

OPTIMAL LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS

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INTRODUCTION

My passion for and drive to become a high-quality physical education (PE) teacher was developed throughout my undergraduate studies. Within these studies, I was lucky to experience invaluable placement opportunities, which have led to me asking myself and others many questions regarding teaching and learning in PE and, in particular, the learning environment. Questions such as: Does environment influence engagement? Does environment affect a holistic approach to teaching? And, therefore, how does the environment develop students holistically?

This article shares the findings and thoughts of my programme leader and me on what creates an optimal learning environment. We highlight some of the potential barriers environments may pose to learners and provide recommendations for creating an optimal learning environment for all learners.

WHAT MAKES A LEARNING ENVIRONMENT?

As teachers and aspiring teachers, it is essential to create optimal learning environments for all students. But what does this look like in PE? When we have varying physical activities and competencies to be taught throughout the academic year, surely there is not one fixed optimal learning environment, but, possibly, ingredients that can and should be used to create optimal enjoyment and learning for all.

Previous studies have highlighted that a learning environment is a place in which learners actively interact with one another, suggesting learning can take place anywhere and is not just confined to the walls of a classroom or sports hall. So and Brush's (2007) findings go further to suggest that, in fact, it is the active interactions between a learner and teacher or learner and learner that characterise

a learning environment. This highlights that there are many contributing factors in creating an optimal learning environment and a teacher or trainee teacher must consider all of the factors within their teaching processes. These include:

- Active interaction between learners
- Active interaction between teacher and learners
- The situation/the physical environment
- The session contents
- Discussion.

EFFECTIVE LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS

As seen in figure 1, there are many underlying factors that influence a learning environment. Students need to be **active for sustained periods of time**, suggested by teachers as being between 40-60 minutes. This is considered an average lesson, including time to get changed at the start and end. The Department for Education (2014) asks in its aims for curriculum PE that "all students are physically active for sustained periods of time". Therefore, for an optimal learning environment to be created in PE, active learning needs to take place.

This learning is best when students get to **sample a variety of sports**, enabling them to find a sport or activity they can participate in for life. Teachers recognise that a link from lessons to extra-curricular provision is important for students to get this opportunity, as it enables students to continue or pursue further activities which sparked their interest in lessons. The Department for Education (2014) supports this, as the purpose of PE is to promote healthy, active, lifelong participation and give all students the opportunity to develop in a range of physical activities.

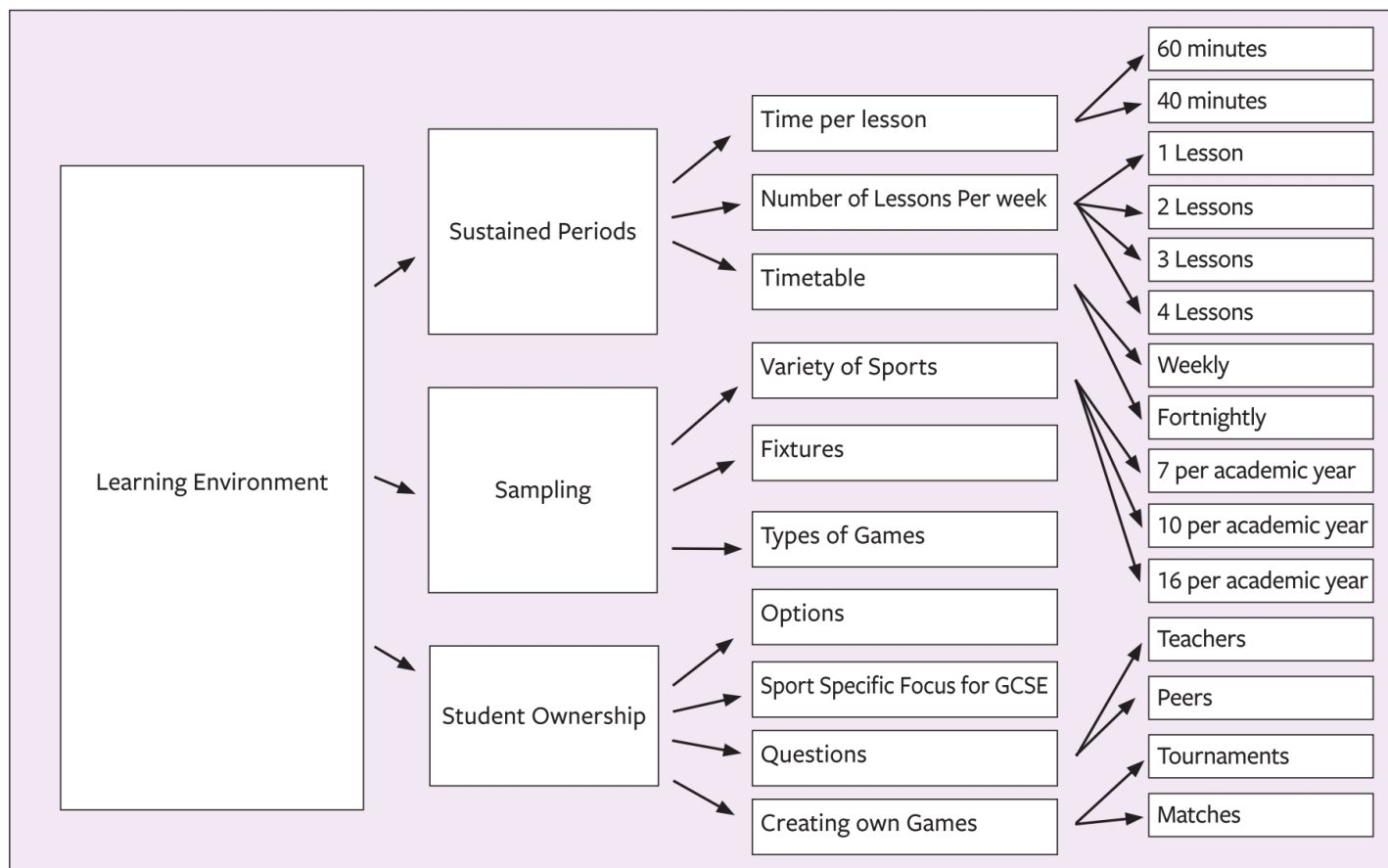
Students also need to take **ownership of their learning** as this is when they truly see the benefits of education. Students need

