

Online Learning and Teaching: benefits and challenges

Review of Bennett, G. (2002). Web-Based Instruction in Sport Management. *Sport Management Review* 5, 45-68.

London Metropolitan University provides a focus on on-line learning technologies within its learning and teaching strategy (London Metropolitan, 2003). Over the past several years there has been a move towards a dedicated learning technologies strategy. Subject areas within the university are in the process of exploring with web-provision and moving to computer-aided assessment so as to offer greater levels of information technologies and communication tools. This review concerns the article by Bennett (2002) and its relevance and implications for the on-line teaching and learning of the sport management subject area.

The main ideas investigated in Bennett's (2002) study focus on a comparison of the learning experiences between on-line/distance learners and their on-campus colleagues. The article reviews the researched advantages and disadvantages of on-line learning, and the contrasting research claiming similar benefits. The review essentially focuses on whether learning is equal to, or increased, through the provision of a class through the virtual environment.

A case study method involving questionnaires of participants, student assessment results, and an instructor's log were the data collection tools for the research. To maximise the validity of the research all course related information and content was held constant across both delivery methods. Thus the only difference was the delivery of the 'live' or traditional lecture. The course was developed according to the (social) constructivist model of learning hence placing an importance on interaction between staff and students as well as the students themselves (peers).

Post-delivery, Bennett (2002) identified three areas for evaluation that frame the discussion: What worked? What needs work? What needs to be changed? The successes from the research, under the heading of what worked, were staff-student interaction, convenience for the learner and actual student performance. Increases in the staff-students interaction and convenience were positive outcomes as provided by the student feedback whereas actual performance was measured by assessment result comparisons. The results were equal between the two groups, hence confirming that the on-line nature can be at least as useful as traditional methods (Bennett, 2002).

Under the other two sections focusing on the less than successful outcomes it was identified that students missed the peer interaction that they could obtain through the on-campus mode, which was attributed to the lack of a live lecture. The administration of on-line quizzes was identified as needing to be changed. Although actual result performance between the two groups was similar the interaction of the students with the technology caused some negative feedback. Specifically the use of timed quizzes and student familiarity were highlighted as areas for possible improvement.

There are a number of implications from Bennett's (2002) study that could have an impact on the teaching and learning, with particular reference to the field of sport management. Issues such as the preparation time for the delivery of on-line courses, and increasing interaction of staff and students, are also valid to sport management as well as many other subject areas.

The preparation and delivery of on-line learning materials is a time-consuming process. The provision of sport management as a subject area tends to be restricted to the 'new' universities. Time allowances for preparation and delivery of modules are efficient at new universities, hence time taken to apply taught modules to the on-line environment can be substantial. Lominé (2002) has identified that one of the reasons for not adopting on-line technologies in the sport education sector is time constraints. The work done by Bennett (2002) in the creation of his on-line course was extensive and time consuming, as it was prepared in full before the module began. Whether this could be replicated by many new university staff is an area for investigation.

Bennett also made a telling comparison with the level of time taken on staff-student interaction, using the example of responding to a question in-class versus on-line. He noted that because the on-line question received a written reply it allowed more time for reflection and was therefore much longer to answer than an equivalent face-to-face question. This example was used to demonstrate the time-consuming nature of on-line delivery. Therefore these seemingly negative aspects could affect the prevalence of on-line environment uptake through the sport management subject area.

Alternatively, the ability to increase interaction between peers in the on-line environment could be positively increased through the sport management subject area. The use of issues in sport to stimulate discussion in the on-line environment could be an effective tool for increasing peer interaction, albeit virtually. This could be a possibility as it could be assumed that students undertaking sport-related courses have an interest in sport. Hence using general sport issues as a lever to stimulate peer-interaction could also lead to increases in familiarity with the technology.

Although Bennett's (2002) research revealed some positive results he comments that his students displayed a high level of maturity with the use on the on-line environment and used their assessment results to assume they did not procrastinate. There is other research that suggests an alternative method of increasing the level of participation in students. Research by Light *et al.* (2000) and Dennis and Dempster (2000) both recommend that students are exposed to the on-line environment from the beginning of this course. This allows students to become familiar with the technology over a longer period of time through general activities. They believe group discussion on-line is better towards the latter end of the student's progression through the programme. Therefore the requirements for student interaction could grow over the duration of the course. Hence it is this exposure and familiarity to the technology that reduce the barriers to communication and interaction that Bennett's (2002) research found.

In conclusion, it can be seen that the Bennett (2002) article is a good piece of research investigating a number of pertinent issues involving the delivery of on-line course in sport management. While the research revealed 'as good as' results in the two modes of

delivery, it is the issues it raised that have the greatest relevance to the learning and teaching of the sport management subject area. The issues involving time consumption in the preparation and delivery of an on-line course compared to that using traditional delivery are particularly pertinent. Increasing peer interaction among students is another issue that requires strategies to stimulate on-line discussion. Not surprisingly, encouraging student interaction is not only restricted to on-line participants; small-groups also require great care to facilitate interaction (Griffiths, 1999). It was seen that other research has devised student exposure methods to reduce the barriers involved in the student-technology and peer interaction issues.

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