Delivering Coaching Education Online: Practical Tips for Online Educators

Melissa Murray, Ph.D.
The University of Southern Mississippi

Abstract
Online learning has grown at a rapid pace in the last decade (Allen & Seaman, 2005). The purpose of this paper is to present some of the most recent technologies associated with online coaching education in academic settings. The effectiveness of the online learning environment is controversial (USDOE, 2009; Jaggars & Bailey, 2010). Therefore, it is critical to examine strategies that can be used to ensure learning outcomes. A series of tips for online educators are offered. Multiple tools for educators, including blogs, wikis, Google Cloud, instant messaging and YouTube are discussed in relation to possible course assignments within a coaching education curriculum. The paper concludes with a few suggestions for educating large groups.
Delivering Coaching Education Online: Practical Tips for Online Educators

Ongoing advances in technology and the internet have provided personal access to seemingly unlimited amounts of information. One of the most notable areas of growth in recent years is access to higher education. Online education in the United States has grown rapidly in multiple disciplines (Allen & Seaman, 2005). According to the most recent data for online education, the number of students taking at least one online course grew by a dramatic one million students (a 21% increase) in one calendar year (Allen & Seaman, 2010). Considering the variability in seasons of play and the hectic schedules of coaches, online education seems to be an ideal medium for delivering coaching education. As the online platform becomes mainstream in higher education, especially coaching education, it is critical to examine effective strategies for developing a quality, learning environment. The purpose of this paper is to outline multiple considerations and teaching strategies for effective delivery of coaching education in an online environment.

Variations in Online Environments

Before transitioning to a virtual classroom, it is critical to assess the types of Learning Management System (LMS) that are available. A multitude of learning-management systems exist. Even within colleges and universities, the systems vary widely, including Blackboard, Moodle, and Educator. Each LMS is equipped with interactive tools necessary for online instruction. For more information on the multiple functions of the LMS with regard to higher education, see the recent review by Monsakul (2007).

According to Allen and Seaman (2010), type of course delivery can be classified in one of four ways. Traditional courses do not use technology as a mode of delivery and rely solely on written and oral means of information dissemination. Web-facilitated courses are those where no more than 29% of the content is delivered online. Technology is used to facilitate learning in these courses, generally in the form of a web page or minimal use of a LMS. Blended or hybrid courses are defined as 30-79% of the course content delivered online. Generally, the number of face-to-face sessions in a hybrid course is greatly reduced because a good amount of the content is delivered through the LMS, paired with some sort of technologically-facilitated discussion (e.g. discussion board). A course is considered online, then, if 80% or more of the content is delivered with the LMS. These courses typically have no face-to-face sessions, therefore, requiring the use of technology to facilitate interaction between students and faculty.
With a better understanding of the LMS available and the preferred method of content
delivery, educators can move to more critical decisions about the online learning environment.
For instance, instructors must choose to deliver the course in a synchronous or asynchronous
format. In synchronous courses, all students log into the LMS at the same time. This type of
delivery usually allows for real-time discussion in a ‘classroom’ or discussion board and more
closely resembles a face-to-face class. Asynchronous delivery is often selected to meet the
demands of multiple schedules, making it an ideal format for coaching education. Asynchronous
delivery relies more heavily on multiple technologies (e.g. discussion boards, voice boards,
voice-over presentations, etc.) to facilitate interaction in the course. Choosing between
synchronous and asynchronous delivery is an important decision in the planning process and
should account for the learning objectives of the program and the type of students the course
hopes to service. More information on determining if online education is right for your
institution can be found in the 2009 report from the APLU (McCarthy & Samors, 2009).

Current Research

While the primary purpose of this paper is to discuss instructional strategies, it is critical
to present some of the current literature related to online education as a foundation for
understanding the recommendations. A recent meta analysis from the US Department of
Education indicates students who are taking part (hybrid) or all of their course online perform
better than students taking the same course face-to-face (USDOE, 2009). Further, students
exposed to hybrid instruction (combination of online and face-to-face) demonstrated a larger
performance advantage than students in a fully online class. Also of note, this study
demonstrated students in online classes spend significantly more time on task than students in
face-to-face courses. Jaggars and Bailey (2010) dispute the findings of the USDOE study,
arguing only a small portion of the included studies are reflective of typical courses in higher
education (e.g. semester-long) and when the atypical ones are teased out, no differences in
performance exist among students in face-to-face and online courses. The authors argue for
consideration of the type of student entering the program. Less prepared students are more likely
to struggle in the online setting and may contribute to the disproportionately high drop-out rate in
online classes. Students who are independent, self-directed learners, however, are likely to
perform well.

