

What Does 'Relevant' Physical Education Mean?¹

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Tena koutou, tena koutou katoa. I want to begin by acknowledging Tangata Whenua and by thanking Lorna Gillespie (PENZ President) and PENZ members who were kind enough to invite me to Aotearoa this year. I was here two years ago and had a great time, so it's been wonderful to catch up with some of the people I met in Hamilton.

Today I'm going to talk about the word relevance because it is a word that has come into fashion in physical education curriculum documents and in talk about education generally. We are told to make our lessons 'relevant' to the lives of children and it is a word that my university students use all the time: 'how is this relevant to me becoming a teacher?'

I'm going to explore the word relevance in a number of different ways. I'm going to do this by telling you a little about my incredibly interesting and glamorous life. I'm going to talk about some ideas I have been using for teaching dance to school and university students. And I'm going to talk about my work on obesity in general and childhood obesity in particular.

Some of you will see how these three topics relate to each other while some of you will think I've raided my hotel mini-bar before coming along and done my best drunken sailor impression. Either way, I hope you get something out of the stories I want to tell and that those of you who doze in and out pick up at least something useful. I should also say that although I have probably been invited to this conference in the expectation that I'll tell you something that you didn't already know, this is

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not something I take for granted. I assume that some of you will walk away from this session thinking I have just landed from the dark side of the planet Kuzbane, some of you will already know some of the things I say and already be doing some of the things that I'll advocate in your classes. Once again, my hope is that there is at least something for some of you in what I'll offer today.

One last qualification: although I know a little about physical education in New Zealand I cannot be sure how much of what I say here will be 'relevant' to you. I'm going to talk about my own context because I think that it is often when we hear others talk about their world we can learn a little about our own.

First question about relevance: why should teachers listen to academics? What is the relevance of what academics do to the work of teachers? This is a question I hear being asked at the morning tea breaks of conferences like this, just after some Doctor or Professor has delivered their version of the world, but I don't hear it discussed much during conference presentations. So I want to tackle it here, briefly, not in order to answer it definitively but to contribute to discussions about it.

I was a teacher once. Teacher education academics like myself like to boast about the fact that they were teachers once, especially when they speak to groups of teachers. I started teaching at Shalvey in 1992. Shalvey was then on the far western perimeter of Sydney although Sydney has continued to sprawl further West since then. I was then a pretty typical physical education type: plenty of sporting knowledge, fit as a trout, up to date on the principles of fitness training, clued up about the workings of the human body, anatomy and physiology, why smoking was bad for you and why we should use condoms when we have sex. I was all these things ... and totally useless.

The Mount Druitt area of Sydney, of which Shalvey is a part, was then a new and growing area for Samoan, Fijian and Cook Islander immigrant communities. This growth has continued since that time and many other ethnic groups have made 'the Druitt' (as we called it) their home. I would have been no better prepared for work if rather than Shalvey High School I'd been air lifted to Sydney's Prince of Wales hospital and asked to start prepping for my first heart-lung transplant. This is true, not because Fijians or Samoans or Cook Islanders are so strange or so very different to me. They aren't. It is true because my students weren't remotely interested in the things I was trained to teach them. This was as true for the young people from my own culture as those from any other. In fact, the classroom management training that I received seemed more concerned with tricking children into being compliant rather than understanding the students in our classes.

The problem was that my teacher education had prepared me to teach machines, not people. Looking back, I have no idea why I needed to know about the principles of

fitness or the workings of the human musculo-skeletal or reproductive systems, except to say that, in their wisdom, the people who design physical education curriculum in Australia have decided that not only do undergraduate physical education student teachers at university need to rote learn this material, but students in schools need to rote learn it as well. So a generation of young people are memorising the names of bones and muscles and organs, the difference between aerobic and anaerobic exercise, the components of fitness and all sorts of other facts and figures. To this day I have not heard a good reason why this should happen. Perhaps some of you, like me, were made to witness an actual autopsy of a recently deceased person while doing your physical education teacher training. I can think of arguments why someone might think this a good idea, but I was made to do it as part of my training in human anatomy and physiology. I remember this experience vividly but I am as sure as I can be that it did not make me a better teacher.

