

# COLLEGE STUDENTS PERCEPTIONS OF APPROPRIATE INSTRUCTIONAL PRACTICES ON THE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT IN THEIR COLLEGE PHYSICAL ACTIVITY CLASSES

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**Barney D and Leavitt T.** Educators have many responsibilities. One of them is to create a learning environment that is conducive for students to learn. If students feel comfortable in their class activities, there is a greater chance of learning. The same applies in physical activity settings. One approach to creating a positive learning environment is for physical activity instructors to utilize appropriate instructional practices. Doing so can also facilitate student learning. This study investigated college physical activity instructors' implementation of appropriate instructional practices in their activity lessons and the perceptions of college students on the impact of such practices on the learning environment. An overall positive finding from this study was that college physical activity instructors do implement appropriate instructional practices in their lessons, thus creating a positive learning environment.

**Key Words:** Educators, activity settings

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## INTRODUCTION

The goal of any teacher regardless of subject is for their students to master what is being taught. One way a teacher can help students learn is by putting them in positions/situations to help them learn. This is done by the teacher creating a positive learning environment (Barney & Christenson, 2012), this also applies in physical education (PE) classes. Typically, PE classes are taught in the gymnasium, the weight room, on the track and on playing fields. A positive learning environment can take place at all of these venues. Pritchard and Sharples (2018) defined a learning environment as "a place in which learners actively interact with one another, suggesting learning can take place anywhere and is not just confined to walls of a classroom or sports hall" (p. 68).

### **Self-Determined Theory**

For this study the Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 1991, 1994, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2000)

was used, which "...proposes three basic psychological needs to produce human motivation: competence, autonomy and relatedness. In other words, in any given situation (e.g., physical education class), the extent to which individuals feel they are competent and effective that their behavior is self-determined and based on their own initiative, and that they are socially connected to others will determine their motivation" (Deci & Ryan 2000, p. 273). Taking this theory, a step further, implications seem clear that the physical education (PE) teacher or instructor can influence their students' motivational orientations and behaviors through the context or instructional practice used with their students.

### **PE Teachers' Role in Creating the Learning Environment**

The literature has highlighted the PE teachers' role in creating the learning environment in PE class. Barney et. al (2016) studied former students

in PE regarding their thoughts and experiences regarding exercise as punishment in K-12 PE. Participants were surveyed to better understand experiences they had in PE when they were exposed to exercise as punishment. Results from the study showed that 73% of males and 83% of females felt that when they or classmates had to exercise as punishment in PE class that it negatively affected the classroom environment. Participants used descriptions such as: “it’s awkward”, “it is humiliating”, “it changes the mood in the class” and “embarrassed” to describe the learning environment when exercise was used as punishment in PE class. It was concluded that exercise as punishment negatively affected the learning environment for students and has the possibility of affecting physical activity throughout a person’s life.

Solmon’s (1996) research is another example of the PE teachers’ effect on the learning environment. This study hypothesized that students participating in a task involved class environment would be more willing to exert effort while practicing the skill of juggling, than those students in an ego-involved class environment. One of the important aspects to this study was the PE teacher and how they instructed and worked with students in regard to juggling. For the task involved class environment the instructor focused on rewarding effort, improvement and being persistent. The instructor also encouraged students to work at their own pace, to work together, and try to do better individually than on previous attempts. In contrast, in the ego-involved class environment the instructor emphasized a competition ladder. Performance was emphasized to the students, with the focus to move up the competition ladder and to demonstrate superiority over classmates. The focus was to be the winner as the best juggler in class. The researcher discovered that the PE teachers who created the ego-involved class environment had arguments, accusations of cheating and students lying about the number of successful juggling attempts. In the task involved class environment students worked together, cheered for each other and helped others. It was concluded that when PE teachers try to implement a task involved environment, students perceive an environment that assists in their learning.

