

PHYSICAL EDUCATION VERSUS PHYSICAL ACTIVITY

SPOTTING THE DIFFERENCE WHEN TEACHING ONLINE

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PHYSICAL ACTIVITY VERSUS PHYSICAL EDUCATION

Restrictions brought on by the global pandemic have prompted physical education (PE) teachers to worry seriously about how they might cope. The initial weeks of lockdown here in our own higher education institution, dedicated in part to the training of teachers, brought a series of difficult challenges with the ongoing teaching of undergraduate and post-graduate students expected to continue despite staff and students suddenly being restricted to working from home. The enthusiasm for maintaining levels of physical activity generally across the UK was stirred and maintained by the likes of Joe Wicks who became, in the popular mindset, 'the nation's PE teacher' in that he engaged children and grownups in phenomenal numbers on a regular basis. At the same time, many national governing bodies and sporting clubs produced online examples of sporting skills to recreate or master at home, such as the Gaelic football '200 touch a day challenge' where, with a ball and a wall, one could systematically keep a variety of particular sporting skills fresh. The question here arises: how are these activity-based video sessions different from skills-based videos and how do they both, in turn, differ from the essence of what we know as physical education?

The pandemic is, perhaps, a useful disruptor for the purpose of urging us to think deeply and critically about how we define our discipline. It has provided us with a lens through which we can re-examine the understanding held by educational leaders of what, precisely, is the difference between physical activity and physical education. For all the benefits

that online activities bring to children in keeping them active, is there a missed opportunity? Is the downside that those same young people learn very little in principle about what they are doing, why they are doing it, how they can keep safe while doing it, and why they should continue to both do it, and *learn more about* doing it, long after the videos end?

Now is the time to remind ourselves of Whitehead's seminal work, *Physical Literacy: Throughout the Lifecourse*, which has long advocated an understanding of physical literacy as central to the discipline:

"I feel it is not inappropriate to use the language and substance of the UNESCO definition [of literacy] and to describe physical literacy as identifying a human capability that affords us 'the ability to identify, understand, interpret, create, respond effectively and communicate, using the embodied human dimension, within a wide range of situations and contexts. Physical literacy involves a continuum of learning in enabling individuals to achieve their goals, to develop their knowledge and potential, and to participate fully in their community and wider society'. At this stage it needs to be stressed that the adoption of the notion of 'literacy' in the field of physical activity is not designed to give academic respectability or credibility to this human capability, but rather to highlight its educational validity as part of a liberal education that recognises all our human capabilities and potentials as of equal importance and value."

(Whitehead, 2010)

This a weighty and thought-provoking contribution to the discussion of what we do when we teach young people in PE. The question then arises, how can such broadly effective PE lessons be delivered online in a time of pandemic? As most of our own students are student teachers, deciding on an answer to this question was exceptionally urgent. Furthermore, it is always important to view these sorts of questions from the point of view of digital non-enthusiasts. In other words, those who are happiest within the digital landscape will, it seems, always find a way. They are enthused auto-didacts and not necessarily in need of much professional development to achieve their ends. It is the others we needed to consider – those who not only lack digital enthusiasm, but who may believe that the very purpose of PE is to get children to put their devices down. They may feel that PE and the online environment are oil and water and never the twain should mix.

ONLINE PHYSICAL EDUCATION THROUGH GAMES

Games were selected as the best medium to attempt a trial run, early in the pandemic, to teach something approximating physical education to children online. Elaine McLaughlin, former head coach of the Northern Ireland women's netball team, took charge of an exercise to teach school children netball online once a week. Zoom was the chosen platform due to its user-friendly nature, improved security arrangements and ease with which the 'share screen' function allowed demonstrating participants to present material quickly to the entire group. The fact that we had a recurring meeting ID also increased ease of access for all participants.

Initially contact was made with a local netball club about setting up the class, but word spread, and a local school soon asked to join as well. The exercise was intended to deliver something approximating more complete PE lessons online, but also to carefully observe where success and failure occurred and thereby inform the teaching approaches which our department would advocate to our student teachers this autumn term.

In keeping with department practices, these online lessons for children would consistently emphasise that a successful PE lesson should address three key elements: activity, fun and learning. According to the Northern Ireland curriculum (2007) in PE, “all children should experience a sense of fun, enjoyment and achievement though a variety of progressively challenging and innovative activities”. Planning went further to address not just the application of specific skills but also to highlight those which were transferable. The children would be challenged as well with broader learning about, and reflection upon, the role these activities and skills play within their lives. Feedback would be sought to improve the sessions.

