors and professors would be well served to have an understanding of the advantages and disadvantages of on-line learning. Oravec (2003) emphasized that on-line education issues have the potential to affect nearly every aspect of higher education, including the relationships between faculty members, students, and administrators. Sport Management faculty members should not only seek out knowledge relative to on-line learning and how it affects the aforementioned relationships of which Oravec speaks, but also gain an understanding of the effects it would have on their own programs and their own professional careers.

There are various ways to enhance one's understanding of how on-line learning may affect sport management curriculums. One way to fully understand on-line learning is to teach (which usually involves an extensive training component/experience by the would-be teacher) an on-line course and

supplement one's teaching experience with familiarity with the literature related to on-line learning. Having experience teaching on-line and acquainting oneself with on-line learning literature will facilitate one's decision making process relative to the question of whether on-line learning is appropriate for one's program/institution. Only after gaining an adequate understanding of on-line learning can sport management directors and teachers confidently choose to implement one of the following three options: (a) maintain a traditionally taught program with no on-line courses, (b) selectively identify preferred courses to be taught on-line, or (c) make the entire sport management curriculum available on-line.

It should be pointed out that there are many different types of on-line courses or distance education experiences which sport management faculty may utilize. For the purpose of this discussion, on-line learning may be conceptualized as any teaching/learning experience in which students are taught by a faculty member via computer(s) (over the Internet) in such a fashion as not to require the student to be in a so-called traditional (physical) classroom *for any significant amount of time*.

It should be noted that there are two types of on-line learning. First, on-line learning can take place in a situation in which the student *never* steps foot on campus to take part in a physical class or learning experience. In this case, the student may be situated physically in the student's home, office, on the road or at any other site of the student's choice—in a networked environment—as long as the student can have access to the internet. The second type of on-line learning experience can be viewed as a combination or modification of on-line learning (off campus, computer assisted) *and* some small percentage of time spent on the institution's campus in a traditional classroom. The amount of time spent in the traditional classroom is minimal as the emphasis is learning on-line through the WWW and with the aid of computers.

Discussion of On-line Literature Points

In an effort to stimulate thought and discussion on the subject of on-line learning for sport management programs/courses, the literature was reviewed and pertinent information from the literature was included in this section from the following four general areas related to on-line learning: (a) pedagogy, (b) finances, (c) assessment, and (d) choosing to transition from the traditional, in-person classroom to on-line learning. Literature relating to each of the four general areas is presented under each of the sections under subheadings entitled, «On-line Literature Point». Following each of the on-line literature points and under another subheading entitled, «Authors' Comments», the authors

have reacted to the on-line literature points by including their comments/reactions from a sport management perspective. The authors' remarks are based on the literature, their own on-line teaching experiences, and observations of higher education over the past decades as full-time sport management faculty.

Pedagogy

On-line Literature Point: The use of technology should be driven by sound pedagogical principles. Ascough (2002) argued that on-line distance education provides opportunities for quality education, although it can lead to poor pedagogical practices. According to Ascough, «For on-line distance education to be effective one must understand the medium and the pedagogical principles that can lead to deep learning in the on-line environment» (p. 17).

Authors' Comments: The authors agree that at a foundational level, pedagogy must take precedence over technology if on-line learning is to continue to be effective. A sound theoretical framework of instructional strategies and methods is essential, regardless of the environment in which instruction and learning takes place. Just as ineffective teaching can take place in the traditional, in-person classroom, the same can take place with on-line learning if sound pedagogical principles are not made a priority. An on-line learning course can be yet *another type of learning experience* that students might find exciting, challenging and rewarding. It allows students to progress at their own rate and to undergo a type of learning experience that might be different –yet still effective, efficient, rewarding and beneficial– from the so-called traditional method found in a lecture class or classroom course.

On-Line Literature Point: Okojie, Olinzock, and Okojie-Boulder (2006) pointed out that good teachers understand the pedagogical principles that govern the application of technology into teaching and learning. Technology in education is not a mere object to be introduced into teaching and learning activities at will without considering basic principles of learning and sound teaching methodology (Okojie et al.).