### ***Music’s Impact on the Learning Environment***

Additional research has found that music can be a tool PE teacher can use to assist in creating a positive learning environment. Barney and Pleban (2018) studied PE teacher’s perceptions when they utilize contemporary music in their PE classes. One of the themes from this study was music’s effect on the class climate or learning environment. Statements from interviews with PE students included, “I believe music has a strong influence over our emotions, so if I’m playing happy upbeat music, my students are happy and active.” Another PE teacher stated, “Positive music aids in creating a positive atmosphere.” PE teachers need to remember that music can create a positive learning environment in which students feel comfortable to participate, hopefully leading to learning skills.

### ***Practitioner Literature***

The literature has mentioned other ways in which the teacher can positively affect the learning environment. These suggestions come from a practitioner’s perspective. For example, creating classroom rules that are clear and cover a multitude of student behaviors along with establishing consistent classroom routines (Lynn, 1994; Todorovich & Curtner-Smith, 1998; Barney & Lynn, 2000). Another suggestion for PE teachers is the proper use of humor in the gymnasium or playing field (Barney & Christenson, 2013). When used properly, humor can create a positive learning environment, thus getting students interest in the activity and keeping their attention. It also helps students recall concepts taught in class. Li (2015) offers a multitude of suggestions for PE teachers. For example, PE teachers should use student names when talking to them, accept students for who they are, be patient and understanding and take time to listen to the student.

### ***Appropriate Instructional Practices Document***

The research has strongly suggested that the PE teacher/instructor creates the learning environment in the class by what they say, how they teach their lessons and other pedagogical methods. A document that has been created by the Society of Health and Physical Educators (SHAPE) to aid PE teachers/instructors in creating a positive learning

environment for their students. Documents have been created for elementary (2009a), middle school (2009b), high school PE (2009c) and higher education (2009d) physical education and physical activity programs. More specifically, the document for higher education physical activity programs proposed purpose is to "...educate professionals about effective programming and teaching within a higher education curriculum. It represents expert consensus about appropriate and inappropriate practices observed in college/university instructional physical activity programs" (NASPE, 2009d, pg. 2). This document is written for college and university administrators, instructional physical activity program coordinators or directors, department chairs, class instructors and students (p. 6). The *Appropriate Instructional Practice Guidelines for Higher Education Physical Activity Programs* document has 79 appropriate instructional practice statements and 79 inappropriate instructional guidelines dealing with topics of: 1) administrative support, 2) assessment, 3) instruction strategies, 4) professionalism, 5) learning environment, 6) program staffing and 7) curriculum. In regard to research concerning appropriate instructional practices (AIP) in PE, Barney and colleagues have assessed different populations knowledge of AIP. For example, K-12 students (Barney & Christenson, 2014; Barney, Christenson & Pleban, 2012), physical education teacher education (PETE) majors (Barney & Christenson, 2013; Barney et al., 2012), K-12 school administrators (Barney & Prusak, 2016), parents (Barney & Pleban, 2011) and senior athletes (50+) (Barney, Prusak, & Wilkinson, 2019). Other research has investigated specific instructional practices in PE such as captains picking teams in front of the whole class (Barney, Prusak, Beddoes, & Eggett, 2016) and exercise as punishment in PE class (Barney et al., 2016). Much of the AIP research has been conducted in the K-12 context. Research dealing with AIP in higher education physical activity programs are somewhat limited. Because of the paucity of research dealing with AIP in higher education, this study will add to and strengthen the literature. Thus, the purpose of this study was to investigate the effects of college physical activity instructors use of AIP on the learning environment in a higher education physical activity program.

## METHODS

### *Participants*

For this study 245 college-aged students (137 males and 108 females) from a private university located in the western United States were recruited for participation. The university Institutional Review Board (IRB) granted permission to conduct this study. All participants were enrolled in one of four different activity classes. The following activity classes participated in the study: basketball, bowling, volleyball and Zumba.

