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Using the meaningful physical education features as a lens to view student experiences of  
democratic pedagogy in higher education

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23 **Abstract**

24 **Background:** Higher education (HE) physical education (PE) can provide opportunities for  
25 students to develop meaning(s) and values towards movement experiences. However, it is an  
26 under researched area in the educational sphere and little is known about what or how students  
27 find, meaningful movement. While there has been increasing interest in the features of  
28 meaningful PE, few studies have explored how they relate to students' experiences of movement  
29 in the context of HE or indeed the meaning held for certain features such as 'fun'. In seeking to  
30 address this gap, the purpose of this article was to explore what university students found  
31 meaningful in PE.

32 **Method:** Using data from a larger digital ethnographic study, this research featured six students  
33 studying a university PE class taught by an educator with a sociocultural perspective towards  
34 education and movement. Digital video narratives and reflective essays served as qualitative data  
35 and were analysed using collaborative thematic analysis.

36 **Findings:** Four themes are described in relation to students' meaningful experiences. These are  
37 (a) meaningful PE is fun and contains elements of delight, (b) meaningful PE is a combination of  
38 fun and challenge (c) meaningful PE develops motor competency in personally relevant areas,  
39 and (d) meaningful PE is a social and personally relevant experience. Our findings demonstrated  
40 the interlinking nature of meaningful PE features and, specifically, how they are embodied by  
41 higher education students.

42 **Conclusion:** We argue that students can have meaningful PE experiences, even when educators  
43 do not plan for them. Furthermore, the features of meaningful PE, particularly in relation to 'fun'  
44 can extend to university settings. Moreover, sociocultural educators with a clear vision for  
45 classes can contribute to students developing foundational beliefs towards movement. This is

46 exhibited through employing democratic pedagogies such as high levels of reflection and goal  
47 setting.

48 **Keywords:** meaningful, physical education, higher education, sociocultural perspective,  
49 embodiment, democratic pedagogy, video narratives.

50 Using the meaningful physical education features as a lens to view student experiences of  
51 democratic pedagogy in higher education

52

53 Physical Education (PE) purposes, philosophies, practices, and durability have been a site  
54 of contention since its beginning (Kirk 2013). However, scholars have agreed that identifying the  
55 value or meaning that physical educators and students gain from their delivery and participation  
56 in PE and physical activity is a worthy research endeavour (Beni et al. 2017, 2019; Ennis 2017;  
57 Gibbons 2009). While many scholars may not refer to the terms ‘meaning’ or ‘meaningful(ness)’  
58 directly; many have explored aspects of PE that relate to the terms such as ‘sense-making’ or  
59 ‘values.’ Both terms ‘meaning’ and ‘meaningfulness’ have been summarised as the relevance of  
60 an activity to a person's life (Chen 1998). For example, PE is a meaningful experience because  
61 the partaker perceives it to be important to their physical development. In other words,  
62 meaningful PE experiences are influenced by the value the learner attributes to PE and their  
63 overall life and whether activities are personally suitable, only then will they actively engage in  
64 or seek to avoid PE (Chen 1998). Throughout this paper, we adopt Kretchmar’s (2007) definition  
65 of meaning. As such, meaning is perceived ‘in a broad, common sense way. It includes all  
66 emotions, perceptions, hopes, dreams, and other cognitions—in short, the full range of human  
67 experience’ (2007, 382). For us, meaningful experiences are those that hold ‘personal  
68 significance’ for the learner (Kretchmar 2007, 382) and occur within nurturing and motivating  
69 environments (Ennis 2017). Thus, meaningful PE is personal and can fluctuate in its association  
70 depending on an individual’s context, preference, and task (Beni et al. 2019). Consequently, it is  
71 a challenging task for educators balancing such a personal human experience in a class of  
72 potentially 50, 70 or 120 students today (Ennis 2013).

73 O'Connor (2018) argued that if PE is to be embraced by all and regarded as a site for  
74 inclusive, lifelong learning, then the meanings and values attached to movement by students are  
75 worthy of attention. PE as a context for exploring movement and its meaning for students is,  
76 therefore, an important area of study. Smith (2007) reminds us that valuing movement in PE is  
77 not a simple matter of teachers introducing students to a range of activities and students gaining  
78 knowledge of them, but, helping young people make sense of their PE experiences and identify  
79 the ways movement can enrich their existence and serve as a source of their identity (Ennis  
80 2013). We prioritise meaningful engagement in PE given its potential to influence the quality of  
81 life at an existential level (Beni et al. 2018; Kretchmar 2006).

