Using the meaningful physical education features as a lens to view student experiences of democratic pedagogy in higher education

Corresponding author: Shrehan Lynch, University of East London

ORCID: 0000-0001-8939-3143

slynch@uel.ac.uk

@DrLynchPE

Co-author: Julia Sargent, The Open University

ORCID: 0000-0001-9082-8378

julia.sargent@open.ac.uk

@julia_sargent

Abstract

Background: Higher education (HE) physical education (PE) can provide opportunities for students to develop meaning(s) and values towards movement experiences. However, it is an under researched area in the educational sphere and little is known about what or how students find, meaningful movement. While there has been increasing interest in the features of meaningful PE, few studies have explored how they relate to students' experiences of movement in the context of HE or indeed the meaning held for certain features such as 'fun'. In seeking to address this gap, the purpose of this article was to explore what university students found meaningful in PE.

Method: Using data from a larger digital ethnographic study, this research featured six students studying a university PE class taught by an educator with a sociocultural perspective towards education and movement. Digital video narratives and reflective essays served as qualitative data and were analysed using collaborative thematic analysis.

Findings: Four themes are described in relation to students' meaningful experiences. These are (a) meaningful PE is fun and contains elements of delight, (b) meaningful PE is a combination of fun and challenge (c) meaningful PE develops motor competency in personally relevant areas, and (d) meaningful PE is a social and personally relevant experience. Our findings demonstrated the interlinking nature of meaningful PE features and, specifically, how they are embodied by higher education students.

Conclusion: We argue that students can have meaningful PE experiences, even when educators do not plan for them. Furthermore, the features of meaningful PE, particularly in relation to 'fun' can extend to university settings. Moreover, sociocultural educators with a clear vision for classes can contribute to students developing foundational beliefs towards movement. This is

exhibited through employing democratic pedagogies such as high levels of reflection and goal setting.

Keywords: meaningful, physical education, higher education, sociocultural perspective, embodiment, democratic pedagogy, video narratives.

Using the meaningful physical education features as a lens to view student experiences of democratic pedagogy in higher education

Physical Education (PE) purposes, philosophies, practices, and durability have been a site of contention since its beginning (Kirk 2013). However, scholars have agreed that identifying the value or meaning that physical educators and students gain from their delivery and participation in PE and physical activity is a worthy research endeavour (Beni et al. 2017, 2019; Ennis 2017; Gibbons 2009). While many scholars may not refer to the terms 'meaning' or 'meaningful(ness)' directly; many have explored aspects of PE that relate to the terms such as 'sense-making' or 'values.' Both terms 'meaning' and 'meaningfulness' have been summarised as the relevance of an activity to a person's life (Chen 1998). For example, PE is a meaningful experience because the partaker perceives it to be important to their physical development. In other words, meaningful PE experiences are influenced by the value the learner attributes to PE and their overall life and whether activities are personally suitable, only then will they actively engage in or seek to avoid PE (Chen 1998). Throughout this paper, we adopt Kretchmar's (2007) definition of meaning. As such, meaning is perceived 'in a broad, common sense way. It includes all emotions, perceptions, hopes, dreams, and other cognitions—in short, the full range of human experience' (2007, 382). For us, meaningful experiences are those that hold 'personal significance' for the learner (Kretchmar 2007, 382) and occur within nurturing and motivating environments (Ennis 2017). Thus, meaningful PE is personal and can fluctuate in its association depending on an individual's context, preference, and task (Beni et al. 2019). Consequently, it is a challenging task for educators balancing such a personal human experience in a class of potentially 50, 70 or 120 students today (Ennis 2013).

O'Connor (2018) argued that if PE is to be embraced by all and regarded as a site for inclusive, lifelong learning, then the meanings and values attached to movement by students are worthy of attention. PE as a context for exploring movement and its meaning for students is, therefore, an important area of study. Smith (2007) reminds us that valuing movement in PE is not a simple matter of teachers introducing students to a range of activities and students gaining knowledge of them, but, helping young people make sense of their PE experiences and identify the ways movement can enrich their existence and serve as a source of their identity (Ennis 2013). We prioritise meaningful engagement in PE given its potential to influence the quality of life at an existential level (Beni et al. 2018; Kretchmar 2006).

In their review of literature, Beni et al. (2017) argued that there are numerous research articles explaining as to why exploring meaningful PE experiences is warranted and should be given priority. An example of such findings suggests that personal meaningfulness derived from experiences that are satisfying, challenging, social or simply fun, are likely to lead to individuals committing to a physically active lifestyle (Teixeira et al. 2012). Moreover, a focus on lifetime activities, developing relevant life skills, involving students in course decisions, using authentic assessment, and promoting a positive and safe environment, can contribute towards developing meaningful PE programs (Gibbons 2009). Beni et al. (2017) further claimed that promoting meaningfulness is likely to emphasise the intrinsic motivational benefits of participation that have been shown to underpin a commitment to lifelong physical activity.

In line with other scholars working within the field of meaningful PE and sport (c.f. Fletcher et al. 2018; O'Connor 2018), within this paper, we are guided by Kretchmar's (2006) features that represent the qualities of meaningful experiences in PE: social interaction, fun, challenge, motor competence and delight. Drawing upon the recent work of Beni et al. (2017),

Walseth et al. (2018) and Beni et al. (2019), we also use the feature of personally relevant learning as an aspect of meaningful PE that has been omnipresent in the literature. These features are qualitative aspects of experiences that participants commonly identify with and, therefore, can be helpful in considering how educators can design experiences for learners. For readers unfamiliar with the meaningful PE features Figure 1 highlights the features with a brief definition.

