

THE CONTENTS OF PHYSICAL EDUCATION IN THE FIELD OF LANGUAGES FROM A SEMIOTIC-PRAGMATICIST PERSPECTIVE

*OS CONTEÚDOS DA EDUCAÇÃO FÍSICA NA ÁREA DE
LINGUAGENS EM PERSPECTIVA SEMIÓTICO-PRAGMATICISTA* 

*LOS CONTENIDOS DE LA EDUCACIÓN FÍSICA EN EL ÁREA DE
LENGUAJES DESDE UNA PERSPECTIVA SEMIÓTICO-
PRAGMATICISTA* 

 <https://doi.org/10.22456/1982-8918.147764>

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Abstract: This is a theoretical-reflexive essay in which we propose a didactic-pedagogical framework for organizing the contents of school Physical Education based on a semiotic-pragmaticist perspective. We rely on the contributions of Charles S. Peirce and Yuri Lotman to argue that the meanings produced in class emerge from experience, action, and the confrontation/dialogue between different cultural systems. We conceive learning as the transformation of habits and conduct, and the school space as a semiosphere in constant motion, where cultural boundaries function as zones of instability and are prone to explosions that create new meanings. In this essay, we propose a model structured around five layers of signification, ranging from playful experience to contemporary sociocultural themes. The model integrates different levels of codification and presents didactic-pedagogical notes on language, reflecting how contents are materialized in movement-based situations. Finally, we propose three teaching conducts to guide didactic planning: promotion of movement situations, translation of contents through dialogue with other languages, and recoding the content based on emerging sociocultural issues.

Keywords: Physical Education. School contents. Language. Semiotics. Curriculum.

Received on: May 27, 2025
Approved on: Sep. 22, 2025
Published in: Dec. 23, 2025



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1 INTRODUCTION

Defining what to teach in Physical Education (PE) is a recurring issue in curricular decision-making. Such definition can only be coherently sustained when articulated with the whys (educational purposes), the hows (didactic strategies), the whens (organization of class time), and for whom (the learners).

In Brazil, the critical and cultural approaches consolidated through the Renewal Movement in PE during the 1980s and 1990s (Caparroz, 1997) advanced the “denaturalization of the object of PE” (Machado; Bracht, 2016) but did not overcome the nature-vs-culture dichotomy. As Betti (2007) warns, a discourse that places excessive emphasis on the scientific-philosophical dimension of movement culture may drift away from its didactic-pedagogical dimension – precisely the focus of this reflection, which is guided by an ontology of action. Although fully resolving this conceptual duality is not our aim, we seek to explore theoretical and methodological paths that promote a different understanding of school content, shifting attention toward meaning-making processes experienced through bodily practices.

The cultural perspective, which treats play, sport, dance, combat, and gymnastics as teaching contents framed and thematized within the body movement culture (Betti, 2005; Bracht, 2003), has influenced PE curricula since the late 1980s, gained momentum with the Brazilian Curriculum Parameters (*Parâmetros Curriculares Nacionais*, PCN) (Brasil, 1997, 1998), and was maintained – and in some respects expanded – by the Brazilian Common Core Curriculum (*Base Nacional Comum Curricular*, BNCC) (Brasil, 2018). However, according to Betti (2018), the BNCC also incorporates structuralist traits by privileging content or objects of knowledge and relegating learners’¹ personal experiences of movement to a secondary role. For Betti and Gomes-da-Silva (2019), content only materializes when someone plays, dances, or fights, establishing a singular and situated relationship with these practices.

This theoretical-methodological gap becomes even more evident because the BNCC positions PE within the field of Languages but fails to provide a conceptual framework or a didactic-pedagogical perspective on language that would clarify how its proposed contents unfold in classroom practice. What is missing is a coherent conceptual foundation and a didactic-pedagogical matrix grounded in Semiotics as the science of language (Santaella; Nöth, 2017) – one that conceives human bodily practices as dynamic sign processes that are in continuous negotiation with other cultural systems. Such a perspective would help avoid both biological reductionism and the crystallization of the curriculum into a mere “list of contents.”

If Semiotics investigates all modes of meaning production (Santaella, 2004) and provides theoretical-methodological tools for analyzing the multiple sign systems that constitute human culture, then it is pertinent to apply a semiotic lens to bodily practices, both within and beyond the school context. From this perspective, bodily practices are themselves sign systems that, with the moving body as their locus, produce meanings and communication.

¹ We share Assmann’s (1998, p. 129) understanding of “learner” as “someone who is actively engaged in the process of learning.”

In light of this, the present essay investigates how school PE contents can be understood and (re)organized based on two complementary semiotic perspectives: (a) Charles S. Peirce's pragmatism, which places action and experience at the core of meaning production; and (b) Yuri Lotman's semiotics of culture, which conceives the cultural semiosphere as a space of confrontation, hybridization, and "explosions" of new meanings.

This article is structured as a theoretical-reflective essay. The methodological approach relies on a critical confrontation of theoretical frameworks (Demo, 2000) to (a) reconstruct the central categories of Peirce's semiotics (pragmatism, sign, semiosis, action, habit) and Lotman's semiotics of culture (semiosphere, boundary, explosion); and (b) analyze how these categories can (re)organize PE contents in alignment with the field of Languages.

These authors were chosen for the epistemological complementarity evident in their works. Peirce (1958, 1972, 1990) proposes the logic of sign action as the fundamental process underlying meaning production and the orientation of conduct (pragmatism), whereas Lotman (1996, 2002) extends this logic to the level of cultural systems, allowing an understanding of meaning production within the dynamics of confrontation and dialogue among different sign systems. Together, they offer a framework for articulating bodily experience, language, and curriculum, thereby contributing to the affirmation of PE within the field of Languages, as we aim to demonstrate throughout this essay.

