PEDAGOGICAL CASE #4

Using metaphors to think about the features of meaningful experiences

Experienced teachers need to consider how the Meaningful PE approach fits with their current approaches, priorities, practices and beliefs. You might ask yourself: are there aspects of the Meaningful PE approach that resonate or align with what I already do? If I take up the Meaningful PE approach, would this require tweaking or radically changing my practice?

Below we share two metaphors – images or illustrations – that might be helpful to get you thinking about how the Meaningful PE approach fits with what you already do or can help you see how you might use it the future. In particular, the metaphors provided showcase how two teachers have thought about the integrated nature of the features of Meaningful PE (i.e., social interaction, challenge, fun, motor competence, and personally relevant learning) and prioritize certain features over others.

A metaphor used by the blogger and secondary PE teacher @ImSporticus is thinking of the features as the controls on an equalizer, which can be moved up and down (you know those things on stereos?). His reason for using the metaphor of the equalizer is because during teaching, we often “need to tune into what is happening and consider the pitch of the lesson. This requires stepping back and observing from a distance allowing us to see the balance of the lesson… Many times our lessons are balanced but sometimes they aren’t and they require us to strengthen or dampen one or a number of the features to make it more meaningful”.

Here is an example where @ImSporticus felt the features and his thinking of them as an equalizer had an impact on how he changed his practice and his students’ experience. In the example, the role of each feature is given a score out of 10, which represents the level at which it was set on the equalizer:

**Grade 9 Gymnastics – Vaulting**
- Social Interaction 3/10 – spotting the performer was the only real social interaction
- Fun 5/10
- Challenge 1/10 – pupils had to perform the vault that I said we were working on
- Motor Competence 3/10 – lots of lines and waiting
- Relevance 1/10

For @ImSporticus, using the metaphor of the equalizer allowed him to observe how his students were experiencing each of the features. In his teaching philosophy, **Motor Competence** is his priority, which in the metaphor could be represented by the volume dial. This then has a trickle down impacts on other parts of the equalizer that require adjustment. After considering the levels of each feature he made the following changes in the next lesson, and noted the outcomes on other features: Animal walks back from the vault (↑Motor Competence and Fun); Essential Movement Challenge to complete with partner whilst waiting to vault (↑Motor Competence and Social Interaction); vault criteria developed in class and a judge gave score and feedback after
each vault (↑Social Interaction).

This metaphor can help us think about the integrated nature of the features. For example, cranking everything up to 10 does not necessarily result in the best sound quality. When you put the volume up too high it can compromise the quality of the sound, and other components need to be adjusted. A challenge of 10/10 means things might be perceived as nearly impossible, so getting to a 7 or 8 might represent the “sweet spot” where you get clear or optimal sound quality.

Ms. P uses the metaphor of a clock mechanism, where the different cogs that work together inside the casing represent each feature. For Ms. P, the feature of Social Interaction represents the largest cog because she is a firm believer that being with or making new friends can be a driving reason to engage in physical activities and sport. Other reasons social interaction might represent the larger cog is because as students feel comfortable with and supported by peers and the teacher, they might feel encouraged to take risks and challenge themselves because they feel safe to make mistakes in the classroom. This is one of the reasons she begins the year for all her classes with a unit on cooperative and adventure games. Students need to work together to solve problems, which means they must negotiate, take on roles as leaders and/or followers, be empathetic, good listeners, and so on.

In the metaphor, once social interaction is positive, it causes the other cogs to turn. For example, once students feel comfortable socially, the cog representing the challenge feature might be turned because students feel safe to challenge and push themselves toward new boundaries. This might then also start turning the cog that represents competent movement (because learners feel encouraged to persevere with and practice tasks that are not too easy or not too difficult), which in turn may lead the learner to have more fun, and see greater relevance in physical education. Importantly, no matter the size of the cog, they all play a part in making experiences meaningful. Depending on individual philosophies or visions for teaching physical education, others might prioritize the importance of challenge and so that feature would represent the largest cog in the watch mechanism. But as with Ms. P’s example, it is important to think about how that cog (or feature) drives and influences students’ engagement with the other cogs.

It is important to note that these metaphors are not meant to be ones we feel are the best or of most value: they are metaphors that help these particular teachers think about how the features of meaningful PE are integrated, and can be represented in a way that helps them make decisions in their teaching.

- What might be your metaphor for thinking about the integrated nature of the features?
- What feature/s would you prioritize? Would this differ according to the content or students being taught? Should you choose the priority based on what you want to do or on what your students want?
Meaningful Physical Education in Practice:

- Developing a personally relevant metaphor can serve as a useful framework for teachers who are thinking about how to incorporate an approach that prioritizes meaningful PE into their own teaching practice.
- The features that guide the MPE framework should be thought of as being interconnected rather than as existing in isolation. Each of the features, regardless of the degree to which they are prioritized, will play a role in making an experience meaningful.
- In accordance with the previous point, teachers should be aware that the degree to which one feature is prioritized in a lesson will also have a trickle down effect that may affect how students experience other features. For example, prioritizing challenge in a lesson may compromise how students experience the feature of fun.

***Case developed by the LAMPE team, with contributions from and thanks to @ImSporticus for allowing us to use his post on “The Equalizer”. Each metaphor can be viewed at: https://meaningfulpe.wordpress.com/2017/09/28/using-metaphors-to-think-about-the-features-of-meaningful-experiences/ https://drowningintheshallow.wordpress.com/2017/10/22/the-equalizer/