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Biographical learning as health promotion in physical education. A Danish case study

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Abstract

This article presents a case study concerning biographical learning as health promotion among 16–18-year-old school girls in a Danish upper-secondary school. The case study shows a conflict in the students’ perception of the learning in traditional physical education (PE) compared to a four-week pilot project employing dialogue groups as a didactic method in PE, which focused on the actual telling and listening to stories about sport and physical activity. The discussion of the results has its starting point in the concept of biographicity as the raw material of a learning process. By exploring the narrative structure of biographical learning, the article develops pedagogical considerations and discussions surrounding the case study, especially concerning biographical learning as an evident educational framework, in which the student has the opportunity to ‘stop, think and tell’ about what matters to him or her as a physical active person and a ‘healthy citizen’.

Key-words: biographical learning • dialogue groups • educational experience • health promotion • narratives

Introduction

‘Those who do not have power of the story that dominates their lives – power to retell it, rethink it, deconstruct it, joke about it, and change it as times change – truly are powerless because they cannot think new thoughts’.


Personal life-histories and narratives as grounds for meaningful human actions such as participating in sport and physical activity are of great interest to recent psychological and sociological research within movement and physical activity (Bale et al., 2004; Coakley and Donnelly, 1999; Kretchmar, 2000; Sparkes and Silvennoinen, 1999; Stelter and Roessler, 2005). Equally, human actions are often surrounded by stories that give meaning to the actions and thereby accentuate the individual’s self-identity and social identity over time, forming the biographicity¹ of the individual (Alheit and Dausien, 1999; Pineau, 1995; Ricoeur, 1990). In that sense, involvement in sport and physical activity simultaneously rests on and
generates narratives, which shapes the bodily identity and physical active lifestyle of the individual.

This paper presents a case study involving 16–18-year-old schoolgirls from a Danish upper-secondary school who participated in a physical education (PE) course with a specific focus on narratives, biographical learning and social-psychological conceptions of health and physical activity. Biographical learning as a pedagogical method supports the students’ involvement in dialogues, which forms the basis for personal narratives surrounding concrete meaningful experiences from participating in sports and physical activity.

The case study aimed to explore the pedagogical scope of biographical learning in health-promoting PE, by studying the students’ view of learning in relation to this particular PE course compared with traditional PE. The exceptional feature of the PE course called ‘Bodily narratives which leave traces’ was that the girls were intended to learn about physical activity as a part of their identity and their lifestyle through reading, telling and listening to narratives about bodily practices and experiences related to physical activity. The course was based on the pedagogical idea that students’ awareness of a healthy lifestyle, physical activity and identity is related to, not merely the bodily practice in itself, but largely the personal biographical reflections about physical activities such as sport and games. From this background the paper seeks a deeper understanding of pedagogical and health-promoting possibilities of including biographical learning (exemplified by this course) in teaching PE.

Physical education as health promotion – but in which way?

A central purpose of PE is – and has been for many decades – to educate future citizens for an ‘adequate’ lifestyle. It is generally believed that sport and PE has an educative and socializing impact on children and young people. Historically, PE has been used for the purposes of military fitness, social control, holistic development and citizen education (Krüger and Trangbæk, 1999; Tinning, 2002a). Today the major purpose of the subject, which is made explicit in curriculum documents across Nordic (Jakobsson, 2005; Vogensen, 2004) and European countries (Hardman and Marshall, 2000) as well as in the USA (Bulger et al., 2001), Australia and New Zealand (Tinning, 2002a) is to educate the ‘healthy citizen’. The political as well as educational focus on the health-promoting outcomes of PE, prompted by a growing concern with problems such as obesity and physical inactivity among children and young people, raises questions concerning the learning outcomes of PE. Furthermore, the focus on health promotion highlights the importance of discussing which concepts of body, health and physical activity PE teachers and physical education teacher education (PETE) teachers talk about and rely upon. As Biesta (2004) indicates, PE is a subject where the learners are struggling with themselves, their body, their identity and their relationships. Thus PE may be legitimatized not only as a
health-promoting subject, but even more as a subject where children and young people learn to engage in and experience sports and bodily movement. For these reasons an important pedagogical issue in PE is the mutual relation between the bodily practices (the actual physical activity and doing sport) and verbal discourses in the speaking about physical activity. The health discourse is predominately based on a medical and mechanistic discourse, using a utilitarian language about the body and physical activity. However, the medical and mechanistic discourse cannot involve social-psychological and cultural conceptions of health and physical activity. Indeed, factors such as motivation, identity, meaning, values and habits are highly relevant for the understanding of health and physical active lifestyles (Biddle and Mutrie, 2001) and for understanding young people’s conceptions of sport and PE (Lake, 2001). Educating the ‘healthy citizen’ therefore, seems to be a matter of exploring and integrating a broad range of bodily practices and verbal discourses. As Lake argues:

... it would appear necessary, in the promotion of health-related exercise is to be effective, to recognize that there is a wide variety of activities beyond organized sports, and of ways of making sense of those activities beyond the performance criteria most frequently applied to them. (Lake, 2001: 89)

With this paper it is my intention to contribute to the qualification of pedagogical grounds for the inclusion of a social-psychological understanding of educating the ‘healthy citizen’ by focusing on healthy lifestyle as a matter of biographicity, i.e. a matter of the underlying self-reflexive and temporal structure of meaning construction and learning. Well aware of this unorthodox approach to the health discourse, I hope to inspire PE teachers to reconsider the role of PE as health promotion.