In this context, we ask which criteria qualify school content to be effectively recognized as an object of teaching within the field of Languages. We thus propose an analytical framework that articulates, on one hand, the Peircean categories of sign/interpretant/habit, and on the other, the Lotmanian concepts of boundary/translation/explosion. The goal is to shift the focus from a "list of contents" to "dynamics of meaning," providing parameters for selecting, organizing, and evaluating content in ways that value both the learners' individual experiences and the collective problematization of cultural meanings that permeate the classroom.

2 PEIRCE AND LOTMAN: IN SEARCH OF THE SEMIOTIC-PRAGMATICIST LINK

2.1 CHARLES S. PEIRCE: ACTION, SEMIOSIS, AND HABIT

According to Santaella (1995, p. 23), Peirce defined the sign as "something which stands for something to somebody in some respect or capacity." This definition articulates three inseparable components, known as the semiotic triad: the representamen (the form the sign takes), the object (that to which the sign refers), and the interpretant (the understanding of the sign). The relation among these three elements produces a new sign (or a more developed one) within a continuous flow of meaning, a process Peirce called semiosis. Bodily practices, insofar as they are signs, represent something to someone in a given experiential context.

Two typologies proposed by Peirce offer significant contributions to PE. The first concerns the categories of experience: firstness, secondness, and thirdness. Firstness refers to potentiality, open possibilities; secondness to actuality, (re)action, and the effective encounter with alterity, things, and people; and thirdness refers to synthesis and generalization, the moment when the sign stabilizes as a habit that regulates future actions or behaviors in similar situations. The second typology involves Peirce's three trichotomies of signs, which result from the intersection between the categories of experience and the semiotic triad (representamen, object, and interpretant), producing nine types of signs² and three corresponding modes of relation to the world, linked respectively to aesthetic, ethical, and logical dimensions.

According to Gomes-da-Silva, Betti, and Gomes-da-Silva (2014), Peircean semiotics conceives bodily practices as dynamic and complex sign phenomena; that is, as movements between aesthetic qualities (firstness), the potential qualities of gestures themselves; ethical singularities (secondness), the contingent dynamics that permeate lessons; and logical generalities (thirdness).

The possible generalizations arising from the experience of thirdness can be understood as the final (though not definitive) interpretant of a given teaching and learning process, one envisioned by the teacher during lesson planning as a form of pedagogical intentionality. For this reason, Peircean semiotics is pragmaticist. In pragmaticism, the meaning of any idea lies in the conceivable or imaginable effects it produces on conduct: action is simultaneously the method of verification and the criterion of truth. Peirce conceives this dynamic of meaning as intrinsically connected to the resistances of the world (the experience of secondness); it is in this confrontation that beliefs are transformed, information is acquired, and new habits are formed (Ibri, 2021). Such transformation constitutes the very product of learning, which results from an experience of thirdness.

In the school context, the teaching of a bodily practice gains greater legitimacy through the effects it produces on the learner's experience. However, the pedagogical intentionality envisioned by the teacher does not always coincide with the actual learning outcome, since learners may construct other semioses, that is, produce other interpretants.

Therefore, grounding PE teaching in a semiotic-pragmaticist perspective means focusing not only on culturally sedimented codes, but above all on the dynamic nature of signs: on the different interpretants that emerge from the relationships among learners, content, and teachers, and on the effects of these processes on learning.

However, one must first learn to interpret signs (and one can only interpret them after first perceiving and attending to them), since the learning experience cannot be accessed directly, except through the mediation of signs; in other words, learning is a communicative process (Betti, 2021). Thus, it is not enough for teachers

2 These are: (a) in relation to the representamen: qualisign (firstness, mere quality), sinsign (secondness, actual thing/fact), and legisign (thirdness, general law); (b) in relation to the object: icon (has similarity to its object), index (has factual connection with its object), and symbol (shared convention with the interpretant); (c) in relation to the interpretant: rheme (possibility), dicisigns (fact), and argument (reason).

to understand bodily practices as systems of signs; they must also see themselves and their students as producers and interpreters of meanings in their relationships with one another and with the content – as signs capable of, through encounters with difference (alterity), guiding the processes of teaching and learning (Gomes-da-Silva, 2012). As Betti (2021, p. 16) writes, “everything is a sign: gestures, stillness, words, facial expressions, screams, silence, laughter, crying, enthusiasm, indifference...”

Such an attitude avoids reductionism and promotes continuous interaction between cultural practices and the meanings produced through learners’ experiences of movement. We therefore turn next to Yuri Lotman’s semiotics of culture and to the possible dialogues between his work and that of Charles S. Peirce, following Merrell (2003), to expand the theoretical-methodological foundation that underlies the analytical framework proposed here.

2.2 YURI LOTMAN: SEMIOSPHERE, BOUNDARIES, AND EXPLOSION

The semiotics of culture, as presented by Lotman (2022), focuses on the production of meaning through language and on the generation of information resulting from the confrontations and dialogues among sign systems. Lotman (1978) describes culture as a “system of sign systems” engaged in constant dialogue; from this interweaving emerges the semiosphere – the space where communicative acts gain meaning.

Three categories structure the functioning of the semiosphere: boundary, modeling, and explosion (Lotman, 1996). Boundary refers to the zone of contact between distinct systems, where translations occur that convert external elements into internally comprehensible forms. Modeling pertains to each system’s capacity to construct its own representations of the world, guiding both interpretation and the production of new cultural texts. Finally, explosion denotes the critical moment when boundary tensions reach a threshold, generating new meanings and thereby reconfiguring the cultural system.

