

Looking Back to Move Forward

Identifying Value in Collaborative Self-Study

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Initial Teacher Education

Physical Education

Collaborative Self-study

Meaningful Physical Education

Value Creation Framework

Researchers engaging in self-study “are committed to their ongoing professional learning and explore their assumptions, beliefs and actions as they are enacted in practice” (Casey et al., 2018, p.56). Maura, Richard and Tony are primary physical education teacher educators working with generalist pre-service teachers (PSTs) in three different universities in Ireland. We previously undertook a collaborative self-study project to explore our pedagogical approaches in introducing the Meaningful Physical Education (MPE) framework to our students. Following the completion of this study, we sought to evaluate our own professional learning outcomes and use self-study to consider future directions for our practice. We decided to focus this inquiry on our interactions within a ‘social learning space’ (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2020, p. 13). The Value Creation Framework (VCF), currently presented as eight value-creation cycles (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2020), was used as a lens to analyse our reflections and discussions. Three themes were generated: developing identities as teacher educators, the influence of collaboration on individual practices within physical education, and professional learning beyond the specific subject area. Exploring our experiences through the Value Creation Framework (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2020) provided us with opportunities for personal and professional learning and enabled us to model reflective practice.

Context

Maura, Richard, and Tony are experienced teacher educators based in three different universities in Ireland teaching physical education (PE) to primary student teachers (PST’s). In Ireland, primary teachers are generalists in the main, so the Bachelor of Education and Postgraduate Masters courses we teach cover methodologies across 11 subject areas and religious/ ethical education, and the PST’s also have periods of school placement throughout their course of study. As we were all interested in deepening our practice in the pedagogy of Meaningful Physical Education (MPE), we embarked on a collaborative self-study during one semester to explore how we might best embed the pedagogical principles of this approach in our PE lectures in our three different contexts.

In recent years, concerns have been expressed about the quality of childrens’ experiences in primary PE, (Hardman & Marshall, 2000). Jess and Gray (2019) have noted how these concerns have prompted attempts to re-envision curriculum and pedagogy. MPE is a framework for quality physical education (Beni et al., 2016; Ní Chróinín et al., 2017).

Maura and Richard had previously taught a module integrating the features of MPE which include social interaction, fun, challenge, motor competence, personally relevant learning, and delight (Beni et al., 2018). Tony had more recently discovered the framework and was invited to engage in exploring the five guiding pedagogical principles of MPE, as outlined by Fletcher et al. (2018). The aim was that meaningful participation should be a central focus of our planning, teaching, and assessment, and that this emphasis should prompt student inquiry into the meaningfulness of their PE experiences as learners, physical activity participants, and as teachers of peers and children.

Current literature supports the use of collaborative self-study to examine how teacher educators learn more about their practices (Tondreau et al., 2021). Collaboration with colleagues facilitates the development of trust and critical friendship (Fletcher & Bullock, 2012), and may help to break down a sense of isolation that often exists among teacher educators (Martin & Dismuke, 2015). A key responsibility of Self Study of Teacher Education Practice (S-STEP) researchers is to make the private insights public to extend the knowledge base of teacher education (Beni et al., 2018; Vanassche & Kelchtermans, 2015). In our context, having national collaborators beyond our own institutions avoided defensiveness by providing a confidential sounding board, and an outsider's perspective free of institutional politics (Roose, 2010) while at the same time understanding the Irish educational system, with particular knowledge of national and international PE curricula and contexts. We were particularly interested in how our use of the principles of MPE was impacting our pedagogical practice generally. In contrast to the research by Lynch and Sargent (2020) who examined student teachers' experiences of MPE, our work is focused on our experiences as teacher educators. Our specific research question at that time was: how did our collaboration support us to integrate a new pedagogical approach into our teacher education practice?

Having completed the initial self-study and reflection (Sweeney et al, 2020) we now wish to reflect (and *look back*) on our experiences. We also *look forward* to considering the potential directions of our future practices. To scaffold this new inquiry, we seek to situate this exploration within social learning theory, with a specific focus on our interactions within a "social learning space" (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2020, p. 13). Specifically, we use the Value Creation Framework (VCF), currently presented as eight value-creation cycles (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2020). The creation of value within these non-hierarchical cycles (Immediate, Potential, Applied, Realized, Enabling, Strategic, Orienting, and Transformative) involves the development of value-creation stories that illustrate how participants are "learning to make a difference" while focusing on agency and meaningfulness (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2020, p. 76).