82 In their review of literature, Beni et al. (2017) argued that there are numerous research  
83 articles explaining as to why exploring meaningful PE experiences is warranted and should be  
84 given priority. An example of such findings suggests that personal meaningfulness derived from  
85 experiences that are satisfying, challenging, social or simply fun, are likely to lead to individuals  
86 committing to a physically active lifestyle (Teixeira et al. 2012). Moreover, a focus on lifetime  
87 activities, developing relevant life skills, involving students in course decisions, using authentic  
88 assessment, and promoting a positive and safe environment, can contribute towards developing  
89 meaningful PE programs (Gibbons 2009). Beni et al. (2017) further claimed that promoting  
90 meaningfulness is likely to emphasise the intrinsic motivational benefits of participation that  
91 have been shown to underpin a commitment to lifelong physical activity.

92 In line with other scholars working within the field of meaningful PE and sport (c.f.  
93 Fletcher et al. 2018; O'Connor 2018), within this paper, we are guided by Kretchmar's (2006)  
94 features that represent the qualities of meaningful experiences in PE: social interaction, fun,  
95 challenge, motor competence and delight. Drawing upon the recent work of Beni et al. (2017),

96 Walseth et al. (2018) and Beni et al. (2019), we also use the feature of personally relevant  
97 learning as an aspect of meaningful PE that has been omnipresent in the literature. These features  
98 are qualitative aspects of experiences that participants commonly identify with and, therefore,  
99 can be helpful in considering how educators can design experiences for learners. For readers  
100 unfamiliar with the meaningful PE features Figure 1 highlights the features with a brief  
101 definition.

102 [Figure 1 near here]

103 To ensure that meaningful PE features are actualised by students, Beni et al. (2018)  
104 suggest they should be planned for when making pedagogical decisions; for example,  
105 encouraging students to set personal goals through a unit of work. Additionally, planning  
106 opportunities for students to select their groups, involving students in planning, constantly  
107 provide modifications for skill activities (teacher and self-directed) and use autonomy-supportive  
108 teaching as pedagogical devices (Beni et al. 2019). O'Connor (2018) advocated for the use of  
109 student reflections and the writing of rich narratives for students in PE meaning-making.  
110 Moreover, Walseth et al. (2019) drew upon activist pedagogies such as getting to know students  
111 and their prior experiences in PE then constructing a thematic unit around a relevant theme for  
112 students; such pedagogies have the potential to empower students and increase students meaning  
113 in PE.

114 It is apparent that there is increasing support for the value of promoting meaningful  
115 experiences, but research indicates there is a lack of understanding of how to promote  
116 meaningful experiences in PE (Fletcher et al. 2018, Kretchmar 2000). Further gaps include the  
117 movement experiences of HE students, scholars have consistently researched meaningful PE  
118 experiences within K-12 settings (elementary, middle and high schools).

119 In their review of literature on HE students' physical activity, Keating et al. (2005) found  
120 that 40-50% of college students are inactive, show no differences in the amount they exercise per  
121 year at university and that research in the area has been neglected. This could be due to changes  
122 in organised PE/physical activity in US HE since the 1960s and that many PE departments sole  
123 purpose is now training teachers (Newell 1990). At present, some PE departments, typically  
124 those housed in larger kinesiology colleges, still teach basic health and PE courses or otherwise  
125 named 'activity courses' or 'university PE' (c.f. Garn et al. 2017 and Author 2018). To what  
126 extent students find these outlets meaningful is not yet known. Limited literature has suggested  
127 that HE PE courses can provide meaningful opportunities for students to develop foundational  
128 beliefs towards movement, but only if students are engaged, without such engagement, students  
129 are more likely to have a negative experience (Garn et al. 2017). In seeking to address this gap,  
130 the purpose of this article is to explore what university students found meaningful in PE. Indeed,  
131 an added contribution of this paper is to extend the scope of the features of meaningful PE to  
132 those in institutions of HE and to our understanding of 'what fun means' in relation to  
133 meaningful PE.

134

135

### **Methodology**

136 We drew data from a broader digital ethnographic study conducted from January 2017 to  
137 May 2017. The broader study aimed to explore student experiences of alternative teaching  
138 practices and digital assessment methods in HE PE. Employing digital ethnography can still  
139 focus on the daily experiences of individuals lives rather than the 'digital' element (Pink 2016).  
140 Henceforth, in this paper, we focus on the ethnographic method as a means to tell a social story

141 (Murthy 2008) of meaningful student experiences in PE and are aware that individual  
142 experiences are personally significant and a highly subjective research endeavour.

143

## 144 **Study Context**

### 145 *Setting and participants*

146 The study was conducted at Readers College (pseudonym), a large public university in  
147 the United States. Readers College provided students with the opportunity to take HE PE courses  
148 that spanned across an array of sports and physical pursuits. The university-aged students  
149 selected activity courses as one-credit modules and came from a variety of undergraduate  
150 disciplines. In some ways, the students reflected typical school PE classes, diverse student  
151 backgrounds, prior experiences in PE and an array of physical, cognitive, social, and affective  
152 competencies within the subject. Data were drawn from six participants; Table 1 provides the  
153 demographic information on the six participants.