With these preliminary reflections I will present the case study and its results, followed by an elaboration of pedagogical considerations and discussions surrounding the case study, including the concept of biographical learning.

The case study

The case study concerned one class (20 students) of 16–18-year-old girls and their involvement in a four-week PE course called ‘Bodily narratives which leave traces’ in a Danish upper-secondary school during November/December 2004. The case-study as research method in education is a way of observing the characteristics of an individual unit (Cohen and Manion, 1994), or as Stake points out: ‘The case is a specific, a complex, functioning thing ... The case is an integrated system’ (1995: 2). An innovative and bounded course such as ‘Bodily narratives which leave traces’ with its own syllabus and distinctive characteristics is in that sense a case. According to Cohen and Manion (1994), the aim of a case-study is to experience and analyse the multifarious phenomena that constitute the chosen unit of observation with the purpose of establishing generalizations about the wider population to which that unit belongs. However, Stake (1995) argues that case-studies hardly provide the basis for generalization. Instead he makes clear that case-studies of an instrumental kind,
i.e. having a research question or an issue as focal point, which we seek insight into by studying a particular case, may provide general understanding of the question or issue in focus. Generalization can be defined in several ways depending on epistemology. Kvale (1996) introduces ‘analytical generalization’ as a well-considered evaluation concerning to what an extent the results from a case-study may work as guidelines for another situation. The analytical generalization is compiled from qualitative data, interpretation and theoretical viewpoints, which merge in the analysis of the chosen research question. In my view, analytical generalization is compatible with Stake’s definition of instrumental case studies. In the design of this case-study I am using the case of a specific course to elaborate the general understanding of the chosen issue. As such the case-study is an instrumental case-study (Stake, 1995), in which I am observing the characteristics of an individual unit (Cohen and Manion, 1994) in order to approach analytical generalizations (Kvale, 1996) about the issue of the case-study: pedagogical qualities and limitations of biographical learning in PE in general.

Data for the case-study was obtained from six hours of observations during the course and in-depth interviews with the teacher and students attending the course. At the end of the course I asked if four to six students would volunteer for in-depth interviews about their learning process, the learning outcomes and their conception of traditional skill-oriented PE versus biographical learning. Five students volunteered and together we accomplished the in-depth interviews. In addition, the data included 14 written stories and poems about personal sports experiences, which 14 of the 20 students prepared during the course and kindly allowed me to use as objects of reflection and as illustrations in the presentation of the case-study. As such the stories and poem are not yet analysed as research data. However, one poem is chosen to exemplify the nature of the students’ written work.

**Context and subject matter of the course**

‘Bodily narratives which leave traces’

The course was a part of compulsory PE lessons, but differed from traditional ’sweaty’ and skill-oriented PE by having a specific focus on bodily narratives which leave traces in the memory and in the self-identity of the students. The aim of the course was to develop the students’ understanding of the relation between 1) physical activities, 2) the way of expressing experiences in relation to physical activity and 3) the way the students see them selves as physically active (and healthy) persons. With this aim in view the teacher developed a pedagogical method by which PE might grasp the idea of biographical learning and thereby encourage the students to develop a personal, sensuous language about experiencing sport and physical activity. The subject matter of the course was reading and interpreting literary narratives about sports experiences as well as telling personal narratives concerning experiences in sport and physical activity from a biographical point of view. Four lessons, each of 1½ hours, were conducted in reflective dialogue groups of five persons. The students were taught to
use reflective dialogue groups as a secure and confidential basis for interpreting and telling literary as well as personal narratives.

Central to this pedagogical method was the actual telling and listening to narratives about sport and physical activity. The students were retelling a personal experience from doing sport and physical activity, which had made traces in their memory and in their self-identity. The story was addressed to the other students in a dialogue group, who were attentively listening and asking elaborate questions. The storyteller tried to intensify the story – created a narrative, so to speak – by focusing on descriptions of sensuous and bodily experiences using a language and a narrative style not from the natural or medical science vocabulary, but from the literary genre. To inspire the students to use such a language and genre the teacher gave examples from poems, diaries, novels and even her own life-history. The aim was to inspire the students to reflect upon their own narratives related to physical activity – building up their own bodily biographicity, so to speak – and in this way make room for the students to write a story or a poem about significant experiences, which they found important to their self-knowledge as sports persons or physically active persons.

**Analysis methods**

The observations comprised of $4 \times 1\frac{1}{2}$ hours of semi-structured observation in the classroom using unstructured notes and drawings as well as a structured observation scheme comprising teacher activities, student activities and the use of the classroom. No numerical indicators were used, merely narrative accounts (Stake, 1995) focusing on descriptions, which could inform the analysis of the in-depth interviews. I took on a relatively passive participant role, sitting not too close to the students because I did not want to participate in their dialogue groups, but close enough to hear low-voiced discussions and sense the atmosphere. The in-depth interviews were conducted and analysed by using the phenomenological method called meaning condensation (Giorgi, 1975; Kvale, 1996), and a structured method called meaning categorization or coding (Miles and Huberman, 1994).