Kim and Frick (2011) specifically studied student motivation in an online class over the
course of a semester. They conclude that lack of time and learner motivation, are the two key
components in student attrition in online courses. Further, they provide a model for student
motivation in online courses reflecting four components, including (1) student attention, (2)
relevance to the student, (3) self-efficacy, and (4) student satisfaction. The development of each of these components is discussed in the next section as related to coaching education.

Tips for Educators

The purpose of this section of the paper is to offer tips for online instructors. The Adult Learning Theory (Ruiz, Mintzer, & Leipzif, 2006) provides a theoretical foundation for the following recommendations. According to this theory, the role of the instructor is to serve as a facilitator of learning rather than a distributor of knowledge. Therefore, the instructor collaborates with students in their exploration of new ideas and discovery of new information. Vygotsky’s theory of Constructivism (1986) also provides guidance for instructors. This theory suggests the role of the instructor is to help students reconstruct their current knowledge through integration of new knowledge. A critical piece of this process is reflecting on current knowledge and prior experiences to connect the complex theories and ideas to professional practice. This process is absolutely essential in coaching education to make the connection between formal and informal education. The following recommendations not only reflect these theoretical perspectives but, are also designed to enhance student motivation as suggested by the Kim & Frick (2011) model.

Enhance self-efficacy. For many students, their first online class can be very intimidating. Instructors can eliminate many of these fears by mindfully structuring the course. Beginning the semester with tutorials on how to navigate the LMS or where to find the course information is critical to reduce fear and increase self-efficacy. It is also useful to include both visual and audio information related to all course requirements. For example, a course syllabus may be uploaded into the LMS, but supplying an audio recording of the syllabus highlighting the importance of certain projects or deadlines further engages the students. As a rule of thumb, try to provide excessive detail in your course components. Because students cannot ask for instant clarification and do not have access to non-verbal cues, instructions and expectations in an online class must be presented in much greater detail than in a face-to-face course. It may also be useful to have veteran online students send a message or recording to your new students with their ‘tips for success. Sometimes students have a different perspective and can offer insight that instructors do not.

Student satisfaction. Online students frequently experience feelings of isolation in the learning environment (Bibeau, 2001), which can easily lead to dissatisfaction. In general, students report delayed feedback from instructors, unavailable technical support, poor content, isolation, and low levels of motivation as causes of dissatisfaction with online learning (Yang &
Cornelius, 2004). The instructor can alleviate some of these issues with proper planning and course implementation. For example, attempt to shape student expectations early by providing procedures for contacting the instructor. Then, provide guidelines for when they can expect a response. If guidelines are not set forth, some students may expect an immediate response from the instructor. However, by providing guidelines (e.g. you can expect a response within 24 hours) students are less likely to become dissatisfied. It may take several semesters to solidify all these guidelines in your syllabus, so be reflective on what procedures are or are not effective.

Making the course easy to navigate will also alleviate many of these issues. If students are bombarded with links and folders to search through, they will often get frustrated and not complete the assigned work. Creating weekly folders, or learning modules, that contain all the required materials for the week is one way to organize your course materials. In doing so, students will know exactly where to find all the information for that unit/week, increasing efficacy and motivation.

Finally, creating a detailed course schedule allows the students to plan and track the course progression. It is critical the instructor commit to the schedule once it has been developed. Continual changes and uncertainty will feed student dissatisfaction and low efficacy. It will also result in the instructor dealing with multiple ‘individual’ circumstantial exceptions for students. Consistency throughout the course is also helpful. If students are required to complete recurring assignments (e.g. discussion board postings) it is helpful if these are due at the same time each week. This allows students to maintain a schedule, similar to the requirements of a face-to-face course where they know they have to be in class at a specific time.