[Figure 1 near here]

To ensure that meaningful PE features are actualised by students, Beni et al. (2018) suggest they should be planned for when making pedagogical decisions; for example, encouraging students to set personal goals through a unit of work. Additionally, planning opportunities for students to select their groups, involving students in planning, constantly provide modifications for skill activities (teacher and self-directed) and use autonomy-supportive teaching as pedagogical devices (Beni et al. 2019). O'Connor (2018) advocated for the use of student reflections and the writing of rich narratives for students in PE meaning-making. Moreover, Walseth et al. (2019) drew upon activist pedagogies such as getting to know students and their prior experiences in PE then constructing a thematic unit around a relevant theme for students; such pedagogies have the potential to empower students and increase students meaning in PE.

It is apparent that there is increasing support for the value of promoting meaningful experiences, but research indicates there is a lack of understanding of how to promote meaningful experiences in PE (Fletcher et al. 2018, Kretchmar 2000). Further gaps include the movement experiences of HE students, scholars have consistently researched meaningful PE experiences within K-12 settings (elementary, middle and high schools).

In their review of literature on HE students' physical activity, Keating et al. (2005) found that 40-50% of college students are inactive, show no differences in the amount they exercise per year at university and that research in the area has been neglected. This could be due to changes in organised PE/physical activity in US HE since the 1960s and that many PE departments sole purpose is now training teachers (Newell 1990). At present, some PE departments, typically those housed in larger kinesiology colleges, still teach basic health and PE courses or otherwise named 'activity courses' or 'university PE' (c.f. Garn et al. 2017 and Lynch, Richards, and Pennington 2018). To what extent students find these outlets meaningful is not yet known. Limited literature has suggested that HE PE courses can provide meaningful opportunities for students to develop foundational beliefs towards movement, but only if students are engaged, without such engagement, students are more likely to have a negative experience (Garn et al. 2017). In seeking to address this gap, the purpose of this article is to explore what university students found meaningful in PE. Indeed, an added contribution of this paper is to extend the scope of the features of meaningful PE to those in institutions of HE and to our understanding of 'what fun means' in relation to meaningful PE.

Methodology

We drew data from a broader digital ethnographic study conducted from January 2017 to May 2017. The broader study aimed to explore student experiences of alternative teaching practices and digital assessment methods in HE PE. Employing digital ethnography can still focus on the daily experiences of individuals lives rather than the 'digital' element (Pink 2016). Henceforth, in this paper, we focus on the ethnographic method as a means to tell a social story

(Murthy 2008) of meaningful student experiences in PE and are aware that individual experiences are personally significant and a highly subjective research endeavour.

Study Context

Setting and participants

The study was conducted at Readers College (pseudonym), a large public university in the United States. Readers College provided students with the opportunity to take HE PE courses that spanned across an array of sports and physical pursuits. The university-aged students selected activity courses as one-credit modules and came from a variety of undergraduate disciplines. In some ways, the students reflected typical school PE classes, diverse student backgrounds, prior experiences in PE and an array of physical, cognitive, social, and affective competencies within the subject. Data were drawn from six participants; Table 1 provides the demographic information on the six participants.

[Table 1 near here]

The university PE class and the pedagogy of the educator

The participants were spread across two courses, aerobics and water aerobics. In total, water aerobics had seven students and aerobics had eight students. Traditionally at Readers College, these courses are taught through teacher-directed instruction. The focus is predominantly 'physical,' and the course culminates with a standardised, final written exam. Shrehan (first author) was the educator of the class. Shrehan has a sociocultural perspective on education and movement. 'A sociocultural approach is a way of approaching human movement that does not start from any given idea neither about what it means to move nor about how to

move' (Larsson and Quennerstedt 2012: 284). *How* and *why* a person moves can be down to a multitude of factors, for example, amount of resources, knowledge or personal confidence. As an educational philosophy, Shrehan draws on democratic and socially just pedagogies. Consequently, throughout the university PE class, she employed a number of democratic pedagogies that are shown in Table 2. Shrehan also had several goals for the class which she shared with students on their first day. These linked to research-informed practices for the semester (see Table 2). Practical goals and visions are important for educators because they help align what is what, how, and why things are taught to students (Ni Chroinin et al. 2019).

As a consequence of Shrehan's pedagogy and philosophy towards education, the teacher-directed traditions of the course were revised. Educators at Readers College were given a degree of flexibility and ownership on their courses, which facilitated the change. On the first day of each course, both groups were asked to come to class with an outline of their goals and aspirations for the semester. Then, in a share circle (Lynch and Curtner-Smith 2019), students were asked to discuss their goals and identify what they needed to do to achieve them. Thereon, students were provided with a list of possible opportunities for class time. For example, the water aerobics course options included: traditional water aerobics, synchronised swimming, diving, water survival, swimming circuits, lap swimming, techniques of swimming, etc. Aerobic course options included traditional aerobics, circuits, yoga, swimming, boxercise, any games/ sports, spinning, tennis, running, rock climbing, gym workouts, etc. Additionally, students were encouraged to research and select different activities and to consider every choice with an open mind.

