

PHYSICAL ACTIVITY

Enhancing “Coopetition”: A Model for Physical Activity Courses

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Abstract

This study explored the extent to which nontraditional physical activity courses and student experiences reflect a pleasure and participation sports model. The theoretical framework for this qualitative study was based on the pleasure and participation sports model (Coakley, 2017). Data via 20 observations and 20 interviews were gathered from participants enrolled in a small liberal arts college. Tenets of the pleasure and participation model were evident, along with a sense of coopetition. College student experiences of physical activity in courses is an important area of research that could lead to increased physical activity levels. It has been demonstrated that physical activity in young adulthood can have a health-promotion effect throughout life. This research indicates that a diverse range of physical activity courses can have short- and long-term positive effects on student wellness.

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Colleges and universities offer activity courses in a variety of ways. While some offer them simply as electives, others require them as part of a physical education or other human performance major. Yet others require them as part of a graduation requirement, often tied into a wellness course. The rationale behind such courses, whether offered as electives or requirements, is often grounded in scholarly research supporting the benefits of a physically active lifestyle (Donatelle, 2019; Thygerson & Thygerson, 2019). This is especially important since physical activity in young adulthood can affect health-promotion efforts throughout life (Beaudoin, Parker, Tiemersma, & Lewis, 2018; Foster & Appleby, 2015). Therefore, when activity courses are required of the general population, higher education institutions need to examine the type of environment in which these classes are conducted to create a positive experience for all students (Beaudoin et al., 2018). Although a substantial amount of research explores student attitudes and experiences at the elementary and secondary school levels, less empirical evidence at the college level exists of student attitudes and what constitutes a positive experience in various types of physical activity courses (Li, Chen, & Baker, 2014).

This research took place at a small liberal arts college with a population of approximately 1,000 students. The college had recently revamped its general education curriculum to include courses that faculty members felt were imperative to providing a holistic student experience. This process included the inclusion of courses that aligned with goals for the newly adopted Core Curriculum. One goal was to “be strong: value and pursue the benefits of lifelong physical fitness, balance in work and recreation, and psychological well-being” (Emory and Henry College, 2017). As a result, one of the outcomes was that beginning in the 2009–2010 academic year, all students would be required to take a wellness course to expand their knowledge of the benefits of lifelong physical fitness. In addition to the wellness course, students were also required to take two activity courses, providing them with opportunities to participate in a variety of physical activities. The goal was to support Core Curriculum initiatives by providing a wide range of physical activity offerings, encompassing traditional and nontraditional experiences, which would meet the diverse needs of the student

population. This is important since research suggests that declines in physical activity are often linked to negative experiences in physical education and sport, which at the secondary level “continues to be dominated by competitive team sports” (Cardinal, Yan, & Cardinal, 2013; Ferry & McCaughtry, 2013, p. 375; Li et al., 2014). Therefore, this project examined whether the nontraditional physical activity courses aligned with a “pleasure and participation sports model” (Coakley, 2017) and explored student experiences in relation to the model. The impetus for this study came about as a result of reviewing presurvey data completed by students enrolled in the wellness course. Beginning with the adoption of the newly revamped Core Curriculum, first-year students who were enrolled in the mandatory wellness course were surveyed regarding what type of activity courses they perceived to be the most beneficial to them. One key question posed was, “When you participate in physical activity, do you prefer a competitive or non-competitive atmosphere?” Overall, 67.5% of students preferred a competitive environment, while 32.5% preferred a noncompetitive atmosphere. However, by gender, 86.3% of males preferred a competitive environment, while 50.8% of females preferred a noncompetitive environment. Although traditional and nontraditional activities can be taught to reflect Coakley’s pleasure and participation sports model, this study focused on the extent to which nontraditional physical activity courses and student experiences reflect a pleasure and performance sports model. According to Coakley (2017), this model can involve competition but has a primary emphasis on “connections between people and personal expression through participation” (Coakley, 2017, p. 63).