**Results**

The results of the case study were structured around three themes which draw out the major findings of the observations, in-depth interviews and written stories and poems.

‘Is this real PE?’: Widening the concept of learning in PE

The overall theme in both the observations and the in-depth interviews was that the students found it rather difficult to talk about what they learned. At the beginning of the course the students were hesitant and sceptical as to whether they really were supposed to learn anything, especially because they mainly understood PE as rehearsing a specific skill, which can be practised and learned. They were told by the
teacher not to arrive at the gym dressed for PE, as they would normally do. Instead they were briefed to arrange the chairs in the classroom according to the dialogue group method, i.e. four groups of five chairs forming a circle. Typically the students described ‘real’ learning in PE as rehearsing the technique of a handstand, training a certain tactic in basketball or simply experiencing the hard work of going through 1000 metres breaststroke. By way of comparison they mentioned that learning in PE, because it is mainly bodily grounded, is not ‘ordinary’ learning grounded in word and figures. On the other hand, one of the first lessons was described as ordinary learning, when the teacher presented the concepts of identity and narrative, followed by discussions in the dialogue groups about definitions of the two concepts.

During the in-depth interviews the respondents often used words like ‘a good experience’, ‘an unusually good atmosphere’, ‘a positive influence’ and ‘very abstract’ about the outcome of the course, but found it strange and almost self-contradictory to define these experiences as ‘real’ learning in PE.

R: I find it difficult to put down in words what I have ‘learned’. I think it has been very interesting, and I have had many impressions in some ways. There has been a certain atmosphere in the lessons, a sort of shared ambience or enthusiasm – and this is rare compared to the general atmosphere at our high school, where you hardly know your teachers. It is unusual that this feeling of ‘now we’re getting a sort of felt sensation under the skin’ occurs. And that has certainly been an extraordinary experience.

C: . . . because it (ordinary learning) doesn’t feel right in physical education as I see it. To sit on a chair and just talk about it . . . We are not used to that in physical education, so it was somewhat different . . . I don’t know how to put it . . . can’t really say I’ve learned anything.

During the observations the students’ different experiences and expressions stretched from ‘shared ambience or enthusiasm in stimulating dialogues’ to ‘just talk’, for bored school girls who want to play basketball instead. These findings showed a conflict or a contrast between the students’ perception of learning in PE and the reflective concept of learning which emphasizes experience articulation. In other words, a contrast between experiencing and practising primary hands-on bodily movements on the one hand and the process of previously experienced actions, knowledge and values on the other hand are the object of reflection. This conflict in educational interests is common knowledge in pedagogical literature, and can be expressed in terms such as education in movement versus education through movement (Arnold, 1979, 1990), learning as doing and experience versus learning as belonging and becoming (Wenger, 2003), knowing-how versus knowing-that (Ryle, 1963) and learning by doing (actions and observations) versus learning as educative experiences produced by reflection and valuation (Dewey, 1963; Kolb, 1984).
The interesting finding here was not the more or less dualistic division between advocates of propositional knowledge and practical knowledge respectively (Wright, 2000). Rather it was the students’ awareness of widening the concept of learning in PE. The students were both sceptical and curious about biographical learning in ‘real’ PE, and in this way the course was pushing their common sense understanding of the content and form of PE.

**The languages of PE: using poems and narratives as eye-openers**

The second theme of the case study was the different languages of PE. As the previous theme indicated, the use of dialogue groups as a pedagogical method was unfamiliar to PE as the students ordinarily recognized it. According to the students, the language of ordinary PE lessons is often brief technical or tactical comments regarding specific skills or games or a theoretical and scientific language from the subject matter of applied physiology. In this course, on the other hand, the students were encouraged to use and develop a sensuous and aesthetic language from the domain of poetry, literature and metaphors in order to grasp the meaningful, bodily and most often tacit experiences in physical activity. The following short extracts from the interviews show how the students reflected upon using different languages in PE:

**AM:** . . . and it is just like we have learned to use a tool – by writing the stories ourselves – to be aware of where we are. But it is not a general thing – like i.e. the theory of French grammar . . . Instead, this is more like some tools – it is still educational, but you learn more about your self and who you are and how you work together.

**S:** We’re used to jumping around and doing aerobics or some basketball or badminton. And we do things like stretching out. And so it is quite different to put words on things and explain yourself . . .

**C:** It is not at all the way we’re used to talking in the gym, you know – we’re used to shouting and screaming and things like that . . .