In PE classes, bodily practices function as cultural texts: they carry historical codes³ yet are continually recreated when confronted with other languages (gestural, digital, and musical, among others). As with cultural texts in Lotman’s (1996) conception, sports, dance, gymnastics, martial arts, and games constitute sign systems (which we refer here to as the “language of movement”) that express and communicate meanings grounded in learners’ experiences.

Bodily practices are not merely a sum of isolated biomechanical movements; they constitute dynamic networks of signification that can be understood through their semiotic and cultural functions. Drawing on Peirce, Merrell (2003) highlights that representation, mediation, and interconnection are essential functions of the sign,

³ According to Gomes-da-Silva, Sant’Agostino, and Betti (2005), the function of a code is to establish distinctive relations between valid and invalid signs, as well as the rules governing their combination. In any given institutionalized bodily practice, the selection of possible gestures is controlled by the code. For example, the code of artistic or Olympic gymnastics determines which signs are valid within its scope (in this case, bodily gestures or movements) and the rules for their combination. When a gymnast creates a new routine or element, it will only be considered valid if it meets the criteria of the already institutionalized code.

wherein representamen, object, and interpretant interact across an infinite continuum of cultural semioses. In Lotman's semiosphere, texts (here also understood as gestures, movements, and bodily practices) are in constant dialogue, forming an intertextual network that sustains the dynamics of meaning-making and reveals movement itself as a sign in context.

Furthermore, the contributions of the semiotics of culture, when grounded in this Peircean-Lotmanian perspective, seek to move beyond a merely structural description of signs or the unveiling of cultural texts. Rather, they aim to understand meaning-making processes in their dynamic, relational, and situated nature. In Merrell's (2003) interpretation of Peirce, semiosis is conceived as a continuous process of sign production and interpretation. When this logic is articulated with Lotman's notion of the semiosphere, the scope of cultural analysis and interpretation expands, allowing bodily practices to be understood as signs in action – not as representations of something fixed, but as interpretive connections with the world, with others, and with oneself. Thus, gestures, displacement, posture, rhythm, and other forms of movement are not merely external expressions but modes of existence that construct meanings within sociocultural contexts.

Accordingly, the sign processes emphasized by Peirce (the interconnection and mediation of meanings generated through semiosis) complement Lotman's conception of the semiosphere as a space of cultural interactions and transformation. Understanding bodily practices in PE from this perspective requires treating them as integral components of cultural and communicative dynamics. The elementary mechanism of semiosis, according to Lotman (1990), consists in transforming perceived information into coded information, or text. In PE, this occurs when a bodily practice is appropriated by learners through their movement experiences: the moving body manifests itself as a living sign through games, sports, gymnastics, dance, and martial arts – analyzable in both its textual and contextual structures. In this way, the meanings that emerge can be compared and expanded through their dialogue with other texts and contexts.

2.3 CONCEPTUAL APPROXIMATION BETWEEN PEIRCE AND LOTMAN AND ITS DIDACTIC IMPLICATIONS

The conceptual convergence between Peirce and Lotman offers PE teaching a promising field for articulating language, experience, and curriculum. This is not merely a matter of borrowing theoretical categories but of understanding that meaning making in PE classes is neither static nor linear: it emerges from dialogue and confrontation among different sign systems and from the effects these interactions produce on conduct. As Merrell (2003) emphasizes, semiosis cannot be understood solely as a structure but as a dynamic, relational, and situated process – one that transforms both subjects and the meanings that circulate among them.

In this context, we propose three complementary didactic-pedagogical guidelines:

1. **Creation of fertile boundaries:** inspired by Lotman's concept of boundary as a zone of translation and instability, these pedagogical situations should promote encounters among different languages (gestural, digital, verbal, symbolic, and others). They are spaces for listening, displacement, and reformulation of meanings in dispute.
2. **Evaluation through action:** in light of Peirce's pragmatism, learners do not merely decode meanings; they recreate them through experience. Meaning emerges when the content taught produces perceptible transformations in students' behaviors, reasoning, or bodily habits.
3. **Semiotic-pragmaticist mediation:** teachers act as mediators of meanings in constant re-elaboration. Their practice, interwoven with both theory and lived experience, requires awareness that every pedagogical gesture is a sign to be interpreted by both them and their students.

These guidelines operationalize the principle shared by Peirce and Lotman: that meaning is always relational and dynamic, as summarized in Box 1.

Box 1 - Didactic implications of the conceptual approximation between Peirce and Lotman

Concept	Peirce	Lotman	Relevance for school PE
Ontology of meaning	Action, habit, and conduct as forms of meaning-making in practice	Explosion: production of meaning arising from the clash of systems	Learning is consolidated when teaching and learning processes generate new habits of action and reasoning
Space of meaning making	Infinite process of semiosis	Semiosphere involving cultural texts	The classroom is a microsemiosphere in which multiple sign systems intersect
Zone of instability	Interpretation has the potential to change habits	Boundary as a space of semiotic explosion	Pedagogical strategies should create "boundary zones" that promote the creation of new meanings
Criterion of evaluation	Effects of the sign on conduct	Translation as the key to system reconfiguration	Evaluation of the formative effects of content on learners' habits.

Source: prepared by the authors.

The box first highlights the ontology of meaning. For Peirce (1972), the validity of an idea is confirmed when it becomes a repeated action, that is, a habit. For Lotman (1996), cultural creation arises from explosion, the clash between previously distinct sign systems. The convergence of these views suggests that, in PE, learning becomes consolidated when bodily practices generate new habits of action and reasoning – integrating and simultaneously recreating cultural codes.

