

Engaging Young People in Active Learning

*“Education is the kindling of a flame,
not the filling of a vessel.”*

Socrates

Teaching for student learning should be at the core of any education system. When considering the ‘key’ characteristics of what that teaching should include I am drawn to two features that have influenced my work as a teacher educator and in fact have become stronger over the past decade; designing instructionally aligned lessons and using student voice in our curricular and instructional decisions. In my view, if teaching is going to produce deep and worthwhile learning, the two must go hand in hand. This editorial will share my view of what these two pedagogical concepts look like when employed together.

Meaningful learning is achieved through teaching that reflects an alignment between learning goals, assessments that provide evidence of students reaching those goals, and the instructional practices employed to facilitate students achieving success (Cohen, 1987; Lund & Tannehill, 2014). In other words, effective teaching should demonstrate a match between what students are intended to know and be able to do, the opportunities they receive to learn and practice, and how we assess for learning.

As teachers begin to consider how to design instructionally aligned curriculum, units, or daily lesson plans it is important to consider the idea of backward design proposed by Wiggins and McTighe (1998). Backward design suggests starting with the end in mind; the goals, what students will learn, the important ‘stuff’. Once it has been determined what students will learn, then planning moves to determining the assessment; how will students demonstrate or provide evidence of that learning. And finally, in order for teaching, and ultimately learning to progress from the goal to the assessment it must be determined what teaching strategies will be most effective and which learning experiences the most powerful to facilitate learning and allow students to practice and enjoy that learning. You might think of it as a three legged stool (Lambert, 2000) where if any one of the three legs is too short the stool will be wobbly, if any leg is missing the stool will fall over. This suggests that all three legs must be present to create balance as with the concept of instructional alignment; learning goals, assessment of learning, and instruction must all match.

The first leg of the triad is reflected in goals for student achievement; what it is that students will learn. Regardless of the country in which you teach all countries have identified what they want students to know and be able to do as a result of participating in a physical education programme. The term used to identify these learning goals or outcomes varies; content standards (US), content descriptions (Australia), key concepts and key processes (England), learning outcomes (Ireland) and achievement objectives (New Zealand). Irrespective of the term, the intent is to focus on desired student learning outcomes by designing the physical education curricula that might allow students to reach the intended goals (MacPhail, 2014).

Student engagement in the learning process is linked to motivation as it tends to direct behaviour toward a particular goal. This suggests that the opportunity for students to set or choose a goal has implications for their level of energy in trying to achieve it, their persistence to continue even when achievement becomes difficult, and ultimately the level of success they achieve. It is critical that we seek student input into the goals we set for physical education if we want them to enjoy the experience, take ownership of it, and ultimately choose to lead physically active lifestyles in the future.

The second leg of the triad is assessment; assessments that match the learning goal. Once we have identified what students are to achieve (goal) we must determine how they might demonstrate success. All learning does not have to be demonstrated in the same way. Just as all students learn differently, so do they demonstrate learning in various ways. It is up to the teacher to provide opportunities for students to demonstrate their

success, their mastery, their competence, and their level of achievement. In other words, assessments are responsive to individual students and to school contexts. This suggests that we interact with young people to determine the types of challenges that would hold the most educational value to them or how assessment results might inform students of their strengths and areas needing improvement. I concur with Wiggins (2011), that assessment is central to instruction, it is not an add-on. If the assessment is a quality challenging measure of what students were taught and what they have been striving to master, then teachers should 'teach to the test'.

The third and final leg of the triad is instruction and how instruction is designed to facilitate learning. It must be done intentionally, thoughtfully, creatively, and in an inviting and individually motivating way. We are fortunate in physical education that our content allows us choice; all movement forms may be used to reach the various outcomes. For example, one of the objectives for Irish Senior Cycle Physical Education is 'developing confidence, competence and creativity in a range of physical activities'. This outcome could be reached through student engagement in dance, invasion game, aquatics, or athletics; dance could be hip hop, creative, or salsa, aquatics could be synchronised swimming, water polo, aerobics, or stroke work, and athletics could be cross country, relays, or field events. Greene (1996) reminds us that if we want to engage young people in our content it is imperative we focus on students' lifestyle interests and preferences taught through a wider range of experiences in which they have a voice in designing. MacPhail and Halbert (2005) concur, suggesting that students be given the element of choice in their physical education participation and programme design.

As I have stated previously (Tannehill, 2011), we need to "involve young people more intimately in the curricular and instructional design process both in terms of what is taught and how it is taught keeping in mind that learning is social and opportunities for this type of engagement must be intentionally embedded in the learning environment". For young people to move into adulthood choosing to be healthy and physically active it behooves us as educators to engage with them on what is critical to their lifestyles and how we might most effectively offer them opportunities to be successful.

Deborah Tannehill

Emeritus Faculty
Physical Education and Sport Sciences
University of Limerick

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