

## Remembering instructors: play, pain and pedagogy

William B. Strean\*

*Faculty of Physical Education and Recreation, University of Alberta, P-408 Van Vliet Centre, Edmonton, AB, T6G 2H9, Canada*

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This study was undertaken to examine how coaches and teachers can contribute to making sport and physical education more fun for children. Twenty-four retrospective accounts resulted in five major themes: (1) personal characteristics of instructors/coaches, (2) learning environments, (3) peak moments in low-organised activities, (4) social aspects, and (5) lessons from negative experiences. Results are discussed in relation to fun, enjoyment and happiness in youth sport and physical education.

**Keywords:** instruction; coaching; physical education; fun

Many of us who work in the area of youth sport and physical education are well-aware that the primary reason for children to participate in sport is ‘to have fun’. Among the factors associated with fun in physical activity are attributes of instructors. In the quest for understanding what makes sport and physical education more fun for children, this study was undertaken to examine instructors’ qualities that provided participants with a sense of fun, play and enjoyment. It may come as a little surprise that as questions were asked of prospective participants for this study, some were not immediately forthcoming with positive examples of teachers and coaches, but were eager to offer a story about a negative experience. As this study unfolded, the initial intention to find masterful teachers and coaches who brought joy to learning was meshed with the emerging, participant-driven, desire to share stories of instructors who left them with bad memories.

The famous quotation from Haim Ginott (1972) speaks about the dual nature and influence that instructors can have in classrooms (as well as fields, gymnasias, etc.):

I have come to a frightening conclusion. I am the decisive element in the classroom. It is my personal approach that creates the climate. It is my daily mood that makes the weather. As a teacher I possess tremendous power to make a child’s life miserable or joyous. I can be a tool of torture or an instrument of inspiration. I can humiliate or humor, hurt or heal. In all situations, it is my response that decides whether a crisis will be escalated or de-escalated, and a child humanized or de-humanized.

Instructors do a great deal to shape the learning environment and the experiences of children. Their influence clearly has an impact on fun (or lack thereof) during the learning. It may also be the case that the consequences of instructors’ attitudes and

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\*Email: [billy.strean@ualberta.ca](mailto:billy.strean@ualberta.ca)

behaviours may linger far beyond the interaction with children. There seems to be a reasonably widely held view that early life experiences in sport and physical activity may shape choices about later life participation. It seems that many teachers harbour a belief similar to, 'If my students have fun now, they'll stay active as they get older' (O'Reilly *et al.* 2001, p. 211).

Because of their central role in the learning process and the potential impact on children's developing attraction or repulsion to physical activity, it seemed useful to seek to understand more about how individuals experienced their instructors. What do teachers and coaches do to enhance fun and a sense of play? What do people remember about their instructors and how do they see their earlier experiences shaping their later participation in physical activity? A retrospective approach was selected to address these questions.

## Method

### *Overview of emergent design*

A secondary contribution of this study may be the degree to which it illustrates a variety of components of an emergent design. Lincoln and Guba (1985) described emergent design as a fundamental characteristic of naturalistic research. They suggested that researchers allow their work to emerge rather than to construct it *a priori* because it is not possible that enough could be known ahead of time to devise the design adequately.

The intent of this section is both to 'come clean' about the method and to reveal important features of how qualitative research can unfold. When I began this study, I wanted to find participants who could talk about wonderful teachers and coaches who were masters at bringing play and fun to learning. I originally thought that I would gather all the data for the study using one-on-one semi-structured interviews. Two things centrally altered my plan. First, as I began to speak to people about my study and share with them how I was seeking reflections and recollections about physical education and sport experiences – wanting to hear the stories about instructors who had used games and created very positive environments – I had a few people say something like (with pained tone): 'I can tell you a story about my phys ed experiences.' Or perhaps: 'I can tell you about a gym teacher I had – what a jerk.' Rather than eschew the negative, my intuition was that I could learn about my fundamental curiosity, about optimal teaching and learning experiences by talking to these people. Second, when I was being interviewed by a reporter from a local newspaper, telling him, again, about seeking to learn about teachers and coaches who exemplified how to use play, fun, and games – I happened to mention that I had spoken to some people who had very negative experiences. His ears perked up. We discussed various aspects of the study and he agreed to put my office phone number and e-mail address in the article, so that potential participants could contact me. When the article appeared on the front page of the Sunday paper, the headline read, 'Too many rules, not enough fun: Bad experiences in sport last long after the game is over.' Subsequently many of the people who contacted me were those who had negative experiences in physical education and sport. Their recollections are part of the story to be told here. In addition, I received several extended written accounts as a result of the article and the call for comments and participants. Some of the poignant vignettes from those accounts are important contributions to the data. One of the participants who wrote to me suggested that some of her family and friends also would have useful accounts to