Regarding the space of meaning making, Peirce describes an infinite process of semiosis, in which each interpretation gives rise to new signs. Lotman expands this notion through his concept of the semiosphere, a sphere encompassing all cultural texts and revealing their interconnections. Thus, the classroom functions as a microsemiosphere in which bodily, verbal, and nonverbal languages intersect, allowing the gestures and narratives brought by learners to engage in dialogue with the sociocultural discourses of games, sports, combat practices, gymnastics, dance, and other activities.

The box also points to the zone of instability. For Peirce, every act of interpretation holds the potential to transform habits; for Lotman, the boundary is the locus of semiotic explosions. Pedagogical strategies that create boundary zones – such as combining gymnastics content with parkour movements captured on video or represented in digital games – can promote the creation of new meanings, expanding both learners’ individual experiences and the cultural repertoire circulating within the school or, more broadly, within their sociocultural group.

Regarding the criterion of evaluation, the articulation between Peirce and Lotman clarifies that assessment cannot be limited to verifying performance or memorization of content. It must consider the formative effects that the signs mobilized in class produce on learners’ conduct. For Peirce, the meaning of a sign is realized in the transformation of habits, that is, in the incorporation of new ways of perceiving, acting, and reasoning. For Lotman, translation between distinct cultural systems is the process through which reconfigurations occur within the semiosphere. Thus, evaluating from a semiotic-pragmaticist perspective means recognizing the transformations that occur when the content mobilizes experiences capable of reshaping learners’ relations with the body, with others, and with the world. It involves tracing how bodily practices, as they are lived, resonate in learners’ ethical, aesthetic, and critical formation. Just as assessment must account for the formative effects of practice on students, the teacher’s pedagogical decisions also express meanings that are realized through action.

Throughout their professional trajectories, PE teachers construct a knowledge-of-teaching that articulates bodily experiences, pedagogical theories, and contingent school demands. This knowledge manifests in decisions made “in the heat of the class,” in response to variable and often unpredictable situations. In light of Peirce’s pragmatism, such decisions constitute the criterion underlying the act of teaching: a didactic conception is only actualized when it is converted into coherent habits of action by the teacher – that is, when it becomes an experience of thirdness (here conceived as teaching conduct or didactic conduct), guided by logical reasoning and open to theoretical mediation.

Teaching conduct faces the challenge of articulating the selected content with the processes of teaching and learning. For pragmatism, what ultimately matters are the effects that signs produce. Consequently, learning in PE should be understood as a process of behavioral transformation: performing a previously inaccessible gesture, adopting a new ethical value, or developing a new form of reasoning. In this sense, the transformation and expansion of learners’ repertoires as a result of experience confirm the pedagogical value of the content and of the teaching strategies employed. This dynamic produces change in the conduct of both teachers and learners (Antunes; Betti, 2020).

An approach consistent with this semiotic-pragmaticist framework can be illustrated by the teaching and learning process described by Passos, So, and Leitão (2024). In the initial situation, titled “Me and the Bicycle,” videos, games, and digital instructional materials functioned as icons, allowing learners to recognize the form of

pedaling through visual and proprioceptive perception. In the subsequent situation, “Me-Bicycle-Friends,” chalk marks on the court, thematic songs, and traces of the routes acted as indices, regulating points of support (secondness). In “Me-Bicycle-Friends-Society,” dramatized traffic rules, the issuance of a “Conscious Cyclist License,” and the writing of letters to the community transformed those indices into shared symbols of safety and citizenship (thirdness).

This example illustrates two of Peirce’s categories of experience – secondness and thirdness – with their respective ethical and logical connections, as well as one of Peirce’s trichotomies of the sign in relation to the object (index, icon, and symbol⁴). The confrontation between PE-specific content (games) and the theme of sustainable cycle mobility triggered a semiotic explosion: new playful routes emerged, along with a hybrid lexicon (“mission,” “bonus,” “avatar”) and the reconfiguration of the court into an adventure track. From a Peircean perspective, the embodied habit of cycling gained ethical and logical density; from a Lotmanian perspective, the classroom microsemiosphere expanded by integrating digital, environmental, and inclusive codes from the culture of mobility.

Betti and Gomes-da-Silva (2019) support this understanding by defining PE as the teaching of the language of movement. The “Movement Situations” proposed by these authors (which can be identified in the example previously described) allow learners to question themselves and the socio-environmental circumstances surrounding them, ultimately aiming toward the pursuit of the common good. Semiotics, therefore, is not a self-referential framework; it is a critical mode of understanding aiming at transforming the world for the benefit of all beings – human and nonhuman alike.

These didactic-pedagogical guidelines allow the PE teacher to act as a cartographer of meaning: attentive to the boundary zones that emerge in class, capable of proposing practices and strategies that link gesture to sociocultural discourse, body to thought, and school content to everyday life. The class thus ceases to be merely a space for the repetition of gestures or crystallized content and becomes an expanding semiotic environment – a space where new cultural, ethical, and aesthetic meanings can emerge.

3 THE ORGANIZATION OF CONTENT FROM A SEMIOTIC-PRAGMATICIST PERSPECTIVE

Betti and Gomes-da-Silva (2019) initially outlined the conception of PE content that will be further developed in this section: play and games, sports, dance, gymnastics, and martial arts as sociocultural narratives originating from ludic behaviors.