**Interviewer:** Try to say more about what you think is special? How does the course differ from ordinary PE lessons?

**C:** Well, it’s like talking *with each other*, and not just talking *to the others*. That you . . . I mean, that you get to know something from the others (students) that they would have said in another way during the games, like: Don’t do that, just do this and this . . . But when we had those lessons (the course) they gave a much more clarifying explanation, like a bit more *why* this and that . . . In real PE lessons you just fight and fight and hope to win – and then you shout at the others (*she laughs*).
During the first couple of lessons the teacher introduced the students to aesthetic learning processes,\(^5\) that is, the awareness and realization of embodiment and sensuous impressions, which is transformed into expressions and as such made accessible and comprehensible to other people through the expressed aesthetic experience (Daykin, 2005; Engel, 2001; Weddington, 2004). The teacher used examples from novels, poems and autobiographies, and asked the students to tell and write their own peak experiences in sport and physical activity as a bodily narrative (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). One of these bodily narratives is presented below as a representation of one of the student's peak experiences from a jogging race. In the poem ‘A bodily experience’ (Figure 1) the student (ML) described the running experience she was telling the other students about, which then became a shared object of the students’ education about movement and physical activity.

During the in-depth interview ML explained the educational perspectives of writing and telling one's own bodily narrative:

ML: Soon it became quite individual and . . . I experienced that it could supplement my own physical activity and sport. That I perhaps could overcome constraints, which I didn't think I would ever beat – because now I have talked it through and heard it from other perspectives, how they see it, and how they think I have experienced this particular situation. I think it is good to have tools for getting on from this point and improve yourself (. . .) It is not educational in the sense that you get a lot of theory in your head – rather it is a matter of looking inside yourself, you're looking at why you perceive this and that experience as a good or bad experience – and by doing that you get on, perhaps.

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I am in front
12000 people behind me
Bang!
The race starts
12000 people pass me
Or it feels like that
I am being drawn by the crowd
The sound of feet against asphalt
12 km yet
Now it is uphill
The sweat runs down my forehead
The thighs hurt
I turn a corner
Suddenly, the sound of a tuba
What happens?

An orchestra on the road
Gives extra energy
I increase speed
The route becomes more and more hilly
The kilometres rush along
Then it becomes tough
Very tough
I slow down
But it doesn't help
My legs are shaking
The lungs are working
Seconds feel like minutes
Am I to give up?
No!

Now something happens
The pain disappears
The negative thoughts disappear
The legs automatically, I come along
1 km left

I overlook the sea
I am faster than the cars
They have to stop
To make way for the runners
The sun beats down

Finally I get in
Suddenly I feel the pain in the muscles
I can hardly stand
People around me jostle
I smile
I did it.

Figure 1 ‘A bodily experience’, written by ML (2004)
And later in the interview she adds:

ML: I also think, that as long as you find out, that there have been good experiences, that you have been really GOOD at one point – just to have had a peak experience means a lot – it gives you a sort of self-esteem to think back on this experience, and especially to use it afterwards.

Both the observations and the in-depth interviews show the same theme as described in the case of ML. Using the sensuous and aesthetic language of poems and narratives as eye-openers, the students developed an introspective and reflective understanding of physical activity. They were challenged to use personal aesthetic experiences as valuable knowledge in PE by using a type of language which is not usually spoken in PE lessons. In this way the focus of the lessons soon became a matter of learning as belonging and becoming (Wenger, 2003) a physically-active person, which gives a personal meaning to bodily experiences in sport and physical activity.

**Physical and bodily identity: identification of meaningful experiences in sport and physical activity as a learning outcome**

The previous theme anticipates the third theme, which can be described as developing physical and bodily identity by identification of meaningful experiences in sport and physical activity as learning outcome. Despite the methodological and pedagogical pitfalls of interviewing students explicitly about learning outcomes, the students were asked if they could make anything of the course. The answers stretched from statements such as ‘You become more aware of your own goals and motivation in sport’ and ‘I feel that I’ve become more conscious about my attitude as a sports person’, to less definite observations such as ‘We have learned from each other and about each other’, ‘It is good to look back on and tell the others about successful experiences in sport – it gives you self-confidence’ and ‘It has been developing for me on a personal level’. The following three extracts show examples of their both enquiring and often reluctant answers to the question: did you learn anything from the course?

ML is an allround physical active girl, who wrote the poem about a running experience. She said:

ML: I think I have learned to benefit from the good experiences I have had, and not... think too much about the negative ones. To learn from what I did good exactly there, and then move on from this point. I think it has been a really good tool to look more inwards and think about what I can learn from this specific situation – and what I can make use of to become better in another situation in sport. Simply to develop as a human being and feel that everything is fine. I think I can make use of what I actually – or perhaps already – knew when I told my story.
C is a quiet girl, to whom sport is an outlandish and sometimes hostile undertaking. She was more reluctant and yet reflective:

C: Well, I really don’t know . . . er . . . because I spoke about a football match during my summer leave. And everyone here knows that I hate to play football – I mean really hate it. And maybe I learned that it depends on where you are and who you are – I mean, not that it is boring to play football here (in school physical education), but it is different when you play with someone you don’t know that well and when it is together with someone from other countries. I think it was MUCH more fun down there (at the beach during the summer leave). I really gave myself completely to the match. I was totally absorbed in it and completely exhausted afterwards. And in those lessons (the PE lessons where she told the story) I perhaps learned that I don’t have to . . . that I sometimes during PE here at the school give up too easily. Sometimes when we play football in PE I think: No, I’m already dead! Before you even enter the pitch you think: this is not working at all! (. . .) Down there we just played football as we liked. If the ball went into the sea then you just ran out in the water to pick it up again. There weren’t all those rules and sour faces, which there is on the pitch in PE as soon as you do something wrong, as it is in every PE lesson . . . If a person does something wrong, there is always somebody screaming and shouting at you.

