Chapter 9
A Quest for a Pedagogy of Critical Theorising in Physical Education Teacher Education: One Physical Educator's Journey

Alan Ovens

Introduction

For some time now I have been oriented by a commitment to a socially critical agenda in my work as a teacher educator and my approach to physical education as a disciplinary field. By criticality (or socially critical) I mean practicing a form of emancipatory politics that invites students to read and discuss teaching and physical education as contested terrains and sites of struggle in which the organization, legitimation and circulation of knowledge are core to issues of power and social justice (Leistyna and Woodrum 1996; Ingram and Simon-Ingram 1992). Like many of my fellow educators, I have found that such an orientation provides an intellectual framework and language for understanding and problematising educational practices in ways that recognise their complexity, humanity and emancipatory potential. In my own approach to being a teacher educator, I aim to enable my students to use critique, inquiry and reflection as tools to challenge existing knowledge, ways of knowing and to inform their practice as teachers (Ovens 2013). Despite this, I have a concern that approaches to promoting criticality in teacher education are dominated by a form of rationalism that works against our ability to actually enact the concept in a meaningful way.

I expect many would not see this as the typical concerns expressed by a physical educator, who are typically more oriented by an uncritical valuing of sport or masculine cultures (Brown 1999; Green 2002). In considering how I have come to this point after more than 20 years as a teacher educator, I have reflected on some of the important transformations and experiences I have had in my career. This is never an easy task given the interconnected nature and complexity of one's life. As Osberg (2008) notes, lives are always in flux and the trajectory of learning is "not linked by

A. Ovens (✉)
School of Curriculum and Pedagogy, The University of Auckland, Auckland, New Zealand
e-mail: a.ovens@auckland.ac.nz

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chains of causality, but (by) layers of meaning, recursive dynamics, non-linear effects and chance" (Osberg 2008, p. viii). Lives need to be understood relationally, and as layered and situated within ecological networks of meaning (Green 2002). We experience life as both constrained within the limitations of the individual's embodied relationship with their world while simultaneously being enabled by that same world to perform particular goal-directed actions (Green 2002).

As a way forward, I draw on writing as a method of inquiry (Richardson 2000), employing performative writing (Pelias 2011; Coylar 2009) as a contemplative practice to highlight the trajectory of my professional biography. I acknowledge that this will be mediated by the inconsistencies of remembering and the necessity of editing for the sake of parsimony. Deciding what to include has been difficult since individual lives are so complex. For example, should I include that my parents had a fairly messy divorce when I was a teenager, or that I have a deaf sister, or that I am a third child of four? All will have influenced my life trajectory. Any telling of a biography will be partial, ambiguous and tentative. However, as a contemplative practice, writing can and does change the world as it constructs worlds, particularly when one takes the time to write freely then come back and edit events in relation to a considered critical path. In this respect, I consider the following to be some of the formative and influential transitions in my development as a teacher educator.

Being a Student and Experiencing Justice and Democracy

I consider myself fortunate to have been schooled in the 1970s when education in general was grappling with the implications of growing social liberalism, which meant it often came into conflict with many entrenched conservative ideas. The secondary school I attended was a good example of the mix of contrasting ideas in play in schools at this time. Some of the more progressive teachers, who I thought looked like hippies, made us sit on cushions on the floor and study Beatles lyrics. They counselled and worked gently with students. In contrast were those who held more conservative ideas about education, tended to have short hair and formal attire, and made us sit in ordered rows of desks and dealt with problems with the cane. This range meant there was considerable debate about the 'proper' nature of schooling, and I was affected not only by the diversity of arguments circulating, but also the range of ideas being implemented. Most memorable for me were the times that learning opportunities were personalised and involved choice. This occurred in a variety of ways, and included individualised lab work in Science (where each student was rostered onto 1 of 30 different Science lab activities each week), working on a personalised learning schedule in Maths (where each student worked on an individual plan worked out by the teacher) or given options to choose from to construct a course of study in English (where students could choose between different classes focussing on different poets or writing styles within the English course).

