

Online Mental Training Using WebExcellence

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INTRODUCTION

The idea of providing mental training¹ (MT) and sport psychology services online is becoming more prevalent as technology continues to shape education and the Web becomes more popular. In September 2000, an Internet search for “mental training” using the Google search engine identified 11,700 sites (Stodel & Farres, 2000a). An identical search in March 2004 revealed approximately 74,700 sites, representing an increase of almost 650%. Although a dynamic and fully interactive online MT environment does not yet appear to have been realised, it surely will not be long before this happens. In this chapter we highlight the importance of thoughtful design when developing such training and present a framework to guide the development of online MT.

BACKGROUND

The Concept of Online Mental Training

Emerging technologies are offering new ways to conceptualise and deliver education, and in the process are revolutionising how learners learn, think and build knowledge (Canada, 2000; Evans & Nation, 2000; Land & Hannafin, 2000; McConnell, 2002; Salmon, 2000). Technology is becoming integral to the teaching-learning process as ongoing advancements continue to offer new avenues for learning (Burge & Haughey, 2001; DeBard & Guidera, 2000). Advances in technology are transforming education in the field of physical education (Goggin, Finkenbergh, & Morrow, 1997; Martens, 1997). In sport psychology, practitioners and re-

searchers are beginning to explore how they can use the Web to their advantage. Most are using the Web to deliver text-based information, market their products and services, communicate with athletes and others in the field, deliver online courses, engage in scholarly discussion, and share and disseminate research (Stodel & Farres, 2000b). However, the full capacity of the Web as an interactive, dynamic educational tool has not yet been harnessed by those in the field.

Stodel and Farres (2002) explored the potential of the Web for sport psychology by considering the concept of online MT. They concluded that, “the capabilities of the Web to support interactivity and make [MT] services and resources easily accessible to a wide range of athletes make it an attractive and viable option for delivering [MT]” (Stodel & Farres, 2002, p. 113). However, despite this appeal we have been unable to find a fully interactive MT environment on the Web that provides athletes with a collaborative learning environment that is both supported by expert practitioners and within which they can develop their mental skills.

The Importance of Design

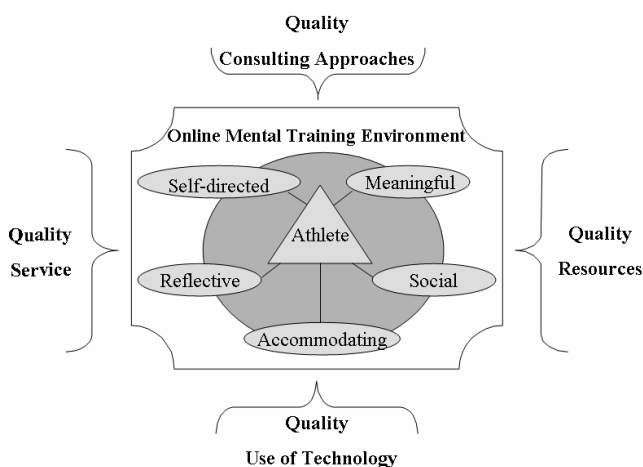
There are concerns regarding the integrity, quality and effectiveness of education offered online (Carstens & Worsfold, 2000; DeBard & Guidera, 2000; Noble, 2002; Speck, 2000). Like any learning, online learning must be grounded in sound pedagogical principles (Jonassen, Howland, Moore & Marra, 2003; MacDonald, Stodel, Farres, Breithaupt & Gabriel, 2001). However, although the literature reveals a number of key elements that define effective online learning (e.g., Berge, 1998; Khan, 2001;

Nicaise, 1998; Salmon, 2000), often these recommendations and frameworks do not inform program design specifically (Farres & MacDonald, 2004) and there is a distressing incongruence between the use of sound pedagogical models and online learning technologies (Salmon, 2000; Willis 2000).

Researchers have demonstrated that when a theoretical framework is used to guide program design, the instructional soundness of online learning is improved (Ahern & El-Hindi, 2000; Nicaise, 1998). However, despite the fact that program design appears to be the cornerstone of quality online learning (Carr & Carr, 2000; Jung, 2000; Lim, 2002; Pahl, 2003; Willis, 2000), it appears that design, and consequently program quality, is often compromised in an “effort to simply get something up and running” (Dick, 1996, p. 59), and the development of online learning often is driven by technology rather than by proven pedagogical principles (Carr & Carr, 2000; Trentin, 2001).

Given the importance of design, it appears critical that MT practitioners intending to create online MT environments use a comprehensive framework to guide them in this process. One such framework is WebExcellence in Mental Skills Education (MSE) (Farres & Stodel, 2003) (see Figure 1)². WebExcellence in MSE was designed to aid practitioners in the development of online MT environments that facilitate the development of mental skills that enhance performance and maximise enjoyment in sport and life.

Figure 1. WebExcellence in Mental Skills Education



WebExcellence IN MSE

WebExcellence in MSE incorporates design considerations from the fields of online learning, adult education and sport psychology. The framework adopts a constructivist approach to learning, and thus, the athlete assumes the central position in the model and is involved in active learning. To promote this the environment is self-directing, meaningful, accommodating, reflective and social (Jonassen, 1994; Jonassen, Peck, & Wilson, 1999; Savery & Duffy, 1996).

Self-Directing

In adult education, effective practice is often linked to humanist philosophy, an important aspect of which is that adults take responsibility for their learning (MacKeracher, 1996; Poonwassie, 2001). As such, athletes are expected to take responsibility for their own learning in online MT. However, even though it is likely that most individuals engaged in such training do so voluntarily, it does not mean that they will all have a high level of involvement and desire to learn (MacDonald, Stodel, & Casimiro, in press; Stodel, 2004). Consequently, when designing such environments it is important to consider what motivates learners (MacDonald et al., 2001).

In online MT athletes should be provided with opportunities to determine their own learning needs, determine how those needs can be met and access information that will help them meet their needs. Moreover, different levels of information should be made available to the athletes without imposing a predetermined path to follow, thereby allowing the athletes to influence what is learned, how it is learned and when it is learned (Stodel, 2004).

Meaningful

When engaging in online MT athletes should feel as though the learning is meaningful. Athletes desire knowledge, strategies and experiences that relate to them. If they do not see a connection between the activity and the learning objectives, it is likely they will lose interest and have an unsuccessful learning experience (Thoms, 2001). Stodel (2004) found that athletes enjoyed and implemented MT techniques that they felt were beneficial to them and that helped

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