Not fade away: A critical look at lesson closures

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What is a lesson closure and what are its purposes?

Why might lesson closures be important for students?

How might teachers implement lesson closures that foster student learning in physical education?

In a tragic yet prophetic irony, American rock and roll legend Buddy Holly closed an impromptu show at Clear Lake, Iowa in 1959 with his song “Not Fade Away” before boarding a charter plane that crashed just minutes after takeoff, killing him and three other rock icons, all on tour together. While the extinguished flame of Holly’s life ironically undermines the title and spirit of his final performance, his music has lived on to fulfill its prophecy, burning brightly as ever through its pioneering mastery and transcendent message.

The story of Buddy Holly and his music draws attention to an important piece of the teaching-learning process. It underscores a critical pedagogic issue: How should teachers spend the final minutes of a lesson? Like Holly’s final performance, a well-taught lesson should be survived by its message and impact long after its close, its legacy the personal meaning and utility it carries to countless lives. But what can the teacher do to ensure the torch of knowledge is passed to and preserved by the student? What can be done to keep the flame alight, to secure its hold in the mind of the learner, to sustain its glow and let learning not fade away? In this chapter, the final breath of a lesson’s life – commonly referred to as its closure – is critically examined in relation to these questions, based on the possibility that the potential for learning is directly proportional to the significance of the lesson’s last moments.

Defining the lesson closure: Attempts and setbacks

Closure can occur at several points in a lesson, such as when summarizing a class discussion, consolidating new concepts, or transitioning from one main idea to the next (Moore, 2009). It is at the end of a lesson, however, that most educationists conceive of the closure’s place amid the sequence of instructional events (e.g., Graham, 2008; Rink, 2009; Schempp, 2003; Siedentop & Tannehill, 2000; Thomas & Lee, 2008). For instance, Siedentop (1991) defines the lesson closure as “the end-of-class time when teachers bring together the parts of a lesson to make it whole for students” (p. 222). Similarly, Thomas and Lee (2008) state, “The closure summarizes the day’s learning” (p. 214), Rink (2009) states.
reaching lesson goals, recognize student successes, and provide a cool down period for students. Other suggested purposes to the closure include making students aware of what was accomplished during the lesson, gauging students' feelings about the lesson, and providing a transition time from the last activity to the lesson's end (Siedentop & Tannehill, 2000). Tjierdsma (1997) takes yet another perspective on the closure, identifying it as a chance for teachers to enhance their communication with students.

In addition to assigning various purposes to the lesson closure, authors not only in physical education but also in general education have forwarded strategies for closing a lesson. For example, based on the assertion that closures should “pull together and organize the concepts learned” (Moore, 2009, p. 132), Moore recommends having students relate lesson material back to a more general theme, cueing or prompting students to elicit recall, having students summarise or reduce the lesson material into several main points, connecting new to previously learned material, or having students demonstrate or apply what they have learned. Yet, despite authors’ provision of guidelines, very little empirical attention has been given to lesson closures. To what extent and purpose teachers exercise lesson closures, as well as through what means and to what end, are questions that have yet to be answered. Attempts to define the lesson closure therefore rest merely on personal interpretations of the concept or anecdotal evidence, which leave its true mechanics and functions unknown.

**Justifying the lesson closure: A theoretical interpretation**

The best justification supporting the utility of any teaching practice is evidence or theory demonstrating how the practice promotes student learning. Learning can be defined in numerous ways. In the cognitive domain, Bloom’s (1956) taxonomy positions the ability to recall lesson material at the most basic level of performance. Recalling important lesson material is fundamental to more advanced cognitive skills identified on the taxonomy, such as those related to comprehension, analysis, and evaluation. Therefore, teachers often strive to have students remember key points or target information from a lesson, since successful recall will promote achievement at higher levels of learning.

One theory that describes the process of information recall is receiver selectivity theory (DeFleur, 1970). Typically employed in mass communications research, selectivity theory posits that audiences selectively engage with messages from advertisers as opposed to passively receiving the information. McCroskey and Richmond (1996) describe four selectivity stages acting in sequence to ultimately facilitate or hinder recall. These include selective exposure, selective attention, selective perception, and selective retention. In short, numerous message properties function to help gauge the extent to which receivers select to expose themselves to the message, attend to the message, perceive or interpret the message's meaning as the message sender intended, and retain the message in long-term memory. Particularly relevant to the lesson closure is the recency principle, which states that more recent messages are more likely to be retained. Applying selectivity theory to teaching and learning, target information communicated late in a lesson should lend itself favourably to retention of lesson material in the final stage of the selectivity process.

