The Relationship Between the Perceptions of Students and Instructors of the Importance of Their Objectives in Physical Education Activity Classes

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Abstract

Although institutions have added physical education activity (PEA) programs to their curriculums, the ability of the instructors to match their objectives with objectives students value in a PEA class is a concern. This study surveyed 416 students in 19 PEA classes at a Doctoral I University to determine: if student perceived instructor objectives are congruent with their instructor objectives; if student needs are being met by the instructor objectives; and if student perceived instructor objectives are the same as their needs. The mean ranks and rank orders of the PEA objectives were analyzed using descriptive statistics. Pearson correlations were employed to analyze the relationships between the variables. Results of the investigation revealed that student perceived instructor objectives were not congruent with instructor objectives. These findings suggest that students are not aware of the important objectives of their PEA classes as emphasized by their instructors. Student needs were also found to be not congruent with instructor objectives, however when the top ranked objectives between student needs and instructor objectives are not considered the outcomes are more congruous. A significant relationship was found between student needs and the student perceived instructor objectives.

Introduction

Beginning in the early 1980s there has been a resurgence in the number of college and university physical education activity programs (Quarterman, Harris & Chew, 1996). Research by Miller, Dowell, and Pender (1989), Trimble and Hensley (1990) provide data to suggest that 92% of all colleges and universities offer courses in physical education, and six out of ten institutions require their students to participate in some form of physical education as a graduation requirement (Trimble & Hensley, 1984).

In a recent study by Hensley (2000), 600 institutions were randomly selected in which 96% of the respondents reported offering physical education activity (PEA) courses (2000). The fact that PEA programs continue to "pervade" institutions throughout the country is possibly related to the movement to increase physical activity (Quarterman et al., 1996); and the evidence suggesting how regular physical activity decreases the risk of dying from such ailments as coronary artery disease (Sallis & Owen, 1999).

Although PEA programs remain prevalent, the ability of instructors to match their objectives with objectives that students value as essential components of a PEA class has been a concern. There seems to be a difference in the perceptions of objectives by the students who enroll in these classes, and the instructors of the classes. According to Avery and Lumpkin (1987) the majority of students value getting regular exercise, having fun and developing skills that can be utilized outside the class environment. It would seem logical that PEA programs should address these needs. In a study conducted by Weick

(1975), the primary objectives identified were consistent with Avery and Lumpkin's findings. Both of these studies revealed that students' values have not significantly changed from Broer and Holland's (1954) research, in which they reported that students value enjoyment and staying in shape as essential components of an activity class (Weick, 1975).

College and university officials assume that students and instructors possess similar values with regard to the objectives in their PEA classes. However, administrators frequently fail to identify the objectives of the students who enroll in their programs (Avery & Lumpkin, 1987). Pate, Corbin, Simons-Morton, and Ross (1987), Thomas, Lee, and Thomas (1989) believe that PEA programs exist for two distinct purposes. They are vital for developing and maintaining health-related physical fitness and provide instruction for the acquisition of skills in lifetime sport activities. Avery and Lumpkin (1987) reported that traditional PEA programs have emphasized skill development, cognitive understanding and social outcomes as essential elements of a PEA class. However, the students who enroll in PEA classes are frequently unaware of this intent. Possibly the objectives and needs of the students who enroll in PEA classes are failing to be met.

Research in physical education suggests that individuals with positive attitudes toward physical activity are more likely to be active throughout their life; and tend to demonstrate more intense exercise behaviors than individuals with less positive attitudes (Mowatt, Depauw & Hulac, 1988). Trimble and Henlsey (1984) reported that for the majority of university students PEA classes are often their only exposure to physical education. If individuals who exhibit positive attitudes towards physical activity are more likely to remain active; and the bulk of university students are exposed to physical education through PEA programs, why have PEA classes continued to adhere to traditional physical education agendas that may not contribute to meeting student needs?