### *Instrumentation*

A review of the literature failed to identify an instrument related to AIP in higher education physical activity programs. For this reason, the researchers constructed a 20-statement survey from appropriate and inappropriate statements from the *Appropriate Instructional Practice Guidelines for Higher Education Physical Activity Programs* document (NASPE, 2009d). The survey consisted of 19 Likert type scale questions (SA=Strongly Agree, A=Agree, N=Neutral, D=Disagree, and SD=Strongly Disagree) and one open ended question (See Table 1). Each survey question began with the following stem, "The Learning Environment is Positively Affected When..." The survey has four general areas of interest that were used for this study: instruction strategies (7 statements), assessment (2 statements), professionalism (1 statement), and learning environment (9 statements). For each of the statements, participants were asked to identify its effects on the learning environment by marking the survey according to the Likert scale (SA, A, N, D, SD). To establish content validity 25 college students and three physical education faculty not involved in this study read through the survey questions to assure clarity and understanding of the instrument. The college students and physical education faculty deemed the survey valid. The survey was pilot tested on a different set of college students that did not participate in the study, checks were done between the researchers and was found reliable.

### *Procedures*

Convenience sampling was employed to collect data for this study. The researchers contacted the instructor for the physical activity (PA) courses explaining both the study and the survey. After

**Table 1. Learning Environment in Physical Activity Classes**

The following survey questions will ask you about the learning environment in your SWELL class. The survey questions will ask you to circle your answer (**SA= Strongly Agree, A=Agree, N=Neutral, D=Disagree & SD=Strongly Disagree**). If you feel inclined to respond to any of the questions, please do so. Thank you for your help in taking this survey.

***The Learning Environment is positively affected when...***

- |  |    |   |   |   |    |
|--|----|---|---|---|----|
| 1. Learning objectives are made clear at the beginning of the SWELL class?   | SA | A | N | D | SD |
| 2. Captains publicly pick teams in front of the whole class for game-play.   | SA | A | N | D | SD |
| 3. I have plenty of time to warm-up before class instruction or game-play?   | SA | A | N | D | SD |
| 4. I have to stand in line to participate in a drill or activity.  | SA | A | N | D | SD |
| 5. The instructor is enthusiastic about what they are teaching?  | SA | A | N | D | SD |
| 6. The instructor gives you specific feedback regarding skills you are working on?   | SA | A | N | D | SD |
| 7. The instructor is on-time to teach the SWELL class?   | SA | A | N | D | SD |
| 8. I feel physically safe in the SWELL class?  | SA | A | N | D | SD |
| 9. I feel emotionally safe in the SWELL class?   | SA | A | N | D | SD |
| 10. Skilled students dominate the drills and game-play.  | SA | A | N | D | SD |
| 11. The SWELL class affords me the opportunity for social development (cooperation and communication)?   | SA | A | N | D | SD |
| 12. The instructor is prepared with a lesson plan.   | SA | A | N | D | SD |
| 13. The instructor is personable.  | SA | A | N | D | SD |
| 14. Individual success takes place during activities in class.   | SA | A | N | D | SD |
| 15. Students makes decisions about what they do in class.  | SA | A | N | D | SD |
| 16. I take ownership of my learning, by being involved in class activities.  | SA | A | N | D | SD |
| 17. Participating in challenging and relevant activities.  | SA | A | N | D | SD |
| 18. Class content is fun and enjoyable.  | SA | A | N | D | SD |
| 19. The instructor knows my name.  | SA | A | N | D | SD |
| 20. When the learning environment in your SWELL class has been positive, do you feel you have learned the content? <i>Please explain you answer.</i> |    |   |   |   |    |

Sex: Male \_\_\_\_ Female \_\_\_\_

Academic Year: FR \_\_\_\_ SOPH \_\_\_\_ JR \_\_\_\_ SR \_\_\_\_ GRAD STUDENT \_\_\_\_

obtaining instructor agreement the researcher attended each physical activity class and administered the survey (10-minutes completion time of the survey). Before survey administration, the researcher explained the study to the class, asking for

volunteers. For this study 97% of the students agreed to participate by taking the survey. All students were assured that their voluntary decision to participate or not participate in the study would not affect their

grade in the class or class standing (Barney, Benham, & Haslem, 2014).