share with me; this led to a focus group (or group interview) which was an unintended, but serendipitous way to collect data. From the interplay of the participants around a table, came rich information and questions among participants that had me wonder why I had not used this data collection procedure previously.

In summary, many of the putative advantages of an emergent design that I had heard about years ago in graduate school (and have taught about in research methods classes), came to pass in this study. The scope of retrospections and the results of this study are more varied and valuable because of how the study unfolded.

### ***Participants***

Twenty-four participants provided data for this study. Seven of the participants were recruited directly by the investigator using purposeful sampling (Lincoln and Guba 1985). Other participants were volunteers who responded to a request advertised in a major newspaper as part of the above-mentioned article. The geographic range of participants was a variety of locations in Canada and the USA (e.g. Ontario, British Columbia, Alberta, California, Oregon). Males ( $n = 12$ ) and females ( $n = 12$ ) were equally represented and the age range was 21–64.

### ***Data collection***

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews (Smith 1995, Seidman 1998), a focus group and written accounts. Specifically, 11 participants in this study took part in one semi-structured interview; three of those participants also provided written accounts; six participants took part in a focus group, one of them also provided a written account and seven participants solely provided written accounts.

Smith (1995) noted that semi-structured interviews are mainly helpful to gain a detailed picture of the respondents' beliefs about, or perceptions or accounts of, a particular topic. Smith (1995) suggested the advantages of semi-structured interviews are that they facilitate rapport/empathy, allow greater flexibility of coverage and enable interviewers to enter novel areas, and they tend to produce rich data.

All the interviews were conducted by the author and lasted 90 minutes on an average. All the interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. Depth-probe questions were asked and follow-up questions were used to ask for clarification, to seek concrete details and to request more information on what the participant was saying (Seidman 1998).

### ***Data analyses***

Profiles of the participants (Seidman 1998) were developed that contained the most relevant topics and ideas discussed in each interview. This process follows an idiographic approach to analysis, beginning with particulars and slowly moving up to generalisations (Smith 1995). In this way, it was possible to maintain a sense of uniqueness and diversity of each case even when progressively emphasising common elements in the participants' experiences (Polkinghorne 1995). Profiles also made it easier for the investigator to retrieve and compare meaningful data from different participants at different stages of the analysis. There was a recursive movement between similar instances in the data and the emerging conceptual categories during the process of organising data according to commonalities (Polkinghorne 1995).

The final step in reducing and shaping the interview material involved the actual write-up in the form of a report for publication. Results are reported in the form of my interpretive analysis interspersed with verbatim extracts to illustrate my conclusions (see Smith 1995). This strategy was chosen because of its potential to help the readers 'see' how the researcher drew conclusions about the data and how such conclusions were grounded in the participants' perceptions and experiences (Charmaz 1995, Ellis 1998).

## **Results**

The results will be presented to highlight five major themes: (1) personal characteristics of instructors/coaches, (2) learning environments, (3) peak moments in low-organised activities, (4) social aspects, and (5) lessons from negative experiences.