There seems to be discord amongst instructors and the students who enroll in these classes. This discord stems from the fact that PEA programs continue to struggle to meet the needs of the diverse enrollment in basic activity classes (Quarterman et al., 1996). Trimble and Hensley (1990, 1993) reported that institutions with PEA programs now place more of an emphasis on the lifelong utilization of physical activity, the ability to help students enjoy physical education, and emphasize the need to provide opportunities for students to become fit and healthy as primary objectives of their programs. Unfortunately, the emphasis reported by PEA program directors in the early 1990s do not seem to be emphasized in current activity classes. There continues to be differences between PEA instructors and students regarding the important objectives in activity classes.

Slava, Laurie, and Corbin (1984) reported that health and fitness related concepts carried over into adult participatory lifestyles more, than when the emphasis was placed on skill acquisition. Avery and Lumpkin (1987) concluded that students who participated in the PEA program at the University of North Carolina emphasized: having fun, staying in shape and being regularly active as possible objectives for enrolling in a PEA class. Similar findings were reported by Broer and Holland (1954), Weick (1975), and Soudan and Everett (1981). A problem that most college and university officials face is how to best meet the needs of their students, while simultaneously clinging to the conventional goals and philosophy of physical education (Quarterman et al., 1996). Unfortunately, administrators of PEA programs do not have an understanding of the objectives of the students enrolled in PEA courses (Avery & Lumpkin, 1987). A miscommunication clearly exists between university officials, PEA instructors and students concerning the goals and purpose of their programs.

If the purpose of PEA programs is to promote lifetime commitment to physical activity then courses must be designed to reflect these objectives. In order for congruence to occur, student needs and objectives must constantly be assessed (Avery & Lumpkin, 1987). The primary purpose of the present investigation is to determine if students are aware of the objectives of their PEA classes; and whether those purposes are meeting their curricular needs. The following research questions guide the primary goal of this investigation:

1. Are student perceived instructor objectives of the PEA program at a Doctoral I University congruent with the objectives of the instructors?
2. Are student needs being met by the instructor objectives?
3. Are student perceived instructor objectives similar to the student needs?

Methodology

Subjects

The subjects were seven volunteer instructors and 416 undergraduate students enrolled in 19 classes in a physical education activity (PEA) program at a Doctoral I University. Of the 416 students, 174 participated in team activities, 112 participated in individual activities and 130 participated in fitness/wellness activities. The instructors were six doctoral level graduate assistants and one collegiate assistant coach assigned to teach in the physical education program. The years of college teaching experience varied from one to five years. The students in the subject pool were undergraduates ranging from freshman to seniors, and in age from 18 to 30 years.

Instrument

The instrument used for data collection was a questionnaire developed by the researchers. The students were asked to rank order objectives for the class by importance according to (a) their perceptions of the instructors' objectives, and (b) what they believe the objectives should be for the class. The questionnaire was designed to determine if students were aware of their instructors' objectives by order of importance. The students were also asked what they believed the objectives for the class should be in order of importance. The instructors were given a questionnaire with the same 11 objectives and asked to rank order their objectives for the class (one being the most important and 11 being the least important). Eight of the objectives were obtained from current literature reflecting college students' motivation for enrolling in PEA classes; and the remaining three objectives were obtained from current course syllabi in the classes surveyed. The vocabulary for the three objectives obtained from the PEA course syllabi were standardized for consistency. It should be noted that the objectives from the syllabi were reflective of the Kinesiology and Physical Education department's philosophy, as well as the instructors' personal teaching philosophies.

Validity of the instrument was determined from a pilot study in three PEA classes. Content validity was established by comparing the purposes of the 11 objectives to those objectives found in the literature. The objectives on the rank order instrument were consistent with past research (Avery & Lumpkin, 1987; Weick, 1975). The objectives were also confirmed as representative by a group of professors in the department. Reliability of the instrument was established with a test-retest procedure. The reliability coefficient was .86.

Procedures

Courses surveyed were selected from three types of physical education classes: (a) team activities; (b) individual activities; and (c) fitness/ wellness activities. A sample of six classes each from the team and individual activities, and seven classes from the fitness/wellness activities were selected for data collection. Students received a questionnaire which consisted of two sections: (a)

the students were asked to rank from one to 11 their perceptions of the importance of their instructors' objectives and (b) the students were asked to rank order the objectives for which they believed the objectives should be for the class. The instructors in each class received a similar questionnaire and were asked for only a rank order of the objectives. The questionnaire was administered during the eleventh-week of a sixteen-week semester, and at the beginning of each session. Internal Review Board procedures were followed throughout the data collection.