Both courses were timetabled to meet twice a week for 50 minutes. However, when negotiating the course outline, students in both courses requested that the class meet once a week

for 100 minutes. When the group came to a final agreement on how they wanted their class to be set up (to achieve their goals and the activities each week), they signed a group contract agreeing to the new conditions of the class and that they would fully commit to the semester. Shrehan was conscious that she had 15 weeks with the students and the reality of what could be achieved towards the goals during this time.

Due to the nature of assessment policies in HE, the methods of assessment were pre-decided, but there were still flexibilities in terms of the content. The methods of assessment were digital narratives and a reflective essay. As per the syllabus, students were informed that they would receive the highest grade in class (an A) if they submitted all the required narratives and attended class each week unless they had an excused absence: 'The main requirement of this course is to actively participate in the activities and to reflect on such activities to show a learning journey through narratives.' Both assessments were submitted through the Reader College online learning platform.

The digital narratives included weekly uploads of a video reflection (1 to 5 minutes in length) on what students had learnt during the class. Students were required to complete ten reflections in total. Initially, to support students, Shrehan encouraged them to write a script or free talk through a set of guided questions. Example questions included: reflect on what you enjoyed this week and why?; How have your prior experiences influenced your enjoyment?; Would you do the activity again? Why/ why not?; Did you like working with your classmates? What have you learnt this week? This can be about yourself, the activity or life in general! Similar to O'Connor (2018), the intent of the reflections was to see how the participants constructed meaning. While the terms meaning and meaningfulness were not articulated or emphasised to students in the guided questions, 'reflection gives experience meaning, and

systematic reflection extends the shared understanding of meaningful experience' (Bain 1995, 241). To support the video reflections, the reflective essay was an open format. Students were required to upload an essay on their learning that took place in the class. The guidelines stated, 'the essay is a personal experience, typically written in the first person to tell a story, it should be written for a specific audience and can use creative language. Furthermore, you may include non-traditional text as part of the story if you so wish.' There was no set title for the essay and students were able to write freely regarding their experiences. Students positive or negative reflections/experiences shared would not influence their grades, simply by submitting the assignment and engaging fully in the course meant they would pass.

Data gathering and analysis

After both courses and grading processes were complete, Shrehan contacted the students as part of a retrospective recruitment process approved by Readers College. She emailed all students asking for their consent to take part in the study. Six participants agreed to take part and subsequently, their digital narratives and reflective essays were collated as data from the digital learning platform. Videos were transcribed verbatim. The transcripts (20, 612 words) and essays (5649 words) were deidentified and uploaded to a shared Google drive. The second author, Julia, had access to the de-identified data collated.

Both authors engaged in a thorough reading of the transcripts for each participant. After making notes inductively regarding our observations in a researcher journal, we discussed our initial interpretations. We were initially surprised that the participants consistently referenced features of meaningful PE (see Figure 1), e.g. 'fun' and 'challenge' even though, to our knowledge, they would have no prior awareness of them. As previously stated, meaningful PE

was not our initial interest or primary goal of the research project; the topic rose inductively. As a result, we imported the data into NVivo and engaged in a collaborative analysis deductively assigning data chunks to features of meaningful PE. At times, we simultaneously coded datum to two or more codes (Salanda, 2013). Subsequently, we reviewed and refined the data for use in the manuscript, selecting quotes that illustrated the meaningful PE features.

At each point in the analysis, we questioned each other's decisions, interpretations, and perspectives. Further, we maintained a researcher journal and wrote analytic memos of our research process pursuing an audit trail. While we believe the data to be an authentic representation of the student's experiences in a specific moment of reality, we are aware that online reflections are only partial representations and we were aware of our power within this representation. Specifically, researcher bias manifested in several ways. We did not intend to research meaningful PE, yet the data spoke to us, so we interpreted the participants' reflections as meaningful experiences. Secondly, as researchers we are keen advocates of meaningful PE features and the research surrounding it, believing that they can benefit practitioners in aligning practice that disrupts traditions in PE. Furthermore, we find movement meaningful in our everyday lives and are regular consumers of movement experiences for internal reasons such as joy, social interaction, and self-care.

Findings and Discussion

In the following sections, we share the experiences that participants identified as personally significant and as meaningful to them through four themes:(a) *meaningful PE is fun and contains elements of delight*, (b) *meaningful PE is a combination of fun and challenge* (c) *meaningful PE develops motor competency in personally relevant areas*, and (d) *meaningful PE*

is a social and personally relevant experience. The combination of two features supports the interlinking nature of meaningful PE features (Beni et al. 2019). As previously mentioned, we have focused meaningful experiences on the intrinsic value (Ennis 2013) and personal significance (Kretchmar 2007) that students shared in their reflections which gave meaning to their movement experiences (Bain 1995).

