Sport literacy: it's not just about learning to play sport via 'textbook techniques'

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Abstract

Physical education (and sport teaching in particular) is often viewed as a marginal subject of less importance than other more 'academic' school subjects. While most physical education programs continue to emphasise mastery in sport skill, many students are unable to develop the expected competencies in the time provided by the unit of work. Those students with pre-developed ability prosper at the expense of less experienced, less skilled students (O'Connor 2006) in a teaching environment grounded on textbook techniques. As sport constitutes the substantive content for most middle and secondary years physical education programs this paper will present sport literacy as a conceptual framework for learning through, about and for sport in physical education (Pill 2009). This framing is designed to improve the core learning experiences of all students in physical education through more educationally valid and socially equitable sport teaching in physical education. It contains the ambitious agenda of creating discussion about the place and purpose of sport as a substantive site of and for learning in physical education by challenging the normative paradigm of textbook technique teaching.

Introduction

Sport and physical education are often used as almost interchangeable terms; however sport is not physical education. Physical education refers to an educational process occurring within the school curriculum with the purpose of developing skills, knowledge and understanding and confidence in the use of these through engagement in physical activity, which serves as the medium for learning. In

Australia, physical education exists as a co-construction with health education forming the Health and Physical Education Learning Area (Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs 2008). Sports are organised competitive activities with codified rules to standardise competition and conditions so that participants understand the process, provisions and restrictions through which to achieve specified goals (Wuest and Bucher 2006). While sport is not all there is to physical education there is no doubting the prominent position of sport as a content form within Australian physical education (Kirk 2006; Light 2008). This is not surprising given that sport assumes a prominent place in Australian culture and national identity (Light 2008; Veal and Lynch 2001). Internationally, sport has been described as a major orienting discourse (Tinning et al. 2001), pivotal (Green 2000) and integral to the meaning of physical education (Bailey and Kirk 2009; United Nations 2005). It has been asserted as a priority (Wuest and Bucher 2006), offering legitimacy (Bailey and Kirk 2009) to physical education's place within the school curriculum. However, despite sport's sociocultural, vocational and academic educative potential (Laker 2002), the educational imperatives of physical education have frequently been observed to be rhetorical or without evidence when the curriculum structure and instructional practices are examined (Alexander 2008; Hickey 1995). The impending inclusion of the Health and Physical Education Learning Area within the planning machinations of the Australian curriculum makes it timely to consider the role of sport within physical education so that rhetoric about learning can become the reality of the enacted curriculum. Different sporting activities can contribute to the learning process, and the learning process can facilitate participation in sport, but this is not automatic nor can it be assumed from the provision of sport in physical education that learning will occur (Bailey 2005). This paper provides an introduction to sport literacy as a contemporary response to curriculum design and pedagogical issues in physical education sport teaching. Sport literacy is the capacity to put sport skills and knowledge to functional use for informed and engaged citizenship. This includes interactivity with sport, understanding the role sport plays in society, and meeting the needs of individuals as engaged, constructive, concerned and reflective citizens (Pill 2009).

Why consider a concept like sport literacy?

Hemphill (2008) proposed that an alternative way of constructing physical education could stand it alongside literacy and numeracy as an equally valued way of knowing; but as long as it is limited to a demonstration of physical skill it will remain a second-rate form of knowledge and an add-on in a cluttered curriculum. At Flinders University sport literacy is being used as this construction for middle and secondary pre-service teachers of physical education.

Why adopt sport literacy as a curriculum framing? To answer this question we only need to consider the criticisms of the traditional normative curriculum structure and pedagogical emphasis of physical education. This critical commentary lands on four connected elements: the student experience of the enacted curriculum, the curriculum design and the pedagogy of the enacted curriculum, and the status of the subject. It is not the purpose of this paper to provide a lengthy treatment of each of these elements as they are well described and illuminated in the physical education literature. However, a summary of these critical interpretations is necessary as it

forms the background to the reflective thinking that gave rise to the conceptualising of sport literacy.

Critical interpretations of the normative construction of physical education games and sport curriculum suggest surface learning for many students and outcomes that are largely inconsequential (Bunker and Thorpe 1982; Siedentop 1994). Students' experiences of physical education are not always positive (Penney and Clarke 2005) as the dominant activities, values and behaviours marginalise many students (Braham 2003). This arises as sport can become a context where those who already can are acknowledged for their existing athleticism and movement competency while those who cannot have reinforced what they are unable to do or be good at (O'Connor 2006). Physical education then becomes a context for reward of existing capacities rather than a site for learning.

