

Student Perceptions of a Conceptual Physical Education Activity Course

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Abstract

Conceptual physical education (CPE) courses are typically included in university course work to provide students knowledge and skills to engage in physical activity for life. The purpose of this study was to identify CPE course characteristics that contributed to positive and negative student perceptions. Participants included 157 undergraduates enrolled in 10 CPE activity classes. Critical incident responses and interviews comprised data collection. Data analysis included constant comparison. Results identified the themes of curriculum, instructor, and social environment contributing both positively and negatively toward participant perceptions of the course. Specifically, participants viewed physical fitness testing and wellness assignments, instructional techniques, and meeting people positively. Negative perceptions included class meeting time, classroom management, and lack of team cohesion. It was concluded that a coherent curriculum and effective teaching behaviors contributed toward positive student perceptions; however, attention needs to be paid to the social environment.

The negative health consequences of U.S. citizen's sedentary behaviors are well documented. More than 60% of U.S. adults do not engage in regular physical activity, and 25% do not engage in any physical activity (USDHHS, 1996). The transition from high school to college is often marked by a decline in physical activity levels. University level conceptual physical education (CPE) courses contribute to reversing this trend by providing skills and knowledge that encourage physical activity. CPE courses, which typically combine a lecture component with a

physical activity class, currently exist in approximately 60% of colleges and universities nationwide (Hensley, 2000). Research conducted on the impact of CPE courses reveals that they do have a positive influence on improving students' health and wellness behaviors (Welle & Kittleson, 1994). Researchers have found improvements in alumni's health related knowledge and behaviors, as well as increased participation in and positive attitudes toward physical activity after participating in a CPE course (Adams & Bryntson, 1995; Bryntsen & Adams, 1993; Slava, Laurie, & Corbin, 1984). Some universities offer only activity classes without a concomitant lecture. In such a course, Jorgenson and colleagues (2001) found that students had a positive attitude toward including homework in the activity course, and that these brief take-home lessons increased student fitness knowledge.

Students' attitudes about physical education and activity are influenced by perceptions of their activity experiences (Steinhardt, 1992). Student experiences should, therefore, be studied throughout the entire student school career (Erickson & Schultz, 1992). In early school careers, children's perceptions of their physical education experiences contribute to decisions concerning engagement in physical activity. In later school careers, determinants identified by university students as contributing to both positive and negative attitudes toward physical education experiences include the teacher, curriculum, and social aspects (Coelho, 2000; Figley, 1985). Programs should view students as "customers" and use their perceptions to enhance delivery of physical education programs, including CPE.

CPE courses on large campuses (i.e., greater than 10,000 students) are taught primarily by graduate students, while smaller institutions use tenure-track faculty as teachers (Hensley, 2000). The University where this study took place—student population approximately 13,000—requires a one-credit semester long CPE course, Physical Education—Activity (PEAC 1001), in an attempt to enhance student physical activity levels and educate students in health and wellness issues. PEAC 1001 is comprised of a one-hour lecture and a concomitant activity class based on a variety of exercise and sport content (e.g., cardiovascular conditioning, badminton). Graduate students, and more recently undergraduate Physical Education Teacher Education (PETE) pre-service teachers, deliver the activity classes. When different teachers deliver the lecture and activity classes it is important to provide meaningful activities and experiences that connect lecture with activity. This project attempted to enhance PEAC 1001 by more closely aligning curriculum across the lecture and activity sections. Assignments included in the activity course to align with lecture included: (a) physical fitness testing, (b) textbook laboratory assignments, (c) physical activity log, (d) goal setting, and (e) wellness homework assignments. The purpose of this investigation was to identify CPE course characteristics that contributed to positive and negative student perceptions toward PEAC 1001. Providing meaningful activities and experiences in CPE could contribute to increased physical activity and enhanced health benefits.