AM is an elite tournament dancer, who told the other students her story about the hard life combining elite sport and school. She replied:

AM: I don’t really know what it means. I think they (the other students) have got another picture of me now, because they see me as . . . I mean, I am often away and participating in tournaments, and they think it’s great, but they haven’t seen it (the dancing) yet. You are another person in school, you know. So maybe they learned to know this side of me as well. We have learned to know each other in another way. You sort of get another picture of it, and it becomes easier to understand, if somebody doesn’t want to do a certain exercise in PE, because perhaps they have some problems rather than they just can’t be bothered to do it. I think I have learned some psychology about that – it sort of fell into place.

These three relatively short cases point to an important awareness among the students, namely that self-confidence and self-image in sport and physical activity is influenced by the stories others tell, the stories told about the person, and the stories the person tells others about himself or herself. This suggestion might explain why the students seemed to pay more attention to their own narratives and the narratives
told by their fellow students, and less attention to the literature suggested by the teacher. The students were often surprised and amazed how different their narratives were, and yet how meaningful it was to learn about them. Through the observations I noticed a certain intense atmosphere and much more concentrated discussion when the students told their own narratives than when they worked with the literary texts. In other words: the phenomena of embodied identity and identification as meaningful experiences in sport and physical activity were central aspects of the course, in which the pedagogical prospects of biographical learning in PE might be found.

**Pedagogical perspectives and discussions**

**The biographical approach as pedagogical foundation**

Subjectivity and the ongoing process of making identities are seen as dominant features of today’s society (Giddens, 1991; Zahavi and Christensen, 2003). Contemporary studies of the body, identity and physical activity argue that modern society gives a new considerable importance to the biographical perspective of the agent (Bale et al., 2004; Chamberlayne et al., 2000; Lewis, 2000; Sparkes et al., 1999) and to biographicity as the underlying structure of meaning construction and learning (Alheit, 1995; Alheit and Dausien, 1999).

In the biographical approach to pedagogy, the life-history of the individual learner plays a central role, because continuous holistic narratives told in the everyday language are assumed to reach deeper layers in the social reality ways of functioning. The biographical approach ‘lays stress on valuing knowledge of a personal history in arriving at an understanding of the choices which people make’ (Chamberlayne et al., 2000: 22). When a person speaks about his or her life, it is done with the help of explanatory models that are legitimate in his or her culture (Järvinen, 2000; Otto, 2001). In this way, insights in life-histories allow for an understanding of a person’s way of structuring his or her life, and provide a connected picture of the different practicalities and limitations which structure a person’s life. This is a central argument for using a biographical approach in pedagogical matters: the intimate and always already existing interrelation between individuality and society. As Tinning points out: ‘Different students make different sense of their experience of the same teaching, because they have different subjectivities and capital that they bring with them to the teaching’ (2002b).

The major issue in the biographical approach is subjectivity, represented in individual ways of doing and ways of thinking. Subjectivity is embedded in the habitus: in the individual’s embodied life-history and perceptual dispositions developed through engagement in social life. As such subjectivity is a person’s capability and intention to understand, experience and evaluate his or herself in a life-course perspective (Otto, 2001). Thus, the life-history and narratives of the learner can be seen as a faculty of experience, through which he or she learns to deal with subject matters in relation to education. Following this point of view, assimilation of lifelong physical
activity and healthy lifestyle as the main educational aim of PE has to be seen as inte-
grated with the self-identity, life-history and biographical reflections of the learner. 
Accordingly, the concepts of biographical learning and biographicity will now be 
explored.

Biographical learning and biographicity

The German Peter Alheit is a leading European educationalist, who has developed 
the concept of biographical learning (Alheit and Dausien, 1999; Alheit et al., 1995). 
Alheit points out that biographicity constitutes the underlying understanding of 
biographical learning. First, biographicity is a theoretical concept that identifies the 
social principle of how individual experience is organized. It addresses a self-reflexive 
temporal structure, which is bound to the bodily-based individual in the span of 
his/her life. Second, biographicity is an educational concept that describes an inner 
potential of the learner, a sort of autopoietic (self-creating) resource of coping with 
current reality, and as such an individual knowledge resource to deal with bodily and 
social aspects related to the modern reality. In this way biographies are creative 
systems:

They do not react to irritating environmental influences by finding more or less 
adequate responses; they react by translating the external impulse into their own 
‘language of experience’ . . . Through this processing work, which we can 
conceive as a learning process (in the sense of ‘in taking’ rather than ‘inputting’), 
something new is generated that then has feedback effects on the environment. 
(Alheit and Dausien, 1999)

