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Embodied Thought of the Month

November (1)

Embodied Learning through HIIT

Laura Gubby and Ian Wellard

In last's month's ETM, Ian provided some thoughts about Higher Education and the possible restrictions put upon creative approaches to learning because of an increasingly performative culture. In subsequent discussions among SBC members we attempted to reflect upon personal experiences of teaching that incorporated some aspects of embodied learning. We were able to generate many examples which we will compile and include in a later ETM. However, for this month's thought, we focus on a reflection by Laura about her recent experience teaching a group of PE students. Ian continues by exploring some of the 'issues' that emerge from this example.

I was teaching physical education students about body image and discrete ideas that can potentially be transmitted within PE environments. The session started with a discussion about differing arguments and research on the topic, followed by a description of some of Foucault's analytical tools. In order to think critically about types of physical education and physical activity, and apply theoretical explanations, I then asked the class to take part in a Joe Wickes HIIT workout that had been marketed at schools and delivered via a live transmission every Wednesday morning (1). Students were told in advance that they would be doing practical activities during the session, but the general response to the task was not that enthusiastic. As we began to 'perform' the HIIT workout, while following the online video, the students started to avoid some of the movements and as I looked around I could see that participation was decreasing. During a 30 second break, I asked a number of students why they were not participating anymore. One student explained 'I am going straight to see my girlfriend after this and I don't want to get sweaty'. Another student shared the same thought, 'I am going straight out from here'. As I encouraged the students to engage in the activity, others began to express how hard the session was, explaining how their legs ached or how they felt so unfit. Once the workout was finished and students had time to cool off we talked about the broader messages surrounding body image that these kind of school workouts and associated brands might be giving. We also considered the appropriateness of these workouts for children from Early Years right through to secondary school. However, because of their experience of the activity and reluctance to engage in it, we were able to have a further discussion about the importance of embodied experience when evaluating physical activities for children. Our subsequent conversations raised questions about how we could accurately evaluate the appropriateness of an activity without experiencing and embodying it? Experience of the activity helped us recognise how, as future physical educators, we should be alert to the embodied aspects of activities and learning through physical movement. So, while not all the students found the HIIT activity enjoyable, it did provide an opportunity to critically reflect upon the implications of traditional deskbound learning as well as the contribution that

embodied awareness may have in encouraging more empathetic teaching approaches.

Laura's reflection does indeed raise some interesting questions about the role of embodied experience in learning. In this case, it highlights how the experience itself provided something tangible to latch onto and explore further – in ways that might not necessarily be obvious in a more conventional, hypothetical discussion. I have chosen two examples to look at in more detail.

1. Can embodied experience develop empathy in teaching?

It is interesting that it was not until the students had experienced the activity themselves that they were able to understand the different ways in which an activity might be experienced. Something as relatively insignificant as getting 'sweaty' can be much more significant in certain contexts, especially if being considered in terms of what has happened before the activity and what might happen immediately after. For the two students that were concerned about getting sweaty and the consequences of having to deal with sweaty body when the activity finished obviously impacted upon how they approached and were able to engage. Simple things such as having the opportunity to shower and change are not always as simple if it entails carrying an extra set of clothes or not having access to a changing room and shower (that is warm and reasonably inviting). I can think of countless times when I have avoided taking a shower when the only ones available are particularly cold and uninviting. Transfer this scenario to a secondary school PE lesson and the prospect of an even more uninviting changing room along with a host of other students with varying levels of social maturity – the initial benefits of getting sweaty become increasingly outnumbered by the disadvantages.

I have (along with many other academic researchers) argued that we cannot assume sport is always beneficial and unproblematic (2). While I also acknowledge that I have a great enthusiasm for sport and enjoy taking part, I need to constantly remain aware of the competing factors that may make an activity enjoyable or not. Consequently, for Laura's students, the activity provided an opportunity to gain a deeper understanding of what the activity entailed and reflect upon how it might be experienced by their potential students. In other words, the activity provided a mechanism to stimulate what might be described as a form of empathetic reflexivity.

2. Can a fitness programme be accessible for everyone?

The other thing that struck me when reading Laura's reflection was how the HIIT activity is a good example of many current fitness approaches that are considered beneficial for increasing physical fitness levels through short periods of high intensity movements. The evidence is 'out there' and Joe Wickes can be seen to have put together an attractive (and extremely lucrative) package that contains the basic principles of high intensity workouts.

These ideas have been developed in relation to performance training subsequently adapted to cater to a broader audience. Consequently, his ideas are not necessarily original as there are many other versions on the market and they all have similar marketing approaches adopted by many previous fitness workouts (for instance, one can trace similar approaches, from Jane Fonda's aerobic workouts in the 1980's through a variety of variations in the 90's and 21st Century by various current 'celebrities', such as Scarlett Moffatt in 2017). The point here is that these approaches are designed as commercial ventures, usually with a specific 'market' or target audience.

The 'evidence' that they are commercially successful sometimes distracts from the broader picture with the result that public-sector organisations (such as schools) are keen to jump on the bandwagon too and attempt to be seen to provide a 'service' that might be appealing to students (or is that customers?).

While the Joe Wickes HIIT programmes are undoubtedly successful, from a commercial perspective, the overarching premise for them is based on a model of consumer choice, However, here the intention is that taking part is determined by the consumer to do when and where they please – and, importantly, if they feel ready and able (physically and emotionally) to do it. The context of a school PE lesson where the PE teacher makes a unilateral decision that it will be good for the whole class to do changes the whole context.

So, while I am not questioning the sincerity of PE teachers in their efforts to provide healthy and active sessions for their students – it does not do any harm to critically reflect upon the context of the activity and how it might be experienced. An embodied approach, like the one that Laura adopted, is one way to generate some empathetic reflexivity.

Notes

(1) Joe Wickes presents a version of his exercise programme specifically for schools, which is available to stream via a live feed on his Youtube channel 'The Body Coach TV'. The programmes are based upon the principles of high intensity interval training (HIIT).

(2) See, for instance:

Dagkas, S. & Armour, K. (2011) *Inclusion and Exclusion Through Youth Sport*, London: Routledge.

Evans J, Rich E, Allwood R & Davies B. (2007) Being 'able' in a performative culture: physical education's contribution to a healthy interest in sport. In Wellard I. (ed) *Rethinking Gender and Youth Sport*, London: Routledge. 51-67.

Wellard, I. (2006) *Able Bodies and Sport Participation: Social constructions of physical ability Sport, Education and Society* Vol 11(2).

Wellard, I. (2013) *Sport, Fun and Enjoyment* London: Routledge.