Back in Bathurst, where I now teach young people preparing to become physical education teachers, this question of what is relevant is an everyday concern. The students file into exercise physiology labs to perform underwater weighing and VO₂ max tests, things that 99% of them will never do again. It seems to me that if an argument can be made for physical education teachers learning how to do laboratory VO₂ max tests with gas analysers when they are at college or university then an argument can be made for them doing just about anything.

Interestingly, in survey after survey undergraduate physical education teachers (before they commence teaching) predominantly say that their exercise science classes are the most relevant of all their classes, while those in history, sociology and psychology are often seen as the least relevant. I have a few theories for why this might be so. One reason is that courses in history, sociology and psychology are often not very well taught, something that I know I have been guilty of myself. Another reason is that they are often not all that much fun. I mean, it's hard for sociologists to compete with under water weighing which, I have to admit, can be an absolute scream!

But I think the main reason why exercise science is sometimes seen as the most important thing that physical education undergraduates do is because we, as a profession, have come to see ourselves as scientists. Exercise science has given us words and phrases like muscular endurance, VO₂ max and BMI which make us feel scientific and, therefore, important. It has helped us to create exams that students can do, to use a language that only other scientists understand, to make physical education seem important.

So, let me say that at this moment I don't exactly know why teachers should listen to academics. But I do know these things. First, as a profession I think we currently have some very funny ideas about the sorts of things students in schools and universities

need in order to become physically educated; that is, what we think relevant knowledge is. Second, the fact that I, or anyone else, was ever once in the distant past a teacher is completely irrelevant to the veracity of my ideas about physical education. In the physical education staffroom at Shalvey High School we rated anyone's ideas about physical education according to the length of time they had spent in the classroom. This was a mistake. If only teachers can talk about teaching then what we have is not a profession but a club.

For my own life as a school teacher, I wish had known more about youth culture, about social disadvantage, about the different ethnic groups I was supposed to teach, or at least how to go about finding out, about life in Mount Druitt or at least places like Mount Druitt. Instead, my physical education teacher training made me grow up too soon, made me forget that I was still young, made me forget that I wasn't so unlike the people in my class. My training turned me into a little scientist and Shalvey High School simply didn't need any of them. It really didn't.

Making dance relevant?

One of the things we didn't do very much of at Shalvey High School was dance. When it came to the dreaded dance part of the school program we would sit in the staff room psyching each other up, similar to what I imagine happens in the dressing rooms before big football games. Then we charged out, ploughed through four weeks of the 'Heel-Toe Polka' and 'Strip the Willow', breathed a sigh of relief and forgot about dance for another year.

I've read a dozens of articles and listened to countless speakers talk about why physical education needs to do more dance so, you can relax now, I'm not going to say anything about the amount of dance that does or does not happen in schools. What I'm more interested in how those who are interested in teaching dance should go about doing so.

I like all kinds of dance but, most of all, I'm interested in dance that, at least theoretically, has no rules. We often hear this called 'creative dance'. I'm talking about the kind of dance where the dancer can be anything. For me, creative dance is special because, unlike all the other forms of physical activity that we tend to use in physical education, there really is no right way of doing it. It is inherently unpredictable, and therefore exciting. It is often the form of dance which teachers are most uncomfortable about teaching and which students are most anxious about doing. To cut to the chase, it is the one place in the curriculum where we are invited to cast off all – well, most – of the rules about bodily movement that we spend our whole lives following. Not many of you will walk around this conference for the next couple of days waving your arms over your head, wiggling your hips or forward rolling from session to session. Any reason? Some might say mechanical efficiency

but I am more inclined to say social convention; we conduct our bodies in a way, which makes us blend in with the crowd. This, by the way, is not a crime. There is, after all, nothing worse than a show off and, in many ways, conformity makes life possible. Without this kind of conformity schools wouldn't even be possible. But much as we often try to conceal it, within many of us lurks a desire to leave our normal, everyday selves behind and become 'something else'. I suppose I must reluctantly admit that there are some people, perhaps some of you here today, who never, ever feel this way but I am sure they are a small minority. I suppose it takes all types to make a world.