This study was funded by the McGraw-Hill Publishing Company’s College and University Instructional Physical Activity Program (C/UIPAP) Research Award. This grant is provided with the intent of facilitating and supporting research efforts by administrators, faculty, instructors, and researchers with an interest in enhancing C/UIPAP instructional environments. The purpose of the study was twofold: (1) to determine the extent to which nontraditional physical activity courses reflect the pleasure and participation model (Coakley, 2017) and (2) to determine the extent to which student experiences in the course reflect characteristics of that model.

The study explored college student experiences in courses offering nontraditional sport and/or physical activity opportunities. Nontraditional refers to sport or physical activities that are not traditionally offered in public schools throughout the United States as part of the regular physical education curriculum. Archery, Adventure Training, Ballroom Dancing, Bowling, Fly Fishing, Hiking/Backpacking, Kayaking, Rock Climbing, Self Defense, and Yoga comprised the courses included as part of the study. Although these types of opportunities to engage in physical activity have become more popular in recent decades, many physical education and extracurricular programs in the U.S. public school system continue to emphasize traditional competitive team sports even though research suggests that “the healthiest of all physical activities [are] rhythmic, non-competitive exercises” (Coakley, 2017, p. 66; Ferry & McCaughtry, 2013). In comparison to traditional courses, the non-traditional options provided opportunities for more inclusive processes with a de-emphasis on competition against others (Buchanan, 2011; Coakley, 2017).

Two key research questions were used: In what ways do the nontraditional physical activity courses reflect the pleasure and participation sports model? and To what extent do student experiences in the course reflect characteristics of the model? Coakley’s (2017) pleasure and participation sports model “emphasizes democratic leadership, inclusive participation, and the use of cooperation and competition with others to develop and test skills in a healthy and enjoyable context” (p. 646). In contrast, the power and performance sports model is defined as a “framework for an organizational structure emphasizing hierarchical leadership, exclusive participation, and the use of strength, speed, and power to push human limits and dominate opponents in the quest for competitive success” (Coakley, 2017, p. 647).

The theoretical framework for this study was based on the work of noted sport sociologist Jay Coakley. He developed the pleasure and participation model in contrast to the power and performance model in an effort to more fully understand and explain the wide variances in sport (Buchanan, 2011). The models have been included in multiple editions of Coakley’s popular text *Sports in Society: Issues and Controversies* since 2001. The variances outlined in each model often

result in different experiences and patterns of socialization outcomes for those who are participating (Coakley, 2017). For many, past experiences in organized sport and physical education have aligned more with the power and performance model which emphasizes defeating others and dominating opponents. Those who are athletic excel in this type of environment. Those who are not as athletic often become discouraged and feel less competent, which minimizes their desire and motivation to be physically active. Yet research has indicated that rates of physical activity increase when individuals feel competent and enjoy the activity (Bai, Allums-Featherston, Saint-Maurice, Welk, & Candelaria, 2018; Eberline, Judge, Walsh, & Henley, 2018). Tenets of the pleasure and participation model include an emphasis on good health, enjoyment, personal expression, social relationships, and creating an inclusive environment, as opposed to an emphasis on defeating others and dominating opponents. The characteristics of this model also align with various dimensions of wellness such as social, emotional, environmental, and physical, thus offering the researchers an opportunity to explore the potential for enhancing overall physical activity levels and well-being during the college experience and beyond.

In today's society, it is important to understand college student experiences of physical activity in courses, which could lead to increased physical activity levels. The cost of physical inactivity is staggering. Conservatively estimated, physical inactivity costs health care providers in excess of \$53.8 billion in 2013, and there is every expectation these numbers will continue to steadily increase (Ding et al., 2016). These figures include the direct cost of treatment of sickness and disease associated with inactivity and the indirect costs caused by lost productivity and foregone earnings caused by premature mortality. Perhaps most troubling is the end result of physical inactivity. The World Health Organization (2009) estimates that 3.3 million people die each year due to physical inactivity, making it the fourth leading underlying cause of death.