Authors' Comments: The authors are in agreement with Stow (2005) in that good teaching in the virtual classroom (on-line teaching) must involve appropriate *dialogue* or communication among and between the students and the teacher resulting in action or learning taking place. Additionally, on-line learning must have appropriate *structure* in terms of how a course as well as various learning activities are organized and presented. It is imperative that instructors design both content and delivery systems that will allow for maximum learning to take place. Sound pedagogical principles serve as the foundation or fundamental building blocks for the use of computers and the WWW as the implementation tools of instruction.

On-line Literature Point: Classrooms can affect the learning process – for better and for worse (Bartlett, 2003). Bartlett specifically pointed out the type of seats, classroom temperature, lighting, glare on laptops, noisy and heating cooling systems, acoustics and furniture as factors that can significantly affect the learning process.

Authors' Comments: The physical environment of the classroom can be controlled by the on-line learner. For example, if a room is too hot, a seat uncomfortable, and the lighting too low, the on-line learner can move to a different seat in a different room that is well lit. The poor acoustics of some traditional classrooms are not of concern with on-line learning since students can choose a learning environment that is more conducive to their personal needs. Instead of traditional classrooms, on-line learners might choose their living room at home, a local coffee shop, or public transportation as suitable learning environments. Such students, for the most part, can choose when and where their learning activity will take place. If a setting/classroom is dysfunctional, the on-line learner can completely avoid it and choose another environment most conducive to learning. In doing so, each and every on-line learner can learn in a more optimal environment.

On the other hand, students who find themselves in traditional, in-person learning environments often do not have the ability to change it. Traditional learning environments are almost always classrooms that are selected with little or no student input. Without student input or influence the physical classroom environment may not be conducive to the process of learning for each and every one of the students. Even if students were allowed to select classrooms for traditional learning, differences among students would still exist to the extent that no one classroom would meet the needs of all students.

On-line Literature Point: Yin, Urven, Schramm, and Friedman (2002) contended that not all laboratory sessions are suitable for a Web-based environment.

Authors' Comments: The authors believe that not all necessary sport management learning can take place strictly through on-line learning. The sport management equivalents to laboratory sessions are field experiences including practica and internships. Although the reporting of daily experiences gained in one's field experiences can take place on-line, the actual field experience requires a physical presence, on the part of the student, at the cooperating sport organization under the direct on-site supervisor. Although this internship experience does not take place in a traditional four wall classroom it still requires the student to be physically present at a prearranged site for a specific period of time.

On-line Literature Point: Ascough (2002) stated that the most important aspect of on-line course delivery is course design. Ascough went on to claim that the following four steps are essential to on-line course delivery: (a) undertake analysis, (b) set goals and objectives, (c) select teaching strategies, and (d) administer evaluations.

Authors' Comments: Instructors of on-line courses must take time and expend the effort to make a thorough analysis of the course content that they wish to teach on-line (through the WWW). Part of this analysis is to determine what content will be appropriate, within the confines and limitations of the internet and the on-line course structure to be used, and will be able to be conveyed through the course. Additionally, obtainable and measurable goals and objectives, both for the instructor and the students, must be established, all within a theoretical instructional framework.

Appropriate and timely teaching methods, strategies and the use of tools, such as small group or open/multi-dimensional (threaded) discussions among students/teacher; private discussions between individual students and the instructor; readings; viewing of CD ROMs and streaming video; use of software; questions and answers; quizzes/examinations and other types of evaluations; writing reports and critiques; and preparing revisions of previously submitted writing projects, etc., can all be part of the overall planning that needs to be undertaken by the instructor and followed through during the course by means of the on-line course (internet).

Finances

On-line Literature Point: From an administrative perspective, on-line courses can have a positive effect on enrollment and, ultimately, on revenue generated (Yin, Urven, Schramm, and Friedman, 2002).