### **Data Analysis**

The data were analyzed using descriptive statistics in the Statistical Package for the Social Science (SPSS) 24.0 program. Percentages were used to reflect the participant's responses for each item being analyzed, the researchers transcribed the participants responses to the one open-ended question, then read and reread the data until common themes became evident (Mueller & Skamp, 2003).

## **RESULTS**

### **Quantitative Data**

Table 2 provides descriptive statistics for all survey statements. Statement two asked the college students, if having captains publicly picking teams in front of the whole class positively affects the learning environment. For this statement male college students responded with 59% strongly disagreeing and 13% disagreeing. For the female college students 50% strongly disagreed and 8% disagreed. Interestingly, 36% of the females were neutral with their response. Statement four asked students if standing in line to participate in a drill or activity positively affects the learning environment. For this statement a majority of the college students either strongly disagreed (10% males & 30% females) or disagreed (36% males & 21% females). Yet, 5% of both males and females strongly agreed, and 24% of males and 19% of females agreed. Interestingly, 25% both male and female were neutral, thus indicating these instructional practices can negatively impact the learning environment.

For statement eight and nine college students were asked if their feeling physically and emotionally safe positively affects the learning environment. A majority of the students strongly agreed that they felt physically safe (males 67% & females 81%) and emotionally safe (males 69% & females 82%) in their physical activity classes, which positively impacted the learning environment. Statement 11 investigated whether a positive learning environment is positive it affords them opportunities for social development, specifically cooperating and communicating with classmates. Here again, a majority of participants

strongly agreed (49% for both males and females) and agreed (males 46% & females 47%). Both statement 13 and 19 it directly inquiry about the instructor's effect on the learning environment, in terms of being personable (statement 13) and knowing the names of their students (statement 19). For statement 13, 76% of males and 75% of females strongly agreed that the instructor being personable affects the learning environment positively. For statement 19 college male students either strongly agreed (66%) or agreed (22%) that the instructor knew the students name and this contributed to a positive environment. For females regarding this statement, 44% strongly agreed and 27% agreed. Finally, statement 18 asked about the impact of content that is fun and enjoyable. Once again, a majority of the students felt that fun and enjoyable content in their PA classes positively affected the learning environment (73% males strongly agreed, 76% females strongly agreed).

### **Qualitative Data**

Other data collected for this study was a short answer response. The statement asked college students when the learning environment in the PA class has been positive, whether they felt they learned the content. After analyzing college students' responses, four consistent themes became evident. The four themes were: 1) feeling safe in class, 2) the instructor is positive and upbeat, 3) the learning environment affects student learning, and 4) the learning environment helps make what is taught in class applicable. Student comments dealing with feeling safe in class were: "When the learning environment is positive, I feel more comfortable to learn and participate", "It is important to be willing to make mistakes and if the environment is not positive that is harder", and "I feel like I can contribute comfortably without judgement which made the class fun and easier." A second theme from student responses were the instructor is positive and upbeat. "Steve is always prepared and excited to be in class teaching volleyball", "Coach is educated; thus, he knows what he is talking about", and "Every time I have a question for coach, he has a smile on his face. I can ask him anything." A third theme from student responses were the learning environment affects student learning. A few student responses included: "The more positive and fun the environment, the more

