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The Challenges and Opportunities of Teaching Sport and Exercise Psychology at a Distance

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Abstract

Distance learning continues to increase in popularity as a teaching method in higher education, but its implementation requires careful planning and consideration. Whilst delivering effective distance learning can be challenging, if planned effectively it can provide great opportunity to both the student and academic that are not always available in face-to-face settings. This article examines the challenges and opportunities of teaching sport and exercise psychology at a distance, using the example of a successful sport and exercise psychology module at a UK university specialising in distance education. The flexibility offered by distance learning and the consequent diversity of students are discussed along with the important role of the tutor in ensuring the success of sport and exercise psychology distance learning. Strategies to encourage an applied understanding of the topic area and minimise the perceived distance between students are also considered.

Keywords: distance learning, blended learning

The Challenges and Opportunities of Teaching Sport and Exercise Psychology at a Distance

Distance learning is increasing in popularity (Knouse, 2010) and consequently its use in sport and exercise psychology education has the potential to rise. Distance learning can be defined as education involving “absence from the specific space and time of the educational institution” (Raddon, 2006, p.157) and thus allows the student to study without having to attend face-to-face lectures. Contrary to common belief, distance learning does not refer exclusively to e-learning and can involve various study modalities (Lim & Morris, 2009). In fact the term ‘blended learning’ is often preferred since it encapsulates the multi-modality composition of effective distance learning (Lim & Morris, 2009). In this article we will outline our experiences of developing and delivering a successful distance learning sport and exercise psychology module. The module in question is an undergraduate level 2 (level 5) module which is the third module in a degree programme in sport and fitness at a university specialising in distance education and widening participation.

We are both experienced academics in the field of sport and exercise psychology but until relatively recently these experiences were confined almost exclusively to face-to-face situations where we had the luxury of being easily able to develop a rapport with students and adapt our teaching ‘on the hoof’ to suit the needs of those students and address topical issues. We were then charged with the task of developing and delivering a distance learning sport and exercise module. We each had differing roles in this process - one of us (first author) works as a full-time academic on the distance learning programme and authored a large proportion of the module content and is the academic lead on the module, whilst the other (second author) is a full-time academic at another institution who is a part-time tutor on the

module and was a critical reader during the module's production. The task of developing an exclusively distance learning based sport and exercise psychology module at first seemed quite a challenge considering the applied aspects of the subject area, but we have come to learn that there are several advantages to distance learning, both to the academic and the learner. However, for distance learning to be successful it needs to be thoroughly planned and developed with the distance learner in mind. In the next section we outline the procedures we followed to ensure this.

The Process

Working at a university with an international reputation in producing high quality distance learning materials means that there are clear established systems in place to ensure the production of high quality materials as well as a wealth of experience in producing such materials. Such systems and preparation are considered essential in order to ensure the quality of distance learning (Knouse, 2010; Stow, 2005). In order to fully understand the challenges of developing our distance learning module in sport and exercise psychology the reader needs to understand the model of module production that exists at the institution. Work began on developing the module in the winter of 2008/09 and the module first went live to students in October 2010. This may seem like a long time to produce a module to those working in face-to-face universities, but in the world of this institution it was in fact rather quick! The reason for this length of time is because of the rigorous quality control procedures that are adhered to during the production of a module. These quality control procedures are necessitated by several factors, but one in particular – once a module is produced, its content largely cannot be changed for several years. This means that there is no room for error in its production and it means that we have to consider the longevity of the materials that we produce. For example, this module will be available both before and after the London 2012 Olympics.

Therefore, references to the London Olympics could neither be accurately made in past or present tense.

The cornerstone of the quality control procedures is the establishment of a module team. The module team is responsible for deciding the content of the module and ensuring the quality of that content as it is produced. The module team for the module in sport and exercise psychology module comprised over ten people and included three full-time sport and exercise academics from within the institution (who were also the authors of the module materials), two academics from within the institution with specialism outside of sport and exercise but with experience of producing high quality distance learning materials, two external sport and exercise psychology academics who also had consultancy experience, and two external fitness professionals with teaching experience. The external members were employed as critical readers. The module team met on a regular basis and critically reviewed drafts of the five study topics which made up the module. Each study topic was subjected to three drafts which were critically reviewed before a fourth draft was handed over to an editorial team for further scrutiny and development.

