The importance of tracking and monitoring in GCSE PE

By Matthew Hunter

With the new GCSE in PE appearing to be more difficult, the challenge of getting students to target grades feels greater than it ever has before. More theory, worth a greater percentage, and a reduction in the number of practical activities, appears to leave mid-level students with an uphill struggle when pushing towards their target. Additionally, in light of Progress 8 measures, teachers are more accountable than ever for developing every student according to their own individual targets, rather than getting groups of students across key borderlines. As a result, every element of course delivery – teaching and learning, data management and intervention – will need to be scrutinised to help students find any extra percentage points that could be available to them.

All schools will have systems for tracking and monitoring their students. From reporting home to parents/carers to maintaining internal data on practical scores and theory test performance, the importance of close pupil scrutiny is unlikely to be lost on many. That said, with the recent changes to GCSE PE, it could be argued that this aspect of PE course management has now become even more crucial.

Tracking and monitoring practical performance

Let’s first consider tracking and monitoring practical performance. Before 2016, many schools will have delivered upwards of ten practical activities in house, and will probably have assessed additional activities off site. Having an effective tracking and monitoring process was necessary to simply manage all these scores and have an up-to-date idea of what practical grade each student was likely to achieve. While the reduction in practical options may mean there are fewer activities delivered and assessed, it also provides us with the opportunity to use performance data in a slightly more developmental way.

With fewer options, more schools are likely to structure their courses to allow students to return to activities where they perform well and which they will be considering using as one of their ‘big three’ (all awarding bodies require students to take part in one team activity, one individual activity and one team or individual (choice) activity). There is also greater pressure to show progression through KS3 and KS4 in order to produce GCSE PE students who will achieve better scores in the traditional activities that remain part of the specifications. Maintaining more detailed information about students’ performance will, therefore, allow staff to build on previous work and push students further with a greater level of bespoke teaching. For example, two students could be looking at 14 for basketball at the end of January, but the reasons for them not quite reaching 15 or 16 could be completely different. If, as part of your tracking and monitoring process, you record additional information about what it is each student is struggling with, the process of further developing them both when they return to basketball later in the course will be smoother. This tracking and monitoring could be student led, in the form of practical logs/diaries, or you could maintain a central database. Either way, your ability to work with your students to build performance quality across the two years could be an advantage – shifting the reduction in practical options from a threat to an opportunity.

Tracking and monitoring theory performance

When it comes to tracking and monitoring theory performance, a similar situation arises. Before 2016, when the theory part of the course was worth 40% of the final grade, practically-able students often felt a C grade was attainable without elite level academic rigour. Now, with theory worth 60% of the final grade, the position will shift quite dramatically. While high practical scores will open up the opportunity to gain a high grade (7–9), it will not guarantee anything, because the bulk of marks will come from the theory exams. This puts greater emphasis on delivering theory, on the teaching and learning techniques used and on the tracking and monitoring of performance.
In the case of higher-level students, a high degree of consistency across lessons and topics is likely. With a diligent work ethic and a desire to achieve comes a high degree of student-led intervention: higher-level students will ask when unsure during class, they may do additional work in areas of concern and they may seek extra guidance outside lesson time if they have queries. Consequently, these are not the students we are most concerned about. The majority of students — those hovering around the old grade C and the new grade 4 — are less likely to operate in this way. Detailed tracking of their performance, across unit tests and mock exams, will allow teachers and middle leaders to ascertain both the level of student understanding and the effectiveness of delivery methods used. It may be that whole topics require re-teaching to a whole class or that specific students need additional support. As with the practical aspect of the course, students could — or perhaps should — be asked to track their own performance. Using a red/amber/green system or a smiley face/frowny face system, students can record, lesson by lesson, or unit by unit, how confident they are with the work covered. This will allow them to build a priority list, which they could use to guide revision and catch up processes, thereby driving overall improvement.

Predicted grades

The final piece of the tracking and monitoring jigsaw is to pull together the non-examined assessment (NEA) data and the theory data to generate current performance and predicted grades. These are the two grades that many schools will be reporting to parents/carers. They are also going to be the grades that guide any interventions.

When adding together different elements of a course we are confronted with the challenge of converting raw marks to the Uniform Mark Scheme (UMS), which can be a tricky business. The lack of projected grade boundaries for the new 9–1 grades is also a major issue. Most staff that I’ve spoken to talk about using the A-G grade boundaries published for the last exam until there is something better available. Alternatively, you can convert these A-G grade boundaries into approximate 9-1 grade boundaries using information provided by the Department for Education and the various awarding bodies. Either way, having a system in place to allow teachers to see where students currently are is clearly very important. Such tools can also be used to predict future grades by entering the marks you would expect your students to achieve based on KS3 and extra-curricular performance, which can be especially useful if reporting windows don’t tie in nicely to your assessment opportunities.

OUP has just launched a grade predicting spreadsheet for the AQA and Edexcel specifications. It is freely available to everyone who has access to AQA GCSE Physical Education Kerboodle and Edexcel GCSE Physical Education Kerboodle. It will work out a student’s best practical combination (their ‘big three’), convert the total NEA and total theory scores to UMS and will then provide a grade, which can be used for reporting. It uses the most recently available grade boundaries and has been designed to save teachers time in trying to calculate for themselves the level at which their students are performing. It does not, of course, replace your professional judgement and shouldn’t be seen as a definitive tool.

Data is only valuable if you know how to use it

Whatever system or systems you put in place for tracking and monitoring, it is clear that they will be required to serve a number of different needs, including identifying each student’s areas of weakness, guiding future progression and powering mathematical formulae that generate an overall grade. Tracking and monitoring alone will, clearly, have no positive impact on student performance. However, arming yourself with data that is activity, topic and student specific will allow your interventions to be appropriate and effective.

Throughout the two-year course, staff and students can use the data to work together and maximise each student’s performance, adopting a targeted approach, rather than a generic one. If each individually designed intervention can add one or two percentage points to a student’s overall grade, then hopefully you will be rewarded with a greater number of students hitting or exceeding their targets. This, in turn, will produce a positive Progress 8 score and, far more importantly, will give students better grades to assist them in the next phases of their lives.

Best wishes

Matthew Hunter