According to Alheit, educational institutions should support people’s biographicity 
as a way of allowing institutional innovations such as informal framework conditions 
of learning, which support biographical learning as an interactive process. This means 
that educational spaces should try to create places and times for talking, working 
together, sharing experiences and responsibility which are not part of the curriculum. 
An example of informal framework conditions of learning is dialogue groups as a 
pedagogical method, by which the actual telling and listening to stories about sport 
and physical activity becomes the central learning activity. In other words, when 
learners have the chance to tell each other the stories of their lives, this could be a 
pragmatic way of practising intercultural learning, which in the context of PE may 
possibly reveal the implicit connection between bodily identity, physical activity in 
different social contexts and the personal narratives of the learner. As described in the 
cases of ML, C and AM in the results from the case study, the students developed an 
awareness of changes in self-confidence and self-image in sport and physical activity 
dependent on different social settings. Furthermore they developed an understanding 
of the importance of how and where they chose to tell their stories, which shape the 
identity of a person in his or her meeting with others.
The narrative structure of biographical learning

An important point here is that the underlying structure of biographical learning is narrative (Alheit and Dausien, 1999; Pineau, 1995), which means that telling your own life-history, listening to other’s life-histories and interpreting these stories are an integrated part of the learning process. Consequently biographical learning regards teaching and learning as a communicative situation based on exchange and exploration of personal narratives.

The French hermeneutic philosopher Paul Ricoeur (1990) defines narratives as creative imitations of lived lives, which due to an essential distance between text and reader (or between the storyteller and the listener) become objects of another person’s interpretations and recognition in communicative situations. Ricoeur uses the model ‘The Threefold Mimesis’ to describe the process of storytelling, i.e. imaging or imitating praxis. The Threefold Mimesis refers to three phases in the formation of the narrative. Mimesis I is the prefigurative reality characterized by an existential unreflective ‘firsthand’ impression. Mimesis II is the configuration of mimesis I, and as such a meaning-giving and creative process by which we try to understand our ‘firsthand’ impressions by structuring the impressions in time. Mimesis II is thus the connecting link between mimesis I and mimesis III. Mimesis III is the meaningful refiguration or interpretation of the configuration created by the storyteller. In the movement from Mimesis II to Mimesis III the reader or the listener acquires the potential understanding of the narrative, and praxis is thus given meaning – not only for the writer or the storyteller, but also for the reader or the listener.

According to Ricoeur, narratives are a universal human basis of recognizing the social world, because objectification of the social world in the form of speech and text allows for interpretation and understanding. This means that narratives have a cohesive force by constructing a meaningful link between praxis (the lived life) and pathos (the emotions and memories of the lived life). Praxis and pathos are the so-called raw material in the formation of narratives and of the biographicity of a person. Narratives and biographicities are in this sense central to subjectivity, the ongoing process of making identities and generating meaning.

Owing to the statement that narratives have a cohesive force, the narrative method as described in the case study is constructing the identity of a person and this person’s place in his or her culture. In this way biographical learning is able to develop the feeling of belonging and being someone – being a person placed in time in relation to other people in the community – and to develop a sense of cohesion between physical activity and the feeling of identity.

The threefold mimesis of Paul Ricoeur shows that to understand praxis we have to follow a devious course through the text and the spoken language. The objectification through language forms a constituent part of the necessary distance between one person and the other, which is the prerequisite for understanding. This is why self-dissociation through the meeting with strangeness or ‘the Other’ is not an obstacle. Instead, it is the precondition for understanding, that is to say: to grasp
the meaningfulness of others’ and one’s own actions. As illustrated in the case study (theme two: using poems and narratives as eye-openers) it is exactly between the feeling of identity and strangeness that a new understanding occurs. In other words, when a story meets the reader or the listener, the distance between them provokes an interpretation which can lead to new understandings of both the story and the individual. The third theme of the case study (identification of meaningful experiences in sport and physical activity) is an example of the threefold mimesis, by which an existential unreflective ‘first-hand’ impression is transformed and structured in time, interpreted and given meaning by the storyteller in the meeting with the listener.

**Educative experience**

In the work of John Dewey, explicitly in the concept of educative experience (Dewey, 1963), the objectification of experience in text and spoken language is considered to be the precondition for interpretation and understanding. Educative experience refers to the idea that experience as an educational outcome needs to be identified on the basis of certain qualities. First of all, experience should be connected with values and habits; that is to say, the link between experience and the individual as a member of a society, and the link between experience and future actions of the individual, should be made explicit. This quality refers to the idea that experience is constituted by its continuity: ‘The principle of continuity of experience means that every experience both takes up something from those which have gone before and modifies in some way the quality of those which come after’ (Dewey, 1963: 35). Thus, experience is both the means and the goal of education. However, only when the experience is the object of abstract thinking and reflected as meaningful, as for example in the biographical and narrative approach to learning, is it considered an educative experience. This is the reason for Dewey to argue that the concept of experience concerns the capacity for changeability. The concept of educative experience thus joins together the four elements of Dewey’s learning cycle. The perspective of Dewey’s learning cycle resembles the different modes of the narrative structure of biographical learning, as I illustrate in Table 1.