Aside from its recency, other message properties highlighted in selectivity theory also hold relevance for the lesson closure. For example, assuming review of key points taught earlier in the lesson is one purpose of the closure (e.g., Schempp, 2003), highlighting and redundancy are two message properties characteristic of such a review that would promote recall. Providing a review often helps to summarise and therefore highlight the most important lesson material, which selectivity theory suggests is important
for encouraging message retention. Additionally, reviews offer students an opportunity to revisit the lesson material and therefore make exposure to the material redundant, which selectivity theory suggests is important for encouraging message perception (i.e., meaning-making consistent with the intentions of the message sender) and message retention (McCroskey & Richmond, 1996).

A second theory pertinent to the argument for providing closure to a lesson is immediacy theory (Mehrabian, 1971). In instructional communication research, immediacy is defined as the degree of perceived psychological and/or physical closeness between teachers and students (Anderson, 1979). For students, high immediacy is characterised by feelings that the teacher is approachable and caring. Immediacy theory asserts that student perceptions of immediacy are positively and directly correlated with affective learning outcomes, usually defined in research as affect for the teacher and affect for the class material. Studies based on immediacy theory provide extensive evidence for its key role in facilitating these outcomes and motivating students to learn (Richmond, Lane, & McCroskey, 2006).

Immediacy theory offers an interpretive lens for understanding why communication functions associated with the lesson closure are important to student learning. As mentioned earlier, Tjeerdema (1997) identified enhancing teacher-student communication as one purpose of the lesson closure. Tjeerdema specifies actions the teacher can take during closure, such as asking questions and engaging students in journal writing, which yield student perspectives and help the teacher to identify with, relate to, and empathise with students. Arguably, teachers who demonstrate these behaviors signal compassion and understanding toward students, thereby increasing perceptions of teacher immediacy and, in turn, promoting positive feelings about the teacher and the subject matter.

Despite the theoretical justification for the potential of lesson closures to promote student learning, research testing the veracity of such theories and their connection to closures is lacking. There is some evidence that reviewing lesson material during closure enhances student achievement (Cavanaugh & Heward, 1996), but a theoretical lens is needed to examine critical questions, such as “How important is presenting or reiterating information late in the lesson to student recall, when compared to presenting information at earlier points in the lesson with no closure?” or “Do the closing strategies recommended by Tjeerdema (1997) function to increase student perceptions of teacher immediacy?” Until such questions are answered, advocating for teachers to include a strong lesson closure must continue to derive from the tenets of theory.

**THEORY IN ACTION**

The end of the period is fast approaching for Michelle’s elementary physical education class. Her students appear thoughtfully engaged in practicing the task at hand and many seem close to reaching the lesson objective. Suddenly, she is faced with a decision: extend the opportunity for practice and let lesson time run out or stop practice and transition to the closure she had planned? Reflecting on her lesson, Michelle knows she has exercised effective teaching practices, providing students with well-structured task presentations, ample feedback, and developmentally appropriate learning tasks. What will the closure offer that her lesson has not already achieved? Will reiterating the same key messages...
Implementing lesson closures: Looking to expert teachers for guidance

Even though direct links have not been well established between lesson closings and instructional outcomes, recent research on expert teaching may provide an initial glimpse into the key role of the closure in student learning. Expert teaching has most often been defined in terms of teachers’ thoughts and actions (e.g., Borko & Livingston, 1989; Housner & Griffey, 1985; Leinhardt & Greeno, 1986; Webster, 2009). Studies of this ilk identified common characteristics of expert teachers or sought to differentiate expert teachers’ thinking and/or instructional behavior from that of novice teachers. But other research suggests that expert teaching can also be defined in terms of student performance. Bond, Smith, Baker and Hattie (2000) found that students of teachers demonstrating prototypical characteristics of expert teaching (e.g., produced written work reflecting deeper and more abstract representations of the class material than students of nonexpert teachers.

Research in sport instruction has revealed that part of experts’ instructional routines include providing lesson closures. Baker, Schempp, Hardin and Clark (1998) conducted a study designed to answer these questions in a sport instruction context. Twenty-one golf instructors meeting criteria for expertise (Berliner, 1986; 1994), which included having taught students who had achieved notable success in golf, were recruited to teach individual golf lessons to volunteer university students who were college-age women with no previous golf experience. Each expert taught one videotaped lesson on the full swing for approximately 45-minutes and was interviewed following the lesson. The findings indicated that among several trends, providing a lesson closure was a routine practice of each expert. A thematic analysis yielded four common components to the experts’ closures: (a) ending the lesson with a successful student performance, (b) signalling to students when the closure would begin, (c) reviewing the major points taught during the lesson, and (d) providing students with suggestions for future reference and practice.