to make choices when they come out of education. Therefore, it is best to encourage students to make decisions from an early age, so they can see how the decisions they make impact on various situations – from simple decisions about whether to bring kit to a session to their options for GCSEs. Through guided discovery, learners can learn from the choices they make and learn from their mistakes. The opportunity to make a choice will affect whether a student engages (Mosston and Ashworth, 2008).

Both my personal experience and reading of the relevant literature suggest students should be encouraged to **create their own games** and rules as part of their learning in PE. Research has found that allowing creativity and collaboration results in an increased positive learning environment, as Kyhala *et al* (2012) suggest. It is also proposed that a high degree of learning often takes place when the students are empowered to create learning opportunities. As a result, students get more enjoyment out of a game they have created and are more motivated to participate. This approach not only meets the purpose of study within the National Curriculum (for example, build character and embed values such as fairness and respect) but develops the whole child – through physical development, cognitive development and social-emotional development.

Furthermore, student contributions may also add to the learner's motivations. This emphasises that students' improvement and effort are largely affected by environment: when students **focus on personal improvement** and effort they are more motivated, thus improving outcomes and enjoyment (Morgan *et al.*, 2005). This can have a positive and direct impact on the health and fitness of our young people, increasing the likelihood of them leading healthy and active lifestyles, thus hitting one of the main aims of the National Curriculum.

Figure 1: Learning environment high order themes. The words are summarised from raw words into categories and then into themes.



An optimal learning environment should include challenging and relevant activities to provide enjoyment and build a foundation of skills to interest the athletes in the future. Schernoff and Csikszentmihalyi (2009) support this and suggest ways to create optimal engagement in a learning environment is through academic intensity and positive emotions.

Positive emotions come from allowing students to use their own initiative to adapt games or generate completely new ideas. Positive emotions are how the students feel on an emotional basis. Success may be felt by a learner on an emotional basis but may not always be physical or outcome-based. Moreover, an optimal learning environment involves Personal Learning and Thinking Skills (PLTS): **not all learning is physical**, some learning is emotional, and teachers need to be aware of this to keep their students engaged within a session. Teachers need to think about students' hands, hearts and heads as this will enable them to include all students in a session, even if a student is not as physically capable as others. PE is not just about the physical but also the mental and social side (Doozan and Bae, 2016).

Academic intensity is a task or test which challenges a student, but which

they do not enjoy (Schernoff and Csikszentmihalyi, 2009). However, an environment which gives students the most challenge should be one which lets students **feel the most success from a challenge**; if they feel success, they will be more engaged and motivated. This requires an environment that includes differentiation – so students are challenged at their own level – or where students have no prior experience or preconceptions of an activity, as they all start on the same level. In addition, an environment which gives students the **foundation of skills** to progress further will see more success as students will become more competent.

CONCLUSION

In summary, we conclude that an optimal learning environment in PE is one in which students: are active; sample a variety of sports that link to provision beyond school; are allowed to make choices and mistakes and learn from them; create their own activities; experience success from taking part in appropriately pitched challenges; and focus on personal improvement. Above all, an optimal learning environment is one which develops students holistically – skills, character and values – not just physically. ■

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