But if we accept that most normal people secretly want to cut loose and seriously boogy, the question inevitably comes, how do we teach this? In some ways, teaching people to lose their inhibitions is a contradiction in terms but I'll leave that philosophical debate for another day. In Australia, the approach of curriculum writers has been to rely on what has become known as the 'elements of dance' approach to dance.

The elements of dance approach to creative dance teaching has been very useful. It was developed to give teachers ideas. Creative dance? What I do? Where do I start? The simple stimulus ideas that the elements of dance approach provides us with are particularly important when we consider how paralysing movement freedom can be. For example, there is a scene which I have witnessed a number of times while out watching my student teachers on prac. The prac-student is ready. The children are ready. Then the prac-student says: 'Ok everyone. Today we're going to do some creative dance. So, I'm going to put some music on and, when you hear it, I want you to just move in any way you feel'. In my experience, this normally results in children freezing and refusing to do anything. If I asked you all to stand up right now and start dancing in a completely uninhibited way you would probably run for cover and we shouldn't be surprised if children do the same thing.

The elements of dance help bring structure to our classes and they have become the dominant curriculum framework for teaching creative dance in physical education in Australia. I have made a great deal of use of this approach in my own teaching. However, there is something that concerns me about the elements of dance approach. In our effort to make dance teaching simple we seem to have also made it very mechanical. The elements approach breaks movement down into little bits and then asks movers (children) to build something novel out of these pieces. To me, it feels like a kind of leggo block approach to dance, a bit like trying to draw a picture by joining the dots. Please don't misinterpret my intention here. This doesn't mean that I think that using the elements of dance is bad teaching. What I want to do is to contribute to ongoing dialogues about new ways of teaching.

To continue the theme I have begun to develop, the elements of dance approach feels, to me, a bit like a science, like we have made something which was meant to be an expression of 'freedom' (and for my academic colleagues I place the word 'freedom' in good old scare quotes) into a scientific formula – a bit of this and a bit of that.

I wonder how these kinds of dance experiences might be considered 'relevant' to the lives of our students. If someone (say a politician or a principle or a parent) said to you that they wanted to see you teach a physical education lesson which was 'relevant' to the lives of children and then you conducted a lesson using the elements of dance, do you think they would be impressed?

I have no idea what the answer to this question is, but it does raise the question of when is dance ever 'relevant' to people's lives. I mean, we might enjoy or not enjoy dancing but does this alone, whether we enjoy it or not, answer the question of relevance? To me, asking whether dance is relevant to our lives is a bit like asking whether the moon is happy. At least from a rational Western perspective it doesn't really make sense although of course I acknowledge that in some cultures it would make sense to talk about the moon being happy.

Confused about all of this, I have tried to draw on a variety of sources to think of other ways of teaching creative movement. I have noticed that, after a while, some students get frustrated with the elements of dance approach. I think that children get tired of its mechanical, arbitrary feeling: 'why should I really care about exploring 'space' or 'relationships' or tempo?' In simple terms, it doesn't always 'turn them on'.

At the moment I've been trying to focus on thinking about why people (and children) would want to dance. One answer (although not the only answer) that I keep coming back to is that people dance because it gives them a chance to be 'someone else'. I can't prove this or create a theory that explains it. It's just my hunch. I promise that this will be the most academic sentence that I'll use today: my hunch is that we dance so that we can transform ourselves out of our everyday selves and into something else. Dance is a form of fantasy so why not allow students to explore these fantasies?

Now, I know what you're thinking: 'if I walk into a physical education class and ask the students to "dance out their fantasies" I may not have a job by the end of the day'. Very true. What I think we can do is take the good thing that the elements of dance approach has taught us; (that is, that children need some structure, and some different stimulus ideas.)

