

The USPE-L Listserv: A Forum for Reflective Discourse?

Carol Wilkinson and Todd R. Pennington

Abstract

Does the USPE-L listserv help physical educators engage in reflection? On-line reflective comments were made in 19% of posted messages, and most comments were about professional issues (64%) and instructional strategies (17%). Participants engaged most in responding communications (61%). Men mainly posted informing messages, women mostly responding messages.

During the last century, educators emphasized the need for teachers to engage in reflective thinking in relation to teaching and professional issues (Calderhead, 1989; Cruickshank, 1987; Dewey, 1933; Van Manen, 1977; Zeichner, 1987). During the latter decades of the twentieth century, reflection was accepted as a basic pedagogical principle in the field of education (Feiman-Nemser, 1990) and this continues to be the case today. What do we mean by the term reflection? Tsangaridou and O'Sullivan (1997) define reflection as "the act of thinking about, analyzing, assessing, or altering educational meanings, intentions, beliefs, decisions, actions, or products by focusing on the process of achieving them."

Through the process of reflection, teachers look at their values and beliefs and make modifications accordingly (Sanders & McCutcheon, 1986). Sternberg and Horvath (1995) found that expert teachers were more reflective, less likely to search for simple solutions to complex problems, and more creative than novices. Unfortunately, in seeking to improve the reflective abilities of teachers, many efforts focus primarily on *how to* instructional strategies and minimize opportunities for teachers to engage in reflective thinking (Onosko, 1992). In addition, teachers often have

no audience with which to share their work and no system of notation to record practice (Castle, Livingstone, Trafton & Obermeyer, 1990; Castle, McLure & Gillingham, 1991). Effective professional development must provide teachers with opportunities to reflect on their teaching practice with other teachers and educators in an on-going way (DiMauro & Gal, 1994).

An electronic communication system called a listserv has the potential to eradicate these problems. A listserv is a mailing list for people with a similar interest who want to share ideas. One computer is set up as the mail server to simultaneously distribute any e-mail message from a member of the group to all members via e-mail (Wilkinson, Hillier, & Harrison, 1998).

In March 1994 the Health and Physical Education Program at Virginia Tech created the USPE-L listserv to encourage teachers to discuss and share ideas about improving their teaching and programs. This became one of the largest electronic networks for physical educators. In April 1999 it was renamed the NASPE-L (National Association of Sport and Physical Education Listserv).

E-mail has several advantages that may encourage reflective discourse. Russell and Cohen (1997) found that while teachers engaged in reflective journalizing via e-mail, their thoughts were formulated without interruption, and reflection at a deeper level occurred during the writing process. They state:

The written document not only provided permanency of record, but allowed for thinking time before responding and opportunities to return to reflect again on what transpired earlier. And because e-mail had the virtues of both spontaneity

and rapidity of response, it was found to be a richer and more fluid medium than written letters sent by mail or even face to face communications.

Other advantages include: inhibition is minimized with face-to-face or phone communication (Harasim, 1990), the number of participants on the listserv facilitates the sharing of ideas (Pearson, 1999), e-mail caters to the individual time schedules of each participant (Russell & Cohen, 1997), geographical distances are overcome, and sustained affiliations are formed (Gal, 1992).

Listservs may create a forum for teachers to engage in reflective dialogue leading to professional enhancement. Teachers have access to other professionals with whom they can share teaching practice and problems. Although access to listservs does not mean that reflective practice will occur, teachers have more opportunities to engage in reflective dialogue (DiMauro & Gal, 1994).

Are reflective behaviors evident on listservs? Pearson (1999) examined the potential of electronic networks as a medium for trainee teachers to share ideas about teaching and engage in reflective practice. He found the trainees were reluctant to contribute messages to the network *for fear of criticism* from others. However, Wu and Lee (1999) discovered that computer science student teachers' interactions with peers via an electronic bulletin board system encouraged discussion and reflection on their views of teaching. This leads one to wonder if in-service physical education teachers experience the same concerns expressed in Pearson's (1999) study or perhaps feel more comfortable participating in electronic reflective dialogue.

