

Another Physical Literacy Conversation

I share this in the hope that it will lead to some quality discussion on this important topic. The more decision-makers, teachers, coaches and parents debate the issue the better chance there is of appropriate actions being taken. My colleague Greg Thompson is an experienced PE Teacher in Ann Arbor, Michigan, USA and for as long as I have known him, he has been at the cutting edge of the teaching of movement within the curriculum. As co-author of the 5in5 movement syllabus and a leading light in how 'learning' appears in the pathway, he acts as a mentor to me in all my decision-making.

In recent days we have had one of our exchanges as he prepares to present some concepts of Physical Literacy to a group of practitioners.

Greg

I have been trying to bone up on physical literacy in the research literature with the intention of giving folks my take on it at GAIN this year. I have shared some of my thinking with Steve (the great Steve Myrland – co-author of the 5in5 syllabus and a world-leading educator). If you are interested, I would be happy to share my notes with you.

I am beginning with a metaphor that Margaret Whitehead got me thinking about. She compared physical literacy to hearing. At a rudimentary level, we hear music. As we gain awareness, we recognize that it is jazz and notice a trumpet. As we continue to gain awareness, we recognize that it is Louis Armstrong. I am thinking that physical literacy is similar in that we become more and more adept at the physical environment we are in and how we react and become an actor in it. At the highest levels of proficiency, we have a physical "voice" which I would describe as a movement signature that is our own. Like a Barry Sanders, Cruyff, Curry or rowers finding "swing". I think the physically literate athlete makes fluid physical adjustments to their environment. The very best at it seem to do it in ways that become recognizable or at least, transcendent, allowing them to be an elite performer in their sport. It would be great to hear your thoughts on it. I'm sure you have forgotten more about it than I will ever know. Of course, if folks agree upon what it is, then the blue-collar workers like us have to figure out how to get kids ready to climb that mountain. I greatly value building learning environments that encourage indirect learning. I still think we must act as expeditors when we see teachable moments that offer us a chance to guide someone with a bit of direct information. I don't think we can talk about physical literacy without dipping into the idea of building a foundation through a banquet of both exploration and direct instruction.

KBG

I won't be much help, but I have made some comments of late that I have attached as documents in this email.

There can be no doubt that before PL can ever appear seriously in the official, bureaucratic journey of all human beings it will need to be defined. Once it is defined it will have to be able to be measured. This, unfortunately, is the fatal view of PL by most decision-makers in sport and education and immediately I am at odds with that position. While we spend inordinate amounts of resources on definitions and measurements little is done to ensure appropriate coaching teaching methodology. I say to these organisations and individuals, "Go ahead and define; go ahead and measure, if it will get you to put physical well-being at the forefront of the journey - but please don't just do this as an academic exercise".

You can define all you like to get the WHY and WHAT but there must be equal energy given to HOW. Australia has just done their attempt at the WHY and WHAT (<https://www.pescholar.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/The-Australian-Physical-Literacy-Framework.pdf>), and it is a fine bit of wordsmithery. I guess that by reading this and loads of other offerings one may arrive at a decent description of PL. The problem is that all organisations that have done this written exercise have stopped right there and patted themselves on the back for a job well done. They think that their

conscience is clear, and they then move on to doing what they have always done - nothing in the way of preparing teachers and coaches to deliver PL.

As science starts to try to measure PL so the flaws continue to grow. They fit their process to what they know is measurable (reliability and validity) so they finish up with a lot of isolated measurements. In my opinion, PL is having an appropriate multi-dimensional reaction to an often changing, multi-dimensional puzzle. These 'puzzles' appear as situations occurring in the daily physical tasks of life and can fall under the umbrella of general physical well-being. They can also appear in situations that individual and team sports create and can be an extension of the 'well-being' elements in a more extreme setting. If science can measure within the environment of a multi-dimensional setting, then I might be willing to listen – but I have seen nothing yet. All I have is my experience to tell me if the picture happening in front of me is of appropriate 'precision, style and grace' or expresses appropriate 'precision, variety and potential for progression'.

I might not get every minute-to-minute assessment right, but I trust my experience to keep me pretty close to a decent assessment upon which I will base the very next thing I will say to the athlete or the very next task I will set them.

This is where all the words and science fail. The final stage for me is "the very next thing I need to say or the very next task I need to prescribe". This is what has made me create all these new courses for coaches as I have (see the Scottish Athletics and Darren Ritchie adventure) – to support every coach in what they say next or what activity they prescribe next. If Physical Literacy can be viewed as existing on a foundation of 'What to say and what to do next' then we all have a chance of delivering it well. If it remains at the definition and research stage all is lost.

Agree with the appropriate mixture of teaching using the entire implicit to explicit continuum. While we all understand the benefits of learning things implicitly there is the obviously important element of using direct methods as a means of reducing errors in those early stages of learning. Like many other strategies e.g. closed-to-open skill learning; simple-to-complex journeys; part-to-whole learning scenarios, we should all be skilled at knowing when to move from one to the other and back again. These learning strategies are all part of the 'progression / regression' tools that teachers and coaches need in their toolbox.

Greg

As I read through your conversation with Joe P., there are another couple of things that occur to me. The first is something a number of my motor development colleagues talked about in a research article. There are psychological factors that drive youngsters to either stay physically active or become more active. They suggest a direct link between a rich early experience and feelings of confidence, even errantly, about their skillfulness.

Good feelings about movement exploration may be a catalyst for young people to keep moving and subsequently build the foundational skills that will support physical activity, including sport, as they get into adolescence - (When they are more cognitively capable of ascertaining their own skill level). Sadly, I think we do see the "death spiral" of decreasing physical activity as they age into adolescence and begin to feel less skillful and choose to decline the embarrassment associated with poor attempts at sports participation. In my thinking, one of the key foundational pieces of creating physical literacy is learning to learn things with your body. You always talk of puzzle-solving and I find myself constantly thinking about creating both new puzzles and kids and older athletes that are alert to whatever is the next new "wrinkle" I can come up with. No matter what we are teaching, explicitly or implicitly, building a climate of accepting challenges with tenacity and creativity has to be central to the learning environment.

The second thing I am really thinking a lot about is creating kids who are aware of the moment they are in at a very alert level. After I started thinking about Margaret Whitehead's "hearing" comparison to physical literacy, I really began trying to ask a few more questions and develop kid's awareness

and thinking about their movement within the activity. The 'rescue keep-away game' exposes deficiencies in both object control skills and decision making simultaneously. The rubrics I sent along were developed by my students. I don't think we can have physically literate athletes without addressing sound principles of play as well as physical competence and metabolic fitness. Ultimately, **knowing** the principles is completely different to **applying** them at a level that I am describing as having a "voice".

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