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Reid on Knowledge and Justification in Physical Education

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Reid on Knowledge and Justification in PE

To my knowledge, very little has been written on the educational justification of PE activities for the last decade.¹ Since PE now does have a place on the National Curriculum, albeit arguably a minor one, the justification issue does seem to have been put on the back burner by the profession.

In a recent and welcome addition to the literature, Reid² revisits the debate, outlining two ‘conventional assumptions’ made by what he calls the ‘new orthodoxy’ in PE:

1. The ‘early Hirstian’ account³, which sees knowledge as propositional, and education as academic.

When applied to PE, this suggests:

2. The distinction between practical performance and the ‘theory’ related to it - i.e. the propositional knowledge of Human Movement Science (HMS).

The paper is a critique of these two assumptions, and a defence of the claim that PE ‘can indeed satisfy the knowledge requirements of education; but ... without making claims to academic significance’ (p95).

Reid asserts that ‘The criterion of practical knowledge is practical performance’ (p99), and that ‘...practical inference ... presupposes the use of intentionalist concepts ... (which describe) ... factors which give the activity its *meaning* ...’ (p100)

These insights are used as sticks with which to beat those who might argue that ‘the propositional knowledge generated by the sciences of human movement are (sic) *necessarily* relevant to the purposes of PE’ (p101). It is only relevant insofar as it is

¹ i.e. since my paper *Physical Education, Justification and the National Curriculum*, 1988. One exception is Alderson & Crutchley, 1990, which is a comprehensive discussion of the school PE programme. It grapples with the justificatory issue, but eventually offers only sport as ‘a vital role in everyday life’ in assertion of its cultural value (pp. 44-5). However, the word ‘film’ could be substituted for ‘sport’ in this paragraph without loss of justificatory import. Rock music, too, is undoubtedly a ‘valued cultural form’ in this sense - but neither film nor rock has a secure place on the curriculum.

² Reid A, 1996b, pp.94-95.

³ I call this the ‘early Hirstian’ account, since Hirst later rejected it as “part of the ‘rationalist’ myth” (1992, p.5). He says (loc. cit.) “we are mistaken if we conceive (the) purpose (of education) as primarily the acquisition of knowledge”; and (p.6) “Of course I now consider practical knowledge to be more fundamental to theoretical knowledge ...”. I think that Reid should have taken account of this, and also of the arguments in Hirst’s 1979 paper on *Human Movement, Knowledge and Education*, to which he does not refer.

useful or applicable to the work of the physical educator (and HMS is not always and necessarily so).

However, there *is* a kind of propositional knowledge that is *logically* required for successful understanding of, participation in and appreciation of PE activities: that which expresses the ‘concepts, principles, constitutive rules and norms which define and govern’ them (p102). But this kind of knowledge, whose proper exercise is practical, must also be assessed in practice (i.e. performatively).

This explodes our two ‘conventional assumptions’, since:

1. Although such knowledge is propositional, it is not academic
2. There is no sharp distinction here between practical performance and the propositional knowledge related to it, which is *not* just the propositional knowledge of HMS.

Reid’s diagnosis is that the source of these assumptions is the mistake of supposing that the performance of physical activities does not in itself constitute an expression of knowledge.

The main outcomes for our purposes are two claims:

1. that there is no justification for the view that HMS is necessarily relevant to PE activities
2. that, however, the autonomous language of human *action*, which alone can express the *meaning* of PE activities, *is* necessarily relevant

These are important conclusions, which neatly encapsulate Reid’s entirely successful attack on naive ‘scientism’; but they do not advance his further claim:

3. that PE can indeed satisfy the knowledge requirements of education ... without making claims to academic significance on the basis of propositional ... knowledge (p95).

I have two comments on Reid’s position here:

Firstly, when he accuses the ‘new orthodoxy’ of making ‘the mistake of supposing that the performance of physical activities does not in itself constitute an expression of knowledge’ (p102) I think he exceeds the evidence. Many in his target group would be quite willing to accept that there is knowledge *of a kind* in practical performance. Their point would be that it is not knowledge of the *right* kind to bestow educational significance on the practice.

Secondly, my main criticism of Reid would be that he includes in his account no claim at all to educational significance. There is no *ground* given for the inclusion of PE practices within a curriculum. There is no justification - no argument for the epistemological significance of the kind of knowledge he champions, i.e. the knowledge expressed in practical performance. In the absence of such an account, we must suspect the existence of subjectivist or relativist assumptions.

It is no use arguing the case that the performance of PE activities requires a kind of practical knowledge, for so do ‘bingo, bridge and billiards’⁴ - which brings us back to Peters’ problematic: how to account for the supposed value of curriculum activities. In other words, Reid has provided no argument to show that the practical knowledge that he champions can clear the status hurdle. As I said before⁵ ‘nothing is gained by reconceptualising knowledge unless it is accompanied by a successful reworking of the justificatory part of the argument’.