The purpose of this study was to find answers to the following questions: 1) Is the USPE-L listserv a forum for physical education professionals to engage in reflective discourse, and if so 2) what topics do physical educators reflect on?

Method

Data Collection and Analysis

The source of data was the archives of the USPE-L listserv for the month of September 1998. The data consisted of publicly posted messages. The owner and the administrator of the listserv gave their permission to use the data. Messages to the listserv are considered public information since they are posted on the Internet. Although the content of some of the messages is quoted, none of the listserv participants are identified by name, and names contained in messages have been changed to preserve anonymity.

All September messages (n=383) were printed and coded with respect to author gender, specific topic, and mode of communication. Then a content analysis was completed to identify modes of discourse and use.

To ensure trustworthiness of the data, messages were sorted by one of the researchers and discussed with a peer debriefer to identify categories with similar content and common themes of greater generality, as recommended by Lincoln and Guba (1985). The researchers then defined modes of communication and identified those modes in the listserv messages. Peer debriefing was also used in this process.

A Pearson chi-square analysis was used to assess the effects of gender on communication modes used and topics discussed. Statistical significance was set at the .05 level.

Results and Discussion

General Characteristics and Content of Listserv Dialogues

The number of people posting messages on the USPE-L listserv during September 1998 totaled 157 (92 women, 54 men, 11 unknown). Names that were not clearly gender specific fall under the unknown category. There were almost twice

as many women as men posting messages. These messages varied immensely in length, from one line to several pages. Discourse took the form of threads, defined by Ruopp, Pfister, Drayton, & Gal, (1993) as strings of messages that discussed the same topic. To begin a thread is to want to share an issue with a wider audience.

The kind of threads represent participants' interests during September. Table 1 shows a summary of the threads discussed during this month, which also coincided with the beginning of the school year. Each thread was categorized as one of the following:

Instructional Strategies—topics concerning instructional strategies that would benefit a teacher's immediate situation or someone else's

Professional Conferences—topics concerning upcoming professional conferences and/or shared experiences of a previously attended conference
Professional Issues—topics that teachers perceived to be critical issues to themselves as teachers and to the profession

Public Relations—topics that contained information that would help teachers promote physical education in a positive light

Teaching Activities—topics concerning physical education activities and/or resources for classes.

Technology—topics concerning various technology applications for physical educators

Miscellaneous—topics that did not fall under any of the threads mentioned above.

A variety of topics were discussed with a definite emphasis on ideas related to professional issues (32%) and teaching activities (30%). Professional issues such as safety, teacher's salaries, report cards, and Title IX were discussed. Golf and use of fitness videos are examples of teaching activities practitioners talked about. There were no significant gender differences concerning the topics that were discussed.

Involvement on the listserv varied tremendously; almost half of the participants posted only one message during the month,

whereas five individuals posted over 11 times (Table 2). Some conversations were over in a matter of hours; others took several days, the longest was 15 days on the subject of report cards (Table 3). The number of messages in a thread also varied considerably, from one message to 18 which focused on the professional issue of teachers' salaries.

Modes of communication

Listserv messages were categorized into communication modes according to the following definitions:

Soliciting. A question is posed to elicit a response.

Informing. Information is given with no response elicited.

Responding. Answers are given to questions, or comments are made about other information or responses posted.

The following messages are examples of each mode.

Soliciting message: "I am looking for some creative golf teaching ideas (grades 7 & 8). Have any?"

Responding message: "I made a really neat miniature golf course out of PVC pipe. Each hole is 10 feet long and 40 inches wide. I teach elementary physical education and the kids love it."

Informing message: "I was talking to a second grade class about how important it is to stretch. When I asked does anyone know why it is important to stretch Mary volunteered, 'So you can reach the mashed potatoes!'"

Listserv participants engaged most often in the responding mode of communication (61%), then soliciting (27%), and lastly informing (12%), (see Table 4). This indicates that individuals were very involved in listserv dialogue which

conflicts with the findings of Ruopp et al (1993), who found 48% of messages posted received no response. The results of the chi-square analysis reveal a significant difference between the communication modes of male and female participants, ($X^2 = 9.3$, $df = 2$, $p = 0.009$). Men tended to focus more on posting informing messages than women, while women tended to focus more on responding to messages than men.

