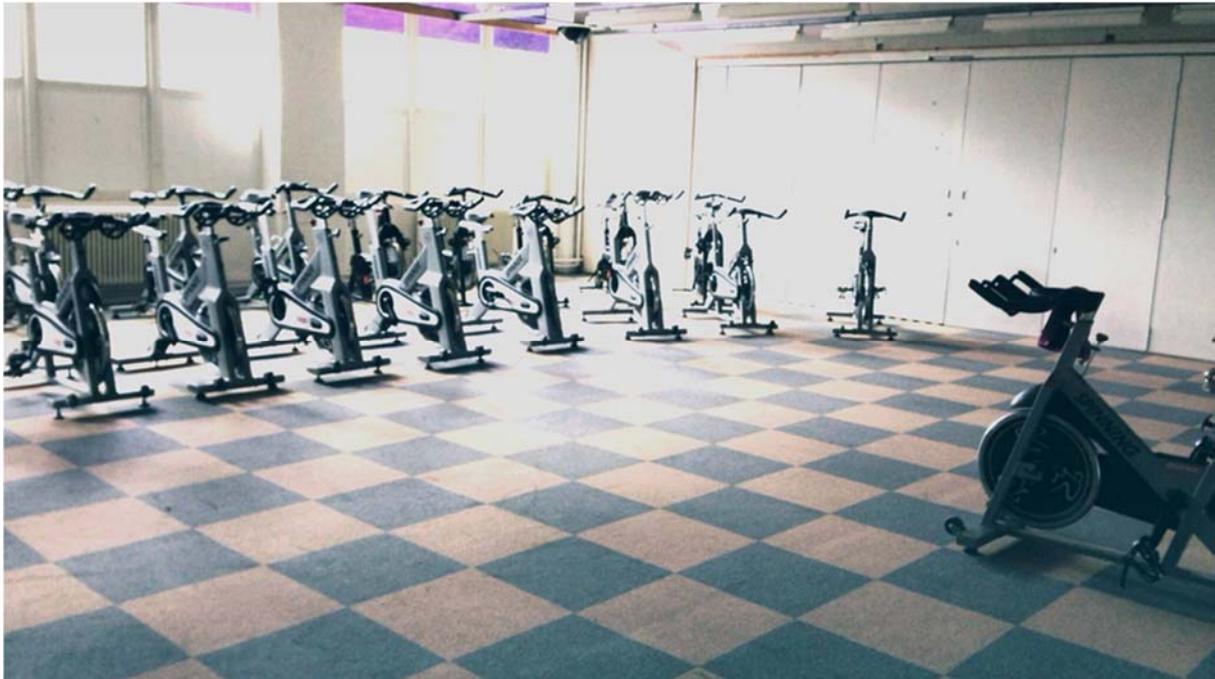


Embodied thought of the month (ETM) – December 2015

Gym Bodies (3): Spinning.

Amy Clark



Indoor cycling is a relatively new gym activity that emerged in the 1990s after the initial step aerobics craze. Fitness giant Reebok had a hand in this phenomenon too, as the term ‘spin’ is actually a trademark of its own indoor cycling program ⁽¹⁾ which eventually became synonymous with the activity. The concept of indoor cycling is fairly simple: a room full of stationary bikes, with an instructor who leads participants through various workouts which incorporate both cardio and strength exercises combined with a pulsating music playlist.

I became an indoor cycling instructor in 2012 although I use the term ‘spin’ or ‘spinning’ for the classes I instruct at the gym and refer to the participants as ‘spinners’. When I had started out as a gym instructor, I thought that gaining a spinning qualification might be a useful addition to my cv. However, previously, the thought of doing exercise to music classes and Zumba classes had never really appealed to me as I didn’t like the dance aspect of these. I did have a gymnastics background and had competed for thirteen years, although thinking back now even my gymnastics routines were regimented and I always considered myself to have two left feet. Nevertheless, I found that I really enjoyed ‘spinning’ and have

participated as an instructor and 'spinner' ever since. In order to understand what it is that I enjoy about this activity, I have attempted to reflect upon my experiences in the spin room. The following is what could loosely be described as a sensual ethnography of my experiences in the spin room (2).

When I enter the spin room, it is dark and empty, almost neglected. A mechanical whirring from an overworked fan is echoing throughout the room. The windows are open and the room smells fresh. Outside, traffic noise can be heard. As I turn the lights on, a sudden change in appearance occurs as the light bounces into the room and reflects off the mirrors.

I drop my bag down behind my spin bike and take out my disc selection. I flick through the forty different play lists I have created so far over the years and finally choose a disc that I consider will deliver a good 'torture' session, one where I can push my body to a maximal level while accompanied by a good song. All the time, commanding others to push their own bodies to the limit. I will be the one dictating the way in which the session will run and possibly how they will experience this spin class. My choice of playlist is crucial as this will determine whether more sprints or hills climbs are included within the class.