**Table 2.** *Results from the Learning Environment in Physical Activity Survey*

		<b>SA</b>	<b>A</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>D</b>	<b>SD</b>
1.	Male	57% (78)	35% (47)	8% (11)	0% (0)	0% (0)
	Female	69% (73)	28% (30)	5% (4)	0% (0)	0% (0)
2.	Male	7% (7)	5% (7)	16% (23)	13% (19)	59% (81)
	Female	1% (2)	5% (4)	36% (39)	8% (9)	50% (54)
3.	Male	46% (64)	38% (49)	10% (14)	5% (8)	1% (2)
	Female	38% (42)	42% (46)	16% (14)	3% (4)	1% (2)
4.	Male	5% (8)	24% (37)	25% (35)	36% (39)	10% (18)
	Female	5% (6)	19% (19)	25% (27)	21% (23)	30% (33)
5.	Male	83% (114)	16% (22)	1% (1)	0% (0)	0% (0)
	Female	85% (92)	12% (14)	3% (2)	0% (0)	0% (0)
6.	Male	50% (69)	43% (59)	5% (8)	2% (1)	0% (0)
	Female	36% (39)	47% (51)	11% (12)	4% (5)	2% (1)
7.	Male	83% (114)	16% (22)	1% (1)	1% (1)	0% (0)
	Female	77% (84)	21% (21)	1% (1)	1% (1)	0% (0)
8.	Male	67% (93)	27% (38)	6% (5)	0% (0)	0% (0)
	Female	81% (88)	17% (17)	2% (3)	0% (0)	0% (0)
9.	Male	69% (95)	25% (35)	4% (6)	2% (1)	0% (0)
	Female	82%	12%	3%	0%	3%
10.	Male	13% (15)	36% (50)	29% (40)	17% (24)	5% (8)
	Female	12% (11)	19% (21)	17% (19)	3% (4)	21% (23)
11.	Male	49% (65)	46% (64)	4% (6)	1% (2)	0% (0)
	Female	49% (51)	47% (51)	3% (4)	1% (2)	0% (0)
12.	Male	61% (84)	35% (49)	4% (6)	0% (0)	0% (0)
	Female	66% (72)	30% (32)	4% (4)	0% (0)	0% (0)
13.	Male	76% (105)	22% (31)	2% (1)	0% (0)	0% (0)
	Female	75% (82)	19% (21)	4% (4)	2% (1)	0% (0)
14.	Male	48% (67)	43% (60)	9% (10)	0% (0)	0% (0)
	Female	52% (57)	40% (44)	8% (7)	0% (0)	0% (0)
15.	Male	27% (37)	36% (50)	27% (37)	10% (13)	0% (0)
	Female	23% (25)	36% (39)	25% (27)	15% (15)	1% (2)
16.	Male	48% (67)	46% (64)	6% (6)	0% (0)	0% (0)
	Female	61% (65)	37% (40)	1% (2)	1% (1)	0% (0)
17.	Male	51% (70)	45% (62)	4% (5)	0% (0)	0% (0)
	Female	56% (61)	40% (43)	3% (3)	1% (1)	0% (0)
18.	Male	73% (100)	23% (32)	4% (5)	0% (0)	0% (0)
	Female	76% (61)	21% (23)	3% (2)	0% (0)	0% (0)
19.	Male	66% (90)	22% (31)	9% (12)	3% (4)	0% (0)
	Female	44% (47)	27% (30)	16% (17)	10% (11)	0% (0)

willing [they are] to try and learn to have a positive experience”, “When I feel comfortable and I can be myself, I learn better”, and “As long as you have fun you are able to learn what you need from the instructor.” And finally, the fourth theme was the learning environment helps make what I taught in class applicable. Students stated, “The drills coach has us do applies to what we do in class”, and “I am interested in the content (basketball), and love to use in games what he demonstrated in class.”

## DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to investigate the effects of college physical activity instructors use of AIP on the learning environment in higher education physical activity classes. The results of this study indicate that a majority of the college students in this study felt that their PA class instructors used appropriate instructional methods in their PA classes. These are encouraging results, particularly important given that the positive experiences the college students are having in their PA classes can lead to a

lifetime of physical activity (Barney & McGaha, 2006). The results concur with previous research. For example, college students disagreed with the practice of captains picking teams in front of the whole class as leading to a positive learning environment. Barney et al. (2016) studied male junior high school students experiences they had in grades 7-9 PE dealing with captains picking teams. Overall, male junior high school students did not feel this instructional practice was appropriate. Both students who were typically chosen first (due to being perceived as highly skilled) and students chosen towards the end were interviewed. Those students that were highly skilled felt bad for their classmates that were picked towards the end. The lower skilled students usually picked towards the end, just did not like or appreciate the process of creating teams. The instructional practice of picking teams in front of the whole class is a form of passing judgement on a classmate. For the current study one student stated, "I can feel comfortable when I play without being judged for my ability."