### ***Personal characteristics of instructors/coaches***

When participants explored factors that were related to positive experiences in sports and physical education, a dominant theme was the personal characteristics of the individuals who served as instructors and coaches. Keeping in mind that the investigator began with an interest in pedagogy and learning environments, it might be said that this theme emerged in spite of the biases and subjectivities that may have been present. Although the elements of how situations were structured were important, it was the qualities of the leaders that seemed most salient. In a sense, the results were consistent with the phrase: 'I can't hear what you are saying, because who you are being is so loud.' That is to say that the 'personhood' of the instructors and coaches was more memorable than was the way in which learning was structured.

Many of the respondents' comments suggested that they most enjoyed physical-activity learning when the instructors were caring, involved, present, fair and individualised:

He was energetic, funny, he really enjoyed teaching, he interacted well with students and he was active himself ... it was an exciting, fun environment.

What I remember most was her enthusiasm for teaching ...she was able to connect with students.

I think Mr. Swanson [note: name is a pseudonym] and his enthusiasm and love for what he was doing ... but the fact that I enjoy movement; I would tie that almost directly to him. ...This is a guy that was involved and invested in the process of teaching ... the smile on the face, interaction with students and just the feeling that this is a person that really wanted to be there.

Personal contact from the adult, coach or teacher with each student or kid, always in an encouraging manner. By encouragement I don't mean, you can win, you can win! I mean encouraging the student to enjoy themselves.

Very positive ... never embarrassed kids, someone that we could relate to.

Her involvement. She would not hesitate to get into the drill. When she was in the drill she was having fun. She would be diving in the ground, but she would be having fun. She would smile at the same time. Little competitive games that she would jump in on

you could see her desire or her passion about the game and that almost like transferred over to us.

Other personal aspects that participants reported were, 'always a sense of playfulness', 'always available, always caring', 'everybody was treated equally', 'innately fair ... Equal playing time' and that the teacher was 'always positive ... Laughed and smiled'. One participant captured the spirit of how pedagogical structures may have been forgotten, yet the interpersonal impression remained, 'but I don't remember any of his techniques, he was just a nice fellow'.

### *Learning environments*

Although the salience of personal characteristics of teachers and coaches was prominent, the participants offered many reflections that are indicative of what makes learning environments positive and attractive. With respect to structuring the learning, three key themes that emerged were (1) providing variety, fun, games and novelty; (2) providing adequate rules and strategy; and (3) fostering flow.

#### *Providing variety, fun, games and novelty*

There is a wealth of information showing that children's primary reason for participation in sports is 'to have fun' and a primary motivator for disengaging from sports is because 'it's not fun' (e.g. Gould and Petlichkoff 1988, Ewing and Seefeldt 1990, Weiss and Chaumeton 1992). Certainly fun was a major consideration in describing positive learning environments. For example: 'The bottom line for me was that I always knew I was going to have a good time – he made it fun to come to class.'

Other similar factors that were addressed were the importance of both variety and novelty. Participants commented: 'There were a multitude of different exercises.', 'There was a lot of movement and activity ... I learned how to do new things.', 'I was able to participate in ... new games that were exciting.'

Previous research (e.g. Streat and Holt 2000) and the core of the Teaching Games for Understanding perspective (TGfU, Bunker and Thorpe 1982, Holt *et al.* 2002) support the relation of games and game-like activities being associated with fun and enjoyment. Several comments in the present data align with this view. Positive aspects of instructors who provided fun and enjoyment included, 'He made a game out of learning.', and 'She always seemed to find a way to have us play games to learn whatever it was we were doing.'. In contrast, teachers and coaches who were remembered negatively were more likely to incorporate technical drills outside of game contexts. 'I think the guy had stock in pylons. Yeah, I learned a lot – how to stand in a line, how to dribble through cones with different kinds of balls. If I ever face an orange cone in the middle of a game, I'm going to be prepared.'

#### *Providing adequate rules and strategy*

Although the experience of freedom or autonomy is often associated with fun and enjoyment, various commentators (e.g. Huizinga 1950, Schmitz 1979) have explored that the structure of games provides for the freedom and pleasure within the boundaries. Participants described that enjoyable learning environments included giving

adequate structure and directly instructing or attending to strategy, which is also consistent with the suggestions from TGfU.