To develop broader learning goals, it would be necessary to mimic or replace the collaborative approach taken in an ordinary sports hall to facilitate opportunities for students to analyse, problem-solve and evaluate activities together. Ensuring learning is taking place at all remotely can be difficult but enabling children to learn *from one another* was raising the bar another level. If any learning was to achieve the sorts of PE goals Whitehead outlines, then opportunities would need to be provided for children to take responsibility for applying previously achieved learning to various contexts.

REDEFINING FUN

Making ordinary PE lessons fun is straightforward when children are working cooperatively with peers in a group situation, as PE often seems just like play to them. Keeping sessions fun for children who are at home and isolated is more challenging. To do this we felt it necessary to re-examine and revise our understanding of ‘fun’ for this brave new world: success is fun; feeling confident when attempting a new skill is fun; racing against the clock is fun; performing skills not usually associated with PE is fun. That old chestnut, of ensuring that challenge level matches ability level, would also motivate and engage children throughout, guaranteeing they would enjoy the lessons and come back every week for more.

Because the class would be a mix of a) those already involved in extra-curricular netball and b) a general school population, we were certain to have a diverse range

Table 1

Group	Netball ability	School age
1	Beginning in netball	Upper Key Stage 2: Primary 6 and 7
2	Developing in netball	Lower Key Stage 3: Year 8 and 9
3	Advanced in netball	Upper Key Stage 3 and 4: Years 10, 11 and 12

of abilities. Setting tasks collectively was bound to undermine the fun for some. Instead, sessions were split into three levels according to Northern Ireland patterns of year grouping (Table 1).

There was some fluidity between groups to allow children to work with appropriate challenge to match ability as the weeks went on. Two very able Primary 7 girls worked with group 2, while three Year 8 pupils opted to engage in the group 1 session. Even within each group and session there was a need to further differentiate. For the most part, participants did this themselves by following ongoing calibration guidance from the teacher. For the weaker participants this would include phrases such as: “If you find this too difficult, move closer to the wall”, “Complete fewer movements” or “Complete this action using two hands instead of one”. For those who were stronger, guidelines went, “Move further from the wall”, “Increase the pace” or “Put greater distance between you and the ball, then try the same action”. By teaching a basic skill, differentiating it among the various skill levels, then progressing it each week, the sessions were able to remain as productive as possible.

Each weekly lesson was divided into six sections. We began with a warm-up, which included various motor skills, including using water bottles as cones, socks as agility ladders and drawing a hoop on the ground. From this, we proceeded to cover just four items selected from a list of 14 skills, such as ball-handling, body control and responding to team mates’ calls. It was made clear that these are transferable skills that would apply in many ball games.

Traditionally, a lesson like this would finish on a strong note by using a conditioned game which reinforces that day’s specific learning outcomes. In terms of fun, this is almost always a hit. However, organising any games in the traditional sense was not possible, so creativity was required to finish positively. A timed challenge, where participants engaged in a range of skills they had covered, was substituted in the place of the usual finishing game. These new concluding challenges provided each young person with a benchmark they could record and use to monitor their own progress from week to week, giving

them a greater awareness and ownership of their own capacities and potential. We called this final challenge the ‘sweat finisher’ to highlight the challenge and progression involved. These were also emphasised energetically with teaching cues throughout. The competitive element missing from digital delivery was essentially replaced by encouraging participants to compete against themselves. This seemed to give greater credence to the value of competing against one’s self and took away the possible difficulties and demotivating disappointment of defeat against others for the weaker pupils.

STUDENT DEMONSTRATORS

To facilitate delivery further, and to distribute engagement as widely as possible, a child with proficient skill level at each stage was asked to be the demonstrator. For this to succeed, the demonstrator needed to be pre-taught the lesson which, again, sent a message about the possibility for pupils to engage in a way that was more than just that of a pupil/follower. Leadership roles were available to those who worked hard and focused. During this pre-teaching time, the demonstrator was able to provide feedback, working collaboratively with staff, to determine if any aspect of the lesson was too difficult or needed to be altered. The demonstrators also provided ongoing feedback as to which tasks they found most fun, and they focused staff’s attention on what were the necessary teaching cues to aid group delivery. As Gray *et al.* (2019) have pointed out, we need to recognise that, given the opportunity, pupils are able to “design meaningful and empowering PE [lessons]”. The role of the demonstrator was vital in the success of the lessons from both a planning and execution point of view, as well as sending the message of distributed leadership: these were PE challenges which children could shape and own for themselves. Furthermore, as the demonstrator performed the skills, the teacher added audio guidance and teaching cues which the participants were able to follow in real time. This freed up the host to focus on general teaching concerns and monitoring all participants, who now had both visual and audio cues to follow. There was a real sense of team-teaching and collaboration throughout the sessions as a result.

