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Embodied Thought of the Month

February 2018

Embodied Learning through Climbing

Laura Gubby

When I teach research methods on the physical education degree programme at CCCU, I try to include as many practical activities as possible. I find that this helps my students apply key ideas, create data collection scenarios and generate data to analyse. Incorporating practical into sessions was also prompted by several students who asked me if I could adapt some of the sessions that had been taught in more traditional ways (class based lectures) as they felt that these gave them more relatable and practical scenarios to apply ideas to. This ETM will discuss a specific session which considered qualitative data analysis and representation by incorporating indoor climbing as the practical activity.

I walked into the sports hall to be greeted by a number of students kicking a football around. I (gently) shouted at them to put the ball away and bring out the box of carabiners, climbing harnesses and helmets. The climbing wall, which towered about 9 metres above our heads, was located at the far end of the hall. Under my instruction, the group walked towards the wall and began unfastening the Velcro around the edge of the safety mats which were secured against the wall, before supporting them as they came away from the wall and landed on the floor. I gathered the students together and began instructing them about how to correctly step into a harness with each leg in individual straps, and how to secure it around their waists.

While most students stepped into their harnesses without question, one female student (Annie) expressed anxiety at the prospect of wearing the harness. In previous class based lectures and tutorials she had jokingly expressed that she lacked body confidence and always wore oversized hoody jumpers, however, in this situation she seemed to have a quite obvious insecurity related to wearing the harness. She looked stressed and uncomfortable at the prospect of putting the harness on and looked desperate when she asked me whether she had to do this practical or whether she could not do the climb but instead formulate interview questions for the other students in the class. I tried to encourage her to take part, but for fear of her bursting into tears, I said that she could develop some interview questions based on the things that she saw and heard. At this stage, I looked around the room at the other students wearing harnesses. Many of the female students were wearing multiple layers with pinched waists where the harness was tightened above their hips. The layers of clothing gave the illusion of bulk around the hips, accentuated by the harness which narrowed the waistline. Each leg was also in an individual harness strap and while it was loose at the moment it was liable to tighten around the legs and bottom as the climber falls or walks back down the wall. This action was completed with the help of an assisting and supporting belayer who would harness the climber which meant that the climber was quite literally dangling their bottoms directly above the other students' heads. Consequently, from this perspective, the harnesses, although necessary for safety, would do nothing to aid body confidence in an already self-conscious student.

Having checked harnesses and put helmets on, the students got into groups of three which would later be the groupings for each section of the wall. At any one time, one person from the group would be climbing, one belaying, and another feeding the rope behind the belayer and acting as a safety support. As we began tying the ropes to climbers and preparing the belayers, another male student (Rick) started to express a dislike for climbing, and I could see that, unlike most of the other students, he was not excited at the prospect. Although he was usually one of the more confident students and always keen to be involved in practical activities, on this occasion he expressed a preference for a traditional lecture style. *'Can't we just sit down and reflect on activities we have previously done?'* he asked. I was surprised to hear this from him, but as other students began laughing and joking around him, it became clear that he had a fear of heights. Rick displayed an awkward smile as the other students jeered at him and referred to previous times they had witnessed him completing this activity. The first set of climbers started to ascend the wall, tapping the metal carabiner as they reached the top. As they became more confident, they timed themselves over the same route and tried to beat fellow students to the top, shouting noisily and cheering for each other. Whilst awaiting his turn, Rick had continued to look awkward and with what seemed like a sense of foreboding. As he swapped roles with his group member, he specifically asked me to check his rope as well as his belayer's equipment too. Nevertheless, despite seeing that his belayer was confident and he had also checked the safety on the belayer's carabiner, as Rick began, slowly finding holds for his hands and his feet, I could sense the worry he was experiencing. Standing with his group, encouraging him to climb, praising him and helping to identify available holds, I could see he was the most cautious climber from the group. He moved slowly and took deep breaths each time a hand or foot moved from the previous, firm hold. Rick did, however, manage to climb half way up the wall before realising that the height was too much for him to reasonably cope with. He called down to his belayer to lower him down. It took him several moments to actually sit back into the harness and release his hand holds, even with the knowledge that his belayer stating he was ready and me confirming that he was well supported from the floor. After a couple of deep breaths, he slowly lent backwards releasing a drawn out 'aaargh' noise as he did so. Once he was in position and could feel the security and support from the harness, he looked to relax slightly. As his feet landed on the ground and he tugged at the harness around his legs to loosen it, his cheeks looked flushed and he smiled. He made a short, sharp 'woo' noise which seemed to present both relief and happiness with what he had achieved. The others in the groups tapped him on the back and congratulated his personal success.

The ways in which both Annie and Rick experienced the climbing activity might initially be regarded as personal experiences and subjective accounts of individual responses to a physical activity. However, the practical activity provided the other students an opportunity to witness the differing ways that individuals react to what might be considered safe and 'harmless' activities. So, while the initial lecture focus was research methods, the practical element enabled a glimpse for all the students into the reflexive dynamics of physical education that are not always readily apparent in traditional forms of text based learning.