The concept of a VCF was first proposed by Wenger et al. (2011). Since then, the framework has been used in a number of different contexts and has been revised and updated by Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner (2020). Using the five cycles of the initial VCF, Booth, and Kellogg (2015) affirmed the framework's use in the identification of learning within a community of practice, but also perceived overlaps between some cycles. In order to achieve greater clarity, they note the suggestion from Wenger et al. (2011) that a more robust understanding of the value created could be achieved by complementary use of quantitative indicators. An example of this is evident in how Cowan and Menchaca (2014) used network analysis in conjunction with their qualitative analysis of their data. Using a theoretically driven quantitative approach, Dingyloudi et al. (2019) concluded that the VCF is a useful lens through which to highlight the potential learning that may take place within a community of practice.

Despite these reservations, the VCF has been applied successfully to identify learning in a range of diverse contexts. In the context of a group of youth soccer coaches, for example, Bertram et al. (2016) used qualitative methodologies to describe how each coach created value across the five cycles of the VCF in ways that were personally relevant for themselves as learners. In a separate study, the same authors used the framework to explore learning within a community of practice made up of university coaches (Bertram et al., 2017).

As Bertram et al. (2014, p. 10) have noted, "the type of value garnered by members is not important, but rather that they are indeed gaining value, and that such value is relevant and timely given the community's practice and the members' respective intentions for participating in the group". Although learning can be viewed as unique to each individual, the learning process, and the inherent values observed, "are nested within a wider social context" Bertram et al. (2014, p. 10). In a context relevant to our study, Clarke et al. (2020) used the revised 8-cycle version of the framework to focus on

specific aspects that related to their own experiences of a professional learning network. Their work highlighted how the VCF, and the development of value-creation stories, can help to give voice to the experiences of participants in a learning community (Wenger-Trayner et al., 2019). In our situation, we were also drawn to the suggestion that researching using the VCF “could look at the longitudinal value of nurturing social learning spaces” (Duarte et al., 2021a, p. 358).

Aim

The aim of this paper is to develop what we have learned through our previous participation in a collaborative self-study of our practices in physical education teacher education (PETE) (e.g. Sweeney et al, 2020). We seek to reflect (and *look back*) on our experiences, through the perspective of the value-creation framework and we also wish to interrogate our values as we *look forward* to considering the potential directions of our future practices.

Methods

LaBoskey (2004) suggests self-study of teacher education practices (S-STEP) research is improvement-aimed, interactive, and includes multiple, mainly qualitative methods to collect data. We demonstrated LaBoskey’s criteria of being improvement-aimed through our efforts to understand the implications of pedagogical approaches more fully to teaching. We have drawn on critical friendship framed as co-mentoring (Allison & Ramirez, 2020), whereby there is a mutual and collective benefit of collaborators on the same journey.

Following an initial discussion, we began the 'looking back' process by writing individual reflections in September 2021 to consider whether further collaboration was worthwhile. Prompt questions which we had found to be a suitable stimulus in our initial study guided these reflections. These reflections looked to consider what we had gained from our initial collaborative self-study, future directions to be explored, and broader thoughts on the value of self-study and reflection. Once shared via Dropbox, each partner commented on the personal reflections to promote further dialogue and inquiry. Following an initial reading of Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner (2020), we recorded and transcribed an online conversation on Microsoft Teams. To advance our inquiry in January 2022, each participant wrote a meta-reflection to consider their personal learning to date and specific needs to be addressed through the next stage of collaboration. An online discussion on January 26th was auto-transcribed by Teams software and it was decided that we should again act as critical friends (MacPhail et al., 2021) to comment on these meta-reflections. We used interactivity by seeking critical perspectives from each other, and qualitative data sources for this project, therefore, included two sets of three reflections with comments by two critical friends and two group online conversations.

The Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner (2020) value-creation framework provided us with a lens to reflect on our social learning space and collaboration. Data were analysed deductively using the eight cycles of the framework. Following the completion of these commentaries, a shared coding key was developed by Tony based on the typical data sources and data indicators outlined in Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner (2020), This was then used by each participant to retrospectively code this transcript, the three meta-reflections and commentaries on an individual basis. Finally, in April 2022, all the coded data from the three participants were subjected to a meta-analysis to identify significant data and to develop themes from the value-creation framework analysis we had undertaken.

Outcomes

Through this meta-analysis, it was evident that, for the most part, relevant data were frequently identified in common across all participant coding. Significantly, however, our interpretation of the values identified through the use of the VCF key varied at times depending on our individual context, experience, and personal perspective (Bertram et al., 2014). Following our analysis, we present our findings under two headings. The first section looks retrospectively at our perspectives on what went before, and this is followed by a consideration of potential value outcomes from future practice.