To further examine these findings, Webster, Connolly and Schempp (2009) conducted a follow-up study using the same videotape data bank collected in the Baker et al. (1998) study. In addition to videotapes of 21 expert tennis instructors teaching doubles tactics to groups of four experienced adult students. Like the golf lessons, the tennis lessons were each approximately 45-minutes. The purpose of Webster et al.’s (2009) study was to identify consistencies in the length, sequence, and content of the experts’ lesson closures, such that an initial model or “anatomy” of an expert closure could be described. In terms of a typical closure length, no consistencies were identified. The experts reserved anywhere from 30 seconds to 10 minutes for their closures, which seemed to depend on factors such as the lesson content, the instructional space needed to review the content (e.g., reviewing the mechanics of the golf swing at a lesson tee versus reviewing where to move in relation to your doubles partner during a tennis point), and the amount of student participation and responsiveness during the closing period. However, using the findings of the Baker et al. (1998) study as an analytical frame, a prototypical sequence and themes in closure content emerged.

Across the 42 lessons, the common practice of the experts was to initiate closure following a successful student performance, usually defined by reaching or nearly reaching a targeted lesson goal. Strategies for ensuring a successful student performance preceding closure included maintaining practice conditions established relative to the goal of the final task and refraining from introducing new content in the final minutes of the lesson. To initiate closure, the experts employed a variety of signals, such as verbally indicating that it was time to close the lesson or alerting students that the next task or successful practice trial would directly precede the closure. The two major purposes of the experts’ closures were reviewing
key points from the lesson and encouraging students to practice the targeted skills on their own, usually accomplished in that order. Reviewing key points included highlighting not only the most important aspects of the content covered, but also noteworthy student performances. Encouraging student practice involved sharing both traditional and non-traditional practice drills designed to enhance student performance beyond the level reached in the lesson. Traditional drills involved what students could do to practice in the given sport setting (golf or tennis) and non-traditional drills involved what students could do to practice in alternative settings (e.g., a dorm room or hotel room) (Webster et al., 2009).

The Baker et al. (1998) study and the Webster et al. (2009) study provide evidence that lesson closures are an important piece to the instructional repertoire of expert teachers. These data strengthen the argument that lesson closures play a role in the promotion of student learning, as expert teaching represents the pinnacle of teaching performance and has been shown to produce more desirable learning outcomes when compared to nonexpert teaching (Bond, et al., 2000). The data also bear evidence suggesting optimal strategies for closing a lesson, given themes identified in the experts' closing practices. However, a limitation of this research is that it excludes any examination of nonexpert teaching to determine if experts' closing practices are unique and therefore more likely to be critical to the formula for producing consistently superior student outcomes. Also limiting the overall strength of this research is its narrow focus on golf and tennis instruction, which may or may not generalise to other content areas or instructional contexts in sport and physical education.

**Closure: The end is but a beginning**

It is time to transition to closure. For this chapter to achieve its educational goals, what purpose should be served in providing these final remarks and what strategies should be used to fulfill this purpose? What information presented throughout this chapter should be granted selective focus and given the chance to resurface in recall? How can these closing words win affection and motivate? Last, what form should this concluding section take in its length, sequence, and content to ensure its ending is but a beginning to a new chapter of learning? The answers to these questions remain elusive, for the central theme in this chapter is that there is great hope and expectation for closures but a lack of empirical evidence for what functions they best serve, how they should be developed, and in what ways they enhance the learning process. Nevertheless, educationists advocate for and believe in lesson closures, stressing the importance of making one final attempt to leave a lasting impression on the learner.

In 1971, American singer/songwriter Don McLean wrote a ballad titled “American Pie” in which he referred to Buddy Holly’s death as “the day the music died.” McLean’s proclamation might have been true if it were not for Holly’s success during his short life in stamping his brand on the musical industry through winning the attention and solidarity of his contemporaries and fans. Since Holly’s death, his music and style have survived each subsequent decade to the present day, finding relevance in the ever-evolving rhythms of rock and roll legends like The Beatles, The Rolling Stones, The Grateful Dead, and Bruce Springsteen. But through what mechanisms did Holly’s music achieve immortality? What critical
Endnote

Two theories were presented in this chapter to explain the utility of lesson closures in the student learning process. The first was receiver selectivity theory, which posits that through selectively exposing themselves to, attending to, perceiving, and retaining information presented in a lesson, students are able to later recall the information. Certain message properties, such as how recently the message was communicated, promote student selectivity and ultimately enhance recall. Closures embody many of these message properties and therefore would seem important to increasing students' ability to learn. The second theory was immediacy theory, which links students' feelings about the subject matter to the perceived approachability of the teacher. Thus, the more approachable the teacher is perceived to be, the more students like what they are learning in class. This theory is relevant to lesson closures because a major purpose of the closure is to enhance teacher-student communication. Serving this purpose during closure would permit teachers to know their students better, relate to students on a more personal level, and ultimately signal greater immediacy.

ACTIVITY

You are an expert physical education teacher who has been invited to give a presentation on incorporating effective lesson closures at a physical education conference. Prepare an outline of your presentation, drawing from theory and research relevant to lesson closures, but also adapting this information to the school physical education context, based on your personal teaching experiences. Include in your outline the strategies you will use to help your audience leave the presentation with a clear idea of what a lesson closure is, why a closure should be provided, and how to develop an effective closure.

References


