

Physical Literacy as a Human Intelligence and as a Human Capability.

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In the years that Physical Literacy has been developed many questions have been asked about aspects of the concept. The paper I will read tomorrow will cover some of the basic questions, however a particular issue is **how does physical literacy relate to other areas of human potential**. Over the years there have been a number of suggestions in respect of how the different dimensions of human being or being human, can be identified. To be able to align physical literacy with an established categorization would seem to have the potential to add credibility to the concept. To date I have considered physical literacy in relation to the work of Nussbaum and that of Gardner.

For example Nussbaum (2000) has identified ten human capabilities described as ‘what people are capable of doing and being’. These are Life, Bodily Health, Bodily Integrity, Senses, imagination and thought, Emotions, Practical reason, Affiliation, Other Species, Play and Control over one’s environment. She asserts that developing these capabilities is concerned with ensuring quality of life. Furthermore she suggests that in the absence of any capability the individual would not have achieved a fully human existence. Gardner (1993) identifies seven (+ in later books) ‘intelligences’, being Linguistic, Logical-mathematical, Spatial, Musical, Bodily-kinesthetic, Interpersonal and Intrapersonal. He describes an intelligence as a biopsychological potential. All members of a species have the potential to exercise each of these intelligences.

These two categorisations of human potential share some similar elements but arise from very different perspectives on being human. Gardner approaches the issue from a psychological perspective while Nussbaum’s work springs from feminist considerations in a political context. However inherent in both is the view that there are different aspects or dimensions of humanness that need to be nurtured. In both cases our embodied potential is identified as an aspect worthy of respect and consideration, and in this sense both categorizations ‘rub shoulders’ with physical literacy: Physical literacy being the concept that describes the expression of our embodied dimension arising from nurturing our embodied abilities.

It is a useful exercise to consider whether physical literacy is best thought of as an Intelligence or as a Capability. I will consider each categorization in its relationship to physical literacy.

Gardner

Howard Gardner (1993) coming from a psychological background identifies the seven ‘intelligences’, mentioned above. For him Intelligences are biopsychological potentials available for all humans to exercise. Each individual will develop these intelligences to different degrees and will combine them in different ways.

While it might appear initially to be to our advantage to tie our work to developing an intelligence, this being a well established and respected concept, I am very uneasy about the specific way that Gardner refers our embodied potential. In his description of bodily-kinesthetic intelligence he focuses principally on our embodied dimension as an instrument. Particular reference is made to handling tools and being a versatile and expressive dancer or an effective athlete. While he attempts to contest the mind/body dichotomy, he would seem to be equating bodily-kinesthetic intelligence very closely to effective motor control – in both fine and gross motor skills. This approach to the potential of our embodied dimension is narrow and leaves Bodily-kinesthetic intelligence out on a limb – literally. So at first glance I have some reservations about labelling physical literacy an ‘Intelligence’, as described by Gardner.

Gardner’s use of the word kinaesthetic also gives me rise for concern as it is generally agreed that kinaesthesia does not reach levels of consciousness. This is odd as he tends to focus on controlled or

controllable movement, that is, consciously performed motor activity. He explains that bodily intelligence, is limited to the exercising of one's own body and is very much focused on performing actions on objects in the world. Moreover there is a sense in Gardner's writing that bodily-kinesthetic intelligence is principally valuable as a means to other ends, being instrumental in achieving other intelligences. I am also a little unhappy about the way that Gardner refers to our embodiment as a vessel. He says that 'the body is more than a simple machine ... its is also the vessel of the individual's sense of self, his most personal feelings and aspirations'. There might be positives and negatives in this statement.

Gardner tends to imply that the mind is at all times managing the body, as against the findings that pervade my work on physical literacy, arguing that in many ways the embodied dimension enables the mind to function. It is the case that he talks about how his different intelligences work together and refers to other writers who suggest that there is a close link between the use of our embodiment and the deployment of our various cognitive capacities. He refers to Bartlett's work (p 209) that suggests that much of what we ordinarily call thinking – routine as well as innovative – partakes of the same principles that have been uncovered in overtly physical manifestations of skill. However I am not sure what he means by this.

