

Original article

Exercise is recreation not medicine

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Abstract

Purpose: This paper responds to the question, is exercise medicine? It does so using a qualitative case study that proposes that *exercise is recreation*. The study (1) describes and reflects upon an *exercise is recreation* metaphor, (2) establishes the principles and processes used to develop a sport park within which *exercise is recreation*, and (3) presents a comparative analysis of the *exercise is recreation* approach with a UK quality framework for “exercise referrals”.

Methods: Four years of documentation were collated and placed into 14 categories: (1) university strategies, (2) plans of the site, (3) policy documents, (4) minutes of a steering group, (5) contemporary documents, (6) organisational charts, (7) responses to local government policies on sport, (8) consultation documents, (9) operational procedures, (10) facility specifications, (11) partnership agreements, (12) material relating to the university's work on events, (13) notes on the universities sport department, and (14) timetables. These data were analysed through a 4-stage process which used recreation as the analytical theme for a comparative analysis.

Results: The characteristics of the *exercise is recreation* metaphor in this case are (1) a focus on the experience of the user, (2) the promotion of well-being, (3) the importance of community, (4) embracing inclusivity, (5) sport, (6) aesthetics, and (7) leisure time. The principles and processes used to develop the sport park were (1) custodianship, (2) partnerships, (3) values, (4) inter-professional working, (5) local heritage, (6) change, (7) the natural park environment, and (8) “riding the bike as you build it”. The comparative analysis with a UK quality framework for “exercise referrals” clearly shows a difference from an *exercise is recreation* approach.

Conclusion: Exercise is recreation and may enable individuals and communities to reach a state of well-being.

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Keywords: Case study; Exercise; Medicine; Recreation

1. Introduction

Is exercise medicine? One way to respond to this question is to present the arguments against the proposition that exercise is a form of medicine. Such a retort has 2 weaknesses. Firstly, it frames the debate around a medical model and excludes alternative metaphors such as *exercise is recreation*. Secondly, it is a negative response, which may explain what exercise is not, but which leaves open the question “what is exercise”? This paper argues that *exercise is recreation*. By proposing that *exercise is recreation* this paper is part of the literature that argues exercise is not medicine. This study joins the work of Nesti on sport,¹ Chen's metaphor that “exercise is vaccine”,² and Sjøgaard's contention that “exercise is more than medicine”³ in constructively critiquing the medical metaphor of exercise.

This paper is a case study, which is defined as an “analysis of persons, events, decisions, periods, projects, policies, institutions, or other systems which are studied holistically by one or other methods. The case that is the subject of the inquiry will illuminate and explicate some analytical theme, or object”.⁴ The case investigated here is the development of a student and community sport park by York St John University (YSJU). The author is one of the leaders of this development on which he has worked since the inception of the project 4 years ago. Thomas et al.⁵ stated that one of the strengths of case studies is that they “can be fruitful in formulating new ideas and hypotheses”.⁵ In this paper the case study helps to develop the idea that *exercise is recreation*. The analytical theme is recreation. As Thomas⁴ notes, case studies can have the “same starting points” but follow “different paths”. Thomas goes on to state that the quality of a case study “is determined by the line of inquiry that you choose to take”. From the outset this case study set out to focus on recreation.

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In the UK, arguably the most authoritative academic voice in Recreation Management has been George Torkildsen. The analytical theme used here draws heavily on his work and specifically on the fourth⁶ and sixth editions⁷ of his seminal book *Leisure and Recreational Management*. Torkildsen recognises that there are many different definitions of “recreation”. Here it is suffice to quote him as saying “recreation is perceived by most people as organised leisure activity for personal and social benefit”.⁶

The aims of this case study are to:

1. describe and reflect upon an *exercise is recreation* metaphor;
2. establish the principles and processes used to develop the sport park within which *exercise is recreation*;
3. present a comparative analysis of the *exercise is recreation* approach with a UK quality framework for “exercise referrals”.