Meaningful PE is fun and contains elements of delight

Many participants in PE and youth sport have described fun as central to meaningful activity experiences (c.f. Smith and Parr, 2007). Similarly, the students in this study found PE meaningful when it was experienced as fun. Subsequently, fun was the most prevalent discussion element within the data collated from students: 'I'm looking forward to other activities, soccer at first was not on the top of my list but I actually enjoyed myself' (Tanesha, Narrative 3). Even though Tanesha was not initially looking forward to soccer, as it was not her chosen activity, she managed to find it enjoyable, linking to the meaningful feature of fun (see Figure 1) and Shrehan's goal to 'learn to enjoy different types of movement and find meaning in them' (Goal 2). Fun was linked to the amount of effort that she put into the lesson. On the other hand, Zara linked fun to attempting new activities and learning within them: 'The next activity we played was soccer, a sport I was very unaware of. Before that activity, I had no idea of what or who a goalie was. We began to play; everyone was having fun' (Zara, Essay).

Bain (1995) suggested that in PE students need to think and talk about movement experiences as a process of reflection. In Zara's reflection she commented on her PE experiences as a realisation or discovery of what she more recently perceived as fun in her adult life. The reflective element of the class meant she was able to reminisce about her prior experiences:

> I really enjoyed the volleyball game. Um, it was very, fun for me because it was a sport I played in high school. Well, the only sport I played in school period. It was very fun, and it brought back a lot of memories. (Zara, Narrative 8)

Lessons or experiences which hold immediate enjoyment are considered as fun (Kretchmar, 2006). However, meaningful features in PE can include an element of delight; delight is a unique and memorable experience and can be recalled days after the event unlike fun experiences (Kretchmar 2005). A possible reason for delight not appearing prominently in literature could be due to the lack of longitudinal studies on meaningful PE experiences and down to the personal nature of delightful experiences that can be hard to (re)produce. Beni et al. (2017) have suggested that delight may be difficult for students to articulate. However, delight can be observed through students being caught up in the moment or experiencing a sense of accomplishment, facilitated through goal setting and hard work (Kretchmar 2006). Despite the sparsity of occurrences presented in the literature conducted at primary levels in education, we suggest that students in this study were able to experience delight as they were able to recall vivid experiences days/weeks after the lessons took place through their video narratives and end of semester essays:

> Surprisingly, I enjoyed running on the track inside. I think because I felt so accomplished when I finished the mile. A sense of accomplishment always makes an activity better. (Tanesha, Essay)

Tanesha articulated the facilitation of her meaningful and perhaps delightful PE experience through goal setting and hard work, fulfilling one of Shrehan's goals for the class (finding enjoyment in movement, see Table 2). James agreed, by having a new experience he may have found delight when considering his overall goal for the class:

> It was fun all around because I don't normally do exercises in the pool, so it was fun to do something different, and I did especially like the jumping squats at the beginning because one of my goals is to be able to dunk a basketball, so it really helped me and it really burned my legs, and I like working unilaterally, so that added on to the fun. (James, Narrative 1)

James frequently revisited his goal of being able to dunk a basketball several times throughout his narratives. Setting himself a personally relevant goal at the beginning of class gave him a greater purpose that he was able to constantly refer to and weigh up whether such experiences were valuable in contributing to his final achievements.

Our findings demonstrated that even over a short space of time (in relation to an entire semester unit of work) HE students may be able to articulate aspects of delight in relation to meaningful experiences in PE by learning to enjoy different types of movement and finding value in them. While we cannot draw generalisable conclusions from this small study, we can acknowledge that a large proportion of the students' PE experiences were described as fun and enjoyable, which can relate to observable elements of delight that may feed-forward into future PE experiences. Indeed, this points to what Beni et al. (2017) describe as meaningful PE features combining, intersecting, layering as they are interpreted by learners and teachers. It is also worth noting that Shrehan, as the educator, opened space for delight to occur by encouraging students to reflect on their goals periodically throughout the unit of work (see Table 2), which may have sustained fun and consequently delight over the semester where at the end, students were able to recall memories and experiences.

Meaningful PE is a combination of fun and challenge

Students experienced challenge when they participated in activities that were neither too easy nor difficult and allowed them to choose their preferred level of working. There was a close connection between the student's experiences of challenge and fun. Challenge was linked to attempting to achieve a particular skill (i.e. failing) but overcoming difficulties through perseverance especially in novel activities. Zara highlighted this during a rock-climbing experience in aerobics:

> It was so hard for me to get back down, cause I have big feet and the rocks were very small, so I couldn't quite get those rocks. I had to put my hands on the smaller rocks and try to find bigger rocks, and I wanted to use the same path but it just like, wasn't there when I was trying to come back down. It didn't work. Um, but it was very fun. But, challenging. I got so far down that I couldn't find a rock to get on, I had to just jump off the wall, but luckily the floor was soft, and we had on foam shoes... I was very scared. It was a fun experience. I will do it again with some more classmates or friends.
>
> (Zara, Narrative 10)

Challenging experiences for students were not only meaningful in terms of them being fun, but vivid experiences were (re)lived and recounted through the reflections. Indeed, as Zara highlights in the above quote, she suggests that she would replicate this activity and involve other social connections to this experience. This suggests that aspects of experience perceived to be fun are likely to be replicated in the future and also shared. Similar to the findings of O'Connor (2018), students lacked the rich vocabulary and relied on basic words such as fun. Nonetheless, their video reflections described and sometimes (re)enacted highly personal experiences. This highlights the embodied nature of meaningful experiences. For example, as Zara explained: 'I had to just *jump* off the *wall*, but luckily the *floor* was *soft*, and we had *on*

foam shoes... I was very *scared* (emphasis added).' An example of the mind, body and environment interacting holistically as one.