While these were positive experiences, the limitations imposed by more traditional thinking were also influential. The most obvious of these came when, around

16 years of age, I firmed up on wanting to be a physical education teacher and realised I would need to study physics, chemistry and biology. Unfortunately, such subjects were the preserve of the top students and my marks meant I did not automatically qualify. It was only by persistence on behalf of my father, who was able to convince the school authorities that such restrictions severely limited my future study and career options, that the rules were relaxed and I was allowed to enrol. However, the teachers of these courses regularly found different ways to reinforce the idea that not only was I not meant to be part of the courses, but that I was wasting my time and could be putting others' marks at risk. Some of these ways included putting my work in the rubbish bin (if it wasn't up to their standard) and shaming any poor performance by making me stand in class (a penalty for any under performing student). If the hidden intent of their approach was to develop my resilience, I can only say they pursued it with great vigour. More importantly, it gave me a strong sense of distrust in those who seek to portion out educational opportunities to those they deem as 'worthy' or to make judgements thinking they know best.

I found university to be a bigger version of my schooling with the interplay between new and old ideas about teaching being prevalent in many courses. Even though I had to fish one of my assignments out of a rubbish bin on one occasion, the university was a significant transition that contributed to my development as a teacher educator. Perhaps the most profound experience was the opportunity to negotiate the coursework for an Exercise Physiology course in my fourth year. The lecturer in charge of this course was provocative, particularly about learning, assignments and grades. I always remember him asking, "What does a 'C' represent?" and then stating, "Probably that you only know half of what you are supposed to know. Would you fly with pilot who only knew half of what he was supposed to know?" He expected us to plan our own assignment work and discuss with him the grade we thought it was worth. He set out to not only teach us content, but also the limitations of that content. It was a very important lesson to be able to question and doubt knowledge, while also being able to use it at the same time. However, while this registered with me, I also was not mature or organised enough to take advantage of the flexible learning opportunity he provided and I ended up failing the course. It was salient experience that would later shape my own use of negotiated grading in my teacher education courses.

Learning from Playing and Being a Sportsman

Another key transition in my life was becoming a sportsman. Sport is an important form of cultural capital to a physical educator and was something that I proved to be reasonably good at through school. I competed and succeeded at a variety of sports, but settled on basketball at a young age. I have no idea why basketball became 'my thing' but it did and it became a core part of who I was through to my early 30s. I captained the Auckland team and played for New Zealand during my twenties. Being good at basketball was not just about who I was, but was a form of cache and

legitimacy in the physical education world. In one sense, I was the epitome of the message being taught to students, that practice and application led to excellence. However, perhaps more importantly, it gave me status and a profile students admired. My students could regularly watch me on TV or support the teams live. It was a profile that shaped my relationship with students, gave me a sense that they wanted to be in my classes and something that generally enhanced my teaching. The limitation was perhaps an overreliance on the cult of personality at the expense of teaching skills. It was easy to become frustrated if the charisma failed to get the desired outcome.

Sport also transformed my understanding of working in complex professional settings like teacher education. While it is essentially an unscripted drama with an uncertain outcome, sport is not a chaotic activity since one seeks to influence the outcome of a game by working as a cohesive team following practiced principles of play. To play well, you have to know your role and understand the nature of the game in order to affect the ebb and flow of the play. I feel this parodies life, particularly in the way we coordinate our individual effort to achieve collective outcomes. However, the balance of this interdependence is easily disrupted. As I have experienced, when you are playing with someone who doesn't understand the game or is too egocentrically focussed on their own performance, the collectivity essential to 'teamwork' breaks down and it becomes quite frustrating. If there is something that I would like to pass on to those I teach, it is the pleasure one can get from working collaboratively and achieving because the team achieves. It is an idea that is in contrast to contemporary ideas that foreground the importance and contribution of individual performance over the distributed abilities and contributions of those you work with. When I reflect on what I have learnt from playing sport, I can see that notions of leadership and performing are heavily influenced by the concepts of collaboration, teamwork and putting team first.