From a semiotic-pragmaticist perspective, play occupies a foundational position. Betti and Gomes-da-Silva (2019) propose a taxonomy of thirteen genres

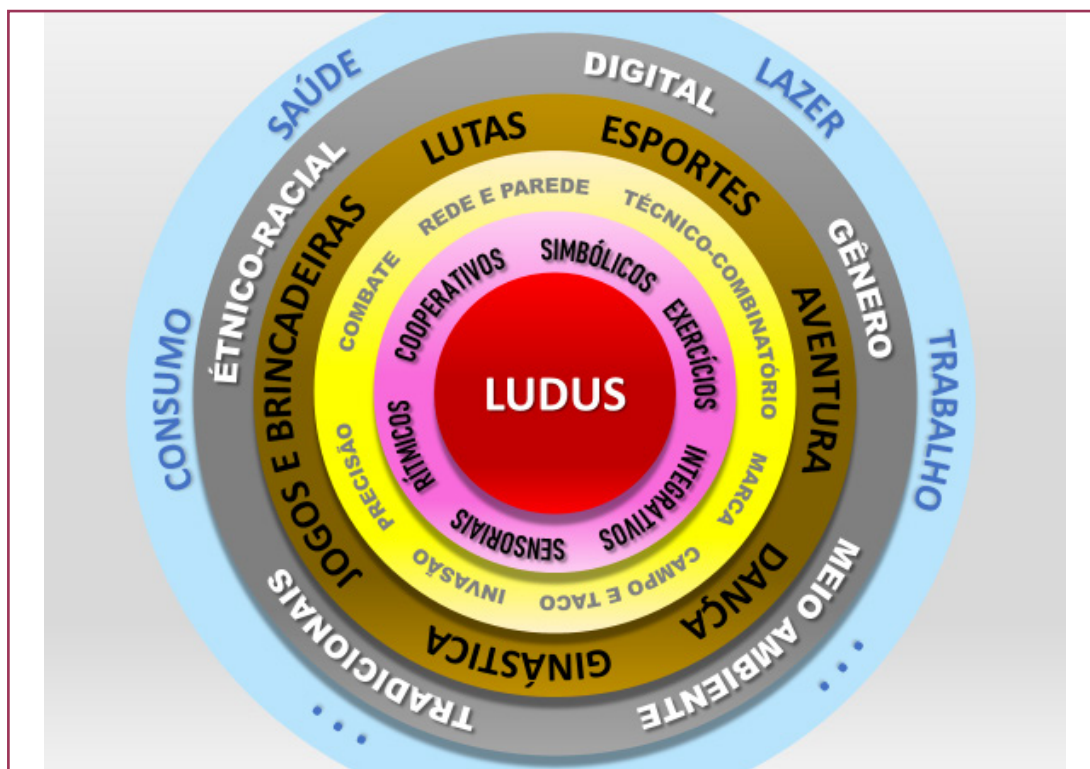
4 An icon is based on its resemblance to the object it represents (eg, a photograph of someone jumping visually illustrates the action); an index relies on a direct, causal relationship with its referent (eg, a footprint in the sand reveals the presence of someone who has run); and a symbol depends on a shared social convention (eg, a white dove symbolizes “peace”).

of games and argue that, in the early school years, play serves as a source content capable of propelling other practices – such as dance, combat, gymnastics, and sport – understood as sociocultural narratives derived from play. However, any content only materializes when someone plays, dances, or fights; in other words, when a person establishes a singular and contextualized relationship with a given bodily practice. The lived experience of the practitioner is, therefore, an indispensable dimension in curricular organization.

Based on the principles previously discussed (conduct, signs, and gestures as integral to the teaching and learning processes and continuously engaged in meaning making; play as a foundational narrative; and bodily practices as sign systems in constant dialogue with other semiotic systems), we propose, expanding upon the work of Betti and Gomes-da-Silva (2019), a model for organizing content that articulates and expands layers of meaning, from play to contemporary sociocultural themes.

Figure 1 illustrates this proposal, distributing the contents into concentric semiotic layers⁵ that extend from the nuclear *ludus* to thematic externalities. Each layer represents a progressively higher level of conventionality and codification while remaining permeable to translations and potential “explosions” of meaning across boundaries. This structure will be detailed in the following paragraphs, outlining teaching processes that begin with ludic experience and gradually incorporate games, culturally crystallized practices, and cross-disciplinary themes that reorganize PE content.

Figure 1 - Onion diagram of the semiotic layers of content



Source: prepared by the authors

5 Key: pink – 1st layer; yellow – 2nd layer; brown – 3rd layer; gray – 4th layer; light blue – 5th layer.

Box 2 - Translation of the words in Figure 1

LUDUS	LUDUS
COOPERATIVOS	COOPERATIVE
SIMBÓLICOS	SYMBOLIC
EXERCÍCIOS	EXERCISE
INTEGRATIVOS	INTEGRATIVE
SENSORIAIS	SENSORY
REDE E PAREDE	NET-AND-WALL
TÉCNICO-COMBINATÓRIO	TECHNICAL-COMBINATORY
MARCA	SCORING
CAMPO E TACO	BAT-AND-BALL
INVASÃO	INVASION
PRECISÃO	PRECISION
COMBATE	COMBAT
JOGOS E BRINCADEIRAS	GAMES AND PLAY
LUTAS	WRESTLING
ESPORTES	SPORTS
AVENTURA	ADVENTURE
DANÇA	DANCE
GINÁSTICA	GYMNASTICS
DIGITAL	DIGITAL
GÊNERO	GENDER
MEIO AMBIENTE	ENVIRONMENT
TRADICIONAIS	TRADITIONAL
ÉTNICO-RACIAL	ETHNIC-RACIAL
SAÚDE	HEALTH
LAZER	LEISURE
TRABALHO	WORK
CONSUMO	CONSUMPTION

Source: prepared by the authors

As in any system, such as a cell nucleus or the kernel of an operating system, the curricular core denotes centrality, structure, and function. In the model presented in Figure 1, this core is occupied by *ludus*, understood here as the ludic impulse: a creative potential that precedes the bodily practices traditionally taken by PE as objects of teaching and learning.