Method

Participants and Setting

The University where this study took place was comprised primarily of Caucasian students of middle class socio-economic background. Approximately 10,000 of the 13,000 enrolled students reside on campus. Gender make up was 44% male and 56% female. Participants in the current study included 157 undergraduate

students enrolled in 10 PEAC activity classes. Age range of the 74 male and 83 female participants was 17 to 34 years. Each of the 10 classes was taught by a PETE undergraduate major enrolled in a teaching practicum experience. This third teaching practicum was conducted the semester prior to student teaching. Not only did PETE professors design the PEAC course syllabus and assignments to assure consistency across classes, but also provided direct supervision for every class. At the beginning of the semester, the pre-service teachers (PTs) submitted unit plans to the PETE professor. Each day class was held the PT submitted a lesson plan to the PETE professor. A PETE professor was present for the entire class period to provide supervision. During class, the PETE professor collected systematic observational data based on effective teaching behaviors (e.g., feedback, lesson components). Following each lesson the PETE professor provided feedback to the PT. As part of the teaching practicum, PTs were required to provide quality instruction by assuring high student activity time and feedback to all students. Additionally, they were encouraged to incorporate components of Sport Education (Siedentop, 1994) to help build cohesion in the sport and exercise groups.

The 50 min class sessions were conducted once per week for a total of 13 lessons. Classes in the study included two cardiovascular conditioning classes, two walking/stretching classes, two circuit training classes, two volleyball classes, and two badminton classes. Participants concomitantly attended a lecture class that met for 50 min once per week for the entire semester comprising 14 lessons. Lecture classes were delivered by graduate students who taught an established program guided by a power point presentation created specifically for the course. Lecture topics included health and wellness, physical activity, nutrition, destructive behaviors, diseases, and sexually transmitted diseases. When topics were introduced in the lecture class, they

were then emphasized in the activity class. For example, the fourth week lecture content was cardiovascular fitness. During the concomitant activity class, the FITT principle was discussed and included in the lesson.

Data Collection and Analysis

This study was patterned after the Coelho (2000) study that investigated, by means of critical incident response, student perceptions of a mandatory physical education program in a military academy. The Coelho critical incident form contained two prompts: "Describe a specific incident that you have experienced in the physical education program at USMA that you believe has had a positive influence on you, your education, or future career," and (b) "Describe a specific incident that you have experienced in the physical education program at USMA that you believe has had a negative influence on you, your education, or future career." The prompts were adapted for the current study. During the final class meeting participants were allowed several minutes to provide written responses to the adapted prompts: (a) "Describe one or more specific incident(s) that you have experienced in the physical activity class that you believe has had a positive influence on you, your education, or future career," and (b) "Describe one or more specific incident(s) that you have experienced in the physical activity class that you believe has had a negative influence on you, your education, or future career." Additionally, two students were randomly selected from each class to engage in a semi-structured interview to further probe written responses. Interviews were audio tape recorded and later transcribed verbatim. Critical incident forms were transcribed verbatim.

Data were analyzed according to the qualitative data technique of constant comparison (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Two researchers independently read the transcriptions and open coded the responses to begin category identification. They then compared and agreed upon categories. As they re-read the responses, it became apparent that even

though the categories did not always reflect those identified by Coelho (2000), emerging themes were the same. Twenty two categories were identified that encompassed three themes.

Results

A total of 401 (264 positive, 137 negative) critical elements were contained in the responses provided by 157 participants. Many responses contained more than one critical incident; therefore, individual elements of each response were separated and categorized appropriately. Table 1 indicates frequency of category responses by theme. Major categories of each theme, both positive and negative, are addressed in this paper. Both critical incident responses and interview data are presented to highlight themes and categories. Responses are identified by data source, gender, and age (e.g., critical incident, male, 19).

Positive Perceptions of Curriculum

The most frequent responses involved components of the curriculum in that approximately 63% of the positive responses were related to the curriculum. Table 2 indicates categories and frequencies of positive responses concerning curriculum. The major categories for positive responses were assignments, content, activities, and exercise.

Assignments. Students cited assignments administered in class and as homework beneficial because they shed light on their own personal fitness and wellness. In class, students were required to complete physical fitness tests (i.e., cardiovascular, strength, flexibility, body composition). These fitness tests were cited most frequently as assignments that were viewed positively by participants, because the tests provided a baseline for identifying strengths and weaknesses and for setting personal goals. This student reflected positive perceptions of some assignments:

Well, the body composition [was positive], because it was looking at my

percent body fat, helped me realize where I am fitness wise and where I want to get to. It helped me set a goal for what I want to do ... otherwise I probably would not have gone into the wellness center and got it done The step test as well ... helped me realize that I need a little more cardio and so that's one of my main focuses that I've been working on outside of class. So it really motivated me to work outside of class. (Interview, female, 22)

Students were required to complete several out-of-class assignments including maintaining a physical activity log, setting a wellness goal and writing in a journal about the goal, and visiting the Campus Wellness Center to engage in the Testwell Inventory and a Wellness Screening. These assignments allowed students to become aware of components of health and wellness, and reflect on their current levels of each component.