Authors' Comments: Although the authors do not think decisions to incorporate on-line learning into sport management programs should be based *solely* on financial principles, the overall potential financial benefits are a reality. On-line courses often result in more tuition dollars than traditional, in-person courses due to higher enrollments, especially from those students who would not ordinarily enroll in traditional, on-campus classes/course. On-line courses do not require physical classrooms; therefore, the costs of owning or leasing a traditional classroom are saved. Nor do on-line courses require having to pay utility costs needed to keep a traditional classroom «up and running». And, additional savings come from the fact that the physical resources inside the traditional, in-person classrooms such as chairs, tables, podiums, and projectors also are not required for on-line learning. Finally, on-line courses free up traditional classrooms on the institution's campus thereby providing the means to offer additional (often revenue generating) classes/courses.

On-Line Literature Point: Smaller and less prestigious institutions are exploring on-line distance education and the production of educational materials as a way of augmenting their revenue streams and expanding their student enrollments (Oravec, 2003). Oravec also indicated that staff reductions might be a way in which institutions can compensate from on-line learning.

Authors' Comments: Many institutions make any number of curricular, instructional and academic decisions based on perceived or actual financial needs or obligations. In fact, the rapid growth of sport management professional preparation programs in the United States and elsewhere can be traced, at least partly, to the need by institutions and departments to tap into the seemingly ever growing popularity of the field and the seemingly inexhaustible pool of students eagerly seeking to pursue the field of sport management (to maintain or increase enrollment). As stated above, there are definite advantages as well as costs associated with the introduction of on-line courses. Institutions have the right to initiate on-line sport management courses because of possible financial benefits just as many have initiated traditional classes in sport management as well as other disciplines.

In terms of staffing, on-line courses, if structured properly, should have no significant impact upon the staffing of sport management courses as regular full-time or part-time faculty may merely substitute an on-line course for a traditional course with no loss of positions or lines. And, if the courses are truly individualized and asynchronous it is not possible for institutions to merely video tape a professor's lectures in an on-line course and then show this same tape repeatedly to new students in new classes in the future (thereby eliminating the need for a teacher/human being to be involved in the instructional aspects of the course).

Assessment

On-Line Literature Point: Speck (2002) stated the following: «Insufficient attention to pedagogical questions and concerns arising from the practice of on-line teaching quite naturally and logically raises questions about assessment of learners in on-line classrooms» (p. 5).

Authors' Comments: Honest assessments of on-line learning must be incorporated into on-line courses and programs. The course and to an even larger degree the overall program must also be assessed to determine its level of quality. Valid assessments of sport management on-line learning courses and programs must accurately determine whether or not graduates master the skills necessary to succeed as employees in the sport industry. Without honest assessments of programs and courses, student success in the sport management work-force may be compromised, which in turn could damage future placement of sport management graduates. Desired outcomes have to be established and assessments applied in ways to determine whether or not outcomes are being met. If learning outcomes are not being met, teaching methods of on-line learning may need to be examined.

Valid and reliable assessments of on-line learning should detect deficiencies prior to placing sport management students in internships and full-time jobs. If on-line learning has deficiencies and assessments fail to detect them, the next opportunity for detection might come from internship site supervisors or full-time employers. Measures of assessment that should be put in place must assure that student learning outcomes of on-line learning are consistent with student success in the sport management work force. This can generally be accomplished by ensuring that student learning outcomes are based on a measure that is partly grounded in the needs of the sport industry (those employing sport management graduates).

Unfortunately, if sport management employers connect poor employee performance to on-line learning, employers, in all likelihood, will refrain from hiring sport management graduates of programs that incorporate on-line learning in their curriculum. If the sport industry refuses to hire sport management graduates from on-line sport management preparation programs, those programs will suffer. Lack of placement in the sport management organizations might well cause a decline in student enrollments in sport management academic preparation programs – something that currently does not appear to be happening.

If recognized program approval/accrediting bodies have developed standards consistent with the needs of the sport industry, on-line as well as traditional programs should be held to the same standards. Students who graduate from undergraduate sport management programs that meet such standards (regardless of whether or not the program is on-line or traditional) should be well prepared to be productive and contributing members of sport organizations. On-line learning programs or courses should be deemed acceptable and credible if they can meet the standards established by recognized sport management program approval and accrediting bodies.