The spinners slowly start to enter the room. The majority of these are my regulars although every now and then a beginner or newcomer will join in. They normally retreat straight to the back row of spin bikes, expressing what seems like nervousness when I ask them if they have participated in spinning before so I can go through the bike set up with them. The more advanced spinners claim their usual bike in the front row, towels and water bottles are lined up on the bikes and I can hear murmurs of anticipation and friendly laughter before the class starts.

When the time arrives to start the class, I press the button on the stereo and as the CD closes a rush of adrenaline and anticipation flows through my body. I adjust the volume of the speaker, normally placing the dial on the same volume level. I take a deep breath and look down on my bike, making sure it is in line with the tiled floor. Heavy, new beats fill the room while I sit on my bike and adjust my foot straps, making sure they are not too tight. I look up and all eyes are on me, ready and waiting for my first command. My body feels like it is

moulded to this bike and this is a feeling that I recognise as a familiar sensation. The seat, handle bars and resistance all work together with me. When I start to pedal I can feel the metal against the bottom of my feet. If my feet aren't correctly aligned they will start to ache and hurt, so I make sure every time that they are secure by doing a quick 'shuffle' with me feet whilst I'm seated. This familiar practice took a while for me adjust to, I remember when I first started feeling very uncomfortable on the bike seat, but it gradually got better each time. I always tell the new spinners this too, so they are aware that it will get better and it is a normal experience to have. I also joke and say that my bottom is now moulded into the shape of the bike seat!

I start with the warm-up, stretching and making sure everyone gets used to the pace and the 'feel' of the bike. My body starts to flow with the beat as I sing to the songs that I have chosen to include within the playlist. In any other context I never find myself singing in front of such a large group of people, but in front of my spin class, I find this fun, comforting and acceptable and I use it to aid me with my breathing and shouting.

Gradually as my body heats, the usual signs occur. My heart rate increases, my breath becoming warmer and as the class progresses from the warm-up to sprints, jumps, endurance and hill-climbs, I start to sweat. I'm working at my best when I'm sweating. It's interesting how sweating in front of class is acceptable in the spin room. My eyes and neck are stinging from the sweat dripping down my body. I can smell the perfume being released from the pours on my drenched body. I feel a sense of empowerment by the demands that this spin bike is placing on my body and the thought that my classes and instruction might be helping the other spinners to feel this way too.

Grabbing my towel, I quickly wipe the excess sweat away. I'm not feeling conscious of how I may be looking, my hair starts to curl more and my make-up is wearing off because of the sweat. I wear tight clothing when I'm on a spin bike as I'm sure this aids my performance. I don't like the feeling off baggy clothing as it leaves me cold and damp during and after a workout. I remember how I used to wear brightly coloured clothing, but over time I found myself choosing to wear darker clothing, so as not to draw too much attention to myself when I'm in the main gym.

The spinners are concentrating on their own efforts and appear quiet, flushed, sweating and breathing heavily as they wipe themselves with their towels. The flywheels of the spin bikes are working as I can hear their distinct grinding against the resistance. My bike is keeping up with me, my body being pushed to its limit. There is a burning sensation in my legs and my hands gripping tightly to the rubber handle bars. As I shout out every command, the spinners follow, pushing themselves further. I'm sure they trust me. Sweat drops off my body, some splashing on the frame of the spin bike. My mouth is dry although relief is at hand as I replenish quickly with my usual choice of water. I always let the spinners know when they have two songs left before the cool down and some say this helps them with a final push towards the end of the class while others gesture (some with two fingers, others with facial expressions) their dissatisfaction for knowing.

After 45 minutes the class slowly decreases to a cool-down. Less frenetic music fills the room and the resistance on the bike is released. I can hear the sighs of relief and satisfaction that follow. Some spinners even cry out with gleeful cheers! As we start stretching I can feel my muscles slightly start to pull and ache as each one is manipulated. My ears are humming. The mirrors in the room are steamed up – I always love it when this happens as it signals to me just how hard everyone has worked out.

The fan is still hard at work, trying to provide relief to the class with some cooler air. As my breathing slowly decreases, I get off my bike and looking around I can see that all of the other spinners are doing the same as me. I count out hygiene wipes to make sure the bikes are left clean for the next class. As I hand out them out, always starting from the same direction, I thank everyone. A feeling of satisfaction flushes through my body knowing everyone has had a good workout - I can see it in their faces.

As I wipe down my own bike, I feel further satisfaction (is this a form of euphoria?) as I remove my sweat, evidence of my hard work, off the bike leaving it clean and ready for another demanding workout. Endorphins are still buzzing through my body when the spinners depart and say goodbye. I look back into the room and as I switch the lights off it looks empty and neglected again. I'm looking forward to the next workout already.

Notes:

1. Newhall, K. (2010) 'You Spin Me Right Round, Baby', in Malin, J. (2010) *My life at the gym: feminist perspectives on community through the body*. Albany : State University of New York Press.
2. Sparkes, A.C. (2009) *Ethnography and The Senses: Challenged and Possibilities*. *Qualitative Research in Sport and Exercise*. 1(1), p.21-35.