Social Interactions in College Physical Activity Classes: “Something Else is Taking Place Here”

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Abstract

Physical activity has been found to benefit a person in many ways. One of the benefits of being physically active is the social component. This deals with interacting with someone before, during or after the activity. The purpose of this study was to investigate social interactions effects on college-aged students during their physical activity class. For this study 408 college-aged students (272 males & 136 females) participated in this study. College-aged students were surveyed regarding their interactions during their physical activity class. The survey contained Likert scale questions and open-ended questions, requiring the students to respond with written answers. Briefly, it was discovered from these students that their interactions during their physical activity were important to them and that the interactions they were having were enjoyable. These results from this study along with other results from this study, highlight another positive benefit that comes from being involved in physical activity.

Keywords: Socializing, Interactions, College-Aged Students, Physical Activity
The literature has strongly endorsed the benefits of physical activity (PA) in a person’s life. For example, physical activity can reduce risks of cardiovascular disease (Lee, Hsieh, & Paffenbarger, 1995), diabetes (Helmrich, Ragland, Leung, & Paffenbarger, 1991), osteoporosis (Kohrt, Snead, Slatopolsky, & Birge, 1995), depression (Camacho, Roberts Lazarus, Kaplan, & Cohen, 1991), and others. One population that can benefit from the benefits of PA are college-aged students (Brown & Fry, 2014). For the college student, one of the main opportunities to be physically active is through physical activity classes offered through the university or college they attend. College students take physical activity classes for a variety of reasons. Barney and McGaha (2006) studied why college students took basketball or tennis classes and the likelihood of being active in the activities after graduation. It was discovered that college students participated in these physical activity classes for the reasons of having fun, getting exercise, getting credit to graduate, improve their skills in the sport, social outlet and a stress reliever. The one finding of physical activity classes serving as a social outlet can have an effect on a person’s PA throughout their life. Dhurup (2012) mentioned that social interactions with friends and family lead to the development of life skills and positive relationships, positively affecting a person’s life time PA.

The social component in physical activity can have different effects on a person. Fahey, Insel, Roth and Insel (2017) feel a person can be successful having a partner/friend to work with and/or during the participation of an activity. Having that social interaction can be motivating, can serve for safety reasons, can help to adhere to activities, and simply time to talk with their partner/friend. Burke, et. al, (2006) studied the effects of exercising with a group of people, as compared to exercising at home alone. The researchers concluded that exercising with a group of people is superior to exercising at home alone. The researchers summarized that when
someone exercises with a group of people, the amount of contact with the people aids in them getting the health benefits of their exercising. There is a built in social support that can come in the form of encouragement and social interactions. Another study looked at social interactions in a college PA class, more specifically a caring climate in an exercise setting in relationship of well-being, hope, happiness and perceived self-concept (Brown & Fry, 2014). The researchers defined a caring climate as one that fosters cooperation, where members feel welcomed and comfortable with their classmates and instructor. The researchers concluded that college students in college PA classes experienced greater hope and happiness when they perceived a caring climate.

Barney, Benham and Haslem (2014) studied the effects of college student’s perceptions of participation in PA classes on stress in their lives. The results of the study were favorable for the fact that the college student’s perceptions were that their participation in the PA class did help them to manage stress they experienced as a college student. A secondary finding from this study was that the student’s felt that the socializing they had during their PA classes helped them cope with stress in their lives. It was found that 75% for the males and 85% for the females felt that the socializing aspect of their PA classes was helpful in coping with stresses in their life. Student comments dealing with socializing during their PA classes were “I have met people in class and talking to them about anything is how I deal with things”, “I can unwind to visit and talk through some of my stressors”, and “Because I can talk and joke they (students) don’t know anything I’m going through so they don’t bring it up.”