Looking Back

Looking back at the various experiences we had during the lifetime of the collaboration there were opportunities where we were “learning to make a difference” (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2020, p. 76), as we focused on the agency

afforded to us through our work together and how we found this collaboration meaningful. Using the VCF, we will identify what values were created through the themes of immediate, realised, and strategic value. Firstly, we will explore the immediate value gained from the collaboration, followed by the realised value and the impact this has had on our professional identities as academics, and finally we will present the strategic value through the lens of our pedagogical practice.

As we were working and researching in a social learning space, created through this collaborative self-study, we had a strong connection with the innovative pedagogical approach, MPE, and the content of the curricula we were facilitating. This connection with each other, the content and pedagogical practices we were exploring and the students we teach gave rise to focused learning and ensured we engaged with each other and our practices more deeply. This immediate value was evident through our regular engagement with each other through reflections shared and our discussions. We mutually recognised each other as learning partners. Tony expressed this in recognising the context for the self-study as it happened for him at a time when his students were using a similar approach as he reflected on a “valuable chance to personally engage in self-study and action research which is a key part of our course in recent years” (Tony, Reflection 1). The learning we experienced in this context was both meaningful and immediate for us. Tony again pointed to ‘productive discomfort’ (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2020 p.81) and the immediate value of “discussing our experiences and learning from each other” and also pointed to the experiences as “helping me to commit to the process...” (Comment on Richard’s Reflection 1). In Ireland, our PSTs study physical education as one of 12 subjects, and our time with the PSTs is limited therefore having ongoing support throughout the modules, we were exploring provided us with immediate value in this learning space, allowing for regular sharing of pedagogical practice which both helped understand the approach we were implementing and informed improvements to our practice.

While we experienced immediate value through our direct experiences as learners, we were also cognisant of the positive outcomes because of reflecting on our practice as individuals and as a group. There was a significant overlap of values arising as we equally recognised the strategic value of links established through the project, and indeed the publication of associated papers and the opportunity to present at conferences could be seen to be a realised value. These positive outcomes, or realised value, were obvious in a personal, collective, and professional sense. Individually we noted the realised value in professional learning and the personal satisfaction we got from participation, “so I think there is that CPD element and I think that’s really important’ and engaging with others’ perspectives, “support, push/nudge, [provide] direction, resources, practical ideas though Covid... and it’s massive for professional learning” (Maura, Online Discussion). We each identified professional outputs such as book chapters, conference presentations and proceedings papers, and a journal article both from an individual perspective as noted by Richard “From the perspective of my own research profile, the project has yielded (and continues to yield) opportunities for papers, presentations, and book chapters” and from a collective perspective, “Great to get AERA, Castle, Routledge publications and ... to showcase our work ...at ESAI”. He also evidenced personal development and personal advancement as a researcher and as a practitioner: “I feel more confident in my own ability to research in the MPE and SS areas. This confidence is supported by regular individual and collaborative reflection” (Richard, Reflection 1).

The realised value of publications and presentations also had strategic value for us as noted by Richard in the same reflection, “our research outputs, in turn, can help raise our profiles within our own institutions”. Each output led to another opportunity for publication helping to build our profiles further and providing opportunities for us to engage with colleagues in our physical education departments, and with PETE internationally, around an innovative pedagogical approach in MPE,” so that our pedagogy will enable our PST’s to develop their own pedagogical approaches to maximise teaching and learning” (Tony, Reflection 2). We recognised the realised value of modelling best practice with our PSTs, “reflecting with students is a priority - to have their feedback on what worked and what didn’t in class and also what they understood and might take forward...it allows PSTs to see what reflecting is and how it might work” (Maura, Reflection 1). Our learning through this collaboration also provided opportunities to share our knowledge on our engagement with self-study with colleagues within our own institutions and beyond “with the potential to be involved in other projects” (Tony, Reflection 1). We each found a value in working with others who understood the process we were going through and wanted to work through that process, in this case learning about the meaningful physical education

approach. Developing and maintaining these productive relationships with colleagues and other researchers in our field provided further opportunities for us to learn in this space, both as PETE and as researchers.

Looking Forward

Our use of the VCF also helped us *look forward* as we sought to identify value that may have accrued during the course of this project. We express our learning through three themes. Firstly, we discuss the potential impact on our own identities as teacher educators. Secondly, we examine how our collaboration may influence our practices within physical education. Finally, we explore our learning in the context of looking beyond our specific subject area.