A narrow conceptualisation of knowledge as textbook techniques (Pigott 1982) and aptitude as a singular ability centred around athleticism and well refined motor skill patterns (Wright and Burrows 2006) means that other learning possibilities that could engage the broader range of abilities, competencies, learning needs and interests of students are positioned at the periphery of physical education. The consequence is sport teaching that can be largely uncontextual (to the real world of sport as a cultural and vocational construction) (Siedentop 1994), culturally irrelevant (Laker 2003) and isolating for many students. Further emphasising the lack of equity and diversity in learning, Ennis (1999) indicated that, no matter how well taught, the normative curriculum structure for physical education did not meet the learning needs of most girls and the less athletically able males.

The status of physical education as a subject of merit is another issue that needs some consideration. Hardman and Marshall (2005) commented upon the marginal status of physical education in Australia while reporting on the condition of physical education worldwide. This observation is not new (Kirk 1986, 1988; Macdonald 1995; Penney and Chandler 2001; Siedentop 1992; Sparkes, Templin and Schempp 1993). Most of the reasoning for this situation focuses on the problematic nature of learning within the normative multi-activity curriculum structure (Alexander 2008; Kirk 2006) and technical teaching paradigm of 'textbook' technique reproduction (Pigott 1982). Siedentop (1994) and Hellison (2003) highlighted that socio-cultural, personal and social learning became casualties of the narrow curriculum emphasis of a multi-activity curriculum structure and textbook technique teaching. Personal, social and cultural knowledge learnt through sport become implicit, rather than explicit, features of the planned and enacted curriculum.

Sport and fundamental movement skill learning theory informs physical education of the folly of a multi-activity curriculum for learning about sport. There is simply not enough time within a multi-activity curriculum structure centred on textbook technique instruction (and subsequent performance expectations) for students to learn to be competent at distinctive sport forms in physical education. Fundamental movement skill literature has indicated that between 240 and 600 minutes of instruction time is required to become proficient in one fundamental movement skill (NSW Department of Education and Training 2005). Competency requires

substantial investments in time (Baker et al. 2003; Siedentop 1994) and perhaps thousands of hours of deliberate practice to develop expertise (Ericsson, Krampe and Tesch-Romer 1993). Clearly the hegemonic convention of a multi-activity curriculum structure emphasising textbook technique development is a flawed construction if learning to be competent at specific sports is an objective of the physical education curriculum.

The literature suggests that the normative construction of the physical education curriculum, emphasising a multi-activity experience through teacher-centred direct instructional strategies focusing on 'textbook' skill learning challenges the wellbeing and 'embodied' identity (Hunter 2006) of many students. In summarising the literature, Dyson (2006) indicated that many students feel they are placed in situations where they are apprehensive about participating fully. Furthermore, if students did not conform to established moralistic norms around physical activity and body shape physical education could be a site for the construction of guilt and self-consciousness. Finally, for many students physical education constructs an understanding that they are not skilled and cannot learn skills.

What is sport literacy?

Macdonald and Brooker indicated that physical education needs to construct a curriculum that is 'defensible, rigorous and relevant' so as to position physical education 'as legitimate work' (1997, p. 5). Penney suggested that this curriculum would have 'education as the core reference point' (2008, p. 38) to establish legitimacy and recognition within education, and development and investment in physical education. Sport literacy is therefore founded on the premise that physical education should be able to justify its presence by its educative purpose (Kirk 1996). This requires a curriculum framing, language, discourse and content substance that clearly articulate learning as the defining feature of the subject (Penney and Chandler 2001). Sport literacy represents a curriculum framing for this purpose.

Sport literacy expands the normative construction of ability in physical education as singular capacity (Wright and Burrows 2006) centred on textbook technique reproduction in sport and sport-related games, and single-dimension subject (Gateman 2005) centred on sport-specific motor skill development, to a broader appreciation of sport knowledge. It does this by covering the three types of learning that Arnold (1979) indicated as forming the substance of physical education:

- 1. learning in movement: skill acquisition enabling an individual to be able to move efficiently and effectively;
- 2. learning about movement: the ability to recognise that sport is structured in certain ways to bring about certain things; and
- 3. learning through movement: social, cognitive, moral and emotional learning available through engagement in sport.