With research that has highlighted socializing during physical activity and the positive effects that can come, additionally there is a document that promotes PA class instructors to do their part of providing socializing opportunities. The National Association for Sport and
Physical Education (NASPE) have created a document titled Appropriate Instructional Practice Guidelines for Higher Education Physical Activity Programs (NASPE, 2014). The purpose of the document is to give “guidance to college and universities for offering quality instructional physical activity programs” (pg.3). The document has seven topic areas. They are 1) Administration/Support, 2) Assessment, 3) Curriculum, 4) Instruction Strategies, 5) Program Staffing, 6) Learning Environment and 7) Professionalism. An appropriate instructional practice in the Curriculum section, it states:

“Program offerings include content that allows students to develop social skills (cooperation and communication) and responsible behavior that will lead them to become productive members of society. Curriculum is designed to ensure that these skills are taught intentionally, and are not left for “teachable moments” only.”

This statement encourages college PA instruction to put students in situations to socialize in a positive manner to be responsible in social situations when involved in physical activity. With the literature and research presented, it is hoped that this study will shed light on the important benefits social interactions can have on college-aged students during PA. Thus, the purpose of this study was to investigate social interactions effects on college-aged students during their physical activity classes.

Methods

Participants

Participants for this study were 408 college-aged students (272 males & 136 females) from a private university located in the western United States. Participants were comprised of undergraduates (94 freshman, 96 sophomores, 86 juniors, & 119 seniors) and graduate (13) students. The participants were enrolled in volleyball, basketball, bowling, Zumba and
badminton activity classes. The university Institutional Review Board (IRB) granted approval to conduct this study.

**Instrumentation**

A review of the literature failed to identify an instrument specific to addressing social interactions during physical activity. Therefore, the researcher developed a 14-question survey instrument (See Table 1). The survey consisted of three Likert scale questions, eight open-ended questions and three demographic questions. To establish content validity, the researcher had college-aged student review survey questions for clarity and understanding (Barney, Gust, & Liguori, 2012). For reliability, the instrument was further pilot-tested on college-aged students that did not participate in the subsequent study.

**Procedures**

Convenience sampling was employed to collect data for the study. The researcher contacted the instructors of the physical activity course explaining both the study and the survey. After obtaining instructor agreement, the researcher attended each physical activity class (16 classes were surveyed) and administered the survey to the students. For this study 97% of the students agreed to participate by taking the survey. All students were assured that their voluntary decision to participate in the study would not affect their grade in the class or class standing.

**Data Analysis**

Descriptive statistics were derived from the survey. Also, qualitative data analysis was used for this study. This comprised of a thematic content analysis of respondent’s short answers. The researcher read and re-read the data until common themes became evident for each survey question (Mueller & Skamp, 2003).

**Results**
Table 2 provides descriptive statistics about student interactions in their physical activity class. The first statement on the survey asked college students “How important are the interactions you have in your physical activity class to you?” For this statement, a majority of the males felt their interactions were very important (17%) and important (42%). Also, a majority of the females felt their interactions were very important (16%) and important (51%) to them. Interestingly, a third of the college students were neutral (38% males & 33% females) regarding their interactions in their physical activity class. The second statement asked the college students, “Have you found your interactions with classmates during your physical activity class enjoyable or not enjoyable?” A large majority of the students (88% males & 89% females) felt the interactions were enjoyable to them. And statement 10 stated, “When do your social interactions take place?” Here again, a majority (60% males & 63% females) had interactions before and after class. Yet, 37% of the males and 30% of the females had interactions just during class.

Other data collected in this study were short answer responses from seven survey statements. The following are common responses from the college students. When asked what positive interactions they had with classmates in their physical activity classes (statement 3), student responses were, “I made new friends”, “It’s fun to get to know people and share experiences”, and “People have been friendly and not judgmental when I or anyone else get something wrong. For example, if I ever mess up with a serve, no one judges or minds.” Students were asked, what negative interactions they have had with classmates in their physical activity class (statement 4). Two common responses to this survey question was students were “too competitive” and “ball hogs.” Other comments dealing with this survey statement were, “Trash talking. People who think they know the sport” and “Being co-ed classes I’ve found it
takes about a third of the semester for guys to take girls seriously as athletes with skills equal to theirs.”