Similarly, strategy can be a real part of the joy of the game.

It was absolutely even and the reason that I really, really, really enjoyed football was because there was always all these little conspiracies going on. And it is when you talk about strategy, like that is how I really liked football because it was a strategising game.

In contrast, experiences where rules and strategies were not taught were remembered as being painful and the lesson of what is important to do may be learned by noting what it was like when not enough tactical instruction was provided.

One of the things that I remember about phys ed: I don't remember the actual rules of any of the sports ever really being clearly explained to us. I remember that it was assumed that we all knew the rules of baseball, that we all knew rules and I did not know rules, I would not know how to play the different positions, no one, I don't have any memory of any teacher saying, you know, for example in a soccer game if you play defense this is what you should be thinking about, if you play forward this, I don't remember, it was all just assumed and then the way that you learned the rules was by trial and error. That you would make a mistake and someone would blow the whistle and then you know your team mates would scowl at you, your ignorance was exposed, and that is why you learned the rules, no one actually ever explained what it was, maybe they do explain them now, but I don't remember ever having learned the rules.

Or as another participant wrote: 'The rules were never taught to us – it was assumed that everyone knew. The girls had to play with the boys whose superior strength made it impossible for all but the most robust of the girls to succeed.'

Also supporting the importance of games and the context of strategy:

I can't remember a single drill that we did and I think that in itself speaks volumes because obviously I not only did I not learn them but I almost anti-learned them. It is you know to just kind of block them out – activity out of your, but they must have taught drills. But that is all about technique, and what good is technique if you don't understand the underlining strategies in playing the game? What good is technique?

### *Fostering flow*

In a simple sense, we might find that participants enjoy learning environments that are designed to accommodate a balance of skills and challenges, or a basic sense of flow (Csikszentmihalyi 1975, cf. Mandigo and Couture 1996). The sense of 'creating and being free to do what you want to do' might also support autonomy and selection of tasks that create a skill-challenge balance. An example of that feeling that would enable more flow experiences is when a participant described that the activities in a physical education class 'were fast paced ... appropriate for my skill level'.

One participant captured a common sentiment:

There were some classes that you would think were designed to show you what an inept klutz you were. The best classes and the best practices that I remember – you could tell the teacher or the coach was clued in to where we were at. They would have us do things that weren't too easy, but also didn't have us look like a spaz ... there was a nice balance.

The importance of the learning environments and how instruction is situated is worthy of greater consideration in our understanding of optimal contexts (cf. Kirk and MacPhail 2002).

***Peak moments in low-organised games***

In seeking to understand participants' best experiences in physical education and sport, they were asked to recall a time when they were really having fun and experiencing a sense of play. With one exception of a competitive wrestling experience, all the participants described situations that were relatively low-organised such as a 'wiffle ball game whether it is maybe with one buddy or with two or three buddies where you are making up the rules' or when 'you invent some game and you start fooling around and you do it until you, and you refuse to come in to eat. It is a powerful thing which shows how fantastically joyful it is'.

Other examples of this kind of experience were:

We used to just play. He would play goalie and I played out and we used to just play and play and play until it got too dark to see.

Football with my brother after school ... Because it was orchestrated by us, we actually took it really seriously.

The freedom of it, just being outside, ... even when we played shinny hockey inside the arena with the lines painted and stuff it wasn't as playful as I remember just being on the outdoor rink with no lines, wood boards and you shoot the puck over the boards and you have to walk in the snow and go and get it. I think that, it was playful because it was free and we played until we got tired and then we switched teams.

I adored playing football/street-hockey with my brother and his friends; we went at it with gusto almost every night on the front lawn/road.

Other components of the most positively recalled experiences were the 'motion, speed ... a little bit of risk', 'I love the novelty and challenge', and physical sensations:

The fun I had was riding my bike by myself. That is the fun I had. Physical fun, I had a bike and we lived in a hilly area and I used to just love to ride my bike, but it was always by myself. [So what was fun about that?] Speed, wind going through my hair, freedom and solitude.