I think that the goal setting and evaluation activity was very useful. It made me aware of problems I needed to work on and improve, simply because I had never thought of them before. The process of actually writing the goals out also made me more committed to trying to achieve them. Another aspect of the class that had a positive influence was the Testwell questionnaire and results. The itemization of each individual area of health was very interesting and gave me specific areas on which to work throughout the semester. It would be interesting to me to see if these areas have improved at all. (Critical Incident, female, 24)

Content. Students viewed the content of the course positively. In both exercise and sport classes students valued learning about their own health and wellness. They also identified learning specific sport skills and rules or proper exercise as important.

I learned the importance of circuit training, which was previously unknown to me. [The teachers] taught us the proper way to lift weights in order to prevent injuries. Also, they taught us the importance of working certain muscle groups. This will help improve my future physical health. (Critical Incident, female, 19)

Activities. Variety of in-class activities was important to students. Some students confessed that they entered class with a pre-conceived notion that activities would be limited. For example, they were relieved to find out that the Cardiovascular Conditioning class included activities other than running laps. "I like the different activities that we did. When I signed up for this class I thought we would just run all the time, but I enjoyed the variety of activities." (Critical Incident, female, 19) They also enjoyed being introduced to unique activities. For example, the walking/stretching class included two Yoga lessons taught by a guest instructor.

The most positive experience I had with this class was when the yoga instructor came. I had never done yoga before and the experience was awesome. Yoga made me feel very in touch with myself, provided a comfortable environment and taught me a new means of physical activity. (Critical Incident, female, 21)

Exercise. Students valued the in-class exercise. Some students saw class as fitting into their already established exercise plan by fulfilling one activity session each week. Others revealed that the class was their only exercise session during the week. Still others were excited that the class had inspired them to begin, or resume, an exercise program.

It's always been hard for me to come to the gym [be]cause I always feel very self conscious. In this class, because all of the circuits were explained to us and how to use the weights was explained, it helped

me to feel more comfortable outside of class. So I got together with some friends and now we have a set work out time. Three days a week. So we get together and work, which was very motivating for me [be]cause I feel like I'm getting in better shape and I feel better about myself. (Interview, female, 19)

Negative Perceptions of Curriculum

Table 2 indicates categories and frequencies of negative responses concerning curriculum. The major categories for negative responses were program features, assignments, and activities.

Program Features. A common complaint about the class was the meeting time. All classes were scheduled at either 8 a.m. or 9 a.m. This scheduling occurred because the PETE preservice teaching practicum was scheduled for that time. There were 26 activity sections scheduled for the semester. Ten of the sections were taught by PETE majors; therefore, they were scheduled at 8 a.m. or 9 a.m. Although some students identified this early class time as a positive in that it got them going for the rest of the day, many more viewed an early class negatively.

The only negative aspect of this class was the time[.]It was very hard for me to adhere & focus on our P[hysical] A[ctivity] sessions because I was often worried about my 9:00 class or what I needed to do for the rest of the day. If this class was offered in the evenings I would be more likely to adhere. (Critical Incident, female, 21)

Assignments. Some students did not believe that homework assignments should be required in a physical education activity class, and they viewed them as busy work taking time away from studying for other classes. One specific assignment, laboratory activities from the lecture book, was viewed negatively by several students. "I feel that the lab assignments were a waste of my time. They didn't benefit me at all." (Critical Incident, female, 21) Although most students viewed the fitness testing and Wellness Screening

as a means to identify their own personal health, some students did not find the tests motivating.