**Table 1** Modes of learning

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mode</th>
<th>Dewey’s learning cycle</th>
<th>Narrative structure of biographical learning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Action</td>
<td>Existential unreflective ‘first-hand’ impressions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Observation</td>
<td>Pointing out and structuring impressions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Abstract thinking</td>
<td>Objectification of the social world expressed in the form of text and words in narratives</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Development of meaning and values</td>
<td>Interpretation of the expression and giving meaning to the narrative</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The four modes of both perspectives constitute a learning cycle or a hermeneutic cycle of interpretation, which ideally never ends. Instead it leads to new actions, new discoveries, new learning.

The link between Dewey and the biographical approach is the continual interplay of action-oriented practical ‘hands-on’ involvement in education (in short, the empirically-based educative experience) and experience articulation and reflective education, where previously experienced actions, knowledge and values (in short, the biography of the learner) are the object of reflection and learning. With the inspiration from Dewey’s concept of educative experience, the implementation of biographical learning in PE can be seen as an interchange of making experiences in the classroom, on the sports ground or in the gym, and reflecting experiences as a part on the learning process in those arenas.

In the light of these reflections biographical learning in PE is a matter of engaging in communicative situations in which learners and teachers meet in biographically-oriented learning processes, which take their starting point in personal narratives surrounding concrete experiences of being physically active in sport, dance, fitness, and so forth. In many of the written stories or poems the students produced during the course they tell about feelings of success, shame, extreme pain, flow experiences and of belonging to a group in relation to physical activity. These written narratives were the final product of the course and during the last lesson the narratives were read aloud in the dialogue groups. During the in-depth interviews this process was often pointed out as an educational experience. The narratives gave the students an awareness of which kind of emotions a certain experience in sport and physical activity awoke in a person, and how the relationship between practising sport and emotions in sport influenced the identity of the person. But it was as listeners, and to a less extent as writers, that the students had that experience. Writing one’s own story was one thing. Yet this seemed not to be the most important educational part of the course. The most genuine educational experiences appeared when the students were listening to their fellow students’ narratives, asked questions and discussed the narratives as something different from their own experience. Sport and physical activity became the object of abstract thinking as objectification of the social world expressed in the form of text and words in narratives. In this way the students developed meaning and values through interpretation and giving meaning to the narratives, i.e. understanding the story and the person as situated and belonging to a continuity of experiences, a life-history or in short: the (bodily) biographicity of the person.

The pedagogical potential of the course would then be the verbalization of meaningful reinterpretations of a personal narrative and biographicity within sport and physical activity, which leads to a deeper understanding of physical activity as a part of personal and social identity. In this way, the central purpose of PE, i.e. health promotion in its broadest sense, would be a matter of making the students aware of their own bodily experiences as a part of their biographicity – and as such their raison d’être for doing (or not doing) sport and physical activity as a part of their healthy lifestyle.
Conclusion

This paper has presented a case-study focusing on a possible way of applying biographical learning to PE. The results from the case study point to pedagogical challenges as well as theoretical issues. The pedagogical challenges involve primarily a conflict in the students’ perception of ‘real’ PE and learning in traditional PE compared to the pedagogical method in biographical learning. Nevertheless, the results also showed that narratives gave the students an awareness of the way in which the relationship between practising sport and emotions in sport influence the identity of the person. The discussion of the results took the pedagogical concept of biographicity presented by Peter Alheit as its starting point. The blend of this pedagogical framework, educational viewpoints of John Dewey and philosophical viewpoints of Paul Ricoeur has informed the case study by exploring and defining the narrative structure of biographical learning as shown in Table 1. The theoretical discussion developed pedagogical considerations surrounding the case study, especially the way in which implementation of biographical learning in PE can be seen as an interchange of the traditional PE focus on making experiences in the classroom, on the sports ground or in the gym, and the biographical focus on reflecting experiences as a part of the learning process in those arenas.

In the paper two major considerations stand out. Is it a ‘problem’ that the students had difficulties recognizing the biographical approach as ‘real’ learning, even if they think the course was an interesting experience, and that it seemed relevant to discuss bodily narratives in a PE lesson? And is it a ‘problem’ that the students had difficulties recognizing the course as ‘real’ PE, because they did not do any sports or physical activity at all during the lessons? These considerations point to a probably never-ending (but nonetheless relevant) discussion among teachers and researchers concerning pedagogical traditions, practices and values within PE. For many PE teachers the aim of PE is to present students with positive experiences in sports and physical activity. Most often this endeavour results in physical and playful lessons – or at least in the intention of having such lessons. In doing so exclusively, PE fails to use its potential as an educative experience to the students. This case study and its theoretical foundation show that retelling, rethinking, deconstructing, joking about and exchanging narratives about bodily experiences in sport and physical activity are an educative experience – if an adequate pedagogical method is employed.

In conclusion, PE is a matter of communicative situations during which the learning of skills and the acquisition of experience always include a communicative and reflective element, which responds to the biographicity and experiences of the learner. PE is thus not merely a representation of the ‘real’ sports practices in the ‘real’ world. On the contrary, it may be a vital response to it and an excellent opportunity to communicate about the individual meaningfulness of being physically active. As such PE in upper-secondary schools is probably better prepared to challenge an increasing demand for educating healthy citizens. One thing is obvious: biographical learning does not impact an active lifestyle in the short run. Instead, in the long
run it holds the potential of being an evident educational framework in which the student has the opportunity to stop, think and speak about what matters to him or her as a physical active person and a ‘healthy citizen’, and to communicate about and argue for different sports practices against the background of subjectivity, identity, culture and power.