The aim of this production process was to produce a set of materials that ‘teach’ the entire module to students. These materials are effectively a set of self contained learning resources that the students learn from with the support of a tutor. The nature of the materials that are produced as part of this process are essentially the decision of the module team. As mentioned earlier there is often a misconception amongst the public that distance learning is e-learning and that is simply not the case for us - e-learning is part of what we do, but we also use other learning modalities as there is evidence to suggest that learning is compromised when an exclusively e-learning approach is used (Lim & Morris, 2009). For the module in

sport and exercise psychology we decided on a multi-modal set of materials that comprised a 300 page text-book known as the Study Guide, which was effectively the lead voice of the module providing teaching and directing students to the other resources; a DVD containing a large amount of audio-visual material; a module website containing online activities and additional resources and an existing sport and exercise psychology textbook (Foundations of Sport and Exercise Psychology by Weinberg and Gould). These learning materials were supported by online tutorial and forum activities.

The module itself is a 30 credit point undergraduate module at level 2, which takes six months to study. It is split into five study topics, each of which has an associated assessment. The module has a specified start and end date, with assessment deadlines that are the same for all students. Students follow a recommended programme of weekly study that will allow them to achieve these deadlines. To follow a model such as this would be recommended for any institution considering delivering distance learning since allowing students to start and finish the module at any time is likely to lead to logistical problems and minimise opportunities for peer interaction and collaboration.

The Challenges and Opportunities

Several challenges were faced in producing a high quality module that would develop students' understanding of sport and exercise psychology. However, we were able to overcome most of these challenges using innovative approaches and in fact the distance learning approach afforded us several opportunities. Some of these challenges and opportunities are discussed below.

Flexibility

One of the key benefits of distance learning is its flexibility and consequent openness (St. Pierre, 1998). Distance learning allows students to choose when and where they wish to study and thus opens education up to individuals who may otherwise be unable or reluctant to undertake university study such as full-time carers, parents, people with disabilities, people who do not live near a university, those in full-time employment, older adults, prisoners, and travelling athletes and coaches. Therefore providing a sport and exercise psychology module has opened up the study of the topic area to a far broader scope of potential students, which can only be of benefit to the field as a whole.

Whilst distance learning is often regarded as an inferior option to face-to-face learning there is plenty of evidence to suggest that this is not the case (Raddon, 2006; St. Pierre, 1998). Studies comparing distance learning students to their 'on campus' peers have found that distance learning students have performed at least as well as campus based students (St. Pierre, 1998). Distance learning may allow students greater opportunity to develop skills such as independence due to its self-directed component (Stow, 2005). Additionally it has been suggested that self-directed learners are much more adept at applying what they learn to real-life situations (Cunningham, 2010).

Although distance learning provides great benefit it is true to say that it requires a certain degree of self-discipline and perhaps is not suitable for everyone, particularly those looking for the 'on campus experience' (Knouse, 2010). However, many prefer distance learning options and perceive face-to-face learning options as restricted and outdated (Knouse, 2010). On the whole our students, perhaps by nature of having selected distance learning and largely having completed distance learning modules previously, did demonstrate the required self-discipline to complete the module successfully. Additionally, monitoring

systems were put in place to identify students who were not engaging with the module and additional support was provided to these students to help them complete their studies. The university as an institution which has a widening participation and open access remit has an extensive support system available to students. Such support needs to be offered by any institution offering distance learning in order to maximise retention and achievement. Of course even with these support systems in place there will inevitably be students who slip through the net and a small minority of students did fail to complete the module. When surveyed these students cited a range of reasons for dropping out, but time constraints and workload issues were commonly expressed. A large number of our students study alongside full time employment or caring duties, which can be challenging.

Diversity of Students

The flexible nature of distance learning attracts a wide range of students with diverse experiences and backgrounds. Distance learning cohorts are atypical, and the students recruited on the module were certainly not what we might traditionally expect on sport related face-to-face courses for the most part (i.e., of a particular age range, coming from specific academic backgrounds). They were extremely diverse and this presented both a challenge and an advantage. The challenge presented was that the students had diverse academic skills and needs. Student support is a key ingredient to managing the challenge that this diversity presents. Both the tutor and the student support team at the institution are a great resource to support the student and facilitate their journey through the learning experience. The advantage of the diversity is that the experiences and backgrounds of the students adds real richness to discussions, tutorials and assessments.

