The Philosophy of Physical Education: A New Perspective

Steven A. Stolz

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I should begin by stating that I am a newcomer to theoretical approaches to physical education and its philosophy. Initially, this led me to wonder why I had been nominated to review this book. However, a quick scan of the book's contents soon aroused my interest, as many of the book's topics and arguments evidently have very marked connections with my own research work, which has centered on topics such as learning from work, professional practice, the development of expertise, and holistic approaches to understanding performance.

This review will, first, provide an overview of the contents of Steven Stolz's book, including a detailed examination of both the key principles and concepts that underpin its main arguments and conclusions. Second, these key principles and concepts will be appraised critically in terms of the wider philosophical literature that extends well beyond the philosophy of physical education. This will enable an overall assessment of the book's central aim to "make a highly original contribution to knowledge in the fields of the philosophy of sport and physical education" (*PPE*, xxii).[1]

The book consists of a short preface and six substantial chapters. Not surprisingly, the preface begins with the famous quotation from Ludwig Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* to the effect that the bewildering array of activities that we call "games" is marked, not by general commonalities but, rather, by family resemblances. Stolz maintains that the wide diversity of different activities that might fall under the physical education rubric — sport, play, games, exercise, fitness, and so on — has created a crisis, as theorists (ignoring Wittgenstein's cogent argument) predictably have sought in vain to identify a factor common to

all instances of physical education. The result of this failed quest has been a prevailing mood of "physical-education-in-crisis." According to Stolz, physical education has suffered very badly from the confusion created by this misleading and mistaken situation. Bolstering his acceptance of the Wittgenstein family resemblance argument, Stolz draws on Alasdair MacIntyre's observation that "traditions, when vital, embody continuities of conflict."[2]

Stolz sees his book as achieving three broad aims (*PPE,* xvii ff). First, providing a critique of existing philosophy of physical education literature as a basis for proposing a new, more defensible conception of the field. Second, providing a distinctive philosophical grounding to the new, more defensible conception of physical education and its rightful place in the school curriculum. And, third, demonstrating the vital role of the doctrines of past and present philosophers in the ongoing debates surrounding physical education.

Chapter 1 of the book critically examines various traditional attempts to justify the place of sport and physical education within educational institutions. Stolz finds fault with each of these justifications. Overwhelmingly, they tend to take as a given the mind–body bifurcation. This has made it easy for opponents of physical education to dismiss it as trivial in comparison to other more educationally worthwhile activities, in particular the development of theoretical knowledge. In order to rectify this general defect in justifications of sport and physical education, Stolz foreshadows that he will offer a theory of embodiment, one that will counter traditional prejudices against the body and the physical, as well as the one-sided valorization of theoretical knowledge and cognition. In his view, a major deficiency of the physical education literature thus far has been its inability to provide a convincing philosophical account of its nature and of its unique contributions to education.

Chapters 2 and 3 provide the conceptual heart of this book. In these chapters Stolz develops his novel framework for establishing the value of physical education and its place in

the curriculum. Consequently, the arguments of these two pivotal chapters will receive the most detailed consideration in this review.

Chapter 2 begins with a historical overview of philosophical and theological positions on the body. The main focus is on how changing concepts of the body influence how we think of sport and physical education. The strong influence of mind/body dualism on educational thought and practice is a primary theme of this chapter. Plato's philosophy is presented as the major source of dualistic thinking, tempered somewhat by Aristotle's more unified account of humanity. The dominant influence of dualism on educational thought persisted throughout the Middle Ages, as various versions of Christianity regarded the body as corrupting and untrustworthy in contrast to the immortal soul. However, against this Aquinas developed further the unified Aristotelian position. For Aquinas, the soul pervades the body and the body is an essential prerequisite for many distinctive human activities, such as sense experience. Despite this brief opening, the pendulum then swung even more decisively toward dualism with the advent of René Descartes's bifurcation of mind and body. So complete was the Cartesian division of mind and body that the ongoing unsolved major problem for Descartes's philosophy was to provide a convincing explanation of how two such radically different kinds of entities could somehow interact with one another.

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So long as educational thinking was dominated by dualism, the role of physical education was bound to be, at best, marginal. Not surprisingly, Stolz begins his quest for a novel theorization with an account of Gilbert Ryle's well-known critique of Cartesianism.[3] On the back of this, seeking a philosophical account that will establish a more legitimate role for the body in education, Stolz turns to Maurice Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological perspective of the body. Drawing upon Merleau-Ponty[4] and subsequent commentators, Stolz advances "a phenomenological anthropology in which a person's body is not simply another object in the

world; rather, our bodies are modes of meaningful communication and interaction with it" g(*PPE*, 41).