Data Analysis

All data from the questionnaires were entered into the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). Frequency statistics for the student and instructor questionnaires were considered independently. The mean rank of each objective was computed and placed in order from the smallest (most important) to the largest (least important). Two comparisons were then made: (a) the mean ranks of the student perceived instructor objectives with the mean ranks of the instructor objectives; and (b) the mean ranks of the importance students believe the objectives should be with the mean ranks of the instructors objectives. Subsequent analysis was performed using Pearson correlation coefficients to compare the rank order of the variables by level of importance.

Results

The data in table 1 consists of the mean ranks, and the rank orders of student perceived instructor objectives and instructor perceptions of the importance of their objectives. As the findings in table 1 display, objectives the student perceived to be the most important in PEA classes were not congruent with the objectives the instructors believed to be most important. The students' top four ranked objectives differed from the instructors' top four ranked objectives.

Table 1

Mean Ranks and Rank Orders of Student and Instructors' Perceptions of the Importance of Class Objectives

PEA Objectives	Rank Order of Student Perceived Instructor Objectives	Mean Ranks	Rank Order of Instructor Objectives	Mean Ranks**
To utilize knowledge assoc. with the activity	1	5.1	10	6.84
To develop skills assoc. with the activity	2	5.37	9	6.68
Help students feels good about themselves	3	5.56	6	6.37
Demonstrate knowledge concerning the activity	4	5.67	11	7.16
To become fit and healthy	5.5	5.68	3	5.95
To have fun	5.5	5.68	4	6.26
To develop good sportsmanship	7	5.92	7	6.53
To develop an appreciation of the activity	8	6.1	8	6.58
Develop a commitment to lifelong participation	9	6.74	2	5.32
To get regular exercise	10	6.99	1	4.26
To help relieve stress	11	7.01	5	6.32

***This represents the mean ranks of how students perceived the importance of the instructors' objectives.**
**** This represents how the instructors perceived the importance of their objectives.**

To utilize knowledge associated with the activity was the instructor objective that students perceived to be the most important. This objective was ranked tenth by instructors. *To develop skills associated with the activity* was the second highest ranked instructor objective by students, and was ranked ninth by instructors. *Helping students feel good about themselves* was ranked third by the students, but ranked sixth by instructors. The ability to *demonstrate knowledge concerning the activity* was ranked fourth by the students, and eleventh by the instructors. Clearly, what the students perceived to be the most important PEA class objectives were different from the emphasis the instructors placed on the same objectives.

When the first four student and instructor objectives are not considered there is little difference between the rank order of the student perceived instructor objectives, and the instructor objectives. A difference exists between the students and instructors perceptions of the most important instructor objectives, however when comparisons of the ranks are examined the remaining objectives vary minimally in both their rank order and mean ranks.

When the mean ranks and rank orders of the student needs and the importance of instructor class objectives were analyzed, comparable findings were observed to the data found in table 1. The objectives students believe should be important in PEA classes were similarly not congruent with the rank order of the instructor objectives. An example of this difference is found in the ranks of the top three objectives students believe to be the most important. These same objectives were ranked as the least important by the instructors. *To develop skills associated with the activity* was ranked as the most important objective in a PEA class by the students, yet ranked ninth by the instructors. *To utilize knowledge associated with the activity* was ranked second by the students, and tenth by the instructors. The ability to *demonstrate knowledge concerning the activity* was ranked third in importance by the students, but received the lowest rank by the instructors placing it in the eleventh position.