Minimising the Distance

A concern with distance learning is that of student isolation – as students do not attend face-to-face there is often a concern that they will not be able to communicate with their peers and tutor and thus feel isolated (Knouse, 2010; Raddon, 2006; Stow, 2005). Whilst this is a genuine concern, distance learning can still allow for interaction between students, thus reducing feelings of isolation and minimising the perceived distance in distance learning. On the sport and exercise psychology module this was achieved by the use of online forums (Moodle website platform) and regular group tutorials via an online classroom (Elluminate). Such online activities are suggested to vastly improve interaction and the student experience (Knouse, 2010).

Each tutor group, comprising of around twenty students, had its own forum in which students could talk asynchronously to each other and their tutor. This gave students an opportunity to interact with other students and share any concerns. In order to encourage as many students as possible to engage with the forums they were also used in several of the module activities where students were asked to discuss issues and share their experiences. Raddon (2008) suggests that to encourage the uptake of such communicative activities they should be compulsory rather than optional. Often participation in online forums reflects participation in face-to-face classroom activities, with only a core group of students fully engaging with and contributing to the forum. However, the uptake on the first presentation of this module has been exceptional with around 80 percent of students contributing to the forums. It is believed that this was facilitated by this inclusion of some interesting discussion topics in the forums and appropriate tutor encouragement.

It has been suggested that distance learning should focus on the class as a whole as well as individuals to minimise perceived distance (Stow, 2005) and therefore group tutorials

are considered an important part of the programme. Each tutor group had at least five group tutorials across the six month duration of the module. These were held in an online classroom, which is a relatively new format for the institution where traditionally group tutorials are held in face-to-face settings. The module used online tutorials as it was part of a pilot project investigating new ways of supporting students. The tutorials allowed open verbal discussion, text dialogue, the use of breakout rooms for private discussions or small group work, PowerPoint presentations, sharing of applications, and the use of an interactive whiteboard. These group tutorials gave students an opportunity to interact synchronously with their tutor and peers thus helping to create a sense of unity and belonging amongst students. There is also the opportunity to record these sessions and allow students to access the tutorial at a later date and this was found invaluable in assessment preparation. Given that many students have other commitments, attendance at these tutorials was not compulsory, but was highly recommended. This created an issue in that attendance was not always as high as it could have been amongst some tutor groups. Tutors who had high levels of attendance tended to be proactive in reminding students of impending tutorials and provided dynamic tutorial activities.

There are some inevitable challenges to using online classroom tutorials. These include the potential of IT problems such as an internet connection fault, the challenge of encouraging the students to speak on their headsets whilst not being able to see their body language, and the need to multitask (i.e., manage the dialogue of both verbal and written conversation). This latter challenge has been managed somewhat for future presentations via the introduction of team teaching where two tutor groups can pair up in tutorials and one tutor take the lead and another monitor and act as facilitator. Despite the distance element it can be

argued that these tutorials are perhaps more conducive to student participation and are more personal than lectures in face-to-face institutions as the group sizes are generally much lower.

Tutor support was not just restricted to online forums and tutorials. Additionally, tutors helped further minimise feelings of isolation by providing one-to-one support to students through detailed assessment feedback and telephone/email communication. In line with the suggestions of Stow (2005) and Knouse (2008) tutors were briefed to respond to student queries in a timely manner and support was also provided to both students and tutors by a centralised student support team.

Applied Understanding

The module team felt that an applied understanding of sport and exercise psychology was important, particularly as many of our students are practicing instructors and coaches. Additionally, learning is believed to be enhanced where opportunities to apply knowledge are provided (Lim & Morris, 2009). There are challenges to providing an applied understanding in a distance learning setting, however, this was overcome through the use of a case study approach and the use of audio-visual resources. The module had a strong case study theme throughout – the module title incorporated the words ‘case study’ and each study topic had at least two case studies (one exercise-related and one sport-related) that were constantly used to demonstrate its content. Additionally, all of the assessments were case study based. With distance learning it can be far harder to bring a case study to life than it can in a face-to-face setting. Therefore, a lot of time was spent developing rich and detailed case studies that drew upon the real experiences of members of the module team. The case studies were threaded through each study topic, with case study information being released sequentially as the topic progressed.