Another point of discussion deals with the emotional and physical safety the students feel in their PA class (statements 7 & 8). Gagnon (2016) has suggestions for elementary PE teachers to implement that can make their gymnasiums emotionally and physically safe. Even though these suggestions are for K-6 PE, there is some practical cross over that can be used in college/university PA classes. For example, when considering students' emotional safety, instructors should plan lessons to set student up for success not failure. This can be done in how the grouping of students, (1 v. 1 or small groups), the appropriateness of the activity/drill, and the feedback given to the students. In considering a students' physical safety, Pangrazi and Beighle (2013) discuss the importance of checking to ensure the equipment is not damaged in any way, that the fields/gymnasium surfaces are clean and clear of debris, and that students have plenty of room to move without running into or bumping into other students. For this study a majority of the students felt their PA classes were emotionally and physically safe, contributing to a positive learning environment. One student responded, "I feel I can learn the content better when I feel safe in my class." A final point of discussion deals with the instructor being positive. A form of being positive is being enthusiastic about what the

instructor is teaching. The Appropriate Instructional Practice Guidelines for Higher Education Physical Activity Programs (2009d) document states that instructors demonstrate enthusiasm for an active lifestyle...models an enjoyment of the activity. The college students in this study felt their instructors were enthusiastic when they stated, "This instructor is upbeat.", and "The instructor is passionate about what she teaches. I love it."

A third point of discussion dealt with the instructor being personable. Being personable could be the instructor knowing the students' name, talking about what they did over their weekend or asking about how their schoolwork is going. Barney (2005) studied student teacher's interactions while they participated in their student teaching experience. One of the findings from this study was that the interactions between the student teachers and the students were very businesslike. There were few conversations dealing with students' life outside of school. Other research has found that when the teacher/instructor takes the time to get to know their students, or be personable, students like the fact that the teacher showed interest in them and what is going on in their life (Barney, 2002). These results from these studies and the results from this study emphasize the importance the instructor can have on creating a positive learning environment for their students.

A final point of discussion from this study's data deals with having a fun and its effects on the learning environment. The results of this study revealed that a large number of students found the content fun and enjoyable. Thus, helping to create a positive learning environment. Barney and Higginson (2017) studied why college students take college physical activity (PA) classes when they are not required for graduation. Of the many reasons why college students take PA classes, having fun in their PA classes was one of the main reasons why they stated that their PA classes. Students stated that their PA class was fun because they "loved the sport" they were participating in. Another student said, "I want a fun class amidst the tough class schedule I have. This class is fun." These types of response from this study and others strongly hint to the fact that when the PA class is perceived as fun, the learning environment is positive.

### Study Implications

After analyzing the data, college students appreciate their PA instructors using and implementing appropriate instructional practices in their PA classes for the reason that it does positively affect the learning environment. Once again, this study specifically investigated the college PA class context. Yet, K-12 and college professors/instructors in other content areas can take these study results and make application to their own teaching situations to create a positive learning environment. Another implication from this study is the importance the instructor has in setting and creating a positive learning environment for their students. Teaching is an activity that requires the teacher to think of what is best for their students (Prusak & Vincent, 2005) and what they need to do to best position their students for learning. It is hoped that as PA instructors create positive learning environments for their students, they will learn the material presented to them that

will enable them to a lifetime of being physically active. For many college students their PA class is the last structured opportunity to be physically active (Barney & McGaha, 2006).

### Study Limitations

The researcher has noted limitations to this study. First, the participants came from one university, which may not allow for a representative sampling of participants from other colleges and universities. This limits the generalizability of the findings. Secondly, the population used in this study came from four activity classes (basketball, bowling, volleyball and Zumba). Universities throughout the United States, including the one involved in the study offer a multitude of activity classes for students to take while they are in college. Research involving students who participate in different types of activity classes has the possibility of providing deeper and richer results.

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