Along with the economic cost, research has suggested that physical inactivity is an important risk factor for the development of a variety of chronic diseases. A wide range of conditions such as coronary heart disease, hypertension, type 2 diabetes, colon cancer, depression and anxiety, hip fractures, osteoarthritis, and numerous

other cancers have been linked to physical inactivity (Donatelle, 2019; Thygerson & Thygerson, 2019). On the other hand, it has been demonstrated that physical activity in young adulthood can have a health-promotion effect throughout life (Beaudoin et al., 2018).

In addition to the long-term benefits, many benefits of physical activity can also positively affect students while they are in college. In terms of academic success, research suggests that physical activity can increase the capacity for students to learn (Institute of Medicine, 2013; Ratey, 2008). Along with benefits related to cognition, engaging in regular physical activity can help college students to control stress and can increase self-esteem (Donatelle, 2019). Therefore, it is important to explore what types of opportunities for physical activity are offered at the college level, along with students' interpretations of their experiences. This process can greatly influence student choice as related to their involvement (or lack of) in physical activity during the college years and throughout the life span. Initiatives that encourage and support physical activity endeavors for college students also align with the SHAPE America position statement, which recommends that all colleges and universities include a physical activity instructional program as a strong and integral part of the academic curriculum (National Association for Sport and Physical Education, 2007). Additionally, the NASPE (2009) *Appropriate Instructional Practice Guidelines for Higher Education Physical Activity Programs* has provided guidance for physical activity programs in higher education and encourages courses that "help students gain the skills and knowledge to be physically active throughout their lives, differ from those of intramurals and athletics, and are sensitive to students' interests and address their overall well-being" (p. 5). According to Beaudoin et al. (2018), "the college environment is pivotal to strengthening positive lifelong physical activity" (p. 8). Given the plethora of research supporting efforts to understand and encourage physical activity, this research study further contributes to the scholarly literature regarding how expansion of opportunities that do not overemphasize competition can result in positive student experiences (Graham, Elliott, & Palmer, 2016).

Method

Participants

Interview participants were randomly selected students who had completed an activity course at the college during the 2011–2012 academic year. These courses included activities such as Yoga, Fly Fishing, and Kayaking. The participants were 11 females and nine males who ranged in age from 18 to 26 years. The researchers coordinated meeting times with each instructor to fully describe details of the study to students enrolled in the course. Students who agreed to participate signed a consent form. This form also provided information regarding their right to cease participation in the study at any time.

Data Collection

Following institutional review board approval and obtaining informed consent from participants, the researchers conducted the study by collecting data from 20 observations and 20 semistructured one-on-one interviews during the 2011–2012 academic year.

Class Observations

For the observations, a minimum of two members of the research team visited each activity class on different occasions to observe the group dynamics. All used the same observational instrument (Appendix A) designed by the team for the purpose of exploring the extent to which tenets of Coakley's pleasure and participation model were evident. The specific tenets included democratic leadership, inclusive participation, cooperation and competition, and a healthy and enjoyable context (Coakley, 2017).

Evidence of *democratic leadership* was observed in the extent to which students had input on choices related to the activity focus, partner involvement, differentiated instruction, and peer feedback. Observation data related to democratic leadership also included consideration for whether participants adhered to the rules and the reaction of the group to such behavior when students did not. The ability of the students to resolve disputes or make collective decisions without the involvement of the instructor was also examined.

For *inclusive participation*, evidence of encouragement both verbally and nonverbally among the participants was observed. The research team also observed for signs of exclusion such as off-color jokes, gender discrimination, and racial bias. The level of participation by all students, whether or not it was to their fullest possible extent, was also noted.