154 [Table 1 near here]

155

### 156 *The university PE class and the pedagogy of the educator*

157 The participants were spread across two courses, aerobics and water aerobics. In total,  
158 water aerobics had seven students and aerobics had eight students. Traditionally at Readers  
159 College, these courses are taught through teacher-directed instruction. The focus is  
160 predominantly ‘physical,’ and the course culminates with a standardised, final written exam. Zoe  
161 (first author, pseudonym) was the educator of the class. Zoe has a sociocultural perspective on  
162 education and movement. ‘A sociocultural approach is a way of approaching human movement  
163 that does not start from any given idea neither about what it means to move nor about how to

164 move' (Larsson and Quennerstedt 2012: 284). *How* and *why* a person moves can be down to a  
165 multitude of factors, for example, amount of resources, knowledge or personal confidence. As an  
166 educational philosophy, Zoe draws on democratic and socially just pedagogies. Consequently,  
167 throughout the university PE class, she employed a number of democratic pedagogies that are  
168 shown in Table 2. Zoe also had several goals for the class which she shared with students on  
169 their first day. These linked to research-informed practices for the semester (see Table 2).  
170 Practical goals and visions are important for educators because they help align what is what,  
171 how, and why things are taught to students (Ni Chroinin et al. 2019).

172 As a consequence of Zoe's pedagogy and philosophy towards education, the teacher-  
173 directed traditions of the course were revised. Educators at Readers College were given a degree  
174 of flexibility and ownership on their courses, which facilitated the change. On the first day of  
175 each course, both groups were asked to come to class with an outline of their goals and  
176 aspirations for the semester. Then, in a share circle (Author 2019), students were asked to discuss  
177 their goals and identify what they needed to do to achieve them. Thereon, students were provided  
178 with a list of possible opportunities for class time. For example, the water aerobics course  
179 options included: traditional water aerobics, synchronised swimming, diving, water survival,  
180 swimming circuits, lap swimming, techniques of swimming, etc. Aerobic course options  
181 included traditional aerobics, circuits, yoga, swimming, boxercise, any games/ sports, spinning,  
182 tennis, running, rock climbing, gym workouts, etc. Additionally, students were encouraged to  
183 research and select different activities and to consider every choice with an open mind.

184 Both courses were timetabled to meet twice a week for 50 minutes. However, when  
185 negotiating the course outline, students in both courses requested that the class meet once a week  
186 for 100 minutes. When the group came to a final agreement on how they wanted their class to be

187 set up (to achieve their goals and the activities each week), they signed a group contract agreeing  
188 to the new conditions of the class and that they would fully commit to the semester. Zoe was  
189 conscious that she had 15 weeks with the students and the reality of what could be achieved  
190 towards the goals during this time.

191 Due to the nature of assessment policies in HE, the methods of assessment were pre-  
192 decided, but there were still flexibilities in terms of the content. The methods of assessment were  
193 digital narratives and a reflective essay. As per the syllabus, students were informed that they  
194 would receive the highest grade in class (an A) if they submitted all the required narratives and  
195 attended class each week unless they had an excused absence: ‘The main requirement of this  
196 course is to actively participate in the activities and to reflect on such activities to show a  
197 learning journey through narratives.’ Both assessments were submitted through the Reader  
198 College online learning platform.

199 The digital narratives included weekly uploads of a video reflection (1 to 5 minutes in  
200 length) on what students had learnt during the class. Students were required to complete ten  
201 reflections in total. Initially, to support students, Zoe encouraged them to write a script or free  
202 talk through a set of guided questions. Example questions included: reflect on what you enjoyed  
203 this week and why?; How have your prior experiences influenced your enjoyment?; Would you  
204 do the activity again? Why/ why not?; Did you like working with your classmates? What have  
205 you learnt this week? This can be about yourself, the activity or life in general! Similar to  
206 O’Connor (2018), the intent of the reflections was to see how the participants constructed  
207 meaning. While the terms meaning and meaningfulness were not articulated or emphasised to  
208 students in the guided questions, ‘reflection gives experience meaning, and systematic reflection  
209 extends the shared understanding of meaningful experience’ (Bain 1995, 241). To support the

210 video reflections, the reflective essay was an open format. Students were required to upload an  
211 essay on their learning that took place in the class. The guidelines stated, ‘the essay is a personal  
212 experience, typically written in the first person to tell a story, it should be written for a specific  
213 audience and can use creative language. Furthermore, you may include non-traditional text as  
214 part of the story if you so wish.’ There was no set title for the essay and students were able to  
215 write freely regarding their experiences. Students positive or negative reflections/experiences  
216 shared would not influence their grades, simply by submitting the assignment and engaging fully  
217 in the course meant they would pass.

