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## A virtual John Gagliardi: new frontiers in distance-learning?

Michael Hemesath

*College of Saint Benedict/Saint John's University, mhemesath@csbsju.edu*

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One of the most interesting and creative areas in higher education today is the use of technology, both in the classroom and to facilitate distance-learning. Most of the focus has been in traditional academic areas: having students in remote locations watching centrally provided lectures or supplementing courses with lectures delivered by professors who have been previously recorded in other locations.

But a recent news story provides an example of using technology for learning in a way that I had not previously considered. Kenyan Julius Yego won the javelin throw at the World Championships in Beijing last

month. The story would be surprising enough as Kenya has famously produced exceptional track stars for decades but no field stars. But what is even more amazing about the story is that Yego has no coach. “My coach is me, and my YouTube videos,” he said. Unable to find a throwing coach in Kenya, Yego decided that his best option was to watch YouTube videos of javelin’s greats training and throwing. His unorthodox training style brought him to the London Olympics in 2012 where he finished 12th, and he continued to improve to the point that he now has the longest javelin throw in the world in the last 14 years.

To what degree might technology enhance or even replace some of the extra-curricular work now done by faculty and staff? The example above raises the question for coaches, but what about **music instructors, art instructors, acting and theater** or even things like **spirituality groups**? The information revolution has given anyone with an internet connection access to incredible “coaching” in almost every imaginable activity, including from many of the **world’s best**.

Yet there are obviously limits to virtual coaching, Yego’s story notwithstanding. Anyone who has tried to improve their golf game by watching videos knows the fundamental problem. A video from an expert can show you how to do something correctly, with perfect form and impeccable timing, but the video cannot watch you and correct your mistakes. Non-experts (as well as many experts) are usually not good at identifying and correcting their own mistakes. It is no accident that the world’s best athletes and actors still use human coaches who can see, hear and feel things that technology is (currently) unable to.

And this does not even begin to touch on the psychology of humans as they attempt to master difficult skills—how does one build confidence, learn to accept failure or be a successful member of a team or cast?

Finally, in the context of an undergraduate education, we are asking our coaches, directors, music instructors and chaplains to do so much more than what their narrow job descriptions might indicate. As part of a holistic liberal arts education, the many activities outside the classroom are an important part of the development and growth of the whole student. Alumni regularly tell me that some of the most important things they learned at Saint John's came from the people who taught them outside the classroom.

John Gagliardi – like most coaches – taught his players a lot more than the X's and O's of football.

Technology can absolutely enhance learning both inside and outside the classroom, but it is rarely a substitute for meaningful human interactions.

By the way, Yego now has a coach: Petteri Piironen of Finland.

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## About the Author: [Michael Hemesath](#)

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Michael Hemesath is the 13th president of Saint John's University. A 1981 SJU graduate, Hemesath is the first layperson appointed to a full presidential term at SJU. You can find him on Twitter [at] [PrezHemesath](#).