Establishing this phenomenological anthropology, according to which "'being a body' is radically different from 'having a body' or 'using a body'" (*PPE*, 50), becomes the centerpiece of this book. Main principles inspired by Merleau-Ponty's work include human beings as "being-in-the-world" and the body as the primary mode of communication with the world, as well as being the central locus of expression and meaning-producing acts. As against the reductivism inherent in Cartesianism, Stolz's proposal creates a kind of holism about the human body. It becomes "a fundamental unity, a single mode of being" (*PPE*, 48). As is typical of holistic positions, the reductive tendencies of language entail some difficulties in articulating them. For instance, Stolz's account might be taken to suggest that we use our bodies as a type of instrument. In this context, however, "use" has its own special sense since we do not use the body in the same sense that we use a hammer or a broom. A person's body is not another object in the world — rather, "it is 'anchored' in the world as a person's mode of communication and interaction with it" (*PPE*, 48).

On the basis of this understanding of the human body as our mode of being, Stolz aims to counter the implicit dualism that he finds in much existing physical education literature. In order to achieve this, he proposes to develop a novel account of what it means for humans to be physically educated. This, in turn, will clarify why physical education should occupy a central place in the curriculum. This becomes the main business of Chapter 3.

However, before leaving Chapter 2, it is worth noting that, inspired by his understanding of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy, Stolz arrives at a distinctive and important characterization of learning as follows: "Learning … involves the exploration of the world from

where one is, as well as coming to a clearer understanding of how things relate to each other and to ourselves in the world. It is an ongoing process" (*PPE*, 52).

The importance of this insight lies in its direct contrast with widely accepted accounts of learning, largely inspired by common experiences of formal education arrangements. According to this "common sense" view, learning is the attainment of an outcome (or product) such as understanding a concept or proposition. Such accounts regard the process aspect of learning as irrelevant. Yet, this monolithic, narrowly-focused, "quiz show" understanding of learning does no justice to the often-overlooked informal learning we gain from living, which comprises a vital part of a typical human's life journey. This crucial, but neglected, learning from experience is quintessentially an ongoing process. As Stolz puts it, "We 'come to' understand something (if successful) from our own point of view as a result of experiencing it" (*PPE*, 52).

Chapter 3, titled "The Unique Place of Physical Education within Education," presents Stolz's account of the process of being physically educated. He argues that physical education deals predominantly with practical knowledge and that practical knowledge has been badly misunderstood within educational thought. Stolz sees this as a reflection of a widespread unwillingness to rate as educationally significant any kind of nontheoretical knowledge. His strategy to rescue and validate practical knowledge is to draw upon some familiar twentieth-century accounts, so as to propose an alternative understanding of education that will accommodate both theoretical and practical knowledge. Important sources for his delineation of practical knowledge are Michael Polanyi's theory of tacit knowledge[5] and Hubert Dreyfus's account of the embodied intelligence involved in skilled performance.[6] Stolz links both of these to his reading of Merleau-Ponty. Polanyi's work suggests not only that "we know more than we can articulate," but that we have practical knowledge of how to deploy our bodies intelligently so as to perform complex movements quickly, autonomously, and automatically with little

awareness of why or how we can do so. Dreyfus's account of the "sculpting" of expert performance chimes well with Merleau-Ponty's claim that "motility … is not, as it were, a handmaid of consciousness."[7]

Stolz next turns his attention to Ryle's 1949 account of knowing how and the subsequent literature that it has generated. Stolz singles out Richard Franklin's critique that knowing how is ambiguous between a weak form of knowing how and a strong form.[8] The weak form involves merely knowing the procedure or technique for a way of doing something (that is, a kind of knowing that), whereas the strong form involves actually doing the something proficiently. The difference is that the strong form requires, in addition to knowing the procedure or technique, various physical abilities such as being able to read and react judiciously to the exigencies of the particular contextual situation in which the something is done. These physical abilities constitute a kind of practical knowledge that differs from theoretical reasoning. Drawing upon the work of David Carr[9] and others, Stolz concludes that there are three common features of practical knowledge that are implicit in physical performance (*PPE*, 73):

1. Intention to act out Φ as a purpose;
2. Mastery of the means or methods adopted for successful Φing;
3. Being judged as consistently successful and flexible according to special criteria in the performance of Φing that are context-specific to the social practices (normative practices) of Φing.

