

Pedagogy of Student Reflection in Physical Education

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Abstract:

In physical education (PE), students are supposed to develop a wide array of knowledge in, through and/or about movement (Arnold Citation1979). Some of this knowledge is commonly considered more theoretical (such as knowledge about how the body functions or aspects of health), and others, more practical (such as various motor skills in and through movement and other types of movement learning). However, recent studies have shown that theory/practice is still considered a taken-for-granted dualism that is difficult to deal with in PE practice. For example, Svennberg's (Citation2017) study from Sweden revealed that written assignments to assess students' theoretical knowledge about movement have become more prominent, replacing assessments of students' knowledge in and through movement. . In the final section, we present an example of how our theoretical discussions can form three principles for a pedagogy of student reflection in PE practice. we could also consider how reflection can enable students to understand the why(s), what(s) and how(s) of friluftsliv from, for example, a sustainability, environmental or social justice perspective, and hence, how friluftsliv might be inclusive for some students but exclusive for others depending on how it is approached and why, as well as that different ways of doing friluftsliv (i.e. locally or through expeditions) have different consequences for nature and for human – nature relations.

So far, to bridge the gap between theory and practice in PE, we have presented a theoretically grounded argumentation for why students need to reflect, the need for them to learn to reflect, how reflection could be facilitated, and that the why(s), what(s) and how(s) could be the objects of reflection. However, an important question (or probably one of many) remains unaddressed: what our conceptualisation of reflection might look like in a PE context.

This is perhaps particularly relevant for contexts in which health is an explicit part of the subject, such as in Sweden, Australia, and New Zealand, where one risk of having a PE and an H – where PE means practice and H means theory – or even P and E and H if these aspects of the subject are not meaningfully connected.

Keywords: Pedagogy, Student reflection, Physical Education

INTRODUCTION:

In physical education (PE), students are supposed to develop a wide array of knowledge in, through and/or about movement (Arnold Citation1979). Some of this knowledge is commonly considered more theoretical (such as knowledge about how the body functions or aspects of health), and others, more practical (such as various motor skills in and through movement and other types of movement learning).

Finding ways to teach PE that allows students to connect and integrate these forms of knowledge has been the focus of attention for decades. For example, over 25 years ago, McBride and Cleland (Citation1998), following up their argumentation that ‘cognitive challenges must interact with movement-oriented activities’ (42), argued for the importance of critical thinking, as the subtitle of their article indicated: ‘Putting theory where it belongs: In the gymnasium!’

However, recent studies have shown that theory/practice is still considered a taken-for-granted dualism that is difficult to deal with in PE practice. For example, Svennberg’s (Citation2017) study from Sweden revealed that written assignments to assess students’ theoretical knowledge about movement have become more prominent, replacing assessments of students’ knowledge in and through movement. Casey and O’Donovan (Citation2015) reported that teaching anatomy and physiology as parts of PE has moved parts of PE from the gymnasium and the playing field into classrooms and has ‘transformed the subject from a practical to a theoretical one’ (354). Furthermore, Bowes (Citation2010) problematised why so many senior school PE lessons in New Zealand seem to be dominated by students accomplishing workbooks and taking notes from theoretical PowerPoint presentations. Quennerstedt (Citation2019) argued that this might make students competent in formulating knowledge about movement rather than knowledge in and through movement. Thedin-Jakobsson (Citation2004) further argued that in Sweden, health has, in many senses, become the theoretical aspect of PE that is discussed in classrooms, whereas movement and sports are regarded as the practical parts of PE that are honed in gymnasiums where little or no theory is needed. Tolgfors (Citation2018) also problematised the higher status of written assignments and argued that ‘embodied learning and oral reflection should be regarded as [. . .] forms of knowledge [that are as important as] written evidence of learning. If not, there is a risk of a counterproductive dualism between theory/practice in the subject of PE’ (325).