For *cooperation and competition*, the research team observed encouragements to participate among the students. Team members also noted if an emphasis was placed on self-improvement in the form of competing against oneself rather than an emphasis on competing against others. Often, members of the team observed there was little pressure for students to attempt difficult skills if they did not feel ready. There was very much an atmosphere of working at your own pace and also evidence of other students helping one another if any student struggled to master a new skill.

Healthy and enjoyable context was the easiest tenet to observe. Research team members consistently noted throughout observations that even when students were challenged by a new skill, smiles and laughter still abounded. Observation data indicated that participants felt comfortable and content in their surroundings and were offered opportunities to make mistakes during the skill development process without connotations of negative repercussions as a result.

Participant Interviews

The interview participants ($n = 20$; 11 female, 9 male) were randomly selected from the rosters of each course. One male and one female student from each course, with the exception of Self Defense for Women, as it is a gender-specific course, were interviewed via a semistructured protocol (Appendix B). The audio-recorded interviews focused on a few main ideas such as course selection, physical activity, role of sports in each person's life, as well as some questions more focused to the study's framework exploring the domains of democratic leadership, inclusive participation, and finally cooperation and competition in a health and enjoyable context.

Initial questions from the interview focused on why the student chose to take that course in particular, with a focus on his or her favorite and least favorite experiences in the course, as well as how it differed from his or her previous physical education experiences. Some of the other questions asked students to define physical

activity and sports. The research team also asked participants about their preferred environments and types of activities when engaging in physical activity. The final questions explored how the various classes helped promote positive behaviors within the college environment.

Data Analysis

Upon completion of the observations and transcription of the participant interviews, each researcher reviewed the mass of data for trends and themes through open coding. Peer debriefing and member checks strengthened validity and established trustworthiness of the data collection and analysis. Researchers individually read and identified common themes emerging in the data sets and then met several times as a group to compare findings. Themes were reviewed for relevance and consistency to the pleasure and performance model. As a group, we compiled the noted trends in the qualitative data. Through discussion and additional analysis, the research team developed through code mapping the categories that eventually melded into the iterations of analysis.

Data analysis procedures included a constant comparative method in which conceptually congruent categories were constructed and multiple iterations of analysis developed (Anfara, Brown, & Mangione, 2002). This involved code mapping and the creation of categories that were conceptually congruent. The first iteration included words or phrases that were representative of data collected. Through interviews and observations, several key terms that provided a foundation for students' experiences were identified. Some of those key terms included *welcoming*, *teamwork*, *engagement*, and "it's a group thing." A departmental goal is to instill a lifelong love of activity. These expressions indicate that the department is on the right track.

The second iteration included four categories that defined the rubric/observations: democratic leadership, inclusive participation, and cooperation and competition in a healthy and enjoyable context. All categories were developed based on Coakley's (2009, 2015) pleasure and participation model.

The third iteration was leveling the playing field through coope-tition. To best describe Coakley's pleasure and participation model in one term, the researchers chose "coopetition," which is defined as

“simultaneous combination of cooperative and competitive behavior” (Tsai, 2002, p. 179). Coopetition synthesizes all of Coakley’s key concepts: “democratic leadership” and “inclusive participation” with the opportunity for competition and the development of skills in a “healthy and enjoyable context” (2009, p. 674).

Results and Discussion

This study explored college student experiences in courses offering nontraditional sport and/or physical activity opportunities. The purpose was twofold and consisted of determining the extent to which these physical activity courses reflect the pleasure and participation model (Coakley, 2017) and the extent to which student experiences in the course reflect characteristics of the model. The model emphasizes good health, enjoyment, personal expression, social relationships, and creating an inclusive environment, as opposed to an emphasis on defeating others and dominating opponents. Category construction through open coding and code mapping provided a systematic process through which multiple iterations of analysis were developed.