Stolz stresses that practical knowledge always involves an implicit dimension that cannot be verbally articulated or explained (*PPE*, 74). Hence it needs to be viewed holistically.

What does this mean for physical education? Stolz suggests that physical education places the body as the focus of lived experiences that exemplify "the non-verbal characteristics

of movement and their meanings" (*PPE*, 87). Thus, for Stolz, physical education takes on a significantly phenomenological dimension.

Chapter 4 examines the concept of play and its educational significance in physical education. The literature reveals strong disagreement over, and even confusion about, the interrelationships and differences between play, games, and sport (the so-called "tricky triad"). Though each clearly belongs within physical education, there has been a tendency for different camps to focus on just one of these at the expense of the others. But Stolz maintains that this narrowing of focus is always a mistake because it limits the educative potential of physical education. Physical education should provide multiple and diverse opportunities to explore alternative modes of awareness and to develop insights into new modes of being. This diversity of experiences represents the unique educational significance of physical education and its capacity to provide valuable educational opportunities that are not readily available elsewhere in the curriculum. Stolz summarizes this as follows:

> Physical education's inherent value is made manifest in movement because it has the capacity to provide an understanding of a unique form of epistemic knowledge (tacit knowing) and in doing so it permits the person to experience him- or herself as a holistic and synthesized acting, feeling, thinking being-in-the-world. (*PPE*, 121)

Chapter 5 examines the often-made claim that participation in certain games and sports encourages the development of moral character. The widespread popularity of sport in Western culture has only strengthened the appeal of this view. Obviously, if proven to be true, this claim provides strong grounds for the inclusion of sport and physical education in the curriculum. However, Stolz cautions that there is no strong causal connection between participation in games and sport and the development of moral character. He argues, quoting various writers,

that the development of character is best achieved in supportive moral habitats. Teams in games and sports are but one example of what might constitute a supportive moral habitat. So, Stolz concludes, it is claiming too much to make moral development the *raison d'être* of games and sports. As the previous chapter showed, Stolz prefers to focus on physical education's capacity to provide valuable educational opportunities that are not readily available elsewhere in the curriculum.

Chapter 6, titled "MacIntyre, Rival Traditions, and Physical Education," brings us back to the starting point of the book: the many and diverse conflicting theories that all seek to characterize and define physical education. Drawing again on MacIntyre[10] to highlight the possibility of rationally resolving conflicting theories, Stolz offers this book as initiating a new tradition in physical education, a tradition of embodied learning. For Stolz this involves, first, recognizing that our bodies are modes of meaningful communication and interaction with the world. And, second, employing the unique opportunities provided by physical education for students to experience alternative modes of awareness and to develop insights into new modes of being.

There is much in the key ideas of this book that resonates strongly with contemporary emerging understandings of professional practice and workplace learning. These research findings have been significantly informed by philosophical concepts that have been brought to bear on empirical studies of workplace practices.

Here are some main findings about the proficient practice of an occupation (that is, professional practice in its broadest sense) and the workplace learning that arises from such practice:[11]

1. Proficient workplace practice, and the learning that accompanies it, are both ongoing *processes*, that is, they are always in the making.

2. Both workplace performance and the learning that arises from it draw upon and develop a type of *seamless know-how*. This know-how integrates a range of human attributes that is much wider than just rationality. Some of this know-how eludes precise verbal articulation, that is, it is significantly tacit. This is one of the key aspects of the holism of both workplace performance and workplace learning.

3. Both workplace performance and the learning that arises from it are embodied phenomena. (Thus, the employment of dualisms such as mind–body, mental–manual, and theory–practice is counterproductive for thinking about these phenomena.) This is a further aspect of the holism of both workplace performance and workplace learning.

4. Both workplace performance and the learning that arises from it are significantly shaped by social, organizational, cultural, and other contextual factors. This situatedness is yet a further aspect of the holism of both workplace performance and workplace learning.

5. Workplace learning is emergent from the context of performance in unanticipated and often unpredictable ways, that is, the nature and scope of the learning is not fully decidable in advance. Thus, changing contexts serve to transform workplace learning and, hence, proficient practice in an ongoing creative process. Consequently, ever-changing contexts become the causal grounds of the ongoing processes of both proficient practice and workplace learning.

6. Workplace practice and learning encompass both individual and social dimensions. Accordingly, workplace learning is not exhausted by instances of individual learning, since it also includes learning by groups or teams.[12] This is

yet a further aspect of the holism that characterizes both workplace performance and workplace learning.