Being a Teacher and Practicing Justice and Democracy

I taught in a secondary school for 5 years and found it all-consuming. The culture I encountered made it difficult to balance my personal, playing and professional lives because it extended so thoroughly outside of the normal working day. If I wasn't planning and marking, I was doing 'lunch time' duty or coaching one of many teams I had responsibility for. I loved it because each day was different. I could be teaching senior students about exercise physiology, junior students about games or on a camp teaching rock climbing. I started with a fairly strong coach orientation, with the initial aim of having really good basketball teams. However, it never worked out like that because I couldn't allow myself to do a poor job of teaching and being good at teaching took a lot of time and energy.

The transition into teaching meant that I found myself questioning what we did in our school PE programme and began to think about it differently. For example,

I questioned the need to fitness test all my students. I doubted the validity of the tests we were using (with thanks to my earlier exercise physiology course) and found the results of little value. I started to explore other ways that my students could examine their health profile and levels of physical activity. I was keen for students to take more responsibility for their own physical wellbeing and see it more broadly connected to the lifestyle choices. I saw little value in perpetuating practices that students disliked and often avoided since there was little hope they would continue after the external motivation of the teacher was removed. Worse still, I could see there was the risk that students would become 'disconnected from their bodies' in the sense that they felt unable to participate in physical activities, embarrassed about their shape and abilities, and unable to benefit from the physical culture that was so rich in our society. Even though I loved sport, I wanted to move away from it being the only content we taught. I also disliked the quasi-military style teaching of traditional PE and instead wanted to encourage students to have more responsibility and options in the programme.

I pushed to make our PE programme more meaningful, and I was keen to explore different ways of organising the programme. Acknowledging that students often had different motivations for doing PE, we began to offer different streams and options. For example, our year ten students could opt into either a class that was about being pushed to excel, a girls only class, a class exploring different recreational options or a class for students who hated doing PE. Over several years this evolved into allowing students to also select which teachers they wanted. I sensed what Tinning (1997) calls the tension between the discourses of participation vs the discourses of performance. That is, should the PE programme orient itself to serve the interests of high performance sport or the broader goal of ensuring everyone can participate in an active lifestyle enjoying the opportunities of human movement culture? For me, the choice was never difficult and I actively sought to make the programme more meaningful for everyone. I even discarded the syllabus for the senior school in favour of one that we developed around living an active lifestyle.

On reflection, I can see that these developments were driven intuitively by an underlying belief system that respected individual choice, difference, empowerment, and social justice. Such values were influenced by my school and university experiences as previously discussed. I say 'intuitively' because it wasn't until I started my Masters some years later that I had a more comprehensive language to articulate the issues and subtleties of what we were trying to do. Till then, I was largely driven to be a good teacher guided by my own experiences and beliefs of what 'good' may be. Fortunately, the department I was part of were always open to trying something new even though the practices associated with a performance discourse were very difficult to change. These struggles and experiences provided an important grounding for my future work as a teacher educator since they helped provide an insight into the constraints and difficulties of initiating educational change as a young teacher.

The Importance of 'We' over 'Me' in Becoming a Teacher Educator

I have used 'we' a lot here to represent the physical education department because the development and implementation of the ideas is usually a collaborative process. The transition here is the shift in perspective from the individual 'me' to a collective 'we' and the importance of acknowledging how the 'social' influences individual action. On reflection, I realise that I have always worked with people who are also interested in trying new things, sharing and implementing new ideas, providing support, and challenging my thinking. I have always had Heads of Department who have been willing to provide me with the flexibility to try new things and be there if and when they don't work. This flexibility has always been very important and I don't think I could work in a setting where the content and approach are fixed or determined by someone else. Like playing a game, I see teaching as a creative act where each situation unfolds in quite novel and unpredictable ways. Your skill rests in the ability to manage the complexity of the events in a lesson setting by knowing strategically what you want to accomplish, being able to read the situation, make good decisions, adapt and create action and affect good outcomes. To do this is not a singular act. It means working collaboratively with others.

Perhaps the most important collaboration shaping me both personally and professionally in becoming a teacher educator has been with my wife, Dawn. We met when I first went teaching and our careers have been entwined ever since. We have always taught in the same institution and readily mixed our personal and professional lives. She is a strong advocate for quality teaching and has won major national awards for her work in teacher education. She is an inspiration, critical friend, source of ideas, constant advocate for quality teaching and essential supporter of innovative ideas. Each night, as we take the dogs for a walk around the local park, we reflect on the day's events and discuss our teaching. Despite working in different subject areas, we do a lot of research together as teacher educators, examining our practice and the innovative ideas we both like to implement. She would say it is not an easy collaboration given our individual personalities, but it is oriented around the same values and commitment to quality teaching.

