

Characteristics of Distance Learners: Lessons for Sustainable Peak Performance in Sports in Nigeria

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Abstract

Sports scientists have viewed peak performance in sports as a state of superior functioning that result in personal bests and outstanding achievements. Several common psychological approaches have introduced the concept of peak performance to explain those moments when an individual experiences feelings of "total unity, inner strength" within their sport. Based on this, the paper highlighted some of the fundamental characteristics of distance learners that may be used as lessons for sustainable peak performance in sports in Nigeria. The characteristics identified were: clearly focused attention, positive mental attitude, physical and mental readiness, positive competitive effect, effortless performance, perception of time, a feeling of supreme confidence, immersion in the present moment. Others are accurate educational setting; prior knowledge and learning styles, time management, self-motivation, and effective communication of needs were all discussed. Conclusively, there is a very strong indication that achieving sustainable peak performance in sports in Nigeria can benefit from the characteristics of successful distance learners.

Key words: Distance learners, peak performance and National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN)

Introduction

Concept of Open and Distance Education

The term open and distance learning and its definition are relatively new in the field of education, having gained prominence only in the past 15 to 20 years.(COL,2002) Among the commonly used terms in relation to open and distance learning are: correspondence education" home study, independent study, external studies, continuing education, distance teaching, self-instruction, adult education, technology-based or mediated education,

learner centred education, open learning, open access, flexible learning and distributed learning

Definitions

According to Commonwealth of learning (2000), there is no one definition of open and distance learning. Rather, there are many approaches to defining the term.

Distance learning refers mainly to a mode of delivery (independent learning at a distance through the means of self-study texts and non-contiguous communication), while open learning includes the notions of both openness and flexibility (whereby students have personal autonomy over their studies and where access restrictions and privileges have been removed) and distance (as in independence from the teacher), COL (2000)

Keegan (1996, p. 44) identifies five main elements of distance education:

- The separation of teacher and learner;
- The influence of an educational organization;
- The use of technical media (usually print) to unite the teacher and learner and to carry educational content;
- The provision of two-way communication so that the student may benefit from or even initiate dialogue and;
- The possibility of occasional meetings for both didactic and socialization purposes.

The educational philosophy of open and distance learning emphasises, giving learners' choices about medium or media, whether print, on-line, television or video; place of study, whether at home, in the workplace or on campus; pace of study, whether closely paced or unstructured; support mechanisms, whether tutors on demand, audio conferences or computer-assisted learning; and entry and exit points.

Sports activities and sports education in Nigeria to a great extent consisted of western sports with little traditional sports content. Sustaining peak performance in sports whether western or traditional sports deriving from natural sports (Grag, 2008), are all the products of human advance experiences, researches and deliberate efforts. To sustain sports development and peak performances in Nigeria therefore require deliberate and practicable strategies and impetus, that is why gathering like this is vital to such realization.

Researchers at different levels had written a lot on how, ways and why sports development particularly in Nigeria can be sustained but this particular write-up attempt to deliberate on how peak performance in sports can be sustain in Nigeria context by drawing experience from the distance learners characteristics, using experiences of the National Open University of Nigeria as example. In doing so, sustainable development theory and method system that were developed for many years (Zheng, 2005), and formed into certain mode or the other were examined but none of these to the knowledge of the writer specifically focused on personality features of successful distance learners that can be annexed for sustainable peak sports performance in Nigeria.

Before the recently concluded Nigerian Universities Staff Sports Associations Games in Benin, Nigeria this year, these features of successful distance learners

occurred to me and in preparation for the sports festival; the features were used in combination with other routine specific sports activity requirements for a successful outing. To a large extent, the National Open University of Nigeria can attribute their successful performances to the use of these features in our sport women and men. This particular presentation therefore, focused on how these identified characteristics of successful distance learners can be used for sustainable peak performance in sports in Nigeria.

Before discussing the elements of a successful distance learner it will be better to examine what seems similar in previous attempts. Sports psychology researchers have viewed peak performance in sports as a state of superior functioning results in personal bests and outstanding achievements. Several common psychological approaches have introduced the concept of peak performance to explain those moments when an individual experiences feelings of "total unity, inner strength" within their sport (Jimmy, 2009). Psychological skills for peak performance in sports include: confidence, goal setting, relaxation, visualization or mental rehearsal, concentration, motivation, arousal, attention control (Jimmy, 2009). These skills are seldom utilized in isolation. Rather, elite athletes combine them in response to the situational demands they face in competition.

It has been shown by different sport and sports psychologist that optimal performance in sports can be facilitated through focus and concentration. What does it mean to be focused? Concentration is the ability to direct one's full attention to appropriate cues and stay focused on task in the present instead of being controlled by irrelevant external (i.e. crowd, game conditions, etc.) or internal (i.e. thoughts, emotions, physiological activity, etc.) stimuli. During any given competition, there are numerous irrelevant cues that surround players and directing their attention through their own efforts will enable them to perform to their potential (Baker, Cobley & Fraser-Thomas, 2009; Balyi, & Williams, 2009; Clover, 2007 and Garcis, 2011).