Aspects of Gardner's work that would seem to align more with the current concept of physical literacy and that have a more holistic ring refer to the suggestion that kinesthesia provides humans with a 6th sense which gathers information about the world and enables us to respond appropriately. Furthermore he seems to recognise that individuals' perception of the world is itself affected by the status of their motor activities. He quotes from other writers who suggest that information concerning the position and status of our embodied dimension regulates the way in which subsequent perception of the world takes place. This is in line with existential views. In fact he goes further to suggest that it is through our 6th sense of kinaesthesia that we are able to appreciate the feelings of others.

However these references to a more holistic approach are few and far between in Gardner's writing and in no way shape his description of bodily-kinesthetic intelligence. This is perhaps not surprising given that he is working within psychology.

It has to be acknowledged that in his later work Gardner does argue for all intelligences to be developed in education, intimating that where the focus is too much on, for example, linguistic and logico-mathematical work, pupils are disadvantaged in not developing their other intelligences. He also refers to a 'funnelled approach' to the mind, in education. He suggests that pupils learn in varied and distinctive ways and that coverage of all intelligences would get the best from all pupils. He reports effective education in situations in which each of the intelligences is addressed in every school day.

Positives in Gardner's description of Intelligences

- Identifies our embodiment as demonstrating a form of human intelligence, a potential all have the potential to exercise
- Accepts some interaction between Intelligences
- Accepts that kinaesthesia provides invaluable information about the world and thus plays a part in fashioning our relationship to the world
- Suggests that bodily-kinesthetic intelligence assists our appreciation of the feelings of others
- Urges that all intelligences have equal attention in education

Negatives in Gardner's description of Intelligences

- Focuses on our embodiment as an instrument
- Is preoccupied with motor control of our embodied dimension and skill production
- Gives the impression that conscious control is all important
- Refers to kinaesthesia as functioning at a conscious level – some confusion here
- Appears to see bodily-kinesthetic intelligence as supporting other intelligences and thus being a means to other ends

So while it might seem to be to our advantage that Gardner singles out the embodied capacities as demonstrating a human intelligence, the predominant focus on the embodiment purely as an instrument being used skilfully, hardly moves us further along the road towards arguing that the individual is an indivisible whole and that our embodied dimension as a highly significant aspect of our personhood. This human aspect in fact functions alongside many of our other potentials and in numerous cases these other potentials depend on our embodied capacities to develop fully. To so clearly separate our embodied potential from, for example, cognitive functions leaves our work once again on the sidelines, arguably separated from the mainstream of the development of our full personhood. To identify physical literacy as an Intelligence therefore carries the danger of appearing to align this aspect of our human nature with Gardner's description of bodily-kinesthetic intelligence. This description is, for me, in many ways inadequate, unhelpful and indeed counter productive.

Nussbaum

Martha Nussbaum approaches the issue from a very different perspective. She works in the field of politics with a particular interest in feminist issues. She is concerned to identify aspects of human functioning that she feels should not be denied to women wherever they live. Nussbaum describes her mission '*to provide the philosophical underpinning for an account of basic constitutional principles that should be respected and implemented by governments of all nations, as a bare minimum of what respect for human dignity requires*'. She attempts to identify capabilities that she can justify as universals that should be addressed in all cultures and in all political systems. To prevent individuals, women in her case, from developing these capabilities, deprives them of their dignity and the expression of their humanness. Her work is most valuable to read. What appeals to me about her work is both that it has a philosophical base and that, as she intimates, it applies to all people, men and women.

The specific capabilities that she identifies are wide ranging and not as clearly differentiated as Gardiner's Intelligences. However while she discusses their inter-dependence she also asserts that each needs to be addressed in its own right. The satisfactory development of one capability does not relieve the parent culture of the responsibility for developing any or all of the others. Nussbaum particularly mentions the danger of focusing in particular capabilities, such as literacy, as if development in this area is all that is needed. She argues strongly that she is not talking about human rights. She describes situations in which people have the right to take up certain opportunities but lack the capability so to do. Rights, she says, without capabilities are vacuous. In respect of exercising capabilities she also argues that any government should provide opportunities for its citizens to give expression to each capability. Included in this is the need for cultures to ensure that the development of each capability is addressed in young people's education.