Students were asked if their interactions in their physical activity class were beneficial or non-beneficial (statement 5). A majority of the students stated that their interactions were beneficial because their physical activity class was a “good way to meet people.” Another common response was their interactions in physical activity class helped relieve stress. Other responses for this statement were, “Knowing that I have friends to talk to is comforting” and “this class helps me stay sane.” Yet, a number of the students were “neutral” in regards with their interactions during their class. For statement six, students were asked if their interactions they have in their physical activity class has carried on outside of their physical activity class. For this statement, the researcher noticed that two themes were common among taking their physical activity class and from their class they were able to find players for their intramural teams. One student stated, “As I play basketball in class I can find good players to be on my intramural team.” A second theme was that students dated a classmate from their physical activity class. One student said, “I went on a couple dates with a nice girl from my basketball class.” The next survey question asked the students if their interactions with their classmates positively or negatively affected their experience in their physical activity class (statement 7). Student responses were, “I actually really look forward to the class and not solely because of the bowling”, “they have very positively affected my experience. I have felt more comfortable and secure and as a result learned better and enjoyed myself more.” Another student stated, “My first class was negative because I was intimidated, but now it’s positive”, and “so many boys make me feel inadequate.”
Continuing on with the survey results, students were asked if their interactions with classmates helped them manage stress in their lives (statement 8). Student responses were “we always talk about how our week has been and sometimes talk about hard things. It’s nice to know someone cares”, and “Interactions with people keep me less stressed.” It should be noted that a majority of the students stated that the physical activity relieved their stress and not particularly their interactions with the classmates. For statement 9, on the survey, students were asked what factors led to forming or not forming interactions in their physical activity class. One student stated, “Being part of a team”, another student said, “You form friendships by just playing.” A majority of the students felt their interactions “naturally happened” because of the sports they were participating in. And finally, students were asked if the social interactions they have in their physical activity class will have a positive or negative effect on their physical activity throughout their lives (statement 11). A majority of students felt that their participation and experiences in the physical activity class would translate into their lives after college. One student said, this class “would make me more willing to sign up for community teams in the future.”

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to investigate social interactions effects on college-aged students during their physical activity class. Results from this study suggest that college student’s interactions do have a positive impact on them. The survey results showed what kind of interactions they have had, if their interactions were beneficial, if their interactions positively or negatively affected their experience in the physical activity class and the effects of their interactions on future PA in their life. The results of this study coincide with previous research. For example, Kahn et. al., (2002) conducted a systematic review of certain interventions to
increase physical activity. One of the interventions the researchers discussed was the social support interventions. Here the researchers discussed building, strengthening and maintaining social networks. They call this having a “buddy system.” Having a buddy system gives the participant a chance to maintain and to strengthen relationships to help with a person’s physical activity. For this study students felt that by playing with their classmates on teams helped them to build friendships by working together during team play, having fun and making new friends.

Another finding from this study that coincides with the literature was that the students felt their interactions with classmates during their physical activity class was beneficial. Burke et. al., (2006) studied the effects of people that exercised with people or as a group and those that stayed home and exercised on their own. It was discovered that those that exercised with people had support in the form of being with someone to keep them on-task with their exercises. The researchers stated that exercising with people is far superior then exercising on your own. The results from this study found that the students felt it was beneficial for them because they were with friends, and because they were with friends they looked forward to coming to class, and in many cases, they wanted to come to class and have those interactions during class activities.

Other discussion points from the results of this study dealt with student interactions in their physical activity class and if it helped them manage stress in their life. Van Kim and Nelson (2013) studied the association of vigorous PA with mental health, perceived stress, and socializing with college-aged students. The results of this study found that when college student’s physical activity was vigorous and they socialized during their PA class the benefits were positive in regards with mental health and stress they were experiencing. For this study, many of the students felt the PA relieved their stress more than the socializing. Yet, one student stated, “I think to an extent, the physical activity and being able to talk to classmates, it helps me
with stress from school.” And finally, do the students feel their interactions have any effect on their future PA. Barney and McGaha (2006) studied college student’s perspectives on taking a physical activity courses (basketball and tennis) and if participation is these courses will influence their participation after the course was completed. A student response was, “As I get older, playing basketball will help me stay fit and give me the chance to be with friends.” Many of the other student responses to this question used the word “confident” or “confidence” in future participation later in their life. For this study, a majority of the students concurred with previous research when they stated, “I am building healthy habits that will help me be active in my later years”, and “I would be willing to sign up for community teams in the future.” The results from this study will add to the limited research highlighting the positive benefits of social interactions that can and do take place in a physical activity setting. These results are further evidence of the importance of physical activity courses that when taken can be beneficial for students. Cardinal, Sorensen, and Cardinal (2012) found that many four-year colleges and universities are not requiring physical activity courses for graduation. If this is the case, Li, Cardinal and Settersten (2009) have put forth this concern for colleges and universities, when they stated, “Greater attention must be paid to their (college students) health and physical activity habits to help them establish positive health and physical activity trajectories across their life course.”