It is interesting to note that on most campuses which utilize on-line courses there is no identification or differentiation of such courses from the courses taught within the traditional method (classroom). The reason for this is simple – on-line learning is recognized merely as a different method or style of instruction/learning and educational institutions do not differentiate (on a transcript, for example) whether a course was taught via a group method, or via a case study method, or by a lecture method, etc. Such courses are merely placed on a transcript with a student's grade as a recognized course taught by an approved faculty member.

It is imperative that sport management on-line preparation programs produce students who are at least as prepared as those who graduate from traditionally taught programs. If sport management employers find graduates from on-line programs equal to or more effective as employees than those from traditional programs, on-line programs are likely to continue to prosper. In short, adequately prepared students are essential to the continued successes of on-line learning.

On-line Literature Point: Given the advantages and disadvantages of on-line courses, Jones and Harmon (2002) concluded that assessment of students in on-line courses can be at least as robust as in face-to-face courses, if not more so.

Authors' Comments: The authors endorse the above statement. If faculty members properly organize the structure of the on-line course there should be no distinction between the assessment of the students in the on-line class and the assessment process (as well as the product) found in the traditional classroom. On-line students will do many of the same type of tasks that they would do in the so-called traditional classroom. They read books and articles, write down notes, watch video, use software, respond to questions, submit papers, do field observations and internships, and have group discussions, although the group discussions are by means of asynchronous or synchronous computer conferencing. Through such conferencing the students can engage in group work, case studies, as well as other learning activities.

A fundamental premise of all on-line courses is that instructors will indeed be able to, and in fact will provide to each of their students timely and appropriate assessments of each student's work. Such assessment or evaluation should be on an individual basis, and when appropriate, to small groups of students working together. The type of assessments by the instructor should be on a par with any assessment found in the more traditional classroom setting for sport management.

Even the one disadvantage that some students might experience, the apparent lack of a physical face-to-face experience/interaction with an instructor and/or fellow students, is often mitigated or offset by interaction (discussion sessions) with the instructor and fellow students through the internet (many on-line courses provide for meaningful discussion between individual class members and the instructor). In fact, in many on-line classes, this interaction (discussion among students and faculty as well as private discussions between an individual and the teacher) can and does take place at any time of the day or night in many on-line (asynchronous) courses.

In fact, many faculty and students find that they react to communications and respond to requests/questions from one another numerous times during a particular day, often more frequently than they would in a traditional four-wall classroom setting. Faculty members have repeatedly reported to the authors that students who would "hang back" in a brick and mortar class – frequently move to the front of on-line discussions within a distance learning course/class.

On-line Literature Point: «Teaching on-line adds the further challenge to the instructor of providing student evaluations in unambiguous terms via the internet to a potentially large number of students» (Pengitore, 2005, p. 5). Not commenting on work submitted on-line is no different than ignoring a student's raised hand in a classroom (Pengitore).

Authors' Comments: Failure to respond, in a timely manner, to a student's question, comment or submission of homework assignment is simply not acceptable and is not to be tolerated. A key element of distance learning (on-line courses) is that the individual students will have appropriate and timely responses from the instructor at all times. In reality, this means that the individual student will have a response or assessment from the instructor within 24 hours (if not before) of submitting the comment, question or simple assignment to the instructor. For larger assignments, such as submission of a 25-page term paper, the turnaround time will necessarily be longer due to the nature of the evaluation task, and the students should be made aware of this well in advance.

On-Line Literature Point: According to Dommeyer, Baum, and Hanna (2002) there is a lower response rate for on-line student course evaluations. There is a fear of no anonymity because often students must enter some form of identification to enter into the evaluation process (Dommeyer et al.)

Authors' Comments: The authors have not found the response rate for student course evaluation to be lower for on-line courses when compared to traditional courses. The on-line courses that are offered by the authors' State University System provide for obvious and clearly anonymous student evaluations of their on-line learning experiences. Such anonymity is a basic element in the on-line course structure itself.

It is true that if students are not assured of true anonymity in their evaluation responses they will hesitate to be forthright in their assessment of the on-line experiences. Of course, this is also true of those students in regular, traditional, four-walled classrooms as well. The point is that true confidentiality and complete anonymity must be provided to the students and the students must have complete faith and confidence in the confidentiality of their evaluation comments.