A DVD containing almost thirty audio-visual (AV) clips was produced as part of the module and further aided students' applied understanding of sport and exercise psychology. Some of these AV clips were taken from pre-existing BBC material (e.g. Olympic Dreams), whilst some were made specifically for the module. The clips covered both sport and exercise related examples and thus had relevance to both those with an interest in sport or exercise.

Content and coverage

The challenge of deciding which topics should be covered in a sport and exercise psychology module is not exclusive to distance learning, but the structure of the programme did place some restrictions on our choices. For example, the open access nature of the modules within the institution means that it cannot be assumed that all students studying the module will have the pre-requisite knowledge covered in previous modules.

One particular challenge faced was to make the content of each topic covered applicable to both sport and exercise settings as they often have very different applications. Sport generally has a performance focus whilst exercise generally has a well-being focus, although it is not always this clear cut (Collins, 2009). This challenge was addressed by ensuring that each topic had both an exercise and a sport case study so that the application in both domains could be illustrated. The differences between sport and exercise also restricted the choice of textbook. One textbook that adequately addressed both sport and exercise in relation to a broad range of psychology topics was required, but whilst there were some very good books that addressed either sport psychology or exercise psychology to the required standard, there were very few that adequately covered both areas thus limiting the choices. The size of the textbook and other teaching resources also needed consideration. For

example, the team gave consideration to the possibility that the learner might be engaging with the module on the move and the associated inconvenience of carrying heavy texts. To overcome this issue the study guide, the course textbook and some of the DVD content were also available electronically.

Writing the content of materials for the module also provided the authors with challenges. In a face-to-face setting if students do not understand a concept presented, the lecturer has the opportunity to explain it further as required. However, in distance learning this opportunity is not available, thus the module authors had to ensure that they provided adequately detailed explanations of concepts to minimise the risk of a student not fully understanding. This can be quite a challenge when writing materials to be studied by several hundred students with a wide range of backgrounds and academic abilities. A balance has to be achieved between ensuring the understanding of all without sounding patronising or compromising the required academic level and flow of the text. All of the authors on the module had previous experience of writing distance learning materials as so were skilled in achieving the right balance, and the critical readers were asked to evaluate drafts of the materials from this perspective. Additionally, drafts of module materials were also ‘tested’ by students as part of the production process to ensure that they were fit for purpose.

Tutors

In order for the module to be successful a network of part-time tutors were needed to support our students. As it is the tutors who have direct contact with the students they can make or break the success of a module. For example, tutors can have a significant influence on the motivation of the student (Simpson, 2008). As online tutorials were used we were not restricted by geography in our selection of tutors which meant that we were able to select the

best applicants nationally. We were fortunate enough to receive some very high quality applications and subsequently were able to employ a group of exceptional tutors. These tutors have the responsibility of leading group tutorials, supporting individual students and marking their students' assignments. Most of these tutors have full-time jobs in other institutions and are highly experienced in teaching sport and exercise psychology, however the vast majority had no distance learning experience and so it was of vital importance to provide them with training in some of the key aspects of being a distance learning tutor such as providing assessment feedback and conducting online group tutorials. It has been noted that the tutor's role in distance learning is quite different to that of the tutor in face-to-face learning, requiring skills stretching beyond standard classroom skills such as technical skills and motivational skills (St. Pierre, 1998).

Employing a network of tutors to support students across the UK and beyond necessitates the need for quality control procedures that ensure consistent standards. This is achieved through the use of a monitoring programme in which samples of each tutors marking on each assessment are monitored. Additionally, tutors are encouraged to communicate and share ideas with each other through an online tutor forum which is monitored by the module lead.

Conclusion

Our experiences have demonstrated that with appropriate planning and preparation it is perfectly possible to deliver sport and exercise psychology through distance learning, thus opening the study of the topic area to a broader range of people. The module has now completed its first full cycle and the results have been extremely pleasing – student retention,

student achievement and most importantly student feedback have all been extremely positive, exceeding the norms for similar modules at the institution.

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