Against this backdrop, the purpose of this paper is to contribute with knowledge about student reflection in PE practice. To fulfil the purpose, we first aim to discuss the concept of reflection to provide some clarity about what student reflection might be in the context of PE practice. Then, we seek to reconceptualise reflection in a way that might enable PE teachers to bridge the gap between theories and practice in new and, hopefully, fruitful ways with their students. In the final section, we present an example of how our theoretical discussions can form three principles for pedagogy of student reflection in PE practice.

Principles for a pedagogy of student reflection in PE:

So far, to bridge the gap between theory and practice in PE, we have presented a theoretically grounded argumentation for why students need to reflect, the need for them to learn to reflect, how reflection could be facilitated, and that the why(s), what(s) and how(s) could be the objects of reflection. However, an important question (or probably one of many) remains unaddressed: what our conceptualisation of reflection might look like in a PE context. Therefore, in the final section, building on the suggestions in the 2018 AIESEP keynote (Quennerstedt Citation2019), we propose three pedagogical principles for pedagogy of student reflection in PE.

Before doing so, however, we need to acknowledge that it is probably not only one way to facilitate reflection, as reflection might differ depending on the context in which it takes place. This is crucial since, as we have argued, reflection is always embodied and situated. For example, reflecting on different bodily norms, reflecting on previous experiences of a particular way of moving and reflecting on how to improve physical skills will require somewhat different pedagogical approaches. Nonetheless,

we believe that they have some commonalities that can be seen as three intertwined pedagogical principles for pedagogy of reflection for PE teachers moving beyond a theory and practice divide. To elaborate on our suggested principles, we use the following pedagogical case as an illustrative example: A group of 10th-grade students are entering a unit where the educational purpose is to experience and explore different movement cultures and landscapes. The students are given freedom to choose between different cultures, such as the fitness culture, organised sports, unorganised sports, or lifestyle activities.

A pedagogy of becoming through reflection:

The first pedagogical principle addresses the why of pedagogy of student reflection in PE. As we have argued, student reflection must be facilitated for intelligent practice that allows students to learn, develop and become competent moving humans within a wide variety of movement cultures. Students' situated and embodied reflection can support their growth into physically educated citizens directed towards diverse worthy purposes.

In the aforementioned case, we can imagine that some students in the class opted to explore the movement culture of friluftsliv (i.e. being in the outdoors, close to nature). On the one hand, reflection on this culture can make students better at lighting a bonfire, navigating in nature or managing safety risks, as Ryle (Citation2009) illustrated. On the other hand, we could also consider how reflection can enable students to understand the why(s), what(s) and how(s) of friluftsliv from, for example, a sustainability, environmental or social justice perspective, and hence, how friluftsliv might be inclusive for some students but exclusive for others depending on how it is approached and why, as well as that different ways of doing friluftsliv (i.e. locally or through expeditions) have different consequences for nature and for human – nature relations.

Thus, for a PE teacher, the principle of becoming in relation to friluftsliv entails creating pedagogical situations in which students:

- Find themselves in situations in which they can relate their own experiences to the environment that currently shapes the contexts of their experiences;
- Are encouraged to reflect on how these meaningful embodied experiences in nature can relate to, for example, protecting our common nature locally or globally; and
- Reflect on how their experiences could inform the ways in which they could participate in sustainable friluftsliv in the future, with guidance from and in discussion with their peers and teachers.

Conclusion:

Pedagogy of reflection does not mean less movement in PE. On the contrary, an understanding of reflection that does not set out to create unbridgeable and pre-determined distinctions between theory and practice, body and mind, and process and outcome can support student learning in movement through intelligent practice. By doing so, we emphasise that reflection in PE practice cannot solely be understood as a cognitive activity and should always involve practical, situated, and embodied experiences of movement.

The educational value of PE has been under contention for a long time. As a final remark, we argue that bridging theory and practice through reflection could strengthen both the P and E in PE so that it becomes PE rather than P and E. This is perhaps particularly relevant for contexts in which health is an explicit part of the subject, such as in Sweden, Australia, and New Zealand, where one risk of having a

PE and an H – where PE means practice and H means theory – or even P and E and H if these aspects of the subject are not meaningfully connected.

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