There isn't just one specific incident that has been negative, but a few. All [of] the physical test[s] to see how "fit" I am have been negative on me. I know that I am not very healthy or fit so reconfirming that is hard on the self esteem. After all that is one of the reasons I took this class. (Critical Incident, female, 19)

Activities. Some specific activities were cited as negative (e.g., half court play, running in the park). More importantly, students reported that lack of variety in class leads to boredom. This was a common complaint in the walking/stretching class.

Nothing in this class has had a negative influence on me, my education, or future career. Everything done in this class was very beneficial for the most part. The only complaint I have was the fact of how boring this class was. I wish there could have been more variation. (Critical Incident, female, 21)

Positive Perceptions of Teacher

Table 3 indicates categories and frequencies of positive responses concerning the teacher. The major categories for positive responses include instruction, motivation, and challenge.

Instruction. The participants viewed the PETE pre-service teachers' instruction in a positive light. They valued teacher preparation, helpfulness, flexibility, organization, and positive attitude.

They also identified and appreciated effective instructional techniques. "I really thought that the instructing techniques were really good. The way that they would explain what to do, do an example of how to do it, and then make you practice. I learn really good this way." (Critical Incident, male, 22)

Motivation. Participants valued the encouragement, positive feedback, and motivation the teachers offered. They appreciated that the

teacher circulated amongst students and called them by name. They viewed teacher encouragement as a signal that they cared about student learning. "I would say when [the instructor] would walk around in the infield checking to see how you were doing, I thought that was pretty cool, showed he was putting forth the effort." (Critical Incident, male, 21)

Negative Perceptions of Teacher

Table 3 indicates categories and frequencies of negative responses concerning teacher. The major categories were instruction, safety, and challenge.

Instruction. A few students cautioned that the syllabus did not properly reflect course activities and assignment due dates. Some students also recommended that a better method for taking attendance be adopted, that teachers need to address tardiness, and that teachers should minimize teacher-talk and increase playing time. Several students found interference by the university supervisor as negative as reflected by this female student:

I often felt very threatened by [university supervisor]. I think that although he held high expectations for everyone, and that's a good thing, the expectations were often too high and made people uncomfortable. This is a beginning volleyball class, and no one took it to become a star athlete. We took it to have fun, and at times [he] made that level of fun and enjoyment go WAY down. (Critical Incident, female, 22)

Safety. Safety, in the form of illness or injury, and environmental concerns were viewed negatively by several students. Some students admitted that they had not properly eaten or hydrated before class and although they took personal responsibility for that, they suggested that the teacher address those issues. Several exercise class teachers attempted to schedule some classes outside early in the semester; unfortunately, the weather did not always

cooperate. Several students identified outside activities in cold weather negatively. "The main negative was walking outside when it was cold out. I thought that the indoor track was a much better option." (Critical Incident, male, 23)

Challenge. Some participants identified challenge negatively. Several students did not feel as though they were challenged enough during class. For example, some students did not work hard enough in an exercise class to increase their heart rate. In the sport classes, some students believed they already knew the sport skills and did not want to spend time learning or reviewing basic skills. On the other hand, this student reveals that she took the class to learn the skills and was intimidated by higher skilled classmates.

It's hard to participate with the different skill levels. I'm at a moderate skill level. I don't think people at a high skill level should take this class because they make it too competitive. It's not fair to the lower level participants because the high skilled players don't let them play as much. That's not everybody, but the majority. You can see it because the higher level players don't let them play rather than helping them improve. The higher skill players get frustrated. (Critical Incident, female, 20)

Positive Perceptions of Social Environment

The smallest number of responses involved social environment. Table 4 indicates categories and frequencies of positive responses concerning the social environment. The major categories for positive responses were meeting people and team/group dynamics.

Meet people. Participants enjoyed meeting and socializing with classmates. Some students revealed that they met new people, while others enjoyed playing or exercising with already established friends. "The one thing that has had a positive influence on me is the people I met in class. My teammates were great and I think I

made a few friends this semester.” (Critical Incident, male, 20)

Team/group dynamics. Teachers were encouraged to incorporate elements of Sport Education into classes in an attempt to promote social cohesion. Sport class participants were placed in teams and exercise class participants were assigned to groups with each student accepting a role. Participants identified that working in a team or being in an exercise group was a positive experience. This female revealed how she enjoyed her volleyball team:

This class had a positive influence on me because it helped me be a part of a team that works together and encouraged each other. The teamwork that I have done in the past has been for academics. There has always been people in my group that don't participate. Everyone participated in this group and it was really great to not have to pick up people's slack. (Critical Incident, female, 22)

Negative Perceptions of Social Environment

Table 4 indicates categories and frequencies of negative responses concerning social environment. The major categories for negative responses were meeting people and team/group dynamics.

