

Designing Online Mental Training Using WebExcellence

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INTRODUCTION

The idea of providing *mental training*¹ (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, a search for “mental training” using Google identified 11,700 sites (Stodel & Farres, 2000a). An identical search in February 2006 revealed approximately 1,330,000 sites, representing an increase of over one hundredfold and by April, 2007, this number had ballooned to 80,800,000. Although a dynamic and fully interactive *online MT environment* does not yet appear to have been realized, it seems likely in the future. 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, Finkenberg, & Morrow, 1997; Martens, 1997). In sport psychology, practitioners and

researchers 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 supported by expert practitioners 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 pro-

gram design specifically (Farres & MacDonald, 2006) 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 is 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 is often 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 aimed at enhancing performance and maximizing enjoyment in sport and life.

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 support this approach, 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, 2006; Stodel, 2004, 2005). Consequently, when designing such environments it is important to consider what motivates learners (MacDonald, et. al., 2001).

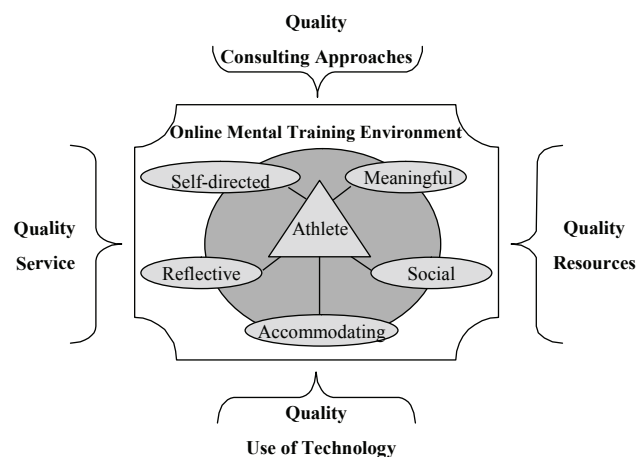
In online MT, athletes should be provided with opportunities to determine their own learning needs, determine how those needs can be met, and access information that will help them meet their needs. Moreover, different levels of information should be made available to the athletes without imposing a 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 not have a successful learning experience (Thoms, 2001). Stodel (2004, 2005) found that athletes enjoyed and implemented MT techniques that they felt were beneficial to them and that helped them achieve their goals. Her finding highlights the importance of making MT relevant and including techniques and approaches that lead to practical outcomes.

A central principle of *adult education* is that adults

Figure 1. *WebExcellence in mental skills education*



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