**Implications for College Physical Activity Classes**

The results from this study should let college physical activity programs know that they are doing more than helping their students improve their skills they learn in their class and that they are improving their cardiovascular functions and strengthening muscles. They are helping their students to form friendships that may last throughout their life. That through the
interactions the students have during their physical activity class they are talking through situations that they are believed to be stressful at this time in their life and that these interactions are helping the students manage and work through the stress they are experiencing. The interactions students are having is and does affect them learning in activities they are participating in. These outcomes that students are purporting as positive and will benefit college students as they participate during their college experience and throughout their life. As one student stated, “I think there is more going on here then just playing volleyball.”

**Study Limitations**

The researcher has noted limitations to this study. Because the participants came from one university, it may not allow a representative sampling of participants from other colleges or universities or geographic regions, thus limiting the generalizing of the findings. Thus, the conclusions and implications are mostly applicable to those participants demographics. Also, the research study was conducted at a private university. Here again, this has generalized the findings.


National Association for Sport and Physical Education. (2014). *Appropriate Instructional
Table 1
Social Interactions in Physical Activity Classes

The following survey questions will ask you about experiences dealing with social interactions you have had in your physical activity class. Questions will ask you to circle your answer and respond from your experiences dealing with your social interactions in your physical activity class. Thank you for participating in this survey.

1. How important are the interactions you have in your physical activity class to you?
   - Very Important
   - Important
   - Not a big Deal
   - Not Important
   - Not at All

2. Have you found your interactions with classmates during your physical activity class enjoyable or not enjoyable?
   - Enjoyable
   - Neutral
   - Not Enjoyable

3. What positive interactions have you had with your classmates in your physical activity class?
   Please give some examples.

4. What negative interactions have you had with your classmates in your physical activity classes?
   Please give some examples.

5. Have your interactions with your classmates during your physical activity class been beneficial or non-beneficial? Please explain your answer.

6. Have your interactions you have had with classmates carried on outside of your physical activity class? Please explain your answer.

7. Have your interactions with classmates positively or negatively affected your experience in your physical activity class? Please explain your answer.
8. Have you noticed if your interactions with your classmates in your physical activity class has helped you manage stress in your life (school, family, dating and others)? Please explain your answer.

9. What factors led to you forming interactions (or not) in your physical activity class? Please explain your answer.

10. When do your social interactions take place?

___ During Class

___ Before or After Class

___ Both

11. Do you feel these social interactions you have in your physical activity class will have a positive or negative effect on your physical activity throughout your life? Please explain your answer.

Gender: Male ____ Female ____

Academic Year: Freshman ____ Sophomore ____ Junior ____ Senior ____

Grad Student ____

STAC Class (ex. Volleyball, basketball, Bowling) __________________
Table 2
Results from Social Interactions in Physical Activity Classes

How important are the interactions you have in your physical activity class to you?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Very Important</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Important</td>
<td>42%</td>
<td>51%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not a Big Deal</td>
<td>38%</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not Important</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not at All</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Have you found your interactions with classmates during your physical activity class enjoyable or not enjoyable?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Enjoyable</td>
<td>88%</td>
<td>89%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neutral</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not Enjoyable</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

When do your social interactions take place?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>During</td>
<td>37%</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Before or After Class</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Both</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>63%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>