The notion of *ludus* does not lend itself to the classification or naming of any specific type of game or play. Rather, it approximates the idea of ludic impulses – behaviors filled with vitality that blend excitement, immediate action, confusion, turbulent and disorderly attitudes, and a tendency toward functional pleasure, not yet shaped by cultural conventions. For example, a child rolling on the grass, balancing on a curb, jumping repeatedly on a sofa, running aimlessly with peers, doing handstands, or spinning in circles.

From a Peircean perspective, *ludus* corresponds to the experience of firstness: it is an immediate phenomenological experience, a percept of full presence that “may come to be” (Ibri, 2021). A ball, for instance, as a phenomenological object, invites us to explore its potential “to be” rolled, bounced, kicked, or thrown, just as the edge

of a sidewalk invites us to walk along it without losing balance. A small child, not yet fully enculturated, establishes this direct and creative relationship with the objects of the world. The same happens when a learner in a PE class encounters a previously unfamiliar object. In exploring the possibilities of the ball or attempting to balance on a low wall, the child begins to experience secondness, as he or she begins to confront the resistances of the world – gravity, uneven ground, and the limitations of their own body. This marks the transition from the potentiality of firstness to the effective encounter with the world's alterity, which characterizes secondness in Peircean semiosis.

This is not to suggest, however, that play exists apart from culture. It is also a historical and cultural manifestation – learned, recoded, and mediated – and, as one plays, one simultaneously transforms the game itself in a dialectical movement of meaning-making (Grillo, 2023).

Nevertheless, games, sports, dance, gymnastics, and combat practices, when observed as conventionalized ludic behaviors, already belong to more advanced levels of codification, which is the result of long sociocultural processes. Thus, running a race may evolve into athletics; balancing on a curb or doing a handstand, into artistic gymnastics; kicking a ball, into soccer, and so forth. In other words, from the phenomenological object emerges the cultural object, that is, the network of spaces, rules, implements, values, and power relations that give it form.

Although *ludus* occupies a central position, it is insufficient on its own to organize the PE curriculum, since its creative potential gives rise to manifestations that extend beyond the scope attributed to this curricular component. Its role lies in generating impulses that, in the subsequent layers, are shaped into bodily practices of increasing codification.

In Figure 1, the two layers immediately external to the core (layers 1 and 2) encompass the first sociocultural narratives of *ludus*. The closer these layers are to the core, the lower their degree of codification or cultural crystallization. Therefore, within these layers, play operates through relatively freer and more fluid signs when compared to the more rigidly conventionalized practices of sport, combat, dance, or gymnastics in their standardized forms, as defined by regulatory institutions such as federations and confederations.

From the perspective of the semiotics of culture, *ludus* functions as a primary modeling system, while play, as secondary modeling, constitutes a network of rules and structures that remains open to mutation (Goffman, 2001). Moreover, it carries ideological, ethical, and poetic nuances: just as cinema or literature have genres, play exhibits variations that interact with the codes, norms, and values of each group (Betti; Gomes-da-Silva, 2019).

Layers 1 and 2 express two distinct classificatory logics. Layer 1, inspired by the framework proposed by Betti and Gomes-da-Silva (2019), groups games into six genres that are minimally subject to predetermined formats: sensory, rhythmic, cooperative, symbolic, exercise, and integrative. Layer 2, derived from categories established in the BNCC (Brasil, 2018), adopts the motor logic of games/sports,

rooted in structuralism (Betti, 2021), and distributes them into seven types: invasion, precision, combat, net-and-wall, technical-combinatory, scoring, and bat-and-ball.

The first layer, being closer to *ludus*, encompasses less conventional classifications, while the second, positioned one ring further outward, engages more explicitly with ludic and sport-related practices, operating within a more complex and normative sociocultural narrative.

In both cases, however, the two layers model *ludus* and play themselves, making visible their distinct rules, motor requirements, and intentionality. Above all, they demonstrate that there are multiple ways of perceiving and experiencing bodily practices: each genre mobilizes specific structural elements (rules, objectives, implements, and environments) and induces particular modes of communication between practitioners and their context. Consequently, other manifestations (sport, dance, combat, and gymnastics) can be understood as secondary modelings of the ludic, although they carry a higher degree of formalization and normativity, as we will discuss next.

The third layer of the onion diagram corresponds to the contents historically consolidated by the cultural approach: play and games, sports, combat, dance, gymnastics, and, more recently, adventurous activities. This configuration stems from the Renewal Movement in PE during the 1980s and 1990s, when scholars aligned with the Social and Human Sciences (Soares *et al.*, 1992; Kunz, 1994; Betti, 2020) reacted against biologism and sport-centered paradigms, proposing that the field be understood as an expression of (body) movement culture (Daolio, 2020). These theoretical frameworks influenced official documents such as the PCN (Brasil, 1997) and, especially, the BNCC (Brasil, 2018), which organized these manifestations into thematic units. For this reason, layer 3 is positioned more externally: its link to cultural conventions is more pronounced than in the preceding layers.