The Characteristics of Successful Distance Learners

Successful distance learners have found to exhibit the following characteristics identified by researchers in sports psychology to enhance peak performance in sports:

- Clearly focused attention
- Positive mental attitude
- Physical and mental readiness
- Positive competitive effect
- Effortless performance
- Perception of time slowing
- Feeling of supreme confidence
- Immersion in the present moment
- A sense of fun and enjoyment

These characteristics and other popular terms in sports such as "in the groove" and "in the zone" are generally used in sports by athletes and coaches to describe a performance feeling where almost everything went right for them that day. However, athletes and coaches are often at a loss to explain how this state and/or repeat it.

Another term, the "flow experience" describes an optimal psychological state, one involving total observation in the task or activity. Other researchers have also identified that the peak performance athletes deal more readily with their competitive mistakes, possessed higher levels of self-confidence, engaged in more positive self-talk, and were able to employ vivid mental imagery to their advantage. In general, when athletes' energies are totally focused (e.g., utilizing a disciplined concentration routine), they may begin to experience peak concentration and confidence that can lead to "flow." It is in this state that lifetime peak performance in sports often occurs. Peak concentration and confidence that can lead to "flow." It is in this state that lifetime peak performance in sports often occurs. Therefore, the challenge for athletes and coaches is to develop the necessary psychological skills and strategies within an individualized game plan, which will give athletes the opportunity to perform closest to their optimal level of performance on any given day. Successful distance learners display a diversity of these features or traits in order to find success in any online courses. These unique characteristics are possessed by online learners. Simonson, Smaldino, Albright & Zvack (2009) recognised accurate educational setting, prior knowledge and learning styles as indicators of successful distance learners. Successful distance learners also possesses time management, they are self-motivated, and effectively communicate their needs. Acknowledging these attributes by the writer, during the preparation for the earlier mentioned universities' festival in Nigeria, the sport men and women of the National Open University of Nigeria were consciously informed by these attributes at the beginning of the preparation that these are characteristics they possess above their counterparts from conventional settings and that they can use them over their competitors. The ways and methods to use this attributes were identified by both the writer and the contingents making it a democratic approach to issues and ideas nursed by one individual but tactically internalized by everyone.

In the same line, time management was also identified on the basis that sport man or woman are usually busy just like most distance learners, it is vital for them therefore to possess time management as a sport man or woman. The ability to manage time is the major factor of encouraging sport man and woman so as to succeed. To sustain peak performance in sport, sports men and women need to realise that they need not to receive persistent reminders about activities such as constant practice, rehearsals, and so on which are vital to their success, rules and regulations regarding their type of sports that are constantly changing and evolving, sports schedules, or deadlines that must be met. All these must be done in a respectable amount of time prior to the due date and in a way that endorses knowledge and sports continuation. In achieving this, goals were set as well as utilize some sort of time management system schedule or time -table in order to keep track of everything before the competition. Time management strategy assists sport men and woman to avoid procrastination. Organising a plan provide a guide to be followed so that

sport men and woman do not waste valuable time deciding what to do next. This promotes motivation and allows one to be more successful in sports endeavour.

Garcis (2010) pointed out that successful distance learners never give up on their work. Likewise, successful sport men and women should never give up. This ability to remain accountable for completing course work in a timely manner is an attribute that sports men and woman must acquire and demonstrate in order to be successful. Sports men and woman must know how to manage their time as well as improve their talents and skills.

In order to sustain peak sports performance also, sports men and women must be motivated, since distance learners are not forced to attend classes; therefore they find it extremely difficult to stay on top of their work because there is no one to keep them on task (Wilkinson, 2010). Distance learning is therefore only for those who have the ability to be self-motivated. This ability is worth adopting by athletes for sustained peak performance. The National Open University of Nigeria contingent find it not difficult to attain this attribute because it is part of their daily routine as a distance learner.

Another notable characteristic of distance learners that was used by the writer to sustain peak performance in NOUN sport men and women is avenue created for them to communicate their needs. Holmberg (1995) asserted that sports men and woman should be identified with a profile that is possibly similar or diverse from that of others and such profiles should be heterogeneous, this was fully agreed to by the writer. This avenue also made the kind motivation of the university not to be misdirected. In addition, the strategy of creating avenue for sport men and woman improve ability of the mind to generate thought patterns, influence emotions, stimulate or diminish arousal and create images of a desired action is now better understood and changed the way that many athletes approach their events (Holmberg, 1995).

Also discovered was that when sport men and woman were allowed to communicate their needs and motivation directed toward those needs it reduced or totally eliminate anxiety. And finally communication of needs and motivation based on communicated needs assist sport men and woman to be able to prepare for major competitions, reduce tension and stress that may have cause a decline in performance, and maintain peak performances over a long period of time.

When sport men and woman develop anxiety and arousal anxiety which is a state of being uneasy, apprehensive, or worried about what may happen before, during and after a performance, the best way to manage this from experience is to allow sport men and woman communicate such and appropriate motivation should be applied. For example, anxiety like what will happen to one study, career, personality, worry, concern, negative thoughts and feelings can be effectively managed through effective communication and motivation after effort that differentiate whether it is trait or state anxiety, sources of stress, and recognize the link between optimum arousal levels and performance. Sport men

and woman should be assisted in learn to manage their personal anxiety levels through psychological strategies such as concentration/attention skills, mental rehearsal/visualization, relaxation and goal setting.

These provide the contingents with the internal confidence coming from external in their ability to succeed in sport activities despite any constrains.

Conclusion

There are very strong indications that identification of peculiar characteristics of successful distance learners and their effective application of the characteristics can be used in sustaining peak performance in sports.

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