Acknowledgement

My sincere thanks to the teacher and the students who participated in the course and made the case-study possible.

Notes

1 The conceptual distinction between ‘biographicity’ and ‘narrative’ is not absolute, but relates to different theoretical sources. However, in this paper biographicity is understood as the underlying self-reflexive and temporal structure of meaning construction and learning (Alheit and Dausien, 1999), whereas narrative is understood as the contextualized and intensified story of a given experience.
2 The Danish equivalent to the British college level or the American high school level.
3 In this paper the term ‘sport’ is regarded as a part of the less specific term ‘physical activity’, which includes dance, play, games, sport and fitness. The term ‘sport’ is used when I specifically refer to organized competitive sports.
4 Writing personal narratives in connection with educational arenas like this specific course involve ethical issues concerning integrity and modesty. Consequently the students were asked beforehand if they agreed to show me and their fellow students their stories and poems. Likewise they were asked if I could use the stories and poems in the case study. All 14 students who prepared a story or a poem kindly allowed me to do so.
5 A detailed definition and discussion of aesthetic learning processes might be relevant to the theme of the course, but will not be developed further here due to the focus of biographical learning in this paper.

References


**Résumé**

*L’apprentissage biographique en tant que promotion de la santé en éducation physique? Une étude de cas danoise*

Cet article présente une étude de cas au sujet de l’apprentissage biographique en tant que promotion de la santé parmi des lycéennes de 16–18 ans dans un lycée danois. Cette étude de cas présente un conflit entre la perception de l’apprentissage en éducation physique traditionnelle par les lycéennes comparée à un projet pilote de 4 semaines faisant appel à des groupes de parole comme méthode didactique en éducation physique, qui a mis l’accent sur le récit et l’écoute d’histoires sur le sport et l’activité physique. La discussion des résultats est le point de départ du concept de *biographicité* (récit de vie) en tant que matière première d’un processus d’apprentissage. En explorant la structure narrative de l’apprentissage biographique, l’article expose des considérations pédagogiques et des discussions autour de l’étude de cas, en particulier en ce qui concerne l’apprentissage biographique en tant que trame éducative évidente, dans laquelle le lycéen peut s’arrêter, penser et s’exprimer sur ses préoccupations de personne active physiquement et de citoyen sain de corps.

**Resumen**

¿*Aprendizaje biográfico como promoción de la salud en la Educación Física?. Un estudio de caso Danés.*

Este artículo presenta un estudio de caso basado en el aprendizaje biográfico como forma de promoción de la salud en niñas escolares de 16–18 años pertenecientes a una escuela secundaria Danesa de grado superior. El estudio revela la existencia de un conflicto en la percepción que tienen los estudiantes del aprendizaje mediante la educación física tradicional,
en comparación a la obtenida a través de un proyecto piloto de 4 semanas de duración en el que se empleó el grupo de discusión como método didáctico, basado en contar y escuchar historias reales sobre el deporte y la actividad física. La discusión de los resultados lleva el punto de partida al concepto de biographicity como materia prima del proceso de enseñanza. Explorando la estructura narrativa del aprendizaje biográfico, el artículo desarrolla consideraciones pedagógicas y discusiones en torno al estudio de caso, especialmente relacionadas con el aprendizaje biográfico como un marco educativo en el que el estudiante tiene la oportunidad de detenerse y pensar sobre lo que importa para él o ella como persona físicamente activa y ciudadano saludable.

Zusammenfassung

Biographisches Lernen zur Förderung der Gesundheit beim Sportunterricht? Eine dänische Fallstudie

Der Artikel handelt von einer Fallstudie, die zeigt, inwiefern biographisches Lernen zur Gesundheitsförderung von 16 bis 18jährigen Schülerinnen in einer dänischen Mittelstufe beiträgt. Die Fallstudie zeigt einen Unterschied in der Wahrnehmung der Schüler im traditionellen Sportunterricht im Vergleich zu einem vier Wochen Pilotprojekt, in dem als didaktische Methode Gesprächsgruppen im Sportunterricht gebildet werden, die das Erzählen von Geschichten und Zuhören über Sport und Sportunterricht fokussieren.

Die Diskussion der Ergebnisse ist zugleich der Ansatz des biographischen Konzeptes als Ausgangspunkt eines Lernprozesses.

Indem die erzählende Struktur des biographischen Lernens analysiert wird, entwickelt der Artikel pädagogische Betrachtungen und Diskussionen, die die Fallstudie umrundet. Im Besonderen betrifft dies das biographischen Lernen als klaren erzieherischen Rahmen, in dem die Schüler die Möglichkeit haben anzuhalten, zu denken und zu sagen was ihnen wichtig ist als aktive Sportler und als ‘gesunder Bürger’.

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