Relevance and student attention. As noted previously, creating connections between course materials and real-world application is a critical role of the instructor. Often students have difficulty connecting the complex ideas of a theory to applied practice. Instructors can facilitate this connection through discussion boards and assignments requiring students to reflect on their own experiences as related to content. For example, in a unit on athlete motivation, students could be asked to consider the most unmotivated player they have coached. They could then be asked, using the concepts discussed in the unit, to create a motivational plan for working with that athlete.

Instructors can also make courses more relevant to students by updating course materials. Video clips and online resources become outdated so rapidly that instructors should always be looking for more up-to-date material. Students in this digital age are critical of ‘old media’ and
outdated events. Expired links or old videos make the course materials seem less relevant. An inherent benefit of teaching online is instant access to the web and its material. Instructors can use this to their advantage by requiring students to seek out more information than is presented in the course. This will not only keep their attention, but it will also keep your course materials relevant and up-to-date. More tips for coaching educators related to relevance and attention are presented in the next section.

Tools for Educators

This section of the paper will focus on a few of the latest tools available that can enhance the online classroom. Technological advances in multimedia are occurring so rapidly that these tools will likely be outdated within the next five years. However, they are currently effective for enhancing the learning environment.

**Live classroom.** Many of the current LMSs have a live classroom feature allowing the instructor to deliver material to the class in a synchronous format. Even if you prefer asynchronous delivery, most of these classrooms have the option of recording the session so students who are not present can watch it at a later time. This is especially valuable to student athletes or student coaches who chronically miss classroom dates due to competitions. Of the many perks of a live classroom, one of the most important is the opportunity for real-time interaction (minimizing feelings of isolation). Live classrooms, even delivered asynchronously, offer the opportunity for the instructor to verbally explain some of the more difficult course material, increasing student learning and satisfaction.

**Discussion boards and groups.** Another way to maximize interaction in the class is to use discussion boards. Providing prompts to students and requiring them to post on the board allows students to share ideas and information in a low-stakes environment. It also provides the instructor the opportunity to address misconceptions and provide feedback in a public forum. Discussion boards are also extremely valuable during student field experiences or capstone courses. Student-coaches are able to discuss their concerns and questions as they engage in self-reflection. Using a group discussion format as part of self-reflection encourages the notion of learning communities as a natural part of professional development. The process also enables the instructor to dialogue with student-coaches to see the connection between research and best practice.

Group assignments also increase interaction and idea-sharing. Students, both face-to-face and online, are often frustrated by group work. However, from a theoretical perspective, group
work is a great opportunity to expose students to multiple ideas, experiences, and ways of thinking. Creating groups at the beginning of the course and requiring them to set intra-group rules and expectations can alleviate some of this frustration. Students are then aware of what their group members expect of them. As always, some sort of group evaluation process should be used to avoid social loafing.

**Instant messaging.** Using some form of instant messaging is a great way to hold virtual office hours and both increase and enhance the communication between the instructor and students. For example, Blackboard (a common LMS) is now equipped with Wimba Pronto, an instant messaging system that resides on one’s desktop. This allows the instructor to have the messenger online throughout the day, providing an opportunity for instructor-student interaction without requiring the instructor to log-in to the LMS. This messaging system also has an 'office hours' feature that allows students to line up outside the virtual office for private conversation with the instructor. Instant messaging allows students to have easier, more direct contact with the instructor, and decreases their feelings of isolation. Many LMSs also have instant messaging features that allow students to communicate with one another within the system, a great feature for group work.

**YouTube.** One of the greatest resources for an online educator is YouTube. This vast database of video clips will likely have any clip you could ever want to use for your course. YouTube is free, making it an even more accessible and valuable tool for students. While an extensive number of videos exist already, YouTube is also a great tool for sharing personal videos. For example, if you attend a softball clinic on effective hitting drills, record the session, and want to share this information with your students, you can upload this video to YouTube (in 15 minute segments) and create a link to it within your course. You can also make this video private so only individuals with the exact URL can access it (i.e. it is not searchable).

YouTube is also a great resource for assignments. For example, if you assign your students a project that requires them to analyze a specific movement of the sport they coach, they can search YouTube for a video clip to use. Not only does this engage the student, but it also makes the assignment relevant. It may also expose the student to less than optimal coaching methods, which you can ask them to address as part of the assignment.