This collaborative dynamic demanded teaching in synchronous mode to replicate the teacher's live presence in a class, with all the feedback and cues that implies, as well as striving to create a live feeling of collaboration among pupils. While asynchronous delivery online has its advantages in terms of reproducibility and ease of access at times that suit all participants, our goal of trying to achieve the broader experience of all of the types of learning that PE is capable of delivering demanded that we remain in synchronous mode, where a greater number of social-emotional interactions occur in comparison to asynchronous delivery (Chauhan, 2017). There was also the very practical concern and benefit of engaging with large numbers of other young people during a very isolating time. The sense of fun and communal experience of a successful PE lesson did, according to feedback from young people and parents, help to lessen the stresses of isolation for many of the children.

This benefit was not, however, experienced equally by all. Some children had increased anxiety at being observed in this digital realm and, for some, that manifested itself in their turning the camera off and (in two cases) not wishing to join in a specific lesson. For these children, this was an issue with online learning that they had not exhibited in face-to-face sessions. As challenging as it can be in a real-life session to address a child's withdrawal while keeping track of all the other children, in the digital realm this was a challenge we were not fully prepared to address satisfactorily. Going forward, this is an area of planning which will receive further attention. For starters, it will be helpful to consider the analysis of Gillett-Swan (2017) who states that there are a number of challenges in online learning for the isolated learner as a result of distance delivery sometimes adopting a one-size-fits-all approach. Despite our efforts to avoid exactly that, we still had some students withdraw. As a first response to mitigating these factors, some extra sessions were provided in a pre-packaged asynchronous manner to a few participants who requested it. Whether making this an option was beneficial or, in fact, might encourage others to withdraw in future will need to be examined. As a general step to give everyone ownership of the material so they could adapt it personally to their needs and revisit it in their own time, a copy of the lesson plan was provided to all participants.

All participants were muted throughout to ensure that everyone could hear the teacher. Therefore, the interaction between teacher and participant became,

unfortunately, one-way until the lesson plenary at the end. Muting is not the only obstacle to developing a full, positive teacher-pupil relationship online. Humphry and Hampden-Thompson (2019), for example, state "that [while] synchronous technologies enhance the sense of communicating with a 'real' person (social presence), we conclude that this does not necessarily have a positive effect. We found that the quality of social presence is contingent on the quality of the pupil-tutor relationship". Therefore, success can be dependent on having previously developed positive pupil-teacher relationships with the participants. This would have consequences for using this mode with a new cohort of pupils. The lack of two-way interaction is tasking in what is normally a very social activity. This is a definite pitfall of teaching PE online: reserving general pupil input until the plenary is simply too late for making it a key part of the class dynamic. Determining levels of understanding really requires questioning. In the online session it was difficult to ascertain precisely if understanding was achieved by most or all, given the participants were mostly muted. We used the Zoom 'thumbs up' emoji during water breaks as a visual cue as to whether more detail was required or if the demonstration needed to be reviewed. The evidence, based on that limited 'real time' pupil feedback, was that understanding was there. While not an ideal form of assessment for learning, it was the best we managed to achieve in this version of teaching PE online. As we work to refine these modes of 'in class' assessment, it is important to remember Tolgfors's edict that we must "adapt the teaching to the students and not the students to the standards" (2018). How exactly we do this, in every respect in the current climate, will be the focus of much work and discussion.

Nonetheless, as the sessions progressed, they certainly became easier to teach. The participants had better expectations of the content, their engagement levels remained high and the feedback continued to be positive. The numbers increased as another school joined the beginners' lessons. Additionally, more and more mothers and sisters began to join in, too. Some mothers, and a senior netball club, joined the older sessions and, by week four, three Northern Ireland netball seniors were taking part in the advanced netball sessions, much to the delight of the participants. It was, again, a real endorsement of the young people's view of the range of learning that was taking place.

So, it is possible to teach PE remotely without solely delivering physical activity or skill challenge sessions. The planning,

preparation and energy requirements are significantly increased. The outcomes, perhaps, cannot match those of face-to-face teaching; however, there are considerable gains to be made. As newcomers to this process, we can see greater possibilities for the future and would be much more confident in implementing these practices and in directing our student teachers to do the same.

This article itself is part of the process which Bodsworth and Goodyear (2017) remind us to undertake: "If practitioners are to purposefully integrate digital technologies into physical education and ensure technology can help students to learn optimally, practitioners should engage with a reflexive process of learning". While the process may not be comfortable or easy – and certainly no teacher ever envisaged, until now, teaching PE while sat at a computer – if PE wants its value maintained and not be replaced by physical fitness, then a creative, reflective and ambitious approach is required going forward. ■

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