Michael played three video clips recorded as part of the assessment requirements for a dance class. (Ed)

The particular work shown in these videos comes from a larger assessment that I used with my students and which some of them have tried with their own students. The assessment task requires students to work in groups and create a series of movement performances; I called it a dance portfolio. The dance portfolio included, amongst other things, five one minute dance performances, with each one minute performance based on a stimulus idea which I chose, although clearly the students could have exercised more autonomy here.

I used the elements of dance for some of the items. For example I asked them to create a one-minute dance, which explored 'speed' and another that explored 'relationships'. I then asked them to create movement that was 'funny'. As with all my creative dance classes, the ground rules were that all forms of movement are ok except obscene or potentially dangerous movement.

Now, the students would want me to say that these are not the most polished dance performances you are likely to see and not all the 'funny dances' were hugely funny, although some were.

Now I guess some of you will be thinking that I'm making a mountain out of a molehill here, but what I think the first video demonstrated was the students a) using an idea of their own and b) creating a little fantasy world involving puppets and, actually, the control of one person over another. By the way, it is important to remember that I'm not suggesting that a complete fantasy world has been created here; the students were still dancing for marks from me, at present a pretty unavoidable part of the educative context.

The second video involved a group of students also dancing for laughs, but this time they have drawn their inspiration from another part of the physical education syllabus in New South Wales which asks students to think about the socio-cultural dimensions of different forms of movement. Put simply, in this item the students drew on other forms of dancing that happens in society. These include ballet, line dancing, the dancing a rock singer might do and, finally, the way performers strike an overly serious pose at the end of their performances as if to say, 'aren't I wonderful'. This dance is a form of parody, a way of commenting on the world around us.

The final video does a similar thing to the previous one, except this time the students explored gender stereotypes, particularly as they relate to the way we use our bodies. Here were three female students, two of them dressed as 'homeboys' and one dressed as a stereotypically girly girl. The girly girl tried to copy the 'homies' but, as you can see, doesn't get it right and may not actually be trying all that hard to get it right.

The students in this item thought it would be funny to have girls moving like homeboys and that it would be funny to exaggerate the macho movements of the

homeboy and the prissy movements of the girl. Who is making fun of whom here? Are they saying that the homies are a bit 'up themselves'? Or that the girly girl is not impressed by the homies? Or, conversely, are they saying that the girly girl is a bit of an airhead? I asked the rest of the class to talk about this and reflect on the issues raised by this dance item in their journals. What I got was some interesting reflections on the rights and wrongs of gender stereotypes and more material for further discussion and debate.

I accept that some, perhaps many of you will have questions and doubts about what I've just shown you. I only have time for a bit of taste of what I'm trying to do here and I'd be happy to chat about this stuff with you. However, what I want to say is that dance is an art, not a science, and that the 'art-ness' of it is something I don't think we should lose sight of. Like all art, dance should be about something, particularly if the dancers are to find it meaningful, enjoyable and, I hesitate to say it, relevant.

But I also want to preserve just a tiny place within physical education where fantasy might flourish, as 'airy fairy' as this might sound. To me, as important as sport and gymnastics and outdoor education and all the other things that we do in physical education are, none of them have the capacity to make human bodies change into something else, to take us into a fantasy world far from concerns about being healthy and fit and skinny and not being obese and being good healthy citizens. Watching my students bring these ideas to life have been the most satisfying moments of my teaching career, by far.

'Couch potato' children

Talking of obesity, I want to conclude by briefly discussing my research into the so-called 'obesity epidemic'. Over the last four years I have been working with Professor Jan Wright from the University of Wollongong, Dr Lisette Burrows from Otago University and Dr Bruce Ross from the Auckland College of Education (now Auckland University) to examine the way obesity is talked and thought about in modern Western societies. This work has covered a great deal of terrain but in short, we have tried to show how the science of obesity is often not nearly as reliable and 'objective' as many of us might take it to be. Let me provide one brief example.

One of the things I have found most disturbing about 'obesity epidemic' talk has been the demonisation of today's children. A picture has emerged of children as lazy, spoilt, fat and always on the look out for soft options. Both the scientific literature and the popular press are full of nostalgic references to previous generations who walked or bicycled everywhere, who played in the streets or paddled endlessly in local streams for hours on end in search of frogs and other wholesome adventures. This vision is contrasted repeatedly with the modern 'couch potato' child who is addicted to junk food, television and computer games. Take the following from an Australian newspaper.