218

### 219 *Data gathering and analysis*

220 After both courses and grading processes were complete, Zoe contacted the students as  
221 part of a retrospective recruitment process approved by Readers College. She emailed all  
222 students asking for their consent to take part in the study. Six participants agreed to take part and  
223 subsequently, their digital narratives and reflective essays were collated as data from the digital  
224 learning platform. Videos were transcribed verbatim. The transcripts (20, 612 words) and essays  
225 (5649 words) were deidentified and uploaded to a shared Google drive. The second author had  
226 access to the de-identified data collated.

227 Both authors engaged in a thorough reading of the transcripts for each participant. After  
228 making notes inductively regarding our observations in a researcher journal, we discussed our  
229 initial interpretations. We were initially surprised that the participants consistently referenced  
230 features of meaningful PE (see Figure 1), e.g. ‘fun’ and ‘challenge’ even though, to our  
231 knowledge, they would have no prior awareness of them. As previously stated, meaningful PE  
232 was not our initial interest or primary goal of the research project; the topic rose inductively. As



256 interlinking nature of meaningful PE features (Beni et al. 2019). As previously mentioned, we  
257 have focused meaningful experiences on the intrinsic value (Ennis 2013) and personal  
258 significance (Kretchmar 2007) that students shared in their reflections which gave meaning to  
259 their movement experiences (Bain 1995).

260

261 *Meaningful PE is fun and contains elements of delight*

262 Many participants in PE and youth sport have described fun as central to meaningful  
263 activity experiences (c.f. Smith and Parr, 2007). Similarly, the students in this study found PE  
264 meaningful when it was experienced as fun. Subsequently, fun was the most prevalent discussion  
265 element within the data collated from students: ‘I’m looking forward to other activities, soccer at  
266 first was not on the top of my list but I actually enjoyed myself’ (Tanesha, Narrative 3). Even  
267 though Tanesha was not initially looking forward to soccer, as it was not her chosen activity, she  
268 managed to find it enjoyable, linking to the meaningful feature of fun (see Figure 1) and Zoe’s  
269 goal to ‘learn to enjoy different types of movement and find meaning in them’ (Goal 2). Fun was  
270 linked to the amount of effort that she put into the lesson. On the other hand, Zara linked fun to  
271 attempting new activities and learning within them: ‘The next activity we played was soccer, a  
272 sport I was very unaware of. Before that activity, I had no idea of what or who a goalie was. We  
273 began to play; everyone was having fun’ (Zara, Essay).

274 Bain (1995) suggested that in PE students need to think and talk about movement  
275 experiences as a process of reflection. In Zara’s reflection she commented on her PE experiences  
276 as a realisation or discovery of what she more recently perceived as fun in her adult life. The  
277 reflective element of the class meant she was able to reminisce about her prior experiences:

278 I really enjoyed the volleyball game. Um, it was very, fun for me because it was a sport I  
279 played in high school. Well, the only sport I played in school period. It was very fun, and  
280 it brought back a lot of memories. (Zara, Narrative 8)

281 Lessons or experiences which hold immediate enjoyment are considered as fun  
282 (Kretchmar, 2006). However, meaningful features in PE can include an element of delight;  
283 delight is a unique and memorable experience and can be recalled days after the event unlike fun  
284 experiences (Kretchmar 2005). A possible reason for delight not appearing prominently in  
285 literature could be due to the lack of longitudinal studies on meaningful PE experiences and  
286 down to the personal nature of delightful experiences that can be hard to (re)produce. Beni et al.  
287 (2017) have suggested that delight may be difficult for students to articulate. However, delight  
288 can be observed through students being caught up in the moment or experiencing a sense of  
289 accomplishment, facilitated through goal setting and hard work (Kretchmar 2006). Despite the  
290 sparsity of occurrences presented in the literature conducted at primary levels in education, we  
291 suggest that students in this study were able to experience delight as they were able to recall  
292 vivid experiences days/weeks after the lessons took place through their video narratives and end  
293 of semester essays:

294 Surprisingly, I enjoyed running on the track inside. I think because I felt so accomplished  
295 when I finished the mile. A sense of accomplishment always makes an activity better.  
296 (Tanesha, Essay)

297 Tanesha articulated the facilitation of her meaningful and perhaps delightful PE  
298 experience through goal setting and hard work, fulfilling one of Zoe's goals for the class (finding  
299 enjoyment in movement, see Table 2). James agreed, by having a new experience he may have  
300 found delight when considering his overall goal for the class:

301 It was fun all around because I don't normally do exercises in the pool, so it was fun to  
302 do something different, and I did especially like the jumping squats at the beginning  
303 because one of my goals is to be able to dunk a basketball, so it really helped me and it  
304 really burned my legs, and I like working unilaterally, so that added on to the fun. (James,  
305 Narrative 1)

306 James frequently revisited his goal of being able to dunk a basketball several times  
307 throughout his narratives. Setting himself a personally relevant goal at the beginning of class  
308 gave him a greater purpose that he was able to constantly refer to and weigh up whether such  
309 experiences were valuable in contributing to his final achievements.