It is important to note that “play and games” are placed in this layer because the cultural approach treats “the game” as an autonomous content, without exploring its relationship with other bodily practices. However, the foundation of Lotmanian semiotics lies in the understanding that culture is dynamic – a living sign system (Lotman, 1978) that incorporates inherited signs while remaining open to the creation of new ones. This is precisely how adventurous activities, which were absent from the PCN, came to be incorporated into school content. In this logic, each content can be interpreted as an intersection between the ludic impulse (*ludus*), the models of play, and a high degree of social formalization, encompassing rules, institutions, values, and ideologies directed toward socially relevant themes.

According to Bystřina (1990), a scholar aligned with the semiotics of culture, play has an inceptive role in the constitution of culture itself, alongside experiences such as dreams, psychic disturbances, and states of trance or ecstasy. These primary forms of human expression are understood as generative sources of structural models that permeate cultural systems. The ludic, therefore, is not merely a recreational or pedagogical phenomenon but a primordial mode of organizing experience. As Baitello Junior (1999, p. 58) observes when commenting on Bystřina’s work, “the ludic

permeates all instances of code generation,” functioning as a modeling principle that both precedes and traverses the formation of culture. This perspective reinforces the understanding of *ludus* as the semiotic core of PE, from which the codified practices that constitute curricular content emerge and unfold.

From this perspective, any ludic form can be remodeled: the act of hopping on one foot transforms into hopscotch, complete with drawings on the ground, numbered spaces, and alternating supports; balancing on a curb evolves into the balance beam event in artistic gymnastics, with its own codes and regulations; and so forth.

From a didactic-pedagogical perspective, studies on the teaching of combat sports confirm the premise that *ludus* is the driving force (Betti; Gomes-da-Silva, 2019) behind other bodily practices. So and Santos Rodrigues (2023) demonstrated that initiating the teaching process of combat sports through combat games reduces fear of injury and dissociates the class from violence, whereas starting with expository-normative strategies that merely talk about combat leads to lower engagement (So, 2023a). Therefore, the pedagogical recommendation is to move from the center toward the periphery of the layers: to begin with movement situations that promote ludic experiences and only later to deepen the sociocultural conventions characteristic of layer 3.

The two outermost layers of the model propose expanding the semiosphere beyond the specificity of PE and its language of movement – without, however, severing ties with it – since they function as transversal matrices of meaning, simultaneously nourishing the inner layers and being renewed by them.

The penultimate layer (layer 4) adopts an anthropological perspective, illuminating the diversity of values, logics, and forms embodied in bodily practices. For example, games originating from Indigenous peoples or African cultural matrices carry worldviews distinct from Western ones, while digital games inaugurate a new relationship among body, play, and sport, shaped by the virtual/actual dialectic (Lévy, 1996; Feres Neto, 2001). Even well-established contents such as soccer (an invasion game/sport) assume plural configurations: from informal amateur soccer to the World Cup (Betti, 1998), as well as variants such as *fútbol callejero*, which prioritizes respect, solidarity, and cooperation in contrast to the rigid codifications imposed by federations. In these configurations, ethical and moral questions are also inscribed. Different bodily practices, particularly in school contexts, are permeated by normative logics that associate specific modalities with masculine or feminine attributes, often reproducing stereotypes. Incorporating gender discussions into this layer allows for the recognition that values, logic, and forms vary according to the social markers inscribed upon bodies, including gender, but also race, class, and sexual orientation. Practices such as gendered soccer (Passos *et al.*, 2025) or interventions that subvert binary distributions of modalities (such as girls practicing combat sports or boys dancing) become strategies of semiotic translation and tension, reconfiguring meanings and expanding the semiosphere of school PE.

The final layer (layer 5) incorporates contemporary themes such as health, leisure, consumption, and work, requiring dialogue with Sociology, Anthropology,

Economics, Public Health, and other disciplines. It is no coincidence that similar themes inform public policies, as evidenced in the PCN (Brasil, 1998), with its cross-disciplinary agenda on ethics, the environment, and cultural plurality, as well as in the BNCC (Brasil, 2018), which includes digital culture and environmental education. This openness renders the final layer dynamic: as the social semiosphere reconfigures itself, new challenges, such as generative artificial intelligence, climate crises, and dissident bodies, can (and should) be incorporated.

In this sense, layers 4 and 5 invite the PE curriculum to engage with broader sociopolitical dimensions, promoting a critical stance toward contemporary phenomena that not only shape but are also shaped by social and cultural practices. By integrating issues such as environment, health, leisure, digital culture, gender, and ethnic-racial relations, these layers expand the formative scope of the field and allow school content to be recoded in tune with the challenges and demands of the present. This entails recognizing that the curriculum, far from being neutral, is a field of symbolic disputes, and that PE can and should mediate and problematize meanings and transformations within both school and society.

The boundaries between layers function as filtering membranes, allowing processes of translation, creative tension, and occasional semiotic “explosions” that give rise to new meanings. For example, the multiple forms of “playing soccer” within Brazilian culture reveal the permeability between the levels of play and sport. Some practices are situated in layer 2, such as informal and street matches; others, more institutionalized, belong to layer 3, such as competitive soccer regulated by federations. These boundary zones are fertile grounds for translation and hybridization processes that, in turn, generate new ways of playing. A recent example is table soccer,⁶ which combines the motor skills of soccer with the structural logic of a net-and-wall game, similar to table tennis. This example illustrates the difficulty of rigidly classifying bodily practices based solely on their motor logic, as the BNCC does when it treats “sport” as a self-contained thematic unit, disregarding the semiotic transitions between genres and practices. From a Lotmanian standpoint, both traditional and table soccer belong to the same semiotic system, as they share codes, variations, and possibilities for remodelization. In other words, there is a continuous flow of signs both between and within layers, producing semioses that create tensions in the processes of teaching and learning in PE.

