Emergency remote teaching in the COVID-19 era: implications and opportunities for sport management education

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Abstract:

In December 2019, a novel coronavirus (COVID-19) was detected in three patients from the city of Wuhan, China. By January 2020, COVID-19 was declared as a widespread pandemic creating a global health crisis, resulting in millions of people contracting the virus and thousands losing their lives. Alongside the wide-reaching health crisis, the impact of COVID-19 had significant economic and societal effects leaving a historical legacy which will affect countries throughout the world for considerable period of time. As COVID-19 spread around the globe the way people socialize, work, and study essentially changed forever.

Therefore, this essay provides an insight into the rapid process that universities across the globe undertook to transition their teaching operations online. Projects and pedagogic reviews that traditionally would have taken months or years to devise were compressed into days, as the pandemic necessitated that traditional concerns to online teaching were cast aside. Consequently, this essay discusses these new educational platforms within sport management education and their future role in developing professionals who will be at the forefront of an unprecedented industry growth in the years and decades post COVID-19.

*Keywords***:** COVID-19, Pedagogy, Online teaching, Emergency Remote Teaching

As the threat of COVID-19 evolved from a few cases in Wuhan, China, during December 2019 to a global pandemic by the end of January 2020, higher education institutions shifted courses to online platforms in an attempt to maintain instruction and normality during this unique period of global history. Jump (2020) states that within a Times Higher Education survey with senior managers representing 189 global higher education institutions, at least 50% of institutions moved all of their teaching online as a result of the global pandemic. Even those institutions that were able to maintain a campus presence, such as the National Tsing Hua University in Taiwan, were only able to deliver campus-based sessions to classes of less than 40 students.

The move to online delivery was a response to a global drive to introduce social distancing measures that, for education providers, removed any opportunities to deliver face-to-face classes including laboratory-based sessions, workshops, and other traditional teaching modes of campus-based delivery. While moving teaching platforms online can establish a unique and flexible learning environment, COVID-19 hastened this process with little time for institutions to reflect and design appropriate course learning outcomes suitable for an online delivery platform. Consequently, the majority of higher education practitioners found themselves challenged to improvise in terms of teaching, learning, and assessment strategies, while institutions rushed to provide appropriate online delivery resources for both staff and students. Very few sessions were canceled worldwide once institutions moved online as staff were flexible in their delivery, evidencing numerous examples of innovative teaching, albeit without time to thoroughly prepare for the scenario presented by COVID-19 (Jump, 2020). This process was defined by Zimmerman (2020, p. 1) as “the Great Online-Learning Experiment” and it is this new found global education environment that this essay considers.

Online education is not a new phenomenon. Historically, higher education institutions have utilized online platforms as a means of developing cost-effective learning provision,

meeting the demands of non-traditional students and establishing a contingency design to the long-term sustainability of higher education (Aoun, 2017; Khan & Badii, 2012; Marshall, 2018). Sport management education is not exempt from these strategic considerations as there are a number of established sport management programs around the world that utilize online provision for both independent modules and even entire degree pathways (Miller & Pierce, 2017). For instance, there are currently two undergraduate and four postgraduate sport management fully online programs within the United Kingdom (UK) and 26 online degrees in sport management across the United States of America (UCAS, n.d.). Furthermore, Willett, Brown, and Danzy-Bussell (2019) illustrate that there are a plethora of sport management courses that offer online options, hybrid classes, and blended learning practices embedded within a campus program. These courses have been designed with clear pedagogical principles and without the urgency of design that COVID-19 has forced upon the majority of campus-based programs that exist globally.

Research on the effectiveness of online education has explored comparisons with conventional sport management classes (Rockhill, Pastore, & Johnson, 2019); the experience of student-athletes (McNiff & Aicher, 2017); and the consistency, flexibility, and quality of online provision (Angiello, 2010; Edwards & Finger 2007; Glover & Lewis, 2012; Housekeeper, 2015). While the predominant feature of this research illustrates that students can complete assignments, listen to lectures, and submit work at their convenience, the caveat to these findings is that any such research is measuring the data against planned and pedagogically informed programs. Nonetheless, online learning has a stigma of being of a lower quality than classic campus-based face-to face learning (Bird, Chow, Meir, & Freeman, 2018), despite research showing otherwise (Allen & Seaman, 2011; Feintuch, 2010). This stigma has the potential of being reinforced due to the urgency of institutional responses to

COVID-19 as academics have not been afforded the time or resources to fully review and maximize the opportunities within an online educational framework.