Through these aims, this case study addresses the question is exercise medicine? It does so by illustrating an alternative way of thinking about exercise which focuses on recreation.

2. Methods

The methodology is a qualitative one in the form of a case study. It is based on (a) the experience of the author as one of the leaders of the development prompted by reflection on the reports he wrote as a leader of the sport park; (b) scrutiny of documents and plans related to the development; (c) discussion of the preliminary findings with other leaders of the sport park; and (d) reference to the UK literature on recreation and a UK Department of Health set of guidelines on exercise referral schemes. Ethical approval for the study was granted by YSJU.

A 4-stage analysis was conducted. The first stage was to collect, file, and collate key documents and other evidence related to the sport park. During this stage 4 years’ worth of documents dating from the start of the multi-million £ project in 2012 were scrutinised. The author had access to all the material related to this development and a deep understanding of the material.

The second stage was to read and think about this evidence from a “recreation” perspective. Recreation was defined as:

“[...] leisure time activities which are [...] organised and institutional [...]. In its purest sense, recreation is re-creation—an inner consuming experience that leads to revival of the senses and the spirit. In this sense recreation renews, restores and recharges the batteries” (p.13–14).⁷

This definition was used for the analysis of the data. It was not the definition used to develop the sport park from the beginning.

The third stage was to categorise the evidence in terms of the contribution it could make to either the *exercise is recreation* metaphor research aim (see section 2.1 below) or to the principles and process research aim (see section 2.2 below). The final stage was to conduct a comparative analysis of the *exercise is recreation* metaphor with a UK quality framework for “exercise referrals”.

2.1. The method used to describe and reflect upon an *exercise is recreation* metaphor

The third stage of the analysis allocated the documentary evidence to the following 5 categories: a) strategies; b) plans of the site starting with concept drawings, sketch proposals through to tender issue plans and planning applications; c) policy documents; d) the agenda and minutes of a sports strategy steering group; and e) contemporary documents from 2016, e.g., current usage figures.

As the sport park was developed in phases, it was possible to create a timeline (Fig. 1) based on the dates major facilities were opened to students and the community. Site plans and visits were used to enable a physical description of the recreational environment to be presented along with a description of the facilities. Schedules of usage and data on bookings were used to catalogue the types of recreational experience taking place in the park.

As the Director of Estates has oversight of the physical development of the sport park, he was given the opportunity to comment on the data. This was done to enable him to add his professional opinion to that of the researchers.

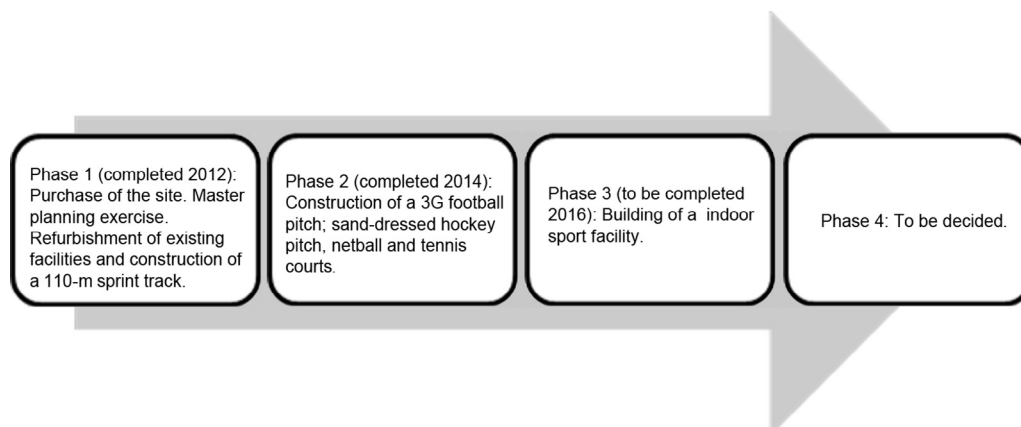


Fig. 1. Timeline of the development of the recreational project.

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