Choosing to Transition

On-Line Literature Point: Educators frequently grapple with how to address the transitional tensions that exist between the *push forward* of new digital literacies and the *pull backward* of traditional literacy (Labbo, 2006).

Authors' Comments: The authors do not believe sport management must choose between the *push forward* of on-line learning and the *pull backward* of traditional learning. Some sport management courses might remain completely traditional and others may transition to become completely on-line. Analysis should be done to determine which courses are best suited to be taught on-line, in terms of course content, course instructional strategies (including multimedia) and availability of qualified and motivated faculty. Only if faculty and program approval boards agree that a particular course can be taught as effectively on-line should the option be available for faculty to teach it on-line.

On-Line Literature Point: For those who live and teach in remote places of the world, on-line learning can extend support to K-12 educators (Hardwick, 2000).

Authors' Comments: One of the major advantages of on-line courses is that would-be students can literally be anywhere in the world and still take a distance learning course/class if they have a computer and access to the internet. This opens up the population for sport management classes at a college or university to a significant pool of potential students located anywhere in the world, if they have access to the internet. This expansion of the student pool beyond the normal distance for students to enroll in classes on an institution's physical campus is one of the advantages for both students and institutions.

From the authors' interaction with students who have taken and/or are currently taking such courses, it is obvious that the students find that they enjoy the freedom of learning and completing assignments at their own pace within the framework of the course syllabus. Students also feel most comfortable being able to perform many of their learning activities when and where they choose (from home, the library, the site of their part-time or full-time job site, and at any time of the day or night) – if the class is taught within the context of the electronic asynchronous learning environment (Gill, 2007).

Students who might otherwise spend 1-2 hours (or more) traveling to and from class can use that time in a much more efficient fashion. Students also choose to take an on-line course because the course offered in a traditional setting (that they need) might not fit their class schedule. Today, advances in technology have now enabled the so-called traditional classroom and the learning experiences to be expanded beyond anything that many of us envisioned only a decade ago.

Conclusion

Although the verdict may still be somewhat in question with respect to how and to what extent on-line learning should be incorporated into sport management programs, it certainly seems to be finding its way. Today, there are numerous colleges and universities that have been offering for some time sport management classes as on-line courses, that is, programs or courses that are delivered via computer technologies (web-base instruction) (Bennett, 2002).

And more institutions are joining the «party» every year. On-line learning will continue to chart its course as even more sport management faculty and directors become open to pedagogy-related changes that are found to be in the best interest of student learning.

Just as people are different, their learning styles or preferences may also be different. Certainly, not all people would enjoy or benefit from an on-line

course just as not all people enjoy or benefit from a traditional classroom/course. Of course, the real difference between the two types of courses (four-walled versus on-line) rests in terms of the teacher and the student. If the teacher is skilled, competent and properly motivated *and* if the student is truly interested in learning and appropriately motivated –almost any teaching forum or setting may be effective and, perhaps, even efficient.

From the available evidence presented by individual institutions and State Systems that offer such on-line courses and distance learning experiences, as well as from independent researchers, students do indeed benefit from on-line courses, regardless of whether taught exclusively on the WWW or are taught in some type of combination utilizing the WWW and actual physical (face-to-face) contact with the instructor.

The mere fact that the traditional, face-to-face approach has existed since the beginning of higher education should not allow it a privileged status. New approaches must be assessed to determine whether or not they can effectively achieve expected learning outcomes of a course. Valid assessments of student learning should determine whether or not one approach is more effective than another. In making such a determination, both on-line teaching and the traditional in-person teaching should be held to the same evaluative rigor.

Change is often difficult for many. In the authors' opinion, even though higher education faculty should embrace change as facilitators of effective learning, change often comes at a snail's pace as the «old guard» all too frequently resists. Transitioning from traditional, in-person sport management courses or programs to on-line learning sport management courses or programs is a change that seems to be unsettling for some in higher education. Those skeptical or fearful of a shift to on-line learning in sport management should educate themselves by studying the literature related to on-line learning, undergoing training to possibly become an instructor of an on-line course, and perhaps even teaching an on-line course. Through knowledge and experience, sport management program directors and faculty can make informed decisions relative to the place of on-line learning in sport management academic preparation programs.

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