James shared a challenging meaningful experience, who tied physical and intellectual experiences through an intense diving experience during water aerobics:

> After a couple of times, you tried it, you try to go in the water straight because if you don't you are gonna hurt yourself and possibly injure yourself, but the adjustment I made was that I kept a tighter core and tried to keep my shoulders as straight as possible when I went up and down [bouncing on the board] and I tried to enter with my arms by my side. I was just trying to keep everything tight and not let me move off to one side or go forward or lean backwards. It was pretty difficult, but it is fun to learn how to control your body in the air, obviously gives you a little more control over your body. This fits into my goal to learn how to dunk as well because you do need body control in the air because it is not just jumping ability, so I very much enjoyed it. (James, Narrative 9)

Elementary-aged students in Dismore and Bailey's (2011) study, suggested fun was less about playing games and more about learning and challenge. It would seem that our study confirms such definitions in relation to the experiences of university students in PE. In addition, students were able (to an extent) explain the complex embodied nature of these experiences to what they had learned. Taking it a step further, challenges were tied to students achieving success and improving skills both emotionally and physically:

> Though the fall was significantly longer, and the pool much smaller, jumping from that platform [1-metre] was not nearly as scary the first time as jumping from the three-metre diving board. The board adds a level of uncertainty that makes me nervous when I am out

there. I even jumped from the five-meter and success! I did pretty well my first time. My final jump was the best of all, and it was very satisfying to do. (Cal, Essay)

While Shrehan did not relate physical performance measures to assessment, students naturally selected physical challenges within the activities that they wanted to achieve and became motivated by the difference in their experience, which linked directly to Goal 3 (to set yourself personalised goals, see Table 2). Furthermore, and countering the findings across the literature detailed in Beni et al.'s (2017) review, the students in this study did not relate experiences of challenge (either positively or negatively) to competition. Instead, students were focused on individual growth in areas they considered relevant to them and their personalised goals.

Meaningful PE develops motor competency in personally relevant areas

Shrehan's sociocultural perspective towards education and movement meant she wanted students to 'learn to enjoy different types of movement and find meaning in them' (Goal 2, see Table 2). As a result, she employed a number of pedagogies to fulfil the class goals and meet student's needs. Namely game-centred pedagogies, such as Teaching Games for Understanding (TGfU), which has been found to contribute to students having fun and finding value in PE (Beni et al. 2017). Shrehan adopted TGfU as pedagogical approach so that students could take part in sequential, progressive, modified game forms, which represent the full version of the game. The rationale behind this was that students can transfer skills with ease and success. We identified that students found value and meaning when developing their motor skills and competencies; these developments were not the same for all students and varied from team games to independent pursuits. Indeed, developing motor competence was perceived as personalised in

contextually based activities which students interpreted as personally relevant. Cal related motor competency with his ability to execute diving skills and developing confidence:

> I did really well on the backward diving. I think it was just easier to do honestly; I didn't really do any forward diving this week. But, as far as the forward jumping goes, I definitely overcame any timidity I had about jumping off of the 3-metre, it definitely doesn't seem like that high any more at all, and otherwise, I felt like I really improved. (Cal, Narrative 7)

Consequently, for Cal, he expressed 'I feel my biggest accomplishments were jumping in with good form off the medium dive and performing a backward dive' (Cal, Essay). Cal was denoting a specific motor competency that he wanted to improve, this was facilitated by Shrehan employing a guest lecturer/diving specialist to teach the students effective ways of diving. Furthermore, by adopting a specialist, students were able to take part in an array of activities (Goal 1, see Table 2).

Emma recognised that learning different training methods to suit her movement preferences was important, specifically, learning to work at her speed/pacing was a motor competency focus and linked to Shrehan's Goal 6 (learning that every person's body reacts differently to movement):

> I have never had to focus on speed. I always tended to start off strong with too much power and would quickly slow down. I found myself facing the struggle of pacing myself correctly again. By the end of the speed class, I had adjusted more and was able to complete the laps, but I was exhausted after the class finished. I have since worked on my speed and pacing myself outside of class in swimming and just normal workouts. Once I realised I was struggling with pacing swimming, I noticed I did the exact same thing

when I go on runs. I sprint immediately at the beginning, and around the ¾ of a mile mark, I always would hit a lull and need to slow down a little. Without this class, I would not have noticed this about myself and would not have been able to start changing my training methods to better my pacing. (Emma, Essay)

One of the students' goals was to be able to run the English department stairs at the end of the semester without being out of breath. As a group, during the 'running' week selected by the class, Shrehan arranged for the group to the run to the English department, attempt the stairs and run back (totaling one mile). The guidance from Shrehan was that they should run as a collective group, supporting each other to promote positive interdependence and individual accountability. On their return, they would then complete an individual mile. Finally, they would reflect on this experience in their weekly narrative, Tanesha shared:

We came back [from running a group mile], and we ran a mile at our own pace. It took me about 17 minutes and 40 seconds to finish my mile. I noticed that when running at my own pace or running and walking at my own pace, I was able to finish about 8 minutes faster than we did when we all did it as a group. I know that other students finished their [individual] mile quicker, but I like to take breaks, and I don't like running, but I did feel a sense of accomplishment when I did finish the mile even though it took me a little longer than other people. I'd like to in the future see if I can get that time down even if I did take breaks or walk and run. What I learnt is it's important to try to stay at your own pace and not worry about the people around you because everybody's body and exercise level is different. (Tanesha, Narrative 2)