A common focus for conversation involved a teacher sharing a physical education dilemma. Often several participants responded to a message, offering examples of how they had dealt, or would deal, with similar issues. Here's an example.

Soliciting: "I need some help coming up with fun exercises. I have a student who has Juvenile rheumatoid arthritis. Her right calf is showing the effects of atrophy. Although she does have a physical therapy regimen, her mother tells me she won't do it willingly because it's not fun. Can anyone help with some activities which could be fun for a kindergartner that could help build up the muscle in her calf? Thanks."

Responding: "I would have her walk on her heels and tiptoe to a song. I have a Barney CD that my students love. Songs like the 'Ants go marching by.' I think incorporating music to any activity might spark her interest. I think she has to understand that she has to do the prescribed activities because it will help her."

Responding: "How about getting one of those steps that they use in step aerobics and using a 'pop goes the weasel' kind of music. The stepping up should strengthen the calf."

Reflective dialogue occurred in short and long threads. A reflective comment offers a "window" into one's professional practice, exploring personal beliefs, and philosophies. Reflective comments occurred in 19% of the total messages posted on the listserv (Table 5). Most of these

comments were in responding messages, such as the following example which is a response to a question on fitness testing.

I applaud Anchorage! I fully agree with you. I believe that it is totally incorrect to grade students on their physical prowess. I also believe that it is wrong to give them a banner or award for such prowess. We are born with certain innate abilities. Our awards should go to the students who can show progress from a baseline score. We do not award anything to the individual who has an IQ above 130 (heredity) and we should not award the individual born with natural talents. Those who use their abilities naturally will gain all that comes to one, no matter which innate abilities they have been granted. We should reward progress and understanding. Thank you for making that a criteria. Test for the purpose of baseline and improvement. When we reward for certain levels we encourage all kinds of "cheating" to attain the magical number. We foster honesty and effort when we teach students to set reasonably attainable goals and strive to follow a plan to achieve their dreams. We must educate them as to what a reasonable goal and appropriate attainment is at this time in their lives. Enough.

Sometimes reflective comments were found in informing messages:

Just wondering if anybody caught the special report on ABC disclosing the sportsmanship issues of spectators, parents, coaches, and players. It was a dynamic expose on the nature of sport in recent years. The report showed the infamous head-butt of the wrestling referee, a baseball game umpired by a 16 year-old who was knocked unconscious by a player after a dispute by the coach, who pushed the youngster. Another dispute covered, was [in] a parent Pop Warner football game who attacked the

referees. The kids who were interviewed stated "It's only for fun game." Why would they do that? In another scenario, parents squared off and vulgarities ran amuck in another baseball game. In other incidents, it covered past problems all the way up to the "spitting" episode in the Major Leagues and the Sprewell problem. The commentary suggested that those two episodes—both players are reinstated and what lesson is learned—you can almost get away with murder in this country. Finally, the report commented what the players and coaches have learned from this—somewhere a rule will be broken, a referee will be attacked, parents need to be taught to just watch and kids must learn to "play the game" for just the fun of it. ABC did mention there are transcripts available, possibly at their web site (abc.com).

Reflective comments were also expressed in soliciting messages:

It's interesting the number of messages that appear on the listserv that describe a unilateral decision by a principal that has potentially negative consequences for physical education. (Please don't take this the wrong way, but) It's also interesting how quickly someone replies with a suggestion of union action. I know there are valid labor disputes, and I recognize the opportunities afforded for us all by collective bargaining. However, I'm concerned that over-reliance on union action creates an adversarial relationship between teachers and administrators.

Some recent literature (Rovegno & Bandhauer, 1997; Dyson & O'Sullivan, 1998) suggests that teacher empowerment and effective school leadership relies on a collegial relationship between teachers and principals. Unfortunately, the majority of schools give power to the principal, not the teachers. Collegiality therefore seems to rely on the generosity

of the principal in terms of how much of that power is shared. My question is this. Do any of you work in school systems that actively attempt to distribute power between principals and teachers? Specifically, are teachers given an opportunity to evaluate the principal?