310 Our findings demonstrated that even over a short space of time (in relation to an entire  
311 semester unit of work) HE students may be able to articulate aspects of delight in relation to  
312 meaningful experiences in PE by learning to enjoy different types of movement and finding  
313 value in them. While we cannot draw generalisable conclusions from this small study, we can  
314 acknowledge that a large proportion of the students' PE experiences were described as fun and  
315 enjoyable, which can relate to observable elements of delight that may feed-forward into future  
316 PE experiences. Indeed, this points to what Beni et al. (2017) describe as meaningful PE features  
317 combining, intersecting, layering as they are interpreted by learners and teachers. It is also worth  
318 noting that Zoe, as the educator, opened space for delight to occur by encouraging students to  
319 reflect on their goals periodically throughout the unit of work (see Table 2), which may have  
320 sustained fun and consequently delight over the semester where at the end, students were able to  
321 recall memories and experiences.

322

323 *Meaningful PE is a combination of fun and challenge*

324 Students experienced challenge when they participated in activities that were neither too  
325 easy nor difficult and allowed them to choose their preferred level of working. There was a close  
326 connection between the student's experiences of challenge and fun. Challenge was linked to  
327 attempting to achieve a particular skill (i.e. failing) but overcoming difficulties through  
328 perseverance especially in novel activities. Zara highlighted this during a rock-climbing  
329 experience in aerobics:

330 It was so hard for me to get back down, cause I have big feet and the rocks were very  
331 small, so I couldn't quite get those rocks. I had to put my hands on the smaller rocks and  
332 try to find bigger rocks, and I wanted to use the same path but it just like, wasn't there  
333 when I was trying to come back down. It didn't work. Um, but it was very fun. But,  
334 challenging. I got so far down that I couldn't find a rock to get on, I had to just jump off  
335 the wall, but luckily the floor was soft, and we had on foam shoes... I was very scared. It  
336 was a fun experience. I will do it again with some more classmates or friends.

337 (Zara, Narrative 10)

338 Challenging experiences for students were not only meaningful in terms of them being  
339 fun, but vivid experiences were (re)lived and recounted through the reflections. Indeed, as Zara  
340 highlights in the above quote, she suggests that she would replicate this activity and involve  
341 other social connections to this experience. This suggests that aspects of experience perceived to  
342 be fun are likely to be replicated in the future and also shared. Similar to the findings of  
343 O'Connor (2018), students lacked the rich vocabulary and relied on basic words such as fun.  
344 Nonetheless, their video reflections described and sometimes (re)enacted highly personal  
345 experiences. This highlights the embodied nature of meaningful experiences. For example, as  
346 Zara explained: 'I had to just *jump* off the *wall*, but luckily the *floor* was *soft*, and we had *on*

347 *foam shoes... I was very scared* (emphasis added).’ An example of the mind, body and  
348 environment interacting holistically as one.

349 James shared a challenging meaningful experience, who tied physical and intellectual  
350 experiences through an intense diving experience during water aerobics:

351 After a couple of times, you tried it, you try to go in the water straight because if you  
352 don’t you are gonna hurt yourself and possibly injure yourself, but the adjustment I made  
353 was that I kept a tighter core and tried to keep my shoulders as straight as possible when I  
354 went up and down [bouncing on the board] and I tried to enter with my arms by my side.  
355 I was just trying to keep everything tight and not let me move off to one side or go  
356 forward or lean backwards. It was pretty difficult, but it is fun to learn how to control  
357 your body in the air, obviously gives you a little more control over your body. This fits  
358 into my goal to learn how to dunk as well because you do need body control in the air  
359 because it is not just jumping ability, so I very much enjoyed it. (James, Narrative 9)

360 Elementary-aged students in Dismore and Bailey’s (2011) study, suggested fun was less  
361 about playing games and more about learning and challenge. It would seem that our study  
362 confirms such definitions in relation to the experiences of university students in PE. In addition,  
363 students were able (to an extent) explain the complex embodied nature of these experiences to  
364 what they had learned. Taking it a step further, challenges were tied to students achieving  
365 success and improving skills both emotionally and physically:

366 Though the fall was significantly longer, and the pool much smaller, jumping from that  
367 platform [1-metre] was not nearly as scary the first time as jumping from the three-metre  
368 diving board. The board adds a level of uncertainty that makes me nervous when I am out

369           there. I even jumped from the five-meter and success! I did pretty well my first time. My  
370           final jump was the best of all, and it was very satisfying to do. (Cal, Essay)

371           While Zoe did not relate physical performance measures to assessment, students naturally  
372           selected physical challenges within the activities that they wanted to achieve and became  
373           motivated by the difference in their experience, which linked directly to Goal 3 (to set yourself  
374           personalised goals, see Table 2). Furthermore, and countering the findings across the literature  
375           detailed in Beni et al.'s (2017) review, the students in this study did not relate experiences of  
376           challenge (either positively or negatively) to competition. Instead, students were focused on  
377           individual growth in areas they considered relevant to them and their personalised goals.