**Google cloud.** One of the most exciting new technologies from Google is the Cloud. Google Cloud works in the background of Microsoft products and allows the document to be synced to the internet for sharing. This is a great tool for group work. For example, groups of students may be assigned to create a PowerPoint presentation on a specific topic they will deliver
to parents. If they create the first draft of the PowerPoint and sync it to the internet with Google Cloud, multiple members of the group can be working on the same document at the same time, and they can see each other’s changes and edits in real-time. This eliminates the need to merge multiple revision documents. It also allows the flexibility to students to complete their part of the assignment at a convenient time rather than waiting until one person is done with a section and passing it on.

There are several additional positive aspects to this software. First, students are presumably familiar with Microsoft software, so they don’t have to learn a new system. Second, students can simultaneously edit a document ensuring they are working on the current version, still allowing for asynchronous coursework. And, third, Google accounts and Cloud are free! In fact, most e-mail accounts ending in ‘edu’ can be used in place of creating an entirely new Google account.

**Google sites and pages.** Google also has a few other resources that can be easily incorporated into an online course. Google Sites allows websites to be created at no cost. An instructor can ask a student or groups of students to design a website related to the course information. This can be a great semester-long project for students requiring them to use all the information presented in the course, and also to seek out other quality resources to include on the site. Asking students to make the information sport-specific can make the assignment even more meaningful. Students can also make their pages live/public, so others can see the information. Including a Q&A section where the public can post questions that are answered by the student or the group is a great way for students to gain a better understanding of the material.

Google Pages offers slightly different features like wikis and blogs. Students completing their internship can be asked to blog about their experiences as they relate to the National Coaching Standards. The student can make their blog public or private (only including the instructor). A great feature of the blog page is that posts are time/date stamped. Of course, restrictions on what types of details of an internship are posted (especially if the blog is public) would be provided to the student.

Wikis can also be great assignments. Consider Wikipedia and how it works. Instructors can ask a group of students to create a wiki on effective examples of discipline in sport other than the use of physical punishment. Wiki content can be updated by anyone but is moderated. Therefore, coaches in the community can post their strategies to this wiki, and then the students in the class can moderate the wiki, determining if the changes or suggestions made by community coaches are in line with the guidelines presented in the course. This is a great higher
order thinking task for students. It also challenges the “that’s the way my coach did it” mentality that many students in coaching education possess.

Educating the Masses

Many coaching educators are challenged with extremely large groups. There are a few things to keep in mind when structuring these types of educational experiences. First, all educational environments should be developed with the learning objectives of the program in mind. If the learning objectives of the program cannot be accomplished with large-scale online delivery, another method should be pursued. Second, the results of the US DOE meta-analysis revealed hybrid courses were the most beneficial in terms of performance outcomes. An ideal implementation of this in coaching education is to offer some of the basic information as a foundational course in an online setting. Then, to present more in-depth information, require face-to-face workshops. Not only will this increase the quality of the program, it will also offer an opportunity for assessment of the student’s ability to apply the concepts. Third, maximizing quality interaction in an online course is essential. Extremely large classes make this difficult. The use of small groups can help enhance the learning environment. Fourth, most of the material presented in this paper reflects teaching practices for long-term courses. Short-term courses (e.g. several hours or a few short sessions) may be influenced by other variables. Student motivation in these types of courses is likely very different than the motivation model discussed above. On a final note, an educational program is not successful if learning has not occurred. An assessment of learning outcomes should accompany any online course delivery to ensure the objectives have been met.

Conclusion

Online education has grown at an extremely rapid pace in the last decade. Some of the features of this learning environment are ideal for programs offered to busy coaches. However, with the growth of online education, it is critical to ensure that the learning environment is engaging and effective. Multiple tools to help coaching educators enhance the learning environment have been presented. It is important to note, however, that this is not an exhaustive list. Further, with rapidly evolving technology, educators should continue to seek the most up-to-date tools and resources for their students.
About the Author

Melissa Murray, Ph.D.

Melissa Murray, Ph.D. is an Assistant Professor at the University of Southern Mississippi and the Graduate Program Coordinator for the MS in Sport Coaching Education. She has 3 years of coaching experience at the collegiate level, is a Level 1 ASA Softball Coach, and is a Certified Consultant through the Association for Applied Sport Psychology.
References