Tsangaridou and O'Sullivan (1997) found that disruptive events appeared to stimulate reflection. This happened several times in USPE-L listserv dialogue in September. For example, the topic of jewelry being worn in physical education classes generated six reflective messages out of a total of seven messages.

Regarding gender differences, 23% of the messages posted by men contained reflective comments, compared to 15% for the women, ($X^2 = 3.4$, $df = 1$, $p = 0.065$). Most of the reflective discourse of all participants was about professional issues (64%) such as lost recess and salaries (see Table 6). Instructional strategies accounted for 17% of the reflective messages.

Another interesting finding is that the three female and two male participants who posted the most messages on the listserv, also posted the most reflective comments. This seems to indicate a level of comfort in listserv communication felt by these individuals who were willing to divulge their thoughts in on-line discourse.

Conclusions

Reflective thinking is a desirable aspect of physical educators' thought processes. Teachers look at their values and beliefs and make modifications based on such reflection. This can occur on an individual basis during and after their teaching. However, in such an environment, teachers may feel isolated. The USPE-L (now NASPE-L) listserv can help remove the feeling of isolation many teachers feel by providing a community of practitioners with whom to share ideas.

The characteristics of e-mail provide a protected workspace for reflection, giving each individual an opportunity to ask questions and

time to think about messages received and appropriate responses to such messages. In fact, it would appear that before posting a question or information or responding to a message on the listserv, individuals engage in reflective thought as they contemplate the question they have or the answer they wish to give. This reflective thought occurs regardless of whether the ensuing posted message contains any reflective comments. It is referred to as off-line reflection. When practitioners include reflective comments in their messages, it is referred to as online reflection. On-line reflection is evidenced in 19% of the total messages. Consequently, the USPE-L listserv (now NASPE-L) is a medium that provides information and a forum for reflective discourse that helps practitioners crystallize their own values, beliefs, and practice. It appears that the more comfortable individuals feel with using the listserv for sharing ideas, the more likely they are to engage in reflective dialogue. In summary, participation on this listserv through reading and/or posting messages appears to be a useful medium for teacher reflection.

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Dr. Carol Wilkinson and Dr. Todd R. Pennington are on the Physical Education faculty at Brigham Young University.

Table 1 Kinds of Threads Initiated on the Listserv -September 1998

	Female	Male	Unknown	Total
Instructional Strategies	34	17	2	53
Professional Issues	74	38	9	121
Technology	15	10	1	26
Teaching Activities	57	41	5	103
Public Relations	5	5	1	11
Professional Conferences	10	4	0	14
Miscellaneous	34	15	6	55
Total	229	130	24	383

Table 2 Total Messages/Participant

# messages	# participants
1	77
2-4	65
5-10	10
11+	5

Table 3 Time Period of Thread

Day	# of threads	%
1	107	68
2	23	15
3-10	25	16
11-20	2	1

Table 4 Communication Modes in all messages

	Female	Male	Unknown	Total
Soliciting	60 (61.2)	36 (34.8)	8	104
Informing	20 (28.7)	25 (16.2)	2	47
Responding	149 (139.1)	69 (78.9)	14	232
Total messages	229	130	24	383

Note: Ratios in parentheses are expected frequencies for each cell.

Table 5 Reflective Messages by Communication Mode

	Female	Male	Unknown	Total
Soliciting	6	6	1	13
Informing	2	5	0	7
Responding	27	19	6	52
Total	35	30	7	72

Table 6 Reflective Messages by Topic

	Female	Male	Unknown	Total
Instructional Strategies	5	3	1	9
Professional Issues	24	20	4	48
Technology	0	0	0	0
Teaching Activities	5	2	2	9
Public Relations	1	4	0	5
Professional Conferences	0	0	0	0
Miscellaneous	0	1	0	1
Total	35	30	7	72