378

379           ***Meaningful PE develops motor competency in personally relevant areas***

380           Zoe's sociocultural perspective towards education and movement meant she wanted  
381           students to 'learn to enjoy different types of movement and find meaning in them' (Goal 2, see  
382           Table 2). As a result, she employed a number of pedagogies to fulfil the class goals and meet  
383           student's needs. Namely game-centred pedagogies, such as Teaching Games for Understanding  
384           (TGfU), which has been found to contribute to students having fun and finding value in PE (Beni  
385           et al. 2017). Zoe adopted TGfU as pedagogical approach so that students could take part in  
386           sequential, progressive, modified game forms, which represent the full version of the game. The  
387           rationale behind this was that students can transfer skills with ease and success. We identified  
388           that students found value and meaning when developing their motor skills and competencies;  
389           these developments were not the same for all students and varied from team games to  
390           independent pursuits. Indeed, developing motor competence was perceived as personalised in

391 contextually based activities which students interpreted as personally relevant. Cal related motor  
392 competency with his ability to execute diving skills and developing confidence:

393 I did really well on the backward diving. I think it was just easier to do honestly; I didn't  
394 really do any forward diving this week. But, as far as the forward jumping goes, I  
395 definitely overcame any timidity I had about jumping off of the 3-metre, it definitely  
396 doesn't seem like that high any more at all, and otherwise, I felt like I really improved.

397 (Cal, Narrative 7)

398 Consequently, for Cal, he expressed 'I feel my biggest accomplishments were jumping in  
399 with good form off the medium dive and performing a backward dive' (Cal, Essay). Cal was  
400 denoting a specific motor competency that he wanted to improve, this was facilitated by Zoe  
401 employing a guest lecturer/diving specialist to teach the students effective ways of diving.  
402 Furthermore, by adopting a specialist, students were able to take part in an array of activities  
403 (Goal 1, see Table 2).

404 Emma recognised that learning different training methods to suit her movement  
405 preferences was important, specifically, learning to work at her speed/pacing was a motor  
406 competency focus and linked to Zoe's Goal 6 (learning that every person's body reacts  
407 differently to movement):

408 I have never had to focus on speed. I always tended to start off strong with too much  
409 power and would quickly slow down. I found myself facing the struggle of pacing myself  
410 correctly again. By the end of the speed class, I had adjusted more and was able to  
411 complete the laps, but I was exhausted after the class finished. I have since worked on my  
412 speed and pacing myself outside of class in swimming and just normal workouts. Once I  
413 realised I was struggling with pacing swimming, I noticed I did the exact same thing

414 when I go on runs. I sprint immediately at the beginning, and around the  $\frac{3}{4}$  of a mile  
415 mark, I always would hit a lull and need to slow down a little. Without this class, I would  
416 not have noticed this about myself and would not have been able to start changing my  
417 training methods to better my pacing. (Emma, Essay)

418 One of the students' goals was to be able to run the English department stairs at the end  
419 of the semester without being out of breath. As a group, during the 'running' week selected by  
420 the class, Zoe arranged for the group to the run to the English department, attempt the stairs and  
421 run back (totaling one mile). The guidance from Zoe was that they should run as a collective  
422 group, supporting each other to promote positive interdependence and individual accountability.  
423 On their return, they would then complete an individual mile. Finally, they would reflect on this  
424 experience in their weekly narrative, Tanesha shared:

425 We came back [from running a group mile], and we ran a mile at our own pace. It took  
426 me about 17 minutes and 40 seconds to finish my mile. I noticed that when running at my  
427 own pace or running and walking at my own pace, I was able to finish about 8 minutes  
428 faster than we did when we all did it as a group. I know that other students finished their  
429 [individual] mile quicker, but I like to take breaks, and I don't like running, but I did feel  
430 a sense of accomplishment when I did finish the mile even though it took me a little  
431 longer than other people. I'd like to in the future see if I can get that time down even if I  
432 did take breaks or walk and run. What I learnt is it's important to try to stay at your own  
433 pace and not worry about the people around you because everybody's body and exercise  
434 level is different. (Tanesha, Narrative 2)

435 This quote by Tanesha is important because it evidences a learning experience, she felt  
436 personally relevant to her own movement experience. She attributed her performance in relation

437 to her current or previous performances rather than to other students in a competitive way. Thus,  
438 linking to each of the goals Zoe set for the class; Tanesha took part in an activity that her  
439 classmates selected (Goal 1), she learnt to find a sense of meaning through accomplishment  
440 (Goal 2), she set herself a goal of trying to reduce her time (Goal 3), she completed the task  
441 through group work and independent work then completing her video narrative – a unique  
442 assessment for students (Goal 4), and lastly and most notably, ‘everybody's body and exercise  
443 level is different’ (Goal 5 and 6). Beni et al. (2018) noted that meaningful experiences do not  
444 occur unless you plan for them. We are inclined to suggest that by having a sociocultural  
445 approach, drawing on an array of democratic pedagogies (outlined in Table 2), setting a clear  
446 vision for classes, and encouraging students to reflect, educators can contribute to meaningful PE  
447 experiences. In this case, even if the educator did not plan specifically plan for meaningful  
448 features. This finding makes strides in understanding how to promote meaningful experiences in  
449 PE (Fletcher et al. 2018, Kretchmar 2000).