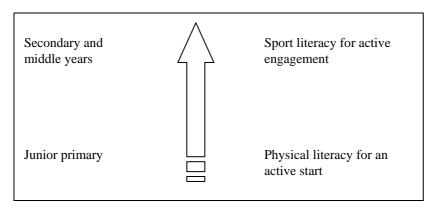
Sport literacy therefore emphasises sport knowledge as:

- A. knowledge and understanding that enables students to appreciate a game tactically and read it strategically;
- B. techniques and tactical knowledge to develop students' capacities to respond in play with appropriate decision making in the familiar and unfamiliar circumstances that present during play;
- positive motivation and enthusiasm towards sport participation stemming from one's knowledge of one's ability to contribute to sport as a community of practice;
- knowledge and understanding that enables students to appreciate tactical similarities in games that are structurally similar, and the ability to transfer game knowledge between sports;
- E. knowledge and understanding that enables students to value the rules, rituals, traditions and socio-cultural significance of sports, and distinguish between good and bad practices so as to be able to make 'reasoned decisions' about sport concerns; and
- F. knowledge and understanding that enables students to make reasoned decisions concerning community and vocational engagement with sport.

Consistent with an emerging understanding of physical education

Sport literacy is consistent with the emerging positioning of physical education as physical literacy. Physical literacy explains the ability to be able to perform fundamental movement competencies (within one's physical capacity), apply these in a variety of situations and activities, develop and adapt these competencies, and have the internal motivation to do so (Hayden-Davis 2005). In Canadian literature it has been linked to the Teaching Games for Understanding curriculum approach for fundamental movement and sport skills in junior primary and primary schooling (Higgs et al. n.d.), and to games teaching as 'games literacy' (Mandigo and Holt 2004). Sport literacy continues this progression by identifying an objective and knowledge base for sport teaching within an expanded conceptualisation of the TGfU cycle of learning (Figure 1). This curriculum progression is consistent with the continuum of achievement presented within the standards and outcomes-based Australian physical education curriculum frameworks of recent years. For example, the South Australian Curriculum Standards and Accountability Framework lists the outcome of games and sport teaching at Year 9/10 as 'Participates in a range of physical activities while planning and evaluating various roles they can take in the community to develop their interests and assist others' (DECS 2004).

Figure 1: Developing sport literacy: physical literacy \rightarrow sport literacy



Consistent with conceptualisation of literacy in other areas of the curriculum

Sport literacy is consistent with conceptualisations of literacy that educators encounter in other areas of the curriculum. As explained in the UNESCO *Education* for all global monitoring report (2006), literacy is more than reading and writing. It encompasses skills enabling access to knowledge and information and is a term increasingly referring to a competence allowing effective participation in relevant social activities. It is a functional concept acknowledging applied, practised and situated skills. These skills encompass:

- how we communicate in society;
- social practices and relationships, knowledge, language and culture;
- content knowledge and comprehension of the content;
- use of critical and creative thinking skills and/or processes;
- conveying information through various forms; and
- use of knowledge and skill to make connections within and between various contexts.

This includes the development of the functional ability to absorb, share, transform and create knowledge (Kickbusch 2001). Adapting Mandigo et al.'s (2007) framing of the features of multi-literacy theory to sport informs us that:

- Sport is an applied, practised and situated set of skills.
- Sport is a body of knowledge with meaning that can be interpreted, understood and used creatively.

- Sport forms an operational 'text' that can be communicated and read in various forms.
- To become sports literate requires a learning process.

Conclusion

Sport literacy provides a theoretical grounding for sport learning consistent with conceptualisations of knowledge and understanding encountered by teachers in other subject areas through multi-literacy theory. At Flinders University sport literacy is being used as a language to talk about sport teaching and learning that articulates the educative purpose of sport teaching in physical education. The expansion of the knowledge base within considerations of ability and competency through sport literacy provides the intriguing possibility that sport could be a context for deep learning, while providing the potential for more affirming experiences for those students traditionally marginalised within the normatively narrow definition of ability within physical education. Sport literacy is therefore potentially both a praxis and curriculum scaffold for sport curriculum design and enactment.

The status of physical education arguably remains as much of an issue now as it did in 1979 when Saunders commented on the marginal status of physical education and Emmel indicated that Australian physical educators were reluctant to confront the difficult questions regarding the failure of physical educators in the field to meaningfully transfer intent into practice. With the impending development of physical education as part of the rollout of the Australian curriculum, sport literacy could provide the focus around which the educative academic merit, community participation and vocational opportunities for sport in physical education could coalesce.

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