On the whole I have been fortunate to work with many excellent and innovative teachers. However, this does not mean that each collaboration is positive or proceeds smoothly. Across my professional life I have been called "arrogant" or "idealistic" because I tend to question and challenge what we do. I am not happy to go with the status quo just because someone in authority has 'decided' this is how things will be. The conflicts I have had in respect to this, and the exclusion from key decision making groups at times as a result, has sparked in me an interest in the way individuals get labelled and storied in educational workplaces. Storying appears to me to be largely an act of social politics, since to label someone as 'arrogant,' 'argumentative,' or 'stubborn' instead of 'passionate', 'innovative' or 'visionary' makes it easier to dismiss or trivialise their concerns and ideas. This is important because I have largely experienced innovation and development as an enterprise driven by the

desire to better engage and support student learning. I have always seen teaching as a something underpinned by experimentation with the intent to develop programmes better suited to student learning and constantly adapted to the changing circumstances. However, for anyone who spends any time in an educational setting, one quickly finds it is a quagmire of politics and competing views. Many appear to be more interested in maintaining their own senior positions than fostering communities where ideas can flourish. As I have learnt, in navigating a pathway for yourself it is important to manage the way you get storied in order to be effective.

Becoming a Teacher Educator

The transition into teacher education was in response to institutional change. After the school appointed a new Principal, the culture of the school began to change. The staff openly doubted the new Principal's abilities and philosophy, and I sensed that he didn't really appreciate the PE programme or value what we were trying to do. In addition, staffing changes in meant our PE department had also changed and I felt that I needed some new challenges. A job at the teachers' college was advertised and it included the opportunity to work in and help develop a new Physical Education degree programme. The decision to apply changed the course of my life.

When I entered the teachers' college I was able to start a long-term desire of doing a Masters degree. At that stage it was difficult to do postgraduate studies in New Zealand while working full time and, almost serendipitously, someone gave me the name of Richard Tinning at Deakin University. Richard would go on to become a long-term mentor and friend. I loved doing the Masters and it introduced me to the literature around critical pedagogy. It was a transformative experience because it gave me a language to express many of the things I had observed when I was teaching but couldn't articulate in any way. For example, when I read about the hidden curriculum (Bain 1990; Kirk 1992) I instantly knew what the concept referred to and had observed it in operation in my own classes. At that stage I just didn't know what to call it. I found that the ideas expressed in my Masters course corresponded strongly with my own experiences from teaching. The broad themes of enlightenment, empowerment and emancipation resonated with my own values of wanting a more humanistic and democratic form of teaching. At the same time, I acknowledge that missing from this was a strong critique of cultural values in respect to colonialism, culture and race, and this has largely continued to this day. I completed my Masters with a thesis examining the value of peer-placements and action research as an alternative practicum curriculum.

While the Masters was something I wanted to do, continuing with a doctorate was something that I felt I needed to do. I would like to say that it was because I recognised that my experience and indigenous knowledge of teaching provided a rather static resource for informing my work as a teacher educator. However, the decision was more about wanting to feel a sense of legitimacy and achievement at the tertiary education level. In much the same way as achievement in sport provides

cultural capital for being a physical educator, having a PhD and doing research provides the valued cultural capital in the academic community. As my friend Richard would say, it gives you the license to practice in the academy. However, the doctorate was more than just a pragmatic exercise. Whereas my earlier experiences had provided the dispositions, values and beliefs that oriented my work as an educator, my postgraduate studies and subsequent research were transformative in the sense that they provided the basis for intellectualising and critiquing that work. These elements are entangled in each other and have become part of the layered fabric of my becoming a teacher educator.

Developing a Pedagogy of Critical Theorising

An important part of my scholarship as a teacher educator has been to look at our collective efforts to develop a democratic and emancipatory form of physical education teacher education. In other words, my studies and ongoing research projects have allowed me to step back from some two decades of active programme development of a degree focussed on critical pedagogy and consider if we were actually 'walking our talk'. One of the key criticisms leveled at those promoting any form of criticality in education is that they tend to overplay the agency of the individual and believe that everyone is capable of challenging the ideological nature of educational practices (Tinning 1995, 2001, 2002). When promoted in this way students of teaching are, to paraphrase Giroux (1996), invited to learn a critical theory of pedagogy rather than engage with a pedagogy of critical theorising. In other words, when students in a degree like ours learn about being "socially critical" they tend to learn about how power relations in education contexts provide for inequitable outcomes, forms of oppression and traditional constructions of subject matter in a general sense focussed on schooling, rather than examine their own lived situations. There was a very real risk that we were asking our students to learn a critical theory pedagogy rather than practice a more difficult pedagogy of critical theorising.

This distinction is more than just polemical or symantic. Understanding the subtitly of how criticality emerges in pedagogical practice was one of the most important transitions for me as a teacher educator following my doctorate. Firstly, I came to see contemporary teacher education as an exercise in separating theory from practice, while effectively disguising the process of doing so. In other words, I felt we taught a detached 'theory' of social justice, power, oppression and privilege while essentially continuing to practice a conventional form of teaching ourselves. The irony is that this approach itself represents a banking metaphor of education since students are expected to accumulate a form of knowledge capital that potentially can be applied to improve their work as future teachers. While our practices were overtly about promoting criticality, the process and product of our courses continued to be about compliance, conformity and consensus, albeit focussed on the practice of critical pedagogy. To me, it appeared that our form of criticality only engaged in the seemingly futile attempt to radicalise students to be capable of

transforming practice once they graduated rather than being the process they experienced as part of their professional learning.

Related to this, I also began to question the nature of teacher education since 'teaching' becomes both the content and process of learning to teach. I found myself questioning what a pedagogy for teacher education may look like. Looking around at others on our campus I could see that the standard approach was to reduce theory to being some generalised and decontextualized knowledge about teaching that was to be learnt by student teachers and applied in school contexts. This content was 'taught' in settings where the pedagogy was either 'telling' (the lecture), 'modelling' (the demonstration lesson or microteaching), or 'apprenticeship' (the practicum). I could see that without interrogating the relationship between what student teachers learn and how they learn, teacher education had little transformative impact. The theoretical knowledge learnt in the university risked being perceived by student teachers as having little use-value, memorized only because of its exchange-value in the marketplace of grades and certification. When conceptualised like this, it was no surprise that student teachers found educational theory sometimes irrelevant, ineffective or disconnected from teachers' work.

I developed a real concern that these orthodox forms of pedagogy work to silence students' concerns and deny them the opportunity to challenge the practices enacted with them as students. The consequence was that student teachers became skilful in learning how to perform expected actions within a culture of surveillance rather than in analysing those actions or the expectations that generate such actions. This insight was interesting since we tended to construct the ideal teacher as the critically reflective and socially-just teacher, who is actively transforming their workspaces and educational programmes to be more enlightened, empowering and emancipatory, but then we would construct them as students in a different, contradictory way. According to Segall (2002), while students may be encouraged to ask critical questions *in* their teacher education courses, they are not encouraged to ask the same question *of* their teacher education courses. This was evident in our courses. For example, we encouraged our students to think about how their teaching met the individual needs of their students, but rarely did we ask them how our lessons met their individual needs. We encouraged student teachers to ask how the interests of different ethnicities, faiths and abilities are served by their teaching, but we did not make our teaching transparent in a way that demonstrated how we differentiated our own teaching (or even if we asked these questions of ourselves). In effect, the orthodox pedagogies we used provided a form of immunity to such investigation. We anesthetised the students from challenging their own education and ensured that theory was disconnected from everyday practice because it became content to be learnt rather than lived.