Team/group dynamics. Only one participant did not feel accepted by her team. A small number of students in the exercise classes did not like the group aspect of sport education as revealed by this student:

I didn't really like the group idea—with a coach, equipment manager etc. To me, exercise is something I like to do on my own—w/out having to worry about what other people are doing. I kind of felt that the group stuff was just a filler—(Critical Incident, female, 19)

Nothing Positive Nothing Negative

Four students (2.5%) shared their negative feelings concerning PEAC being a university required class. They viewed time spent in the class as taking away from other classes that they

viewed as “more important.” Two of these participants were able to identify one positive component of the class (i.e., teacher, yoga). However, two could not identify a single positive critical incident of the class.

I can't really say I had a positive experience here. This class wasn't about fun. It was about the stupid university requirement. However, any positives I could have gained were sucked away by the activity and assignments that took away both time and effort from any important classes. (Critical Incident, male, 21)

In contrast, 34 participants (i.e., 21.7%) did not have a response to a negative critical incident in the class. When provided an opportunity, and even encouraged to write about negative elements of the class, they could not think of any. Following is a typical response from this group of students: “I can't think of anything that has had a negative influence. Everything we did in the class was beneficial in some way.” (Critical Incident, female, 20).

Conclusions

The purpose of this study was to identify CPE course characteristics that contributed to positive and negative student perceptions. Student views need to be examined in order to provide meaningful experiences for these “customers” of physical education programs. The focus of the project was alignment of curriculum between lecture and activity by including activities and assignments to connect the classes. Students identified three main areas of positive and negative perceptions: (a) curriculum, (b) teacher, and (c) social environment. Based on these responses, three conclusions are offered.

Coherent Curriculum

The purpose of CPE courses is to provide students the knowledge and experience that will aid them in making informed decisions about their own health, which could affect quality of life and

life span (Rimmer & Kelly, 1987). Guiding students to value physical education could help them to embrace life-long healthy decisions. Curricular decisions, therefore, must be based on “content that is interesting and meaningful to [students] and can help students make connections between the content and their lives” (Silverman & Ennis, 2003, p. 121).

Like participants in previous research (Coelho, 2000), most students found the content of the physical education class relevant. Participants in this study valued the content, assignments, and activities included in the activity class. The assignments were related to content learned in the lecture class (e.g., health, wellness, physical activity) and revealed personal information that guided student goal-setting. Most of the assignments were interesting and meaningful to students because they provided personal information (e.g., cardiovascular fitness level, body composition, environmental awareness). The positive attitude these participants revealed about short but relevant in- and out-of-class assignments also reflects previous research (Jorgenson et al., 2001). Participants were, however, specific about assignments that they did not view as relevant (i.e., textbook laboratory assignments). It is important, therefore, to include assignments that provide students information that can be used in setting and attaining goals and eliminate assignments that do not provide meaningful connection.

Effective Teaching Behaviors

Participants in this study recognized and appreciated effective teaching behaviors (e.g., feedback, demonstration) exhibited by the teachers. Even though the teachers were pre-service teaching undergraduates, students appreciated that teachers were prepared, and believed that this preparation reflected a concern for student learning. They frequently identified teacher feedback and encouragement as contributing to their positive perceptions. Weinberg and Gould (2003) suggest that teachers motivate

students using feedback that focuses on trying hard and exerting effort.

In contrast to many of the participants in Coelho’s (2000) study, the students in this study found the teachers to be pleasant, encouraging, and motivating. Students in Coelho’s study reported that more teachers exhibited adversarial behaviors than showed patience and concern. There are, however, important contextual differences between the two studies. Coelho’s students evaluated an entire physical education program at a military academy. This study examined one course in a public university. The purpose and goals of physical education and fitness at a military academy may be different from those at a public university. The goal of this CPE class was to teach students knowledge and skills to become life long participants in physical activity.