Results indicated that tenets of the pleasure and participation model were evident to a large extent in all of the courses. The environment, instructors, instructor philosophies, and types of sports provided a foundation for democratic leadership and inclusive participation in a healthy, enjoyable context. In terms of the environment, several participants expressed their positive associations with being in a relaxed and welcoming environment that was not focused solely on competition. This provided an “atmosphere of cooperation in which everyone achieves a common goal,” as opposed to “an atmosphere in which the success of some is dependent upon the failure of others” (Buchanan, 2011, p. 25). Participants also expressed their positive associations with an environment providing them the opportunity to be outside and in nature. For many, this experience was much different than the gym environment associated with public school physical education and physical activity.

Data indicated that along with the environment, the instructors and their instructional philosophies influenced the extent to which students interpreted their experiences as positive. For example, students overwhelmingly referred to the instructor’s ability to provide encouraging and individualized instruction from a nonjudgmental

approach. Instructors also emphasized personal goal setting and skill mastery, as opposed to structuring class sessions focused mainly on competition. Instructors were described as patient, caring, and interested in helping every student succeed. The description of instructors in this study mirrors recent findings by Garn et al. (2014) in relation to the description of club leaders in an after-school physical activity program. Garn et al. found that “successful club leaders were viewed to be highly caring and supportive” (p. 122). Also contributing positively to participant experiences in this study was the level of instructor competence in their ability to teach and their knowledge of the specific physical activity. Providing students with opportunities to become proficient at and enjoy physical activity emerged as a core philosophy of all of the instructors.

The various types of sports offered also supported themes included in the second iteration of analysis. For example, research has shown that students are more likely to indicate positive experiences when they feel accepted and are able to fully participate in activities (Coates & Vickerman, 2008). The types of sports offered, such as kayaking and fly fishing, created more of an inclusive environment that required a different kind of physical skill set than traditional sports such as basketball. This is important given that many individuals choose not to participate in physical activity if they do not feel confident and competent (Cardinal et al., 2013; Ferry & McCaughtry, 2013). As noted by Azzarito and Solomon (2005), declines in physical activity are often linked to negative experiences in physical education and sports. Research suggesting that physical inactivity is an important risk factor for a variety of chronic diseases also provides the impetus for the creation of more diverse opportunities for individuals to be physically active (Donatelle, 2019; Fernandes & Zanesco, 2010; Thygeson & Thygeson, 2019).

Participants in the study also indicated that their experiences promoted within the college environment positive behaviors and feelings of well-being that expanded beyond involvement in their respective courses. Students stated that interacting and developing relationships with peers, building values, increasing confidence in physical abilities, and encouraging others were some of the positive outcomes transcending beyond their class participation. This aligns with the concept of wellness, which includes mental, physical, and

social well-being encompassing the body, mind, and spirit in ways that optimize the full capabilities of individuals (Hattie, Myers, & Sweeney, 2004). Garn et al. (2014) noted similar benefits that highlighted the “importance of establishing positive and caring social environments” that promote student engagement and personal goal setting in physical activity (p. 129). Since students in this study were required to complete two physical activity courses in conjunction with a mandatory wellness course, the findings associated with a high level of well-being are encouraging.

The overriding theme throughout the study evolved around cooptation. This sense of cooptation (Brandenburger & Nalebuff, 1996; McCarthy, Carleton, Krumpholz, & Chow, 2018) was developed as the third iteration of analysis through data indicating that a combination of cooperation and competition. In the business sector and the realm of education, cooptation has proven to be an effective strategy associated with higher levels of academic attainment, growth, and performance (Adnett & Davies, 2003; Tsai, 2002). Specific to the physical activity courses, through this type of experience students felt empowered to challenge themselves and one another in a low-pressure environment. As a result, students were provided with greater opportunities to experience a sense of flow, which requires a balance of skill and challenge to produce enjoyment. This balance successfully illustrates the concept of too much or too little skill or challenge, which can result in an overall negative experience (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990).

Implications from the study suggest that a diverse range of physical activity courses appeals to students of varying athletic ability and can have both short- and long-term positive effects on student wellness. Research such as this should continue to further explore the types of opportunities offered at the college level, along with students’ interpretations of their experiences. This process can greatly influence student choice as related to their involvement (or lack of) in physical activity.