In the movement situations that structure PE classes, whether initiated by the teacher or by learners, the potency of *ludus* converges with the rules of play, cultural conventions, and contemporary themes. From this confluence, three key processes occur: translation, hybridization, and explosion. In *translation*, signs migrate from one system to another, acquiring new forms; in *hybridization*, elements from distinct layers combine, creating hybrid formats – such as a digital game inspired by a conventional sport; and in *explosion*, boundary tensions produce an unexpected meaning, as in the transformation of the schoolyard into a “sustainable cycling track” following the

⁶ Not to be confused with button soccer (futebol de botão).

integration of adventurous activities and environmental discussions, as reported by Passos, So and Leitão (2024) in the previously mentioned study⁷.

Finally, we propose three teaching conducts to guide the planning and development of teaching and learning processes:

- Propose and articulate Movement Situations in class that encompass the selected contents, since the mediation of the moving body triggers the semiotic process that validates every teaching and learning experience in PE.
- Translate: create fertile boundaries where the content can interact with other languages (sign systems), disciplinary knowledge, and contemporary social issues.
- Recode: connect the content to broader sociocultural questions and promote the production of new habits of action and reasoning, thereby expanding students' repertoires.

This pedagogical matrix values *ludus* as the driving force of engagement and the starting point of didactic experience, without disregarding the symbolic and cultural complexity normalized by contemporary curricular policies. Rather than constituting a closed framework, these conducts serve as guiding principles for a teaching practice that is sensitive to languages in motion, cultural differences, and the transformation of meanings in everyday school life.

4 CONCLUSION

The guiding question of this essay – “Which semiotic-pragmaticist criteria can help logically organize the contents of PE?” – served as the foundation for developing an analytical framework composed of five content layers and their corresponding implications for the teaching and learning processes inspired by a semiotic-pragmaticist perspective.

By articulating ludic experience, degrees of codification, and sociocultural relevance, the layered model we propose provides a curricular logic capable of moving from the early narratives of games at the boundaries of *ludus* to the complex demands of contemporary sociocultural themes. This model does not prescribe rigid paths but provides recommendations for teaching conduct.

To organize the contents and processes of teaching and learning in PE through a semiotic-pragmaticist lens is to recognize that teaching-learning and learning-teaching (Merrell, 2008) unfold across a continuum of expanding signs, where each gesture – from the first jump or throw to the discussion of sociocultural issues – expands the school semiosphere and the learners' cultural repertoire. Through this process, habits are reconfigured and new ways of coexisting ethically with others and with the world are proposed, guided by the pursuit of the common good.

⁷ PASSOS, Fagner José; EUSTÁQUIO, Andreia Dias; SILVA, Paula Fernanda da; LEITÃO, Arnaldo Sifuentes. Das práticas esportivas às camadas de reflexividade: futebol e gênero na Educação Física escolar. In: SILVA, Erineusa Maria da; MARTINS, Mariana Zuaneti (org.). **Gênero, sexualidade e Educação Física escolar**: intervenções e práticas pedagógicas na educação básica. [S.l.]: [s.n.], 2025. (In press).

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SOARES, Carmen Lúcia *et al.* **Metodologia do ensino de Educação Física**. São Paulo: Cortez, 1992.

Resumo: Trata-se de um ensaio teórico-reflexivo em que propomos uma matriz didático-pedagógica para a organização dos conteúdos da Educação Física escolar, a partir de uma perspectiva semiótico-pragmaticista. Apoiamo-nos nas contribuições de Charles S. Peirce e Lúri Lotman para compreender que os sentidos produzidos nas aulas emergem da experiência, da ação e do confronto/diálogo entre diferentes sistemas culturais. Concebemos a aprendizagem como transformação de hábitos e condutas, e o espaço escolar como uma semiosfera em constante movimento, na qual as fronteiras culturais operam como zonas de instabilidade e explosão de novos significados. Orientamos o estudo com base em uma estrutura composta por cinco camadas de significação, que vão da experiência lúdica às temáticas socioculturais contemporâneas. O modelo articula níveis de codificação e apresenta apontamentos didático-pedagógicos sobre a linguagem, refletindo como os conteúdos se concretizam nas situações de movimentação. Por fim, propomos três condutas docentes como eixos do planejamento didático: propor situações de movimentação, traduzir conteúdos em diálogo com outras linguagens e recodificá-los a partir de questões socioculturais emergentes.

Palavras-chave: Educação Física. Conteúdos escolares. Linguagem. Semiótica. Currículo.

Resumen: Se trata de un ensayo teórico-reflexivo en el que proponemos una matriz didáctico-pedagógica para la organización de los contenidos de la Educación Física escolar, desde una perspectiva semiótico-pragmaticista. Nos apoyamos en los aportes de Charles S. Peirce e Luri Lotman para comprender que los sentidos producidos en clase emergen de la experiencia, de la acción y del enfrentamiento/diálogo entre distintos sistemas culturales. Concebimos el aprendizaje como transformación de hábitos y conductas, y el espacio escolar como una semiosfera en constante movimiento, en la cual las fronteras culturales actúan como zonas de inestabilidad y de explosión de nuevos significados. El estudio se orienta por una estructura compuesta por cinco capas de significación, que van desde la experiencia lúdica hasta las temáticas socioculturales contemporáneas. El modelo articula niveles de codificación y presenta aportes didáctico-pedagógicos sobre el lenguaje, reflejando cómo los contenidos se concretan en situaciones de movimiento. Finalmente, proponemos tres prácticas docentes como ejes de la planificación didáctica: proponer situaciones de movimiento, traducir contenidos en diálogo con otros lenguajes y recodificarlos a partir de cuestiones socