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## Online and Blended Learning within a National Governing Body of Sport: A Professional Practice Case Study

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All authors:

Peter Horgan (corresp), Pat Daly, Jimmy Darcy, David Sweeney, Pat Culhane

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Synopsis:

Abstract:

The Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA) is the amateur, volunteer led association responsible for the organisation, development and promotion of Gaelic games worldwide. Gaelic games comprise of the field games of Hurling, Gaelic football and Rounders and the court game of Handball. The GAA coach education programme began in 1992, and was composed of a series of formal programs within a 5-stage linear model. This form of Coach Education Programme has come in for criticism from many sources; for example Gilbert and Trudel (2004) argue that the complexity of the role of the coach and the context that they operate within has not been adequately represented in coach development programmes. Research has shown that coaches do not value highly those formal learning opportunities, preferring non-formal and informal situations such as practice experience, observing other coaches and networking with other coaches and athletes at training or competition sites (Gilbert, Côté and Mallet, 2006). As a consequence, it has been argued that there is a need for innovative coach education approaches that complement these clearly preferred, informal routes (Gilbert, Gallimore, & Trudel, 2009). With a view to addressing these criticisms, the GAA began the process of reforming its coach education program in 2007. Organisationally, the coach education program is being replaced with a program of applied lifelong learning, incorporating a broader range of learning opportunities and a revised format of delivery. Recognising the call by Jones and Turner (2006) that means must be found whereby cutting edge content is made relevant to student-coaches so that it can be readily integrated into practice, one of the key developments has been the implementation of online and blended learning opportunities for coaches, including the use of collaborative online tools such as blogs, forums and wikis. The aims of the programme of applied lifelong learning mirrors the proposed expansion of the definition of elearning to

incorporate learner engagement and empowerment, the enhancement of learning, ease of use and execution of the programme (Roffe, 2004).

A bespoke GAA learning and development website was built, to serve as a 'one stop shop' for coaches. Moodle, an open source learning management system, was chosen as the platform for the applied lifelong learning program. Existing coach education program learning opportunities were reviewed to assess their suitability for delivery online, and through a process of instructional design, the introductory coach education course was chosen to be the first course to be delivered on a blended basis. Choosing a blended approach allowed participant coaches to access content online, irrespective of location, while also maintaining links through engaging in person with tutors and peer coaches. The blended approach also allowed for 1) the tutor to review and expand upon materials that had been delivered online and 2) additional online support for the field based activities incorporating a broad range of multimedia content. Since February 2012, in excess of 1900 coaches have completed the blended learning version of the introductory coaching program.

As part of the implementation of online and blended learning opportunities, a number of important lessons have been learned. Internet connectivity and I.T. skills have been an issue in some instances, however the use of the single sign in system has helped to simplify the process.

The blended learning approach in the context of the GAA and its members was not going to meet with an overwhelmingly positive welcome and grow organically but instead it has required appropriately qualified coordinators and tutors to stimulate the engagement of the end users in the process. The role of the coach educator has also evolved to reflect the blended environment and further consideration needs to be given to the supports required by learners. While the introductory course of the coach education program was chosen as the first blended programme, it has become apparent that more time intensive programmes would have the greatest impact with respect to end user engagement.

It is intended in late 2015/early 2016 to implement the next phase of the online roll out, to further the development of the collaborative environment. Mahara, a Moodle compatible open source plug in, has been chosen to facilitate the development of e-portfolios, and the sharing of information between users. This paper is an example of professional practice within a National Governing Body (NGB) of sport, and addresses the conference theme of Online and Blended Sports Management Teaching and Learning. NGBs exist at the nexus between research and action, and this paper outlines how one NGB has evolved to incorporate online learning to enhance the educational opportunities for its members, specifically coaches.

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