Driven to school, picked up from school, kept off the dangerous streets and away from the dangerous parks, they are the cotton-wool generation and, often the only physical exercise they get is when their parents have time to supervise. A child these days doesn't break an arm falling off his billycart, he develops a bad case of Nintendo thumb – a recognised medical problem. The average Australian child aged 5-13 spends between two and three hours a day watching television, lying supine, soaking up advertisements for high-fat junk food. These are the real telly tubbies. If we follow in American footsteps, as we so often do, TV viewing will increase, to slowly soak up almost all the leisure hours of children.

(Powell, 2000: 6)

Given what I take to be the historical tendency for Western adults to look unfavourably on the generations that come after them, I wondered what evidence there was to support this claim of declining physical activity. One way of doing this is to look for claims about declining physical activity levels amongst children in the scientific literature and to examine the evidence they present. While scientists regularly make the claim that children are less physically active these days, it is very rare for them to offer supporting evidence. To date, I have found not one example of credible evidence to support the declining physical activity thesis. In one striking example, Peters et al. (2002) cite a paper written by themselves (Hill and Peters 1998) as evidence. However, rather than offering empirical support, this earlier paper simply makes the same unsupported claim.

What is even more surprising is that scientists who assume that children are doing less physical activity ignore the small amount of scientific evidence, which does exist. I will not discuss these studies in detail here except to say that none provide any support for the declining activity argument (readers interested in further reading could start by consulting French et al. 2001 or Pratt et al. 1999). In fact, all suggest either no overall change or some increases. The scarcity of data in this area makes definitive conclusions impossible but the fact remains that the scientific community routinely ignores evidence that has a direct bearing on the question of changes in activity levels.

Despite this situation, the demonisation of children has continued, not least, I'm sad to say, at other physical education conferences I have attended where the contempt for today's young people has been particularly strident. Is it possible that being a physical education teacher gives people a sense of superiority when it comes to physical activity? It hardly needs to be pointed out that amongst the many things that are usually said about children at these gatherings, supporting evidence is never (in my experience) presented. That we have a generation of 'couch potatoes' on our hands is simply assumed to be self-evident.

The things that physical education teachers think to be true are important because they inform the sorts of classroom practices they use. My sense (although this is

hardly proof) derived from practice teaching supervision and reading the work of my undergraduate teachers is that there is now widespread acceptance of a range of (in my view) highly problematic approaches to health and physical education teaching. These include fitness and fatness testing children and asking children to keep food and physical activity diaries. It concerns me that in 2005 we might still need to make the case for why fitness and fatness testing children in schools is neither useful (that is, of very little statistical value) nor enjoyed very much by children. With respect to food and physical activity diaries, it is well known in the scientific literature that children provide extremely unreliable data when asked to keep diaries. That is, they forget, make it up or lie. What business schoolteachers have in knowing what children eat at home is simply beyond me.

In doing my research into the 'obesity epidemic' I have come to the conclusion that, in claiming to have a role to play in the 'obesity epidemic' physical education is playing a dangerous game. At some point in the future somebody will ask what progress we have made. In my view, it is fanciful to suggest that physical education classes have ever or will ever make a measurable difference to the body weight of Western populations and I am not aware of anyone who has tried to mount an empirical argument to this effect. At this point, the return for governments who spend significant sums of money training physical education teachers may be questioned. After all, if your objective is to have children burn off a few extra calories at school then there is no obvious reason why three years of university training is necessary. Surely private providers employing enthusiastic sporty types with a few weeks training could do this just as well?

However, the temptation to see ourselves as a quasi-scientific arm of the medical profession has been too strong for some people. There are those who think physical education has a role in reducing population obesity levels and improving the medical health of the nation. I am not one of those. We are not scientists and the health of our nations is not in our hands. In my view, I think we need to see our job of producing skilful and thoughtful movers as sufficient. We should be satisfied with this.

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