What is most striking is that virtually all participants selected an experience outside of a formal physical education class or youth sport experience when identifying their most enjoyable memories, when they were having fun and experiencing play.

***Social aspects***

A fourth positive aspect of instructors and the good environments they created was recognition of the importance of social aspects of sport and physical activity. One participant noted that:

It is important to have more awareness on the part of the adult about the social interactions going on during the play time ... but when you are working with kids, what you are working with is a little person. So learning the game needs to be in service of the total development of that little person.

Another comment was that 'the social issues ... are more important I can tell you that right now than the game'.

Consistent with previous findings (e.g. Allen 2003), being with friends is a major factor associated with the fun of sport and physical activity.

So there is some greater bond of friendship, which obviously makes playing the game ... more fun than if you are out there on your own just playing for the sake of playing. You may enjoy the game, as a kid you always enjoy playing with friends and people you know. This is part of the enjoyment.

As one participant put it simply, 'as a kid you always enjoy playing with friends and people you know. This is part of the enjoyment'.

### *Lessons from negative experiences*

As an investigator, the most intriguing and poignant information emerged from individuals who had negative experiences in sport and physical education. These results are striking in that participants frequently related experiences from many years ago, but did so with strong emotions. These quotations may provide some important considerations for professional practice:

To this day I feel totally inadequate in team-related activities and have a natural reflex to AVOID THEM AT ALL COSTS ... largely because of humiliating experiences in childhood.

So, my major beef with the so-called physical education that I received as a kid is that it robbed me of the joy of physical activity for many years. It did nothing whatever to establish habits of balance in life between the cerebral and the physical. It did not promote habits of physical and mental health that can be derived from participation in physical play. Instead, the focus seemed to be on achieving excellence in a competitive setting. It destroyed my physical confidence.

The exception to otherwise pleasant childhood play: those fucking gym classes. Drill, verbal abuse, elitism, a sense of futility, and occasionally fear. Yuck.

I probably would have grown healthier if I had been left completely alone by adults in terms of physical play.

I desperately wanted both of them [teachers] to spend more time with me and neither one of them did.

I am a 51-year-old woman whose childhood experiences with sports, particularly as handled in school, were so negative that even as I write this, my hands are sweating and I feel on the verge of tears. I have never experienced the humiliation nor felt the antipathy toward any other aspect of life as I do toward sports.

What should we conclude from these distressing quotations? The potential virtues of physical-activity instruction are well-documented. Yet, the possible damage we can cause as physical educators needs to be kept in mind. One might assume that the teachers and coaches who instructed the participants who made these comments were probably well-intentioned and believed in the value of what they were doing. The best intentions can still lead to very negative outcomes. We need to keep looking, both as individuals and at the structures of our learning environments, as we seek to raise the ethical standards of our profession and seek to reduce or eliminate the heartrending experiences some have had.



## **Discussion**

In some respects, the findings may be useful to highlight or to remind practitioners of some key factors associated with creating positive and enjoyable learning experiences. It may be constructive to contextualise these results and to offer some potential linkages to theory to help to understand and apply the information.

### ***Youth sport and physical education today***

Now, as much as ever, it may be crucial to look at what it takes to create positive physical-activity learning experiences. The current context of youth sport and physical education can lead us to raise serious questions about what children are experiencing. *U.S. News & World Report* had a cover story on 'Fixing kids' sport: Why the fun is gone and the players are quitting; What you can do' (Cary 2004). Some of the disturbing statistics include that 45% of youngsters have been called names, yelled at or insulted while playing; 22% of children had been pressured to play while injured, and an additional 18% said they had been hit, kicked or slapped while participating. 'Not surprisingly, the dropout rate of all children from organized sports is said to be 70 percent' (p. 46). Furthermore, 44% of parents said that their child 'had dropped out of a sport because it made him or her unhappy' (p. 50).