My doctorate provided the initial means to develop these insights. Using a phenomenological approach, I studied the lived experiences of five students as they moved through our physical education degree (Ovens 2004a). I was initially concerned that the participants may have been too similar, but in the end I was amazed how different each of their journeys were. It gave me a real sense of how students engaged with the criticality of the degree (Ovens and Tinning 2009) and the role their

own personal politics played in shaping their engagement with key ideas and activities experienced (Ovens 2009). The doctorate enabled me to bring new theoretical lines to bare on our teacher education practices, particularly notions around situated learning, critical reflection, poststructuralism and performativity. These not only expanded how I understood educational practice, but provided important foundation for my more recent work exploring complexity and post-qualitative methodologies (Ovens 2010a; Ovens et al. 2012; Ovens and Fletcher 2014; Smith and Ovens 2014).

Rethinking my pedagogy to be cohesive with the ideas of a pedagogy of critical theorising has been my transformation over the past decade. I see myself as having evolved a set of practices oriented around inviting students to be co-designers of courses, negotiated grading contracts, peer-marking panels, peer-teaching, cooperative and project-based learning (Brubaker and Ovens 2012; Garbett and Ovens 2012; Ovens 2014). Early on I had the capacity to influence our students' practicum curriculum and I structured their experiences around action research and peer-placements (Ovens 1996, 2004b), as well as actively using ideas like 'lesson study' to engage students to think about pedagogy (Ovens 2010b). More recently I have begun to explore how new and emerging technologies can be integrated into a pedagogy for teacher education (Ovens et al. 2014; Ovens et al. 2013). I see each of these developments as transitions grounded in my values and beliefs around social justice, democratic teaching and excellence. Like my earlier teaching experiences, all of this has been done in collaboration with colleagues and because I have the flexibility (within reason) to implement new ideas (Garbett and Ovens 2012).

Concluding Thoughts

I have always enjoyed educational theory, but have come to see it as not about the mastery of knowledge that can inform teaching decisions, but about a means of critiquing how we come to know and understand the process of education. Educational theory should challenge the notion that educational practice and biography are a form of inescapable reality and aim instead to allow students to undo existing meanings and undermine their confidence in the experienced, given and obvious. In what is perhaps a significant change in thinking for me as a teacher educator, I have come to envisage all of teacher education as a practicum setting, where each context encourages students to critique the interrelationship between knowledge, learning and power in each of the discursive settings in which they are situated. Disturbing practice in this way provides a criticality to my practice that enables an embodied and experiential means for student teachers to examine the origins, purposes and consequences of educational actions and the political, economic, and social contexts that give rise to them. Such change emerges from a growing understanding of these issues in response to personal and professional transitions experienced over my career.

My wife sometime likes to joke that she married a sports star and ended up with an academic nerd. While this may overly simplify the rich mix of personal and

professional experiences that have shaped my practice as a teacher educator, it does capture something of the transitions I have made over my time in education. In reflecting back on these transitions, and on the 20 years of being a teacher educator, I offer the following advice and insights. Firstly, it is important to balance the competing demands on your life (parent, husband or wife, academic, son or daughter, teacher, etc) and give attention to each. Not only is it important to respect that lives are multidimensional and need to cared for, it is important to recognise that each dimension is interconnected. Transformations as a teacher educator are enriched and nurtured by the other aspects of your life. Secondly, the quest to develop a pedagogy of critical theorising is more about the journey than the final outcome. These transitions are not made against a static backdrop, but are the result of living in and being part of a constantly changing personal and professional context; of being challenged by and challenging the status quo; of giving myself the license to experiment and enact what I believe to be good teaching. The accumulated experiences have taught me that developing a pedagogy of critical theorising implies more than cosmetic reform of programmes to ensure they are 'research informed and led'. It also requires more than considerations about the amount and length of practicum placements or even if teacher education should be more school-based and authentic. Rather, it implies attention is given to the experience of teacher education in a way that meaningfully ensures that the purpose, nature, culture and process of learning to teach provides multiple spaces and communities to promote reflexive engagement with ideas in a way that challenges prior experience and assumptions, while also creating avenues for alternative thinking, alternative ways of being and experiencing, and alternative ways of knowing. When one is enabled in this way, I believe we are in an effective position to confront the forms of rationalism that work against our ability to actually enact a pedagogy of critical theorising in a meaningful way.

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