Throughout Nussbaum's work there is an insistence that each person is treated with respect, that all should reach a threshold of each capability and that each person should be treated as an end in themselves not as a means to the ends of others. She resists paternalism regarding the expression of the capabilities in adults, being keen to allow for individual liberty, agency and freedom of choice. For Nussbaum it is having the capability rather than necessarily capitalising on this ability that is important. Underlying all her work is the reference to human powers and to the way that expressing these powers enables humans to flourish and live with dignity.

It can be seen from the above, without going into the detail of her work, that there are resonances with aspects of physical literacy. Physical literacy is a unique human aspect, the development of which is not achieved through attention to other aspects. In promoting physical literacy the focus of the work is on the individual as an end in him or her self, development is not promoted to further the ends of others. Furthermore the development of physical literacy can enable each of us to capitalise on a particular human power and to flourish in a truly human way.

The dangers of aligning physical literacy with the capabilities approach are the close relationship this approach has with political theory, the very diverse nature of the capabilities and the lack of a clear focus on the embodied dimension.

However in relation to the last point, i.e. the lack of a single specific focus on our embodied dimension, the actual capabilities Nussbaum identifies encompass our embodied attributes in a variety of ways. She includes Bodily health and Bodily Integrity both of which have an embodiment-as-object flavour. She also includes the development of the Senses, Expression of emotions, Affiliation with others and Play in her capabilities. Our embodied dimension is intimately involved in each these human attributes and there would be no difficulty in showing how physical literacy would make a contribution to all of these. In a sense physical literacy feeds into and enriches elements of number of her Capabilities. So, far from down- playing the value of physical literacy in having no specific capability for this aspect of our being human, the permeation of our embodied capacities in many Capabilities can also be read as supportive in relation to much that has been found to be valuable within the concept of physical literacy.

Positives in Nussbaum's description of Capabilities

- Arises from a philosophical base
- Stresses capabilities are applicable to all, are universal, overriding cultural differences, not grounded in Western culture nor on a particular metaphysical position
- Capabilities concerned with human functioning, being fully human and with respect for persons and respect for human dignity
- Capabilities are closely related and often function together
- Argues that all capabilities are essential, there is no 'pecking' order, cannot satisfy the need for one capability by developing others. Need all capabilities – not just those related to cognitive functioning e.g. literacy
- Capabilities not seen as rights, as having a right does not ensure that one has the capability to exercise that right
- Paternalism is appropriate in school education to lay the ground for all capabilities
- Governments have the responsibility to develop, foster and maintain capabilities in all citizens and to provide situations in which capabilities can be expressed
- Argues for a threshold level of achieving a capability for truly human functioning, thus justifying unequal time and money to be given to those most in need
- Requires every person is treated as an end in themselves and not a means to the ends of others
- Not paternalistic, approach allows freedom of agency and choice for each individual
- Capabilities identify human powers through which humans can flourish

Negatives in Nussbaum's description of Capabilities

- Capabilities wide ranging with many interdependencies
- Reference to the embodied dimension distributed among the Capabilities
- No commitment to the central role that our embodiment plays in total self-respect and self esteem
- Closely related to a political approach and to feminism

While physical literacy does not fit neatly into either Gardner's or Nussbaum's categorizations, the concept has resonances with aspects of both systems of analysis. There are, however, as I have argued, a number of key features as above, in the description of capabilities that lead me to feel more comfortable to refer to physical literacy as a capability rather than an intelligence.

In relation to Nussbaum's work it is not her identification of a Capability focused specifically on our physical dimension that attracts me to her work, but it is her overall approach to the way a capability is a fundamental aspect of humanness that all should have the opportunity of realising to achieve human dignity. It is her profound respect for persons which also attracts me to the notion of capabilities and to feeling that to label physical literacy as a capability provides a wealth of useful support for the concept.

As we move through life we will each be confronted by different situations and contexts in relation to which our capabilities may need to be drawn on and adapted. The potential significance of each capability will not diminish as life is lived, although its expression may differ. This supports the assertion that that physical

literacy, described as a human capability, can be of value to every individual from cradle to grave. However as Nussbaum indicates, it is open to each individual to capitalize on or disregard any aspect of their potential, and some people may choose not to develop or utilize a particular capability.

References

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