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Physical education on YouTube - a study of practical epistemologies

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Background

Traditionally, epistemology has dealt with questions about what knowledge is and how knowledge is developed. Questions to be solved have according to Sfard (1998) often been related to the acquisition of knowledge as gaining ownership of a self-sustained external reality. Wickman (2006) discusses this as a dualistic pursuit of how we can get reality right in terms of a restricted cognitive perspective focusing claims of truth. This pursuit is based on a metaphysical division between an inner mind and an outer reality, and in consequence also a metaphysical division of mind and body (Dewey, 1916, 1928).

In physical education (PE), conclusions are sometimes drawn that knowledge and learning doesn't seem to be a relevant part of its daily practice since neither students nor teachers have a developed and explicit idea about issues of knowledge in PE. However, it can be argued that this entails an idea of knowledge and learning restricted to the processing of information and an idea that epistemological questions in PE is limited to alleged valid claims of truth (Rovegno & Kirk, 1995; Macdonald, 2004; Quennerstedt, et al, forthcoming).

Research Questions

In order to go beyond knowledge restricted to information processing, this presentation draws on John Dewey's re-understanding of knowledge and epistemology and his transactional methodology where he rejects ultimate, universal truths or absolute knowledge (Dewey & Bentley, 1949). Instead knowledge is regarded as something practical, something "we use in order to live, work and act in the world" (Biesta & Burbules, 2003, p.69).

The paper aims to investigate practical epistemologies in PE as they can be identified in data from YouTube in terms of what is regarded as relevant knowledge in the practice of PE.

Methods

In the presentation practical epistemologies are investigated using video clips on the video sharing web site YouTube. YouTube is the largest user generated social network site where different video content is visibly reflected on a public arena (Cha et al, 2007).

Lange (2007) argues that for many users YouTube is a practice where they publicly create and negotiate different social networks. As an empirical data source for explorations of PE practice, YouTube can be seen as a site where PE-teachers share video clips with the PE-community or with students. Students, however, share videos, as Lange (2007) argues, mainly with friends and relatives, as a way to show something about what is currently happening in their lives. Lange (2007) states that these 'my-typical-day-in-school' clips are publicly private behavior that is neither strictly private, nor strictly public, and a way to stay connected through "posting videos that friends and family could see and respond to" (p.16).

The video clips used in this study – posted by both students and teachers – can be seen as reports of ongoing PE practices, and regarded as authentic settings for investigation that says something about the practical epistemologies in PE practice.

In this paper practical epistemologies is investigated and described in terms of the participants' habits-of-action in relation to the assertible conditions of action as they appear on YouTube. The empirical material consists of video clips from 285 PE-lessons from 27 different countries.

Frame

Dewey's transactional perspective on knowledge and epistemology takes form in a critique of predetermined metaphysical dualisms. In these divisions the epistemological problem about individuals' capacity to have a cognitive relation with the world occurs. The consequence of this so called 'spectator theory of knowledge' (Dewey, 1929; Biesta, 2007) is that knowledge, in order to be considered as knowledge, corresponds to a true picture of reality accessible only through a position outside language.

Questions of what knowledge is and how knowledge is developed can instead be seen as a framework for understanding the role knowledge plays in action (Biesta 2007). In this sense knowledge is not a matter of getting reality right, but as a matter of acquiring habits-of-action for coping with reality. Knowledge, the knower and the environment is then mutually dependent of each other in what Dewey and Bentley (1949) calls the transactions of "organism-in-environment-as-a-whole" (p.103). An example of habits-of-action in PE could be how students without further instruction from the teacher starts playing a game of basketball with rules, lines, baskets, technique and also the 'right' moves and posture, just because basketballs are taken out in the gym.

The analysis has been conducted in four steps, focusing on participants' spoken and embodied actions in the studied events (Quennerstedt et al forthcoming). The first step is to identify the main purposes, content and activities in terms of what is relevant in this specific event. In the second step students and teachers habits-of-action is identified in terms of what Wickman and Östman (2002) calls what is and what occurs when the participants of the studied event acts. Questions at hand doing the analysis have been; What is obvious in the studied event? What is done without hesitation? Step three, the practical epistemologies in PE practice is analyzed in terms of what is assertible in the studied event. Questions used are; What stands out as certain in the situations? What is stable in these situations? In step three patterns are identified and described in terms of knowledge. In step four the epistemologies used in PE practice is discussed. This is done through focusing how students and teachers participate in terms of ways considered to be normal or 'true' (Hodkinson et al 2007), and how they co-ordinate their actions to make something in common (Dewey & Bentley 1949).

Research findings

With a transactional understanding, epistemology can be seen as both part of and a result of human practices, a practice where knowledge and truth is produced and re-produced. In this way different knowledge can be regarded as valid, useful or 'true' in PE practice because students and teachers act as if it is true.

The results of the study, the identified practical epistemologies, will be presented and discussed in terms of how the practical epistemologies become important in the practice of PE in terms of how students develop knowledge as acting participants, and in what direction the learning is guided.