### ***Theoretical and applied perspectives***

It may be useful to consider what we have learned about fun and enjoyment and shift our perspective slightly: What does it take to be happy in youth sport and physical education? Ryan and Deci (2001), in their exploration of happiness, provided a useful distinction between the hedonic perspective (which defines well-being in terms of pleasure attainment and pain avoidance) and the eudamonic perspective (which focuses on meaning and self-realisation). The concept of eudemonia may provide a key to understanding the overall sense of enjoyment or fun that young athletes often derive from sports and physical education, despite some unpleasant and painful times they experience. In its best sense, physical-activity instruction can go beyond momentary pleasure and it can provide long-term development and memories that provide greater meaning for one's life.

Another perspective that is both helpful in interpreting the data and in considering their application, comes from Alfred North Whitehead (1929), who made one of the few famous attempts to describe the development of learning over time. The first stage he identified was 'romance', and he wrote about the importance of beginning all learning with romance, with seeing the big picture, with understanding how whatever it is that you are learning fits with your life. It is the time in which children see the novelty of an activity. There is an emphasis on freedom, allowing children to see and act for themselves. Romance, according to Whitehead, is an awakening or arousing stage.

It is a time in the learning process when the learner does not care about rules and details but is overcome with awe. There is playing, dabbling, experimenting – without worry or concern about exactness. After this time of romance, the learner has a desire to learn more, and begins paying attention to the details, is interested in exactly how one accomplishes the task to become an expert. Now learners enter the stage of 'precision' which is a time when they pay attention to important details and rules and want

‘to make a good job of it’ (p. 35). Most importantly, Whitehead wrote, if one moves into the stage of precision without the stage of romance, the learning is empty and meaningless: ‘Without the adventure of romance, at the best you get inert knowledge without initiative, and at the worst you get contempt of ideas – without knowledge’ (p. 33). We might add, ‘or contempt of physical activity or movement, without understanding’.

Participants’ comments about low-organised experiences and the sense of freedom they felt fit with Whitehead’s view. One of the major implications that might be taken from this study is that reducing the organisation and structure of physical activity may result in greater fun and happiness. A great deal of the very significant problems that seem rampant in children’s sports presently could be reduced or eliminated by creating the structures and atmosphere of activities that are low-organised and directed by children themselves.

The work of Deci and Ryan (1985) might be of further use in considering the participants’ reports. The factors associated with positive memories of sport and physical education follow closely the three organismic needs that Deci and Ryan (1985) identified. The need for interpersonal relatedness can be seen in participants’ recognition of the importance of social aspects. The need for freedom or autonomy is addressed by participants’ many comments about most enjoying those situations where they were doing activities of their own choosing and under their own control. The need for competence is perhaps most central in the experience of fun in the achievement-oriented arena of physical-activity instruction. Participants’ notions and comments above about the importance of a skill-challenge balance support the role of competence. Other factors that have been noted as important (Alderman and Wood 1976), such as novelty and vertigo, were also reported.

### ***Learning from mistakes***

It would be difficult for a caring instructor, or anyone concerned about the status of children’s physical-activity instruction, to read participants’ deeply emotional comments and their negative experiences, and not take pause. Going back to Ginott’s (1972) quotation, misery – if not torture – is a result that some instructors produced. Any reminder of the tremendous power we hold as physical educators and youth sport coaches is worthwhile. The participants’ words are powerful in this regard.

### **Conclusion**

There is something beautiful, if not astonishing, about the joy and fulfilment that can come from wonderful instruction in physical activity. One of the chief findings is that ‘who we are’ is often more important, and certainly more memorable, than what we do. As Schmier (1995; paraphrasing Carl Jung) puts it, ‘If you want to be a teacher, you have to put aside your formal theories, intellectual constructs, axioms, statistics, and charts when you reach out to touch that miracle called the individual human being’.

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### Notes on contributor

Billy Strean is an associate professor in the Faculty of Physical Education and Recreation at the University of Alberta in Edmonton, Alberta, Canada. One of his primary research interests is fun and enjoyment in physical education, sport and leisure.

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