Table 2

Mean Ranks and Rank Orders of Student Needs in Comparison to Importance of Instructor Class Objectives

PEA Objectives	**Rank Order of Student Needs**	**Mean Ranks***	**Rank Order of Instructor Objectives**	**Mean Ranks****
To develop skills assoc. with the activity	1	5.29	9	6.68
To utilize knowledge assoc. with the activity	2	5.5	10	6.84
Demonstrate knowledge concerning the activity	3	5.56	11	7.16
To have fun	4	5.62	4	6.26
To become fit and healthy	5	5.72	3	5.95
Help students feel good about themselves	6	5.83	6	6.37
To develop good sportsmanship	7	6.1	7	6.53
To develop an appreciation of the activity	8	6.25	8	6.58
To help relieve stress	9	6.59	5	6.32
To get regular exercise	10	6.73	1	4.26
Develop a commitment to lifelong participation	11	6.81	2	5.32

*** What objectives students think PEA classes should include.**
****This represents how the instructors perceived the importance of their objectives.**

Although, there were extreme differences in the rank order of the top three objectives between the students and the instructors, there were similarities in a number of the remaining objectives. The differences in the mean ranks and rank orders of at least five of the objectives did not differ substantially, and in some instances did not differ at all. For example, students and instructors both ranked the objective *to have fun* as fourth. They also ranked *to develop an appreciation of the activity* as eighth. *To develop good sportsmanship* and *to help students feel good about themselves* also received the same ranking by both groups. There is an apparent disparity among the three most important objectives presented by the students and instructors in table 2. However, this disparity is not evident throughout the data. In fact, students and instructors had similar or identical rankings for numerous objectives.

Pearson correlation coefficients were utilized to determine if any relationships existed between the variables. When the data was examined a negative correlation (-.69) was reported between student perceived instructor objectives and instructor objectives. A negative correlation (-.70) was reported between student needs and instructor objectives; and a third correlation of .76 was reported between student perceived instructor objectives and student needs. The reported correlation of (-.69) between student perceived instructor objectives and the instructor ranked objectives indicates an inverse relationship between these two perceptions. What students believed were the most important instructor objectives in the PEA classes differed from what the instructors thought to be the most important. A negative correlation (-.70) was reported between student needs and instructor objectives, suggesting that what students believe to be the most important objectives in a PEA class is significantly different from what the instructors thought the class objectives should include. The correlation of .76 between student perceived instructor objectives and student needs suggests that what students thought were the perceived instructor objectives did not differ substantially from what they thought the objectives of a PEA class should consist of.

Table 3

Pearson Correlation Coefficients between Student Perceived Instructor Objectives and Instructor Objectives; Student Needs and Instructor Objectives; Student Perceived Instructor Objectives and Student Needs.

	Student Perceived Instructor Objectives	Student Needs
Instructor Objectives	-0.69	-0.7
Students Perceived Instructor Objectives		0.76

Discussion

The goals of this investigation were to determine if: (a) student perceived instructor objectives were congruent with the instructor objectives; (b) if student needs are being met by the instructor objectives; and (c) if student perceptions of instructor objectives are similar to student needs. After examination of the data, all three of these research questions can be answered.

A disparity exists between the rank order and mean ranks of the top four student perceived instructor objectives when compared to their instructor objectives. Although, there were similarities in a number of the remaining PEA class objectives, student perceptions of the most important objectives were not congruent with the rank order of the instructors. The lack of compatibility between these two variables was possibly a result of the instructors not clearly emphasizing their objectives. PEA class instructors at this institution are predominantly doctoral students in the School of Kinesiology and Physical Education. Hensley (2000) stated that large institutions are considerably more likely to employ graduate assistants and non-tenure track faculty to teach PEA classes; and in most cases PEA classes are traditionally taught by non-tenure track personnel regardless of the size of the institution (2000). Due to the fact that six graduate students and one collegiate assistant coach participated in this study, lack of teaching experience could have been a factor that accounted for the incongruity between these two variables.

Another plausible reason for why there were significant differences between the student perceived instructor objectives and the instructor objectives was that six of the 19 classes surveyed were team activities. The remaining 13 classes were either individual or fitness/wellness activities. Possibly the individuals who selected a team activity were more concerned with *having fun* and *becoming fit and healthy,* which were two PEA class objectives that had identical mean ranks between the students and instructors, and varied minimally from the first four ranked objectives. While students enrolled in individual and fitness/wellness activities were more concerned with *utilizing knowledge associated with the activity* and *developing skills.*

Goc-Karp, Kim and Skinner (1985) analyzed the differences in perceptions and beliefs of professors and physical education majors, and determined that students placed more of an emphasis on fitness rather than the development of skills for lifetime sports; while their professors continued to adhere to traditional physical education views emphasizing skill development.