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Appendix A

Pleasure and Performance Model Observational Instrument

Tenet	Example	Not applicable	Never/ not observed	Rarely	Sometimes/ frequently	Consistently
Democratic Leadership						
Group members have choices and/or input and share ideas with one other	Members have choice of partner, choice of activity; share feedback with one another on skill development					
Group members resolve conflicts amicably in a manner that encourages honesty, openness, flexibility, and compassion	Members adhere to rules of fair play; no cheating; observes sport/activity etiquette					
Inclusive Participation						
Group members participate in sport/ activities equally, to the fullest extent possible	No inclusion (or sense of inclusion) due to race, class, gender, etc.; no off-color jokes, etc.					
Group members support efforts of one another in encouraging and positive ways	Positive verbal reinforcements among members such as “good job” or “good try”					
Cooperation and Competition						
Group members work with one another in a constructive manner to participate in class activities	Group members speak up in class; problem solve; encourage others to participate					

Tenet	Example	Not applicable	Never/ not observed	Rarely	Sometimes/ frequently	Consistently
Group members participate in sports and activities in which emphasis is placed on competing against oneself	Self-improvement is emphasized and practiced to a greater extent than beating someone else					
Healthy and Enjoyable Context						
Group members express pleasure or satisfaction with the class and/or activities offered through verbal and/or nonverbal expressions	Laughter, smiles, statements such as “this is fun”					
Group members participate in activities that support concepts related to wellness and lifetime activity	Activities offered can be continued later in life; adulthood					

Appendix B

Pleasure and Performance Model

Sample Interview Protocol

Topic domain: Course Selection

Leadoff question:

Why did you decide to take this course?

Possible follow-up questions:

1. How did you find out that the course was offered?
2. Tell me about physical education courses you've had in the past prior to college.
3. Is this course different?
4. If so, how?
5. What have been some of your favorite experiences in the course?
6. Why?
7. What have been some of your least favorite experiences in the course?
8. Why?
9. Is there anything you would do to make the course better?

Topic domain: Physical Activity

Leadoff question:

Can you tell me about your physical activity level?

Possible follow-up questions:

1. How would you define "physical activity"?
2. What are your favorite types of physical activity?
3. Tell me about your preferred environment when participating in physical activity.

Topic domain: Sports

Leadoff question:

Can you tell me about sports in your life?

Possible follow-up questions:

1. What appeals and/or does not appeal to you about sports?
2. How would you define sports?

3. What kind of sports do you enjoy most?
4. Why?
5. From whom did you learn about sports and what kinds of messages did they leave with you?

Topic domain: Democratic Leadership

Leadoff question:

Can you tell me about your experiences in this class working with others?

Possible follow-up questions:

1. Relating to the above question, recall an incident if you can.
2. What does that experience mean to you?

Topic domain: Inclusive Participation

Leadoff question:

To what extent have you participated in the sports and activities offered in this class?

Possible follow-up questions:

1. Would you describe any activities in which you have not been able to participate?
2. Can you share a time, not necessarily related to physical activity, when you felt excluded from something?
3. If so, how did it feel?

Topic domain: Cooperation/Competition With Others in Healthy/Enjoyable Context

Leadoff question:

What would you describe as the ideal type of competitive environment in sport and physical activity?

Possible follow-up questions:

1. Can you tell me about competition in this class?
2. How is competition in this class similar or different to your competitive experiences in previous physical education classes or sports?
3. Has there ever been a time when you did not enjoy competition?
4. If so, can you describe?

5. Does this class provide a healthy and enjoyable environment?
6. If so, to what extent?

Topic domain: Summary/Debriefing

Leadoff question:

Do you feel this course has promoted your positive behaviors within the college environment? If so, can you explain how and/or provide an example?

Possible follow-up questions:

1. Is there anything else you would like to add?
2. Do you have any questions about the interview?