450

451 ***Meaningful PE is a social and personally relevant experience***

452 Learning is a social activity (Butler 2016) and Zoe’s goal for the class was ‘to become a  
453 team and forge a learning community’ (Goal 5, see Table 2), which meant she drew upon  
454 pedagogies that made class conversational, participatory, and reciprocal. As a result, and similar  
455 to findings by Light (2010), social interaction was described by the students as contributing  
456 towards a meaningful PE experience. Significantly, participants found the interaction with their  
457 peers as motivating and encouraging: ‘I like the fact that the people in this class would help you  
458 if you need help and they would motivate you if they see you falling behind’ (Tanesha, Narrative  
459 1). Zara agreed:

460 Encouragement was a big thing in our class; everybody pushed somebody. The activities  
461 that I was not so familiar with, I was taught and pushed to play them just as well as my  
462 fellow classmates could play them. (Zara, Essay)

463 Due to the small nature of the classes, Cal described the ‘intimate affair’ as space where  
464 students were able to learn about each other's fears and encourage one another:

465 The familiar setting of the class allowed the seven of us to become well acquainted with  
466 each other’s personalities, talents, likes, weaknesses and fears. For example, I was never  
467 aware of the full extent of [student’s name] fear of jumping into water until we did our  
468 weeks of diving. (Cal, Essay)

469 Gibbons (2009) suggested meaningful PE is rooted in positive and respectful class  
470 environments. We would agree that creating a learning community means that students know  
471 their peers at a deeper level and are able to respect a classmate when they need personal space to  
472 reflect or encourage classmates when they want to achieve a goal:

473 I think that diving off the 5-meter platform was the perfect end to the semester. I always  
474 thought that I would be too scared to go off something that high but having the  
475 motivation of all my friends in the class with me made me want to do it. (Emma, Essay)

476 Students ended up genuinely caring about one another, and when Zoe attended a  
477 conference, and the class meeting was changed to an independent choice workout, Natalie felt ‘it  
478 was weird not having class on Monday, my afternoon felt empty’ (Natalie, Narrative 7). Students  
479 did not just talk about peer interactions as personally meaningful, but their experience with Zoe:

480 Aerobics gave me an opportunity to go to the gym and engage in sports I had not played  
481 in years... It taught me that you gain the most benefit going at your own pace. My  
482 instructor was very, very, very helpful, actually the best teacher I’ve had in college. You

483 can tell she's passionate about her work and that she really does care about others. She  
484 takes the time out to get the opinions of others, and if she can help, she does. The small  
485 class plays a huge part in teacher-student relationships as well. Aerobics has opened the  
486 door for a new life for me. (Tanesha, Essay)

487 This quote evidences Beni et al.'s (2017) point that many PE experiences that are personal and  
488 private occur amid students' interactions with others (i.e. peers or teachers). Small  
489 interactions/class numbers matter to students and they will remember and learn from those  
490 experiences. For example, as Tanesha highlighted in her essay extract above, she felt unable to  
491 develop the personally relevant experience and reflection of pacing without the contextual  
492 reference of the class and perhaps, pedagogical learning experience.

493 Similar, to Beni et al. (2019) and Walseth et al. (2019), Zoe implemented several  
494 pedagogies to get to know her students, to build relationships and understand them beyond the  
495 teaching space. Where possible, and unique to the university context, she participated with  
496 students in activities:

497 Zoe came and did the majority of that mile with me. And, um, it was very fun. I think I  
498 did a mile in like, 11 minutes. Better than I've ever done because I'm usually on the  
499 treadmill doing my whole mile and it takes like 20 minutes. Yes, it takes that long to do a  
500 whole mile. And I'm really proud of myself because I really pushed myself... We was  
501 [*sic*] walking and talking, and we didn't notice how far we were going or how fast we  
502 were going, but it didn't take any time. (Zara, Narrative 10)

503 Not only did Zoe draw on popular media and share relevant blogs and videos with  
504 students but each lesson she gave examples to their context. Furthermore, she gave students an  
505 opportunity to develop relevant life skills as suggested by Gibbons (2009) for meaningful