In table 2 the top three ranked instructor objectives surprisingly differed from the student needs. Instructors believed *developing a commitment to lifelong participation, becoming fit and healthy,* and the ability *to get regular exercise* were the essential elements of a PEA class. A recent study by Hensley (2000) confirmed previous findings by Trimble and Hensley (1990, 1993) that indicated over the past decade PEA programs have emphasized lifelong participation, the ability of students to become fit and healthy, and for students to enjoy physical activity as three of the four most important objectives in a PEA class. The emphasis on a health related physical education curriculum could be a result of the increasing number of sedentary Americans, childhood obesity levels and a higher number of reported deaths from coronary artery disease from the lack of regular activity patterns (Sallis & Owen, 1999). Thus, a traditional element of a PEA class such as skill development, has possibly taken a back seat to health related concerns in order to increase activity levels of college-aged individuals. This finding is supported by the fact that college students have increased health risk behaviors as a result of the lack of regular physical activity (Patrick, Covin, Fulop, Calfas & Lovato, 1997; Dinger, 2000).

Concerning the issue of meeting student needs, our data suggests that the elements students hope to receive from a PEA class are possibly being

met by the instructors. Although a (-.70) correlation was reported between these two variables, if the first three objectives are not considered the variability between the remaining objectives is minimal. The mean ranks of the eleven objectives support this claim; as well as the .76 correlation that was reported between student needs and student perceived instructor objectives. Suggesting that what the students thought were the most important objectives to instructors, are the objectives that they would include in a PEA class. However, due to the narrow range between the mean ranks of the student perceived instructor objectives in table 1, and the mean ranks of the student needs presented in table 2, it is not clear if the students enrolled in these classes are sure what the objectives are, or what should be included in a PEA class.

Recommendations

Many institutions continue to employ graduate assistants and non-tenured track faculty to teach PEA classes. This university primarily employed graduate-assistants to teach these courses possibly contributing to the incongruity between the student perceived instructor objectives and the instructor objectives in this study. Unfortunately, with limited resources the majority of universities offering PEA classes will be forced to continue to employ graduate-assistants and non-tenured faculty to teach in their PEA programs. However, steps can be implemented to enhance the learning experience for each student enrolled in these courses.

The first step is to offer in-service training for newly hired PEA instructors. Too often a graduate student is awarded an assistantship with no prior college teaching experience. In order to ensure that students enrolled in PEA classes receive the best possible instruction, beginning instructors should attend a series of in-service workshops to acquaint each instructor to the department's teaching philosophy. Many programs exist within a physical education and kinesiology department and often the graduate students and non-tenured personnel hired to teach PEA classes lack teaching experience. By offering in-service training newly hired instructors might become more familiar with the philosophy of the department.

However, many institutions cannot afford to implement such a training program. A possible alternative is to pair each newly hired graduate assistant and non-tenured track faculty member with an experienced instructor in the PEA program for one semester. Dependent upon a satisfactory recommendation by the supervising instructor the individual will be assigned to teach a limited number of PEA classes the following term. Intermittently, a tenured faculty member would observe and videotape the instructor to provide feedback on their teaching. This process will ensure that newly hired PEA instructors will receive constructive feedback; as well offering the faculty an opportunity to contribute to retention discussions on all instructors.

In many states physical education has been taught by classroom teachers and unlicensed physical educators. The message being sent by universities hiring inexperienced instructors for PEA classes is similar to the elementary and secondary schools employing under qualified personnel to teach physical education. Perhaps, physical education departments might require that individuals selected to teach within the department possess college teaching experience, or participate in in-service programs suggested in the previous sections to ensure that the level of teaching in PEA classes is representative of the goals and objectives of the programs offering these classes.

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