‘Sport, Philosophy, and Practice’

These are extracts taken from recorded conversations between Philip Gaydon (P), Jonathan Heron (J), and Tatjana Seitz (T) in June 2016. They worked on the ‘Sport, Philosophy, and Practice’ project which resulted in a transdisciplinary gymnasium event, the creation of new undergraduate IATL module, and a variety of images and videos to be used as teaching and research materials.

Philip Gaydon and Jonathan Heron

P: Can you say a bit about why we started the Sport, Philosophy, and Practice [SPP] process?

J: Yes. While you were considering how to go about investigating innovation within teaching and learning, we were having several conversations about how to innovate within interdisciplinary teaching and learning. From my recollection, and as part of our ongoing investigations into play studies we’d arrived on the idea of sport as a philosophically interesting category that would mobilise the arts and humanities, science and medicine, as well as the social sciences because within the concept of human sport, you have play and games, issues around politics and conflict, material associated with the body and human embodiment; also the difference between sport, exercise, and physical activity, as well as a possible tension between sport-as-competitive and sport-as-healthy. So it seemed to me that sport was something that was culturally relevant and academically interesting for an interdisciplinary group.

So far, it would seem that sport is a good choice and our enquiry may be based around a question like: “why does such an apparently frivolous or meaningless activity such as sport still hold so much value for the human species?”[1] If people from the sciences and arts, and different social backgrounds, can come together and feel confident enough to try and answer that question then I think we’ve started to create the material conditions that could enable not only an interdisciplinary but a transdisciplinary classroom.

[…]

P: One of the things that we’ve both commented on is that we wanted to move away from the idea that a transdisciplinary module needs a disciplinary expert in the room [at all times] for the right kinds of interaction to take place, which has been quite a dominant model in interdisciplinary modules so far – at least as I’ve seen them done.

J: There are a few things that are really important here. One is that having a disciplinary expert in the room [at all times] actually maintains disciplinarity because it acknowledges that the discipline they represent is important and has some form of authority within the space. I think that is quite a good way into multi- and/or interdisciplinary teaching and learning but it’s not necessarily a good strategy for transdisciplinarity; as we have discovered, and other colleagues have found, our role then becomes about the importance of facilitating the engagement between the so-called expert and the participants. As long as the learners know where to go to find evidence, data, and/or theory that they feel they need to support their work, then I think it’s possible to sustain quality without [the constant presence of] that disciplinary expert.

---

[1] A question that has been highly influenced by our reading of Steven Connor’s *A Philosophy of Sport*.

[…]

P: From my recollections of the process I think I would add two things. The first is that when we were first introduced in 2011 you immediately spotted a link between my role as a sports coach and the developing practice of OSL [open-space learning] as they both involve the moving of bodies around a space in relation to learning.[2]

J: Now that's a very good point. We were still in the midst of the OSL project and I was running an event which explored philosophy, science and performance [via Nietzsche and Darwin]. Within that event there was an opportunity to participate practically and through the body.[3] That event, which you attended, laid some of the groundwork for our SPP project because it was asking, 'how can philosophy engage through and with performance?' and it's not a huge leap to say that if philosophy can engage with performance then philosophy should be able to engage with sport.

[…]

P: Something that really stood out for me as particularly valuable during the process was the fact that we held our discussions and planning meetings *in situ*; having our meetings whilst walking the campus or at the gym, for example. This really stimulated us because we responded to the objects and situations around us.

J: Yes, an engagement with the material environment is highly valuable for all teaching and learning. I think our gymnasium event is a really good example of that work. I don't think we could have delivered that event if we hadn't planned it in that way. We always challenged ourselves to not sit in a room – as we're unfortunately doing at the moment – and have a conversation about something in the abstract. We always pushed ourselves to go somewhere, to do something, to use a relevant space; the fact that we chose to run the event as a *gymnasium* rather than a *symposium* is an excellent example and extension of that.

[…]

P: Another key theme to add, is that we were really motivated by the idea of exploring how curricular and extra-curricular activities combine within a learning space. Alongside the SPP process was the sense of sport or exercise being a big part of our own lives and, more importantly, student and campus life. Yet there is very little, if anything, that reflects that in Warwick's academic spaces.

J: There is a significant parallel here to extra-curricular student arts and cultural activities and how they impact upon the university's formal curriculum.

[…]

P: One of the big discussions we've had in creating the module is about assessment. How were we ever going to assess the module with all of this in mind? It really raised difficult questions for us

---

[2] See Monk, et al. (2011) *Open Space Learning: A Study in Transdisciplinary Pedagogy*, London, Bloomsbury Academic

[3] https://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/cross_fac/iatl/funding/fundedprojects/pedagogic/john_final_report.pdf

about student devised assessment right through from 'what does it need to be called?' to 'how can we possibly do it?'

J: Yes, I think we wanted to avoid the sense that it would be an easy option, that you could turn up, do something sporty, and get credit. What we want participants to do is to think about their own, [professional and/or amateur] sporting practice as well as the representation of that practice within film, media, and literature, whilst also keeping an eye on ethical, aesthetic, and phenomenological questions. So, what we're asking the students to do each week is quite complex and detailed. Eventually we settled on the idea of regular blog entries responding to the module and concurrent sporting experiences which they can then select themselves and decide how they want to put them forward for assessment. They will also do an assessed piece of writing – an essay or a review – focused on sporting practice but also a considered piece of academic writing. Then they have to generate some practice which they're assessed on. The way in which this practice is articulated in relation to their writing [and vice versa] is a really important part of how the assessment functions and they'll need to be able to evaluate that.

***

Philip Gaydon and Tatjana Seitz

T: I was already interested in visualising data differently so I was intrinsically motivated to answer a question like, 'how can we capture the physicality of an academic event that's also a gymnasium?' I've done video analysis before and always found it thought-provoking to have the abstract data that doesn't show the people because, in my experience, you will always look at it differently with the people removed. I truly believe that abstracted data can tell you something else, something different from what you're used to, so in the video I've removed the human body and represented the abstracted data in an alternative way.

P: Coming to that video, what was your process in creating it?

T: It was a long process and a bit of pain to find something usable. I showed you the material from *Synchronous Objects* which was highly impressive but they used a whole team of professionals and their tools require your video to fit their definitions.[4] Also, they were doing dancing visualisation and while there's quite a lot of that around there is not so much for visually tracking people doing small-movement sports outside. The materials for tracking that are more commercial and for runners or cyclists over long distances. They don't really look at the smaller detail. But then, in a moment of desperate need – and it really was *desperate* need – I found some software that physicians use to track objects and then apply formulas and mathematical functions.[5] The interesting thing was that it already had the tracking script in the software. Unfortunately, the auto-tracking didn't work as our event was in a darkened room and feet and hands are just too small and moving too quickly, so I ended up manually tracking them. But I was so happy to find some software that I could use and I actually use it in my own work outside the project now as well.

[…]

[4] http://synchronousobjects.osu.edu/
[5] *Tracker*; http://physlets.org/tracker/

P: What about your perception of what should go on or be studied in a university? Has that changed in any way by doing the project?

T: Being at the Centre for Interdisciplinary Methodologies I've come to expect that university or academia somehow broadens, opens or softens the edges of study and there's no sense of "this is academia and nothing else is". This project was in that same vein. We need to open up a variety of areas and this can be found in even the oldest or most overlooked of concepts. I mean, come on, sport is one of the oldest concepts there is but there is still more to be understood, new research and studies to be done, and new techniques and software to be applied.