As each of us examined our involvement within this collaborative self-study, we identified opportunities for “my own professional development and moving myself forward” (Maura, Online Discussion). In this way, our collaborative self-study has sensitised us to the possibilities for each of us to engage in continuous professional development, supported by our colleagues. Furthermore, our regular “conversation and dialogue help you make sense of your own learning” (Tony, Online Discussion). This focus on lifelong learning, and the possibility of the generation of transformative value, aligns with the experiences of some participants in other studies (Duarte et al., 2021b). The supportive nature of our collaboration was valuable because it provided us with the means to discuss our specific engagement in physical education pedagogies, along with issues relating to our teacher education practice more generally. In terms of immediate value, this has given us a means to look inward at our own practice, with a focus on making improvements in the future. As Richard pointed out “for me, the collaborative self-study provides a consistent framework with which to reflect on, and enact, some changes in my practice” (Richard, Reflection 2). In conjunction with this inward-looking focus, our self-study also prompted us to adopt a more outward-looking orientation, and it was “a stimulus to look at something in a different way or in a different direction” (Tony, Online Discussion). We noted orienting value in this observation, as we developed a greater understanding of our current position within our teaching environment. We suggest this interplay between inward and outward foci is important because it helps us to learn more about ourselves as physical education teacher educators.

Our engagement with the VCF heightened our awareness of the potential value of our collaboration on our review and revision of our existing practices. As Maura noted, “[it is] important that we understand what we currently do, and why we do it – if something needs to be changed, first why, and then how?” (Maura, Reflection 1). Her assertion was that “there is always something that can be improved upon, even if a little bit” highlights how participation in this self-study enabled us to interrogate our current practices, with a view to improving them in the future.

Our involvement in this project provided us with possibilities to develop and create links with the wider physical education teacher education community. Realised value was identified, for example, through an invitation we received to present at a pre-conference workshop hosted by an international organisation. This opportunity, in turn, had orienting value for us, as it has helped us to engage with practitioners beyond our own universities, and has forged links that can facilitate further collaborations in the future.

As we reviewed our collaboration, it became clear that much of the value that was accruing for us could be applied to some of our academic roles beyond PE. Crowe (2020, p. 775) argues that “self-study has a history of crossing disciplinary boundaries and not confining itself to predetermined academic silos.” By re-examining our data, we have noticed how our collaboration has provided us with opportunities to look beyond our specific subject area, leading to the potential for transformative value because “we’re stepping out of the silo...of our own institution, and we’re getting a chance to broaden the perspective” (Richard, Online Discussion). Within our conversations, we highlighted how our specific engagement with physical education practice, and the learning therein, can be applied more broadly. Presentations about our research to teaching colleagues have presented us with possibilities to engage in other self-study research. These interactions can, in turn, lead to interactions with practitioners in the broader educational landscape, including teachers and policymakers. As Maura noted, “this experience has encouraged me to become involved in other self-study groups as a participant and leader and I am encouraging colleagues...to support their learning through collaboration with others” (Maura, Reflection 2). We identified orienting and transformative value in this aspect of our collaboration: orienting because of the potential to extend our professional networks, and transformative in the ways that we may be able to support institutional change and contribute to the shaping of national policy.

Duarte et al. (2021a, p. 348) use the metaphor of “zooming in and zooming out” to explore how different perspectives of a social learning landscape can be attained. In our context, a process of *zooming in* on our individual practices helped us to identify how we now better understand ourselves as teacher educators. By *zooming out* to varying degrees, we gain a better perspective on how our learning can guide our work more broadly within the PE teacher education community and, subsequently, across our educational practice landscape more generally.

Implications

As practitioners with previous experience of S-STEP, the decision to use the VCF to aid our reflection was a productive one. Applying this lens gave us a fresh perspective on the outcomes of our previous work, and this learning process supported us in considering the potential value that could be gained from our future practice. In reflecting on our approaches to pedagogical innovation with MPE, we gained a deeper understanding of framework outcomes in light of this insight. By collaborating, we could move beyond the confines of our personal contexts and ‘silos’, and through interaction with our self-study research partners, interrogating each other’s reflections as critical friends, a broader perspective and consequent understanding of our pedagogical practice and the value outcomes of the VCF we were expressing, was gained. While we must acknowledge the occasional dissonance of the values being identified in our personal coding during the project, as cited in Bertram et al. (2014), the resulting dialogue and reflection was a positive outcome of the data analysis because it helped us to reflect on our individual and collective learning.

We are reminded that the opportunity to reflect as teacher educators through self-study, either individually or collaboratively in this instance, is of benefit, not just to us as practitioners, but significantly our modeling of reflective practice in our work with our student teachers is supporting their learning, and is very much in keeping with the expectations of The Teaching Council (2020, p. 23) that require our students to be able to “reflect critically on the effectiveness his/her practice on an ongoing basis so as to inform and adjust his/her practice”

As teacher educators and self-study researchers, looking back helps us as we look forward to the future, and from our experience in this study, taking the time to ‘Pause at the Threshold’ and explore the Value Creation Framework (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2020) was a valuable opportunity for our personal and professional learning and practice.

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