This is where we can turn to another paper by Reid⁶, in which he presents an account of the concept of PE and an embryonic justification. This paper is a systematic attack on the ‘strategy of assimilation’ (p9), i.e. the attempt to assimilate physical (and ‘non-serious’) activities to mental (and serious) activities.

However, he simply asserts a range of ‘givens’, the axiological basis of which is ‘pleasure’, or ‘the hedonic good’ (p14). Later, he acknowledges that there is a problem of identifying what counts as ‘valuable rather than worthless knowledge’ (p15), but he offers no further account of the value of the knowledge that he promotes. Later still (p16), he acknowledges the ‘modest but essential’ nature of such knowledge, but still offers no educational justification of it. We are left with mere pleasure.

Those who reason thus are, I think, victims of the Hedonic Fallacy: the satisfactions we achieve from the successful pursuit of whatever it is that we value should undoubtedly give rise to pleasure; however, it is not necessarily the *pleasure* that we seek, but rather the values of what we pursue. The hedonist puts the cart before the horse. Unless there is already something that we value (apart from mere pleasure) then there is little possibility of gaining pleasure from it. In addition, there is the tricky empirical - and therefore contingent - question (from the point of view of even a hedonist educational justification) of just who *does* get pleasure out of PE activities⁷.

My own position is that, whilst PE activities are naturally a source of pleasure for those who value engagement in them, pleasure is a concomitant rather than the central value of them, if they are to be seen as of educational value. For education has to do not only with the pursuit of pleasure, or the pursuit of knowledge (of a certain valued kind) but also with the development of human excellences (of a certain valued kind).

Reid’s view on ‘the axiological dimension’⁸ seems to be that, if PE activities are infused with some dimension that raises them above bingo, bridge and billiards, then they are being used as means to the intellectualist project. But this doesn’t follow at all. We need *some* way of showing PE activities to be above the level of ludo, or else there will be no way of showing them to be of educational value (unless ludo is, too). But this way does not have to be intellectualist.

⁴ Peters RS, 1966, p.144

⁵ Parry, 1988, p. 114

⁶ Reid A, 1996a

⁷ Betjeman J, in his poem ‘Summoned by Bells’, presents the case for the opposition:

*The dread of beatings! Dread of being late;
And, the greatest dread of all, the dread of games.*

⁸ Reid A, 1996a, pp 12-13

Hirst on Practices

As I have already intimated, arch-intellectualist Paul Hirst⁹ radically revised his earlier position in the early and mid-1980s.¹⁰ In the reformed Hirst we find two interesting features. Firstly, there seems to have been a shift from the Petersian transcendental deduction in favour of an appeal to a kind of relativism.

He says:

It is those practices that can constitute a flourishing life that I now consider fundamental to education (p.6)

and he goes on to suggest that a curriculum should be organised in terms of 'significant practices'. However, just which practices can constitute a flourishing life, or just which practices are to be deemed significant, remains opaque. Without the theoretical support of the transcendental deduction, and in the absence of a stated alternative, we can only assume that the test is a relativist one: those practices are significant which are deemed so by some social group.

Secondly, we nevertheless find a modified intellectualism, clothed in the language of 'practices'. What is clear from Hirst's account, though, is that he is certainly *not* talking about 'practices' in the sense of 'practical PE activities'. His point seems to be that the forms of knowledge should be reconceptualised for educational purposes as ongoing social and intellectual practices into which students must be initiated, rather than as sets of propositions to be taught.¹¹

He says (p.5):

What is required ... is the development by individuals of the overall rational practice of specific rational practices.

Whilst I would in general agree with this characterisation, this leaves us no further on than we were at the end of my section on 'reconceptualising rationality'. Is a rational practice one which contributes to the development of rationality; or simply a practice that can be engaged in rationally? If the former, then the case remains to be made for PE activities; and, if the latter, then it is not clear what is excluded, so that no educational justification is forthcoming.

Hirst's further insistence that those practices are to be specified in terms of 'the good life for that individual' (p.5.) is hopelessly vague and empty, admitting of an indefinite number of interpretations.

⁹ See Hirst PH, 1965.

¹⁰ As evidenced in his mature exposition (Hirst, 1992).

¹¹ See Ross GM et al (1993) for a full statement of such an account in relation to philosophy. If taken seriously, it demands a 'Copernican Revolution' in pedagogy (p.6), requiring an initiation of students into the skills and practices of philosophizing.

Towards a Philosophical Anthropology

For me, the justification of PE activities lies in their capacity to facilitate the development of certain human excellences of a valued kind. Of course, the problem now lies in specifying those 'human excellences of a valued kind', and (for anyone) this task leads us into the area of philosophical anthropology.

I want to suggest that the way forward for PE lies in the philosophical anthropology (and the ethical ideals) of Olympism. My next task is to elucidate and enlarge upon the ideas which, for reasons of space, have been simply presented in this short paper, seeking to develop a case for Physical Education as Olympic Education.¹²

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¹² This will be a revised version of Parry J, 1997, which is in preparation.