This quote by Tanesha is important because it evidences a learning experience, she felt personally relevant to her own movement experience. She attributed her performance in relation

to her current or previous performances rather than to other students in a competitive way. Thus, linking to each of the goals Shrehan set for the class; Tanesha took part in an activity that her classmates selected (Goal 1), she learnt to find a sense of meaning through accomplishment (Goal 2), she set herself a goal of trying to reduce her time (Goal 3), she completed the task through group work and independent work then completing her video narrative – a unique assessment for students (Goal 4), and lastly and most notably, 'everybody's body and exercise level is different' (Goal 5 and 6). Beni et al. (2018) noted that meaningful experiences do not occur unless you plan for them. We are inclined to suggest that by having a sociocultural approach, drawing on an array of democratic pedagogies (outlined in Table 2), setting a clear vision for classes, and encouraging students to reflect, educators can contribute to meaningful PE experiences. In this case, even if the educator did not plan specifically plan for meaningful features. This finding makes strides in understanding how to promote meaningful experiences in PE (Fletcher et al. 2018, Kretchmar 2000).

Meaningful PE is a social and personally relevant experience

Learning is a social activity (Butler 2016) and Shrehan's goal for the class was 'to become a team and forge a learning community' (Goal 5, see Table 2 and hooks 2003), which meant she drew upon pedagogies that made class conversational, participatory, and reciprocal. As a result, and similar to findings by Light (2010), social interaction was described by the students as contributing towards a meaningful PE experience. Significantly, participants found the interaction with their peers as motivating and encouraging: 'I like the fact that the people in this class would help you if you need help and they would motivate you if they see you falling behind' (Tanesha, Narrative 1). Zara agreed:

Encouragement was a big thing in our class; everybody pushed somebody. The activities that I was not so familiar with, I was taught and pushed to play them just as well as my fellow classmates could play them. (Zara, Essay)

Due to the small nature of the classes, Cal described the 'intimate affair' as space where students were able to learn about each other's fears and encourage one another:

The familiar setting of the class allowed the seven of us to become well acquainted with each other's personalities, talents, likes, weaknesses and fears. For example, I was never aware of the full extent of [student's name] fear of jumping into water until we did our weeks of diving. (Cal, Essay)

Gibbons (2009) suggested meaningful PE is rooted in positive and respectful class environments. We would agree that creating a learning community means that students know their peers at a deeper level and are able to respect a classmate when they need personal space to reflect or encourage classmates when they want to achieve a goal:

I think that diving off the 5-meter platform was the perfect end to the semester. I always thought that I would be too scared to go off something that high but having the motivation of all my friends in the class with me made me want to do it. (Emma, Essay)

Students ended up genuinely caring about one another, and when Shrehan attended a conference, and the class meeting was changed to an independent choice workout, Natalie felt 'it was weird not having class on Monday, my afternoon felt empty' (Natalie, Narrative 7). Students did not just talk about peer interactions as personally meaningful, but their experience with Shrehan:

Aerobics gave me an opportunity to go to the gym and engage in sports I had not played in years... It taught me that you gain the most benefit going at your own pace. My

> instructor was very, very, very helpful, actually the best teacher I've had in college. You can tell she's passionate about her work and that she really does care about others. She takes the time out to get the opinions of others, and if she can help, she does. The small class plays a huge part in teacher-student relationships as well. Aerobics has opened the door for a new life for me. (Tanesha, Essay)

This quote evidences Beni et al.'s (2017) point that many PE experiences that are personal and private occur amid students' interactions with others (i.e. peers or teachers). Small interactions/class numbers matter to students and they will remember and learn from those experiences. For example, as Tanesha highlighted in her essay extract above, she felt unable to develop the personally relevant experience and reflection of pacing without the contextual reference of the class and perhaps, pedagogical learning experience.

Similar, to Beni et al. (2019) and Walseth et al. (2019), Shrehan implemented several pedagogies to get to know her students, to build relationships and understand them beyond the teaching space. Where possible, and unique to the university context, she participated with students in activities:

> Shrehan came and did the majority of that mile with me. And, um, it was very fun. I think I did a mile in like, 11 minutes. Better than I've ever done because I'm usually on the treadmill doing my whole mile and it takes like 20 minutes. Yes, it takes that long to do a whole mile. And I'm really proud of myself because I really pushed myself... We was [*sic*] walking and talking, and we didn't notice how far we were going or how fast we were going, but it didn't take any time. (Zara, Narrative 10)

Not only did Shrehan draw on popular media and share relevant blogs and videos with students but each lesson she gave examples to their context. Furthermore, she gave students an

opportunity to develop relevant life skills as suggested by Gibbons (2009) for meaningful experiences. The students that lived in coastal states found the water survival lessons particularly meaningful and personally relevant. Emma noted:

> I spend most of my time at home and on the water or on a boat or at the beach or something and I know that it is not that common but it still does happen people getting tired and almost drowning in the water, so it was definitely interesting and being fully clothed made it more difficult for the class itself but it definitely made it more useful and more attributable to real-life situations. It was good to learn. (Emma, Narrative 8)

These findings highlight the importance of educators making explicit connections for learners in how experiences in PE can inform their broader physical activity participation or real-life situations that students may experience outside of institutions of education. While linking to real-life situations, interactions between learners, the environment and others, play a key role in motivating students in PE and allowing them to find meaning (Ennis 2017). Through Shrehan's attempt to forge a learning community (hooks 2003), students demonstrated more than collegiality; friendships were formed and were more than in-class social interactions. Students' essays and narratives highlighted that friendships moved from beyond the teaching space to group messaging platforms, attending lunches, and going for group gym sessions. We suggest this may be one way in which we can encourage students to find value in physical activity and movement and socialising techniques provide the grounds for lifelong physical activity to occur. In addition, friendships, learning communities and social interactions with educators can influence student's physical activity/engagement in university PE.