The aforementioned sport management programs that utilize online learning employ concepts such as distance learning, distributed learning, blended learning, mobile learning, and others in order to achieve learning outcomes assigned to the programs. However, in light of COVID-19, academics at conventional campus-based programs have not been afforded the time to consider these differing concepts and consequently their actions could be classed as *emergency remote teaching* rather than online learning (Milman, 2020). This term stems from the actions of academics focusing on teaching and delivery in response to COVID-19, rather than the pedagogic underpinning that frames online learning.

Classic definitions of the principles of effective online learning focus on the use of a systematic design, the quality of instruction, and the development of appropriate assessment strategies to ensure threshold completion of learning outcomes. Research by Means, Bakia, and Murphy (2014) suggests that there are nine dimensions for effective online learning and within each of these dimensions options exist for varying the platform to reflect the subject area, the learning, the learners, and assessment strategies. Furthermore, in order to devise a structured online learning environment the resources, learners and learning need to develop a social presence, community, and meaningful interaction (Bigatel, Ragan, Kenan, May, & Redmond, 2012; Szeto & Cheng, 2016). Incorporating a systematic design and fostering a social presence, community, and meaningful interaction recognizes learning as both a social and a cognitive process, and not merely as a matter of information transmission which has become commonplace in responses to provision and practice due to COVID-19 (Taylor, 2020). These variables, when meaningfully integrated into an online learning environment, provide opportunities for threshold learning outcomes to be completed and for sport management faculty to adhere to the professional requirements of the industry sector.

Classic online learning programs undergo a lengthy development process to ensure that the learning environment and academic staff are competent in devising a product that ensures threshold learning outcomes. The academics are a vital part of the process as they are involved in the initial development through to the delivery of the final product. There is discourse around teaching competencies for online learning that suggests that there are specific skills and sets of pedagogies that are vital for academic staff to be able to function in an online learning environment (Anderson, Rouke, Garrison, & Archer, 2001; Bennet & Lockyer, 2004; Lee & Tsai, 2010; Major, 2010; Natriello, 2005; Stewart & Bower, 2019). However, COVID-19 has not allowed the majority of academics to focus on online skill and pedagogic development and consequently traditional education practices have transitioned into the online environment. Lim (2020) provides an example of an institution's response to COVID-19 and suggests that, while some faculty members already had competencies and experience of online or remote teaching, the majority did not and struggled during the sudden transfer to teaching in the online space. Now that the initial mobilization phase as a result of COVID-19 is over, institutions are moving past crisis thinking towards recovery and sustainability. This consequently means that institutions need to evaluate purposeful provision in order to support students and staff through the new mix of blended operations, with bespoke mixtures of home and campus work for many.

While the traditional roles of academics can be transferred into an online environment, Berge (2008) suggests that academics in online learning environments need to learn to function in four different categories: informal, collaborative, reflective learning, and with user-generated content. Furthermore, technology-related competencies (Baran, Correia, & Thompson, 2011), communication competencies (Martin, Budhrani, Kumar, & Ritzhaupt, 2019), and assessment-related settings (Gikandi & Morrow, 2016) are vital in establishing context and culture within online learning environments. Martinez and Barnhill (2017)

suggest that for sport management academics to evolve and enhance the online learning environment they need to establish a teaching presence by being explicit in explanations and facilitating discourse between students, using both narrative and episodic teaching methods. The University of Portsmouth in England focused on staff using co-creation in the early stages of the transition to online learning to ensure that there was an opportunity to facilitate discourse between its students and academic staff ("Our Strategy", 2020). Ultimately, a focus on these competencies changes the fundamental nature of the interaction between the academic, student, and content which eventually re-examines the role of the academic in the learning process.

Through the use of technology, academics can move from the practice of passive learning methods, such as lecturing, to present active learning opportunities via participatory education. Subsequently, the transition to an online setting facilitates learner-centered environments and the academic moves from being at the center of the interaction and the source of information, to a position whereby the academic designs the activities and the learners assume a greater responsibility for their learning. Consequently, Milman's (2020) suggestion that higher education's response to COVID-19 is more akin to *emergency remote teaching* than online learning is further evident when examining the role and competencies required of academics to develop and establish an online learning platform. There has been more than 25 years of research and development into online education delivery in higher education, and more than 50 years of history of "traditional" distance learning delivery at organizations such as the Open University (Weinbren, 2014). The evidence from the Open University digital archives website (The Open University, 2020) suggests that to develop a complete distance learning program a design team consisting of academics, developers, librarians, alumni, and employers are required from the initial conception stage, and continuously throughout the delivery process. In the short time that academic staff were

afforded to move to an online teaching platform in light of COVID-19, not all of these planning processes were available, but rather they adapted their teaching provision to fit the new teaching and learning conditions of COVID-19.

The sport management programs that moved to an online delivery platform as a result of COVID-19 were also faced with understanding the overall impact upon their stakeholders in ensuring comparable educational quality and satisfaction as their previous campus-based provision. Jump (2020) reports that 20% of senior leaders in global higher education institutions believed that the quality of the student experience had suffered since the move to virtual teaching, and while online teaching may be as good as offline teaching, the same cannot be said for the wider online student experience. Shreffler, Cocco, and Shreffler (2019) suggested that satisfaction levels were vital in sport management programs transitioning to an online platform and their research compared the satisfaction levels of students between an online learning environment and a traditional teaching setting. The results demonstrated that the traditional classroom-based provision had higher mean scores in comparison to an online equivalent delivery, which is also comparable to previous research by Lowenthal, Bauer, and Chen (2015).

It is important to note that both pieces of research illustrate a desire for the campus-based students to have a course that utilizes face-to-face interaction and connectedness. While, in light of COVID-19, all 214 sport management programs within the UK implemented a combination of asynchronous and synchronous activities via online platforms (Zoom, WebEx, Teams, Hangouts etc.), these platforms do not replicate the classic "on-campus" experience the stakeholders expected when they originally signed up to their studies. Jump (2020) suggests that 85% of senior leaders believe that the transition from a campus learning environment to an online delivery platform as a result of COVID-19 has been a success. Consequently, the sudden move to an online platform has implications for

student satisfaction, and while the platform and mode of teaching has changed, the student group has not.

As COVID-19 continues to impact on higher education, the sport management programs that moved to an online learning platform should consider this move as a short-term strategy rather than a long-term solution. It is anticipated that once COVID-19 has abated, institutions will return to face-to-face or a blended learning approach that was advertised within all 214 UK sport management higher education providers for the 2020-21 academic year. This strategic intention illustrates that responses to COVID-19 can be labeled as *emergency remote teaching* rather than classically defined online learning. However, it is evident that the pandemic has caused a rethinking of the classic delivery methods implemented within sport management studies and builds on earlier research by Harrolle, Bopp, Keiper, Ridinger, and Ryan (2013) which suggests that online platforms need to be considered as the future of sport management education.

It has been notable that the transfer to an online teaching space has been a considerable challenge for the majority of global higher education institutions that currently offer sport management programs. Academic staff have reacted swiftly and produced continuous education throughout a global pandemic that is more aligned with the concept of *emergency remote teaching* than classic distance learning practice. That being said, the experience has provided a clear benchmark to establish a protocol for considerations of a return to campus with a blended learning approach under the social distancing guidelines stipulated by the World Health Organization (Bothwell, 2020). Means et al. (2014) illustrate that there are nine key dimensions that need to be considered for effective design and decision-making within online learning platforms. The nine dimensions are modality, pacing, student-instructor ratio, pedagogy, instructor role online, student role online, online communication synchrony, role of online assessments, and source of feedback. Whilst these

dimensions provide a structure for online leaning, it is evident that there are layers to each dimension, and not all of the layers are equally affective for a blended learning approach. For example, class size and consequently the student-staff ratio will be dependent upon the recruitment strategies and the use of campus facilities considered at each institution. Furthermore, in the case of communication synchrony, the choice of delivery profile (asynchronous or synchronous) will depend upon the learner characteristics at each institution, with research illustrating that adult learners require more flexibility and align more to asynchronous delivery (Yamagata-Lynch, 2014), whereas younger learners benefit from the structure provided by synchronous sessions (Martin, Wang, & Sadaf, 2020). Therefore, in order to consider a blended learning return to campus, or even the initial stages of distance learning course development, sport management programs need to consider the dimensions outlined by Means et al. (2014); however, they need to focus specifically on the following to create consistency across subject delivery:

- Establish learning environments that place the student at the center of blended learning course considerations.
    - **Publish a uniform definition** of blended learning (unique to each institution/course) that designates blended learning's structural dimensions such as the integration of face-to-face and online instruction (Porter, Graham, Spring, & Welch, 2014).
    - **Ensure students are clear** about the following and how they will be delivered in a blended learning approach:
        - What topics will be learned;
        - When specific content will be delivered;
        - Who will be involved in delivery;

        - How and when learning outcomes will be assessed (formatively and summatively; Szeto & Cheng, 2016).

- Create a learning space that actively promotes inclusivity.
    - **Implement user guides** when creating content for online learning environments to establish structure and convenience to suit the need of an online learner (Meiselwitz & Sadera, 2008).
    - **Develop lecture material** that divides traditional lecture content into smaller bit-sized chunks, as Dinmore (2019) suggests that 6 to 12 minutes is the ideal duration for online asynchronous learning. Furthermore, blended learning principles indicate that session recordings are most effective when they offer clarity about key concepts and ideas, and then direct students towards other avenues for learning about broader issues, critiques, and application rather than the content coverage that might feature in a traditional lecture.
    - The use of **pre-recorded materials** for asynchronous delivery will enhance accessibility and overcome issues such as irregularities of Wi-Fi bandwidth, difficult time zones for students who are stranded overseas, ill-health; learning differences, language barriers, child-care or other caring responsibilities, self-isolation requirements.

- Establish clear guidelines for student and faculty (online) interaction.
    - **Record Lectures; do not simply stream them** – If students are unwell or struggling with internet access, they will miss a live streamed lecture. Similarly if conducting a student-student or

academic-student seminar/workshop, these sessions need to be recorded live for those students who were unable to make the session.

- **Show your face** – Martin and Bolliger (2018) illustrate that lecture videos that show the academic's face are more effective than simple narrated slideshows. Intersperse slides/presentations with videos of teaching staff to enhance presence amongst the student cohort.
- **Establish virtual office hours** as part of both the tutorial and course program.

- Use peer interaction to foster a community through asynchronous communication tools.
  - **Provide interactive activities** – Quizzes, questionnaires, and bingo events to provide interaction between the student cohort and faculty.
  - **Let students take control** – Create weekly forums and or Questions and Answer Boards to reassure students that they have a voice and can communicate effectively with faculty (Galvis, 2018)
  - **Set reasonable expectations -** When creating quizzes etc., ensure all questions can be answered by referring to the given learning resources. When asking students to write a summary of lecture videos, it should be made clear that this is part of the overall formative assessment strategy.

- Explore innovative assessment design.
  - **Consider assessment practices** that encourage group work. For example, students could be asked to develop a podcast, video clip, or

web page to encourage group interaction. These activities can be either formative or summative depending on the nature of the subject area.

- **Introduce a mini self-test** of knowledge every three weeks of content to amplify individual learning activities (Reimann, Liedl, & Schellhammer, 2019).

It is important to acknowledge that COVID-19 has illustrated educational planning in a crisis and the exceptional activities that academics have provided to help meet the new needs of learners and learning in a challenging situation. Nonetheless, the speed of transition raises questions about the quality of the provision, especially when compared to traditional online learning platforms that take a significant period of time to develop and implement. Consequently, it is clear that a blended learning approach is being considered globally by sport management programs. However, as with all elements of distance or off-campus provision, student satisfaction will be influential in any success of these revised curricula. Consequently, staff need time to develop asynchronous and synchronous activities, pedagogical innovative approaches (Keiper & Jenny, 2017), appropriate learning outcomes, and assessment strategies to ensure a thorough engagement from professional bodies and future employment providers.

To conclude, a systematic audit should be considered as part of a long-term review of provision in a post-COVID-19 era to ensure that the learning environment reflects the needs of the learner. COVID-19 has instigated an abrupt migration to online learning but it has also caused disruptions to students and staff outside their association with higher education. Academics and institutions should take comfort in assessing their approaches to *emergency remote teaching* and use the experience to establish a clear emergency protocol for years to come against other potential global disasters (floods, wildfires, hurricanes, etc.) and the

revised learning potential following considerations of other potential learning platforms and methods. Ultimately, the experience should not be used to influence long-term plans for online provision as it was a truly unique global situation. However, it would be vital to assess the threshold learning outcomes, student motivation, engagement, and leaner success, although like the development of online learning platforms, these are not quick processes but are vitally important.

COVID-19 has presented some unique discussion regarding the urgent adaption of pedagogic practice within a compressed timeframe. It has also questioned the sustainability and long-term relevance of traditional campus-based sport management program's temporary transition to online learning. However, this essay suggests that the global response to COVID-19 is a short-term approach to *emergency remote teaching* rather than a transition to online learning. The pandemic has illustrated some good practice and opportunities to engage with a wider student cohort. This is an important consideration for sport management education providers who will be responsible for developing professionals who will be at the forefront of managing an unprecedented industry growth in the years and decades post-COVID-19.

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