506 experiences. The students that lived in coastal states found the water survival lessons particularly  
507 meaningful and personally relevant. Emma noted:

508 I spend most of my time at home and on the water or on a boat or at the beach or  
509 something and I know that it is not that common but it still does happen people getting  
510 tired and almost drowning in the water, so it was definitely interesting and being fully  
511 clothed made it more difficult for the class itself but it definitely made it more useful and  
512 more attributable to real-life situations. It was good to learn. (Emma, Narrative 8)

513 These findings highlight the importance of educators making explicit connections for  
514 learners in how experiences in PE can inform their broader physical activity participation or real-  
515 life situations that students may experience outside of institutions of education. While linking to  
516 real-life situations, interactions between learners, the environment and others, play a key role in  
517 motivating students in PE and allowing them to find meaning (Ennis 2017). Through Zoe's  
518 attempt to forge a learning community, students demonstrated more than collegiality; friendships  
519 were formed and were more than in-class social interactions. Students' essays and narratives  
520 highlighted that friendships moved from beyond the teaching space to group messaging  
521 platforms, attending lunches, and going for group gym sessions. We suggest this may be one way  
522 in which we can encourage students to find value in physical activity and movement and  
523 socialising techniques provide the grounds for lifelong physical activity to occur. In addition,  
524 friendships, learning communities and social interactions with educators can influence student's  
525 physical activity/engagement in university PE.

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528

## 529 **Conclusions**

530           The purpose of this article was to explore what university students found meaningful in  
531 PE, to extend the scope of the features of meaningful PE to those in institutions of HE and to add  
532 to our understanding of ‘what fun means’ in relation to meaningful PE. Our main finding  
533 exemplifies that the experiences of HE students in PE can be meaningful, specifically when the  
534 environment for learning is set up in democratic ways. These findings are unique, because the  
535 educator of the course did not plan for them as previous research has suggested (Beni et al.  
536 2018). In addition, previous literature has focused on K-12 settings (Beni et al. 2017; Walseth et  
537 al. 2018; O’Connor 2018) and, our findings enhance our understanding of meaningful  
538 experiences in HE contexts.

539           Our findings support the integrated nature of meaningful PE features (Beni et al. 2019).  
540 Students often reflected on activities crossing two meaningful PE features (e.g. an activity was  
541 challenging and personally relevant learning). This occurred when they were provided with  
542 opportunities for reflection. The authenticity of the assessment used by the educator meant that  
543 students gave vivid, embodied explanations during their reflections in terms of what and how  
544 they experienced the features of meaningful PE. Consequently, reflections on previous  
545 experiences can contribute to student engagement. The experiences of the students in this study  
546 has further supported findings that suggest positive experiences increase engagement and  
547 meaning (Garn et al. 2017, O’Connor 2018). We suggest from our findings that sustained fun, in  
548 combination with goal setting and pedagogical environments set up in democratic ways can  
549 contribute to students’ feelings of delight. However, delight remains a deep, sustained, elusive,  
550 idiosyncratic experience (Kretchmar 2006) for both students and educators to investigate further.  
551 Despite this, Kretchmar (2005) recommends that delight is an unusually ambitious pedagogical

552 goal and educators should work towards modest goals. However, we believe that all educators  
553 should aspire for ambitious goals themselves and can facilitate environments for delight to occur.

554 Educators that have a vision (Ni Chroinin et al. 2019), a sociocultural approach (Larsson  
555 and Quennerstedt 2012), drawing on democratic pedagogies can contribute to university students  
556 developing foundational beliefs towards movement (Garn et al. 2017). The intentions of the  
557 educator were actualised, we attributed this down to the class size. Because the class was small,  
558 the educator was able to balance the personal human experience (Ennis 2013). Pedagogies of a  
559 democratic and social nature facilitated getting to know students, which is an extreme challenge  
560 and barrier when there are large class numbers (Author 2020). From a pedagogical perspective,  
561 our findings contribute to the research field by highlighting the importance of providing  
562 possibilities for students to experience elements such as challenge, overcoming fear,  
563 experiencing new ways of moving, joyful memories and a sense of accomplishment to enhance  
564 the experiences of 'fun'. These elements go beyond the selection of a particular sport or activity  
565 but seek to draw our attention, as educators to the meaning within an experience. This finding is  
566 significant for all students in education, not just those in HE.

567 In conclusion, forging a learning community, building friendships and having social  
568 interactions within the university PE setting can support movement efforts by students.  
569 Henceforth, due to the small nature of this study and the original intentions of the research, we  
570 suggest future study in the area of meaningful PE and HE and its potential relationship to  
571 lifelong enjoyment of movement. Specifically, in-depth studies drawing on the everyday  
572 experiences of students on movement spaces may give us insight into how to adapt our pedagogy  
573 to suit an everchanging world around us. Digital ethnography, drawing on the technology's  
574 students use in everyday life would prove useful in research tasks ahead.

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