When taught effective teaching behaviors (e.g., feedback, demonstration) in methods classes and practicum teaching experiences, these pre-service teachers could competently deliver physical activity classes to university students. Wankel (1980) found that motives for adults to continue in an exercise group included enjoyment, activity type, social factors, and leadership. Leadership included the instructor. The participants in the current study enjoyed the instructors—not only the feedback they received in class, but also the effective teaching behaviors exhibited. However, teachers can always improve, and suggestions from participants that would enhance instruction included addressing safety issues, following the syllabus, addressing tardiness, and challenging students on an individual level in various classes.

Social Environment

Approximately 50% of participants who begin an exercise group drop out within six months (Dishman, 1988). Interestingly, recent research has identified a relationship between cohesion and adherence in exercise groups (Estabrooks & Carron, 1999; Spink & Carron, 1994). Social support contributes to group cohesion. Many

participants in this study enjoyed making social connections by meeting new people or being part of a team or group. The pre-service teachers were encouraged to incorporate components of sport education (Siedentop, 1994) into their classes specifically to enhance group cohesion. Unfortunately, this theme included the smallest amount of participant comments. Therefore, enhancing the social environment is an area of focus for future classes. Spink and Carron (1993) successfully used team building strategies to enhance cohesion in exercise classes. Examples of strategies to build group cohesion included group name and poster, team roles, choosing exercise partners, and establishing group goals. These strategies correlate with those emphasized in Sport Education. Although the pre-service teachers included some of these strategies, perhaps not enough emphasis was placed on building the social environment or the included strategies were not important to the participants.

Future Research

For future research, the survey question needs to be adjusted for administration in the public university context. Coehlo (2000) asked students to “Describe a specific incident that you have experienced in the physical education program at USMA that you believe has had a positive/negative influence on you, your education, or future career.” That program spanned four years of student enrollment and encompassed a variety of classes and components (e.g., intramurals). The question was too broad and sweeping to assess a single CPE course. Therefore, the question could be more relevant to assess a single course by changing it: “Describe one or more specific incident(s) that you have experienced in this class that you believe has had a positive/negative influence on you or your future engagement in physical activity.”

If the goal of our CPE course is to prepare students for engagement in lifelong physical activity, then we need to provide appropriate

knowledge and meaningful experiences. In an attempt to improve our CPE classes, it is important to listen to the customers of the classes—that is student voices. Frequently we fail to systematically ask for student input. By systematically asking students to make their voices heard, we teachers can identify what components of our classes are meaningful to students and what components are not appropriate. We must welcome and elicit student voice. Then using those voices as a guide, identify and provide the most meaningful experiences and activities to help students make those connections between course content and their lives.

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Table 1
Frequency of Key Components by Categories

Positive Perceptions Related to:			Negative Perceptions Related to:		
Category	Frequency	%	Category	Frequency	%
Curriculum	166	62.9	Curriculum	85	62.0
Teacher	66	25.0	Teacher	42	30.7
Social environment	32	12.1	Social environment	10	7.3
Total	264	100		137	100

Table 2
Positive and Negative Perceptions of Curriculum

Positive perceptions	Frequency	Percentage	Negative perceptions	Frequency	Percentage
Assignments	52	31.3	Program features	27	31.8
Content	50	30.1	Assignments	29	34.1
Activities	24	14.5	Activities	23	27.1
Exercise	22	13.3	Competition	6	7.0
Fun/enjoy	8	4.8			
Program features	4	2.4			
Competition	4	2.4			
Other	2	1.2			
Total	166	100		85	100

Table 3
Positive and Negative Perceptions of Teacher

Positive perceptions	Frequency	Percentage	Negative perceptions	Frequency	Percentage
Instruction	40	62.1	Instruction	17	40.5
Motivation	21	30.3	Safety	13	31.0
Challenge	5	7.6	Challenge	10	23.8
			Motivation	2	4.8
Total	66	100		42	100.1

Table 4
Positive and Negative Perceptions of Social Environment

Positive perceptions	Frequency	Percentage	Negative perceptions	Frequency	Percentage
Meet people	20	59.4	Team/group	7	70.0
Team/group	12	40.6	Meet people	3	30.0
Total	32	100		10	100