There are some evident overlaps between several of these findings. This reflects the importance of the holistic dimensions of the phenomena of workplace performance and workplace learning. While there is some analytical value in identifying various components of these phenomena, the set of components in itself does not constitute the original whole. Thus findings 2, 3, 4, and 6, taken together, highlight key dimensions of the *holism* of workplace performance and the learning that it engenders. Alternatively, findings 1 and 5, in particular, point to the *emergent processes* associated with these kinds of holism.

It is evident that there are some close affinities between Stolz's proposed novel philosophy of sport and physical education and recent research on workplace performance and learning. Key constitutive terms such as "practice," "performance," and "process" (including "process of learning") are common to the two domains. Likewise, the main philosophical concepts advanced to provide better understandings within the respective domains are largely shared — for example, *holism*, *embodiment*, *know-how*, *tacit*, *situated*, and *emergent*. Further, in both cases, the main aim has been to displace traditional, but deficient, accounts by novel, more insightful understandings.

Having engaged quite closely with this stimulating book, it seems to me that Steven Stolz's proposed *novel perspective* on the philosophy of physical education is generally quite powerful and fruitful. Prominent underpinnings of Stolz's position, such as his nuanced account of practical knowledge and the tacit, are equally applicable to the elucidation of the seamless know-how of workplace practice and learning. However, there are aspects of Stolz's proposed philosophy of physical education that merit closer critical consideration. One of these is his claim that the significantly phenomenological dimension of physical education offers a

unique capacity to explore alternative modes of awareness and to develop insights into new modes of being. This claim remains at a very general level and I was looking for more specific information about what this might mean for actual curriculum activities. Further, given Stolz's process view of learning, an issue that would seem to demand serious theoretical attention is the possibility of team or group learning, that is, teams, over time, developing learning that is not reducible to the sum of the learning by individuals within the team.

As well this book raises major strategic problems that extend beyond physical education itself. The sheer scope of Stolz's novel philosophy of physical education is such that it challenges deeply entrenched assumptions that underpin global formal education arrangements. In other words, to implement Stolz's reconceptualization of physical education would require a drastic renovation of the existing culture and philosophy of formal education provision. For example, the ingrained assumption that learning is a product pervades educational practice. Course content represents items for students to acquire and then to recycle in assessment situations. Even the terminology of educational provision implies that learning comes in discrete chunks or products — for example, educational providers *offer* and *deliver* courses, quantified in terms of *course load* and *student load*. Stolz's concept of learning as an ongoing creative process obviously clashes with this dominant culture. Equally influential is the prevailing assumption that learning by individuals is the prime focus of teaching and assessing. As indicated already, Stolz's position suggests that this assumption is too narrow. In significant ways, then, this book is much more than a proposal for reconceptualizing physical education. Its implementation would entail at least some rethinking of taken-for-granted assumptions about education in general

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Nevertheless, as already emphasized, the major principles in Stolz's philosophical perspective on physical education do chime very well with similar themes in other relevant

fields. So if his perspective is indeed as new to physical education as he maintains, then this book can be recommended to both thoughtful practitioners and theorists of the field.

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1. *The Philosophy of Physical Education* will be cited in the text as *PPE*.

2. Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue,* 2nd ed. (South Bend, IN: Notre Dame University Press, 2007), 222.

3. Gilbert Ryle, *The Concept of Mind* (London: Penguin, 1949).

4. Especially Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (London: Routledge, 1962).

5. See, for example, Michael Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958); and Michael Polanyi, *The Tacit Dimension* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966).

6. See, for example, Hubert Dreyfus, "Intelligence without Representation: Merleau-Ponty's Critique of Mental Representation," *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences* 1, no. 4 (2002): 367–383; and Hubert Dreyfus, "Refocusing the Question: Can There Be Skillful Coping without Propositional Representations or Brain Representations?," *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences* 1, no. 4 (2002): 413–425.

7. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 160–161.

8. Richard L. Franklin, "Knowledge, Belief and Understanding," *Philosophical Quarterly* 31, no. 124 (1981): 193–208.

9. See, for example, David Carr, "Knowledge in Practice," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 18, no. 1 (1981): 53–61.

10. Especially Alasdair MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (London: Duckworth, 1988); and Alasdair MacIntyre, *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry* (South Bend, IN: Notre Dame University Press, 1990).

11. See, for example, Paul Hager, "The Integrated View on Competence," in *Competence-Based Vocational and Professional Education: Bridging the Worlds of Work and Education*, ed. Martin Mulder (Dordrecht, The Netherlands: Springer, 2017).

12. For more on this, see Paul Hager, "Practice and Group Learning," *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 46, no. 6 (2014): 584–599.