Conclusions

The purpose of this article was to explore what university students found meaningful in PE, to extend the scope of the features of meaningful PE to those in institutions of HE and to add to our understanding of 'what fun means' in relation to meaningful PE. Our main finding exemplifies that the experiences of HE students in PE can be meaningful, specifically when the environment for learning is set up in democratic ways. These findings are unique, because the educator of the course did not plan for them as previous research has suggested (Beni et al. 2018). In addition, previous literature has focused on K-12 settings (Beni et al. 2017; Walseth et al. 2018; O'Connor 2018) and, our findings enhance our understanding of meaningful experiences in HE contexts.

Our findings support the integrated nature of meaningful PE features (Beni et al. 2019). Students often reflected on activities crossing two meaningful PE features (e.g. an activity was challenging and personally relevant learning). This occurred when they were provided with opportunities for reflection. The authenticity of the assessment used by the educator meant that students gave vivid, embodied explanations during their reflections in terms of what and how they experienced the features of meaningful PE. Consequently, reflections on previous experiences can contribute to student engagement. The experiences of the students in this study has further supported findings that suggest positive experiences increase engagement and meaning (Garn et al. 2017, O'Connor 2018). We suggest from our findings that sustained fun, in combination with goal setting and pedagogical environments set up in democratic ways can contribute to students' feelings of delight. However, delight remains a deep, sustained, elusive, idiosyncratic experience (Kretchmar 2006) for both students and educators to investigate further.

554 Despite this, Kretchmar (2005) recommends that delight is an unusually ambitious pedagogical
555 goal and educators should work towards modest goals. However, we believe that all educators
556 should aspire for ambitious goals themselves and can facilitate environments for delight to occur.
557 Educators that have a vision (Ni Chroinin et al. 2019), a sociocultural approach (Larsson
558 and Quennerstedt 2012), drawing on democratic pedagogies can contribute to university students
559 developing foundational beliefs towards movement (Garn et al. 2017). The intentions of the
560 educator were actualised, we attributed this down to the class size. Because the class was small,
561 the educator was able to balance the personal human experience (Ennis 2013). Pedagogies of a
562 democratic and social nature facilitated getting to know students, which is an extreme challenge
563 and barrier when there are large class numbers (Lynch and Curtner-Smith 2020). From a
564 pedagogical perspective, our findings contribute to the research field by highlighting the
565 importance of providing possibilities for students to experience elements such as challenge,
566 overcoming fear, experiencing new ways of moving, joyful memories and a sense of
567 accomplishment to enhance the experiences of 'fun'. These elements go beyond the selection of
568 a particular sport or activity but seek to draw our attention, as educators to the meaning within an
569 experience. This finding is significant for all students in education, not just those in HE.
570 In conclusion, forging a learning community, building friendships and having social
571 interactions within the university PE setting can support movement efforts by students.
572 Henceforth, due to the small nature of this study and the original intentions of the research, we
573 suggest future study in the area of meaningful PE and HE and its potential relationship to
574 lifelong enjoyment of movement. Specifically, in-depth studies drawing on the everyday
575 experiences of students on movement spaces may give us insight into how to adapt our pedagogy

576 to suit an everchanging world around us. Digital ethnography, drawing on the technology's

577 students use in everyday life would prove useful in research tasks ahead.

References

Bain, L. 1995. “Mindfulness and Subjective Knowledge.” *Quest* 47 (2): 238–53.

Beni, S., T. Fletcher, and D. Ni Chroinin. 2017. “Meaningful Experiences in Physical Education and Youth Sport.” *Quest* 69 (3): 291-312.

Beni, S., T. Fletcher, and D. Ni Chroinin. 2018. “Using Features of Meaningful Experiences to Guide Primary Physical Education Practice.” *European Physical Education Review* 25 (3): 599-615.

Beni, S., D. Ni Chroinin, and T. Fletcher. 2019. "A Focus on the How of Meaningful Physical Education in Primary Schools." *Sport, Education and Society* 24 (6): 624-637.

Butler, J. 2016. *Playing Fair.* Champaign: Human Kinetics.

Chen, A. 1998. “Meaningfulness in Physical Education: A Description of High School Students’ Conceptions.” *Journal of Teaching In Physical Education* 17 (3): 285-306.

Dismore, H., and Bailey, R. 2011. “Fun and Enjoyment in Physical Education: Young People’s Attitudes.” *Research Papers in Education*, 26 (4), 499–516.

Ennis, C.D. 2013. “Implementing Meaningful, Educative Curricula, and Assessment in Complex School Environments.” *Sport, Education and Society* 18(1): 115-120.

Ennis, C.D. 2017. “Educating Students for a Lifetime of Physical Activity: Enhancing Mindfulness, Motivation, and Meaning.” *Research Quarterly for Exercise and Sport*, 88 (3): 241-250.

Fletcher, T., D. Ni Chroinin, C. Price, and N. Francis. 2018. “Teacher Educators’ Enactment of Pedagogies That Prioritise Learning about Meaningful Physical Education.” *Curriculum Studies in Health and Physical Education* 9 (1): 76-89.

Gard, M., and J. Wright. 2005. *The Obesity Epidemic: Science, Morality and Ideology.* Oxon: Routledge.

Garn A.C., K. Simonton, T. Dasingert, and A. Simonton. 2017. "Predicting Changes in Student Engagement in University Physical Education: Application of Control-Value Theory of Achievement Emotions." *Psychology of Sport and exercise* 29, 93-102.

Gibbons, S.L. 2009. "Meaningful Participation of Girls in Senior Physical Education Courses." *Canadian Journal of Education* 32 (2): 222-244.

hooks, bell. 2003. *Teaching Community: A Pedagogy of Hope*. London: Routledge.

Keating X.D., J. Guan, J. C. Piñero, and D.M. Bridges. 2005. "A Meta-Analysis of College Students' Physical Activity Behaviors." *Journal of American College Health* 54 (2):116-26.

Kirk, D. 2013. "Educational Value and Models-Based Practice in Physical Education." *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, 45 (9): 973-986.

Kretchmar, R.S. 2000. "Movement Subcultures: Sites for Meaning." *Journal of Physical Education, Recreation & Dance* 71 (5): 19-25.

Kretchmar, R. S. 2005. "Teaching Games for Understanding and the Delights of Human Activity." In Teaching Games for Understanding: Theory, Research, and Practice, edited by L. L. Griffin & J. Butler, 199-212. Champaign: Human Kinetics.

Kretchmar, R.S. 2006. "Ten More Reasons for Quality Physical Education." *Journal of Physical Education, Recreation & Dance* 77 (9): 6-9.

Kretchmar, R.S. 2007. "What to Do With Meaning? A Research Conundrum for the 21st Century." *Quest* 59 (4): 373-383

Larsson, H., and M. Quennerstedt. 2012. "Understanding Movement: A Sociocultural Approach to Exploring Moving Humans." *Quest* 64 (4): 283-298.

Light, R. 2010. “A Cross-Cultural Study on Meaning and the Nature of Children’s Experiences in Australian and French Swimming Clubs.” *Asia-Pacific Journal of Health, Sport & Physical Educatio*n, 1(3–4): 37–43.

Lynch, S., K. A, R. Richards, and C. Pennington. 2018. "“What’s the Middle Ground? Am I Ever Going to be the Perfect Teacher?:” Self-Study of a Doctoral Student’s Acculturation Process." *Studying Teacher Education* 14, (2): 194-211.

Lynch, S, and M. Curtner-Smith. 2019. "‘You have to find your slant, your groove:’one physical education teacher's efforts to employ transformative pedagogy." *Physical Education and Sport Pedagogy* 24 (4): 359-372.

Lynch, S, and M. Curtner-Smith. 2020. "Faculty Members Engaging in Transformative PETE: A Feminist Perspective." *Sport, Education and Society* 25, (1): 43-56.

Murthy, D. 2008. “Digital Ethnography: An Examination of the Use of New Technologies for Social Research.” *Sociology* 42 (5): 837-855.

Newell, K.M. 1990. "Physical Education in Higher Education: Chaos Out of Order." *Quest* 42 (3): 227-242.

Ni Chroinin, D., S. Beni. T. Fletcher, C. Griffin, and C. Price. 2019. "Using Meaningful Experiences as a Vision for Physical Education Teaching and Teacher Education Practice." *Physical Education and Sport Pedagogy* 24 (6): 598-614.

O’Connor, J. 2018. “Exploring a Pedagogy for Meaning-Making in Physical Education.” *European Physical Education Review* 25(4): 1093-1109

644 Pink, S. 2016. “Part III: Experience: Digital Ethnography.” In *Innovative Methods in Media and*
645 *Communication Research*, edited by S. Kubitschko and A. Kaun, 161–166. Nueva York,
646 Switzerland: Springer International Publishing.
647 Salanda, J. 2013. *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers* 2nd ed. London: Sage.
648 Smith, S. 2007. “The First Rush of Movement: A Phenomenological Preface to Movement in
649 Physical Education.” *Phenomenology and Practice* 1 (1): 47-75.
650 Smith, A., and M. Parr. 2007. “Young People’s Views on the Nature and Purposes of Physical
651 Education: A Sociological Analysis.” *Sport, Education & Society*, 12 (1): 37–58.
652 Teixeira, P.J., E.V. Carraca, D. Markland, M.N. Silva, and R.M. Ryan. 2012. “Exercise, Physical
653 Activity, and Self Determination Theory: A Systematic Review.” *International Journal*
654 *of Behavioural Nutrition and Physical Activity* 9 (78): 1-30.
655 Walseth, K., B. Engebretsen, and L. Elvebakk. 2018. "Meaningful Experiences in PE for All
656 Students: An Activist Research Approach." *Physical Education and Sport Pedagogy* 23
657 (3): 235-249.