

Learning Online is not the same as Online Learning: Implications for Coach Education and Development

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The opportunities for sports coaches to learn online is often well imagined but not well understood¹. May be this is because the possibilities to learn online have become so varied that establishing what has the most impact for who and why is a challenging question. The purpose of this article is to offer a possible conceptual approach to better research and understand learning in online environments. It focuses on explaining the distinction and relationship between 'learning online' and 'online learning'.

Online learning

Online learning is a structured, formalised and mediated method of teaching and learning enabled and supported by digital technologies – it is a form of technology-enabled learning (TEL). Online learning is defined by the presence of a curriculum and syllabi that are often linear, delivered over a period of time and developed by educational professionals. The content and outcomes of online learning are designed for an intended audience and adopt particular pedagogical approaches. Furthermore, in online learning assessment, both formative and summative, are present to test, measure, recognise and certificate learning. In online learning technologies can enable learning but they do not in themselves bring about learning. Learning is not achieved because of the technology but through the chosen approach to learning design and pedagogy.

Typically, online learning is undertaken as a 'course' that is accessed remotely and is not so different to the teaching and learning intended to occur within 'courses' delivered in physical environments. This is in the sense that the same pedagogical questions regarding learning design, learning outcomes, the narrative flow of content, assessment methods and methods of quality assurance are still present but adapted to the capabilities of the various software platforms and hardware through which the teaching and learning is accessed. Equally questions regarding constructivist alignment, the scaffolding of support, feedback, the balance between direct instruction and social engagement between students are all important considerations within an online environment.

As with teaching and learning in physical spaces questions about the power relationships and the 'social distance' between educator and student also apply in online learning. Using Bourdieu's terms, online learning does not negate questions about the pedagogical actions of educators and their pedagogical authority to determine, influence and structure a learning experience - an experience which often reproduces established ideas, values and beliefs. As such, the learning experience can be analysed and researched through similar methods of enquiry that have been developed in education and the learning sciences more generally². This could, for example, focus on researching and examining the decisions and

¹ For an elaboration of this point see Cushion, C. and Townsend, R.C. (2018) Technology-Enhanced Learning in Coaching: A Review of Literature. *Educational Review*, 71(5), pp631-649.

² See for example Neelan, M and Kirschner, P. (2020) Evidence Informed Learning Design: Creating Training to Improve Performance. KoganPage, London.

choices made by the people who design, write and deliver online learning for sports coaches.

Learning Online

Learning online is different to online learning. Learning online is self-directed, self-paced and self-regulated, individuals turn the pedagogical action onto themselves and into a form of self-curation - they create their own curriculum. Learning online is not defined within a period of time, neither it is assessed or leads to certification or does it exist in an ecosystem of quality assurance. Learning online requires a more connectivist approach to learning, that is individuals connect the meanings they discover for themselves within and across different learning experiences. In learning online the pedagogical authority of the educator is also different. Rather than exerting influence through the duration of a structured course, the educators authority is expressed in episodic, discreet often disconnected events – a podcast, a webinar, a blog for example.

Learning online is like, and could be categorised as, informal learning. It lacks the structure and organisation of online learning but still offers an alternative means of learning for sports coaches, albeit one fraught with questions about what learning might take place. For example:

- How do coaches choose what content to experience and why?
- Are they attracted by content which seems to fit with their own existing ideas and beliefs and therefore use learning online as an echo chamber and a form of confirmation bias?
- Do sports coaches possess the educational skills to question and filter out dubious ideas and theories?
- How are coaches challenged to reflect and question their existing beliefs and personal theories of coaching?

These questions are just suggestions and indicators of the avenues that could be explored with sports coaches to better understand how they engage with learning online and what they think they learn and why.

The relationship between online learning and learning online

Having to sought to clarify a distinction between learning online and online learning the relationship between the two in the context of coach education and development will now be explained. We know coaches learn from a range of different sources, influences and experiences. Learning to become a better coach is a process of assembling and constructing a bricolage of knowledge that informs understanding and practice. This bricolage is situated across a formal to informal continuum where each coach uniquely assembles their learning according to their own level of experience, their curiosity and their skill in deciphering knowledge from information.

Whilst this occurs in person and alongside other people in physical spaces it increasingly occurs in online spaces as well. The relationship between learning online and online learning is therefore not an either/or dichotomy, rather it represents a complex inter-relationship that is different for each coach at different points in time.

Sports coaches will no doubt engage in both learning online and online learning for different reasons at different points in their development. Therefore, capturing the complexity of the relationship is not a straightforward endeavour.

If we want to better understand how coaches learn in online environments we need to accept that the opportunities to do so are very different. At least some form of typology and conceptual model would be a good starting point to help differentiate the opportunities currently available, many of which will continue to grow. Equally the focus should be on the pedagogical context and approaches to learning within which online opportunities occur. Instead of being concerned with researching the learning that is prompted by different types of online content such as blogs, webinars, podcasts, MOOCs and BOCs independently of each other we should focus on how these interact, inform and combine together in the overall online experience of sports coaches.

Blended Learning

It is commonplace to describe blended learning as a mixture of in-person and learning accessed online. This is a simplistic definition. Rather blended learning, I would argue, should be conceived as a relationship between the types of learning sports coaches engage with across online and in-person environments together with how they might be classified on a formal to informal continuum. This is described in figure 1.

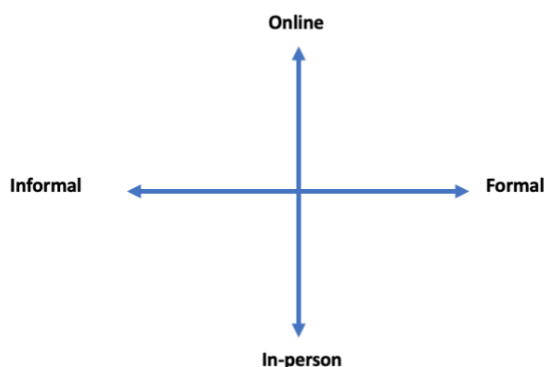


Figure 1: Blended learning as a multi-dimensional process.

Figure 1 could also be developed a 'mapping tool' in a research context to explore where coaches situate different learning experiences as a means of starting to identify patterns in their learning. Follow-up interviews might explore this pattern in more detail and from that an understanding of what has worked for them and why. This might help to advance, evidence and establish a better understanding of coach learning across both in-person and online environments.

Where next: Implications for coach education and development

Opportunities to learn in online environments are likely to continue to grow and develop. For this reason it will be helpful to explore what impact online opportunities have on the knowledge, understanding and practice of sports coaches and why it has an impact. To undertake this some key questions should be asked:

- How can we differentiate between the different types of learning opportunities experienced online?
- What are the mechanisms that promote learning in an online environment and how can this be understood through a critically evaluative pedagogical analysis?
- To what extent does learning in an online environment reproduce existing dominant forms of knowledge and understanding, who exercises the pedagogical authority, why and what influence does this have? To use a clunky Bourdieu phrase³ “all pedagogic action is, objectively, symbolic violence insofar as it is the imposition of a cultural arbitrary by an arbitrary power”. Whilst this observation has been drawn on to research physical teaching and learning environments it equally applies to teaching and learning in online environments as well – it might even help analyse and understand Twitter debates!
- Is it desirable to make online learning more like learning online and learning online more like online learning? Is there a hybrid, a synthesis, a third way that combines the strengths of each other?

Final thoughts

The COVID-19 pandemic has focused unprecedented attention on teaching and learning in online environments. Understanding the impact on learning amongst sports coaches in online environments, and the complexities this presents, is an important task as this form of learning is probably here to stay.

³ Bourdieu, P. and Passeron, J-C. (1990) Reproduction in Education, Society and Culture 2nd edition, London, Sage. Bourdieu uses the term symbolic violence to refer to forms of non-physical violence through which social groups are able to impose their norms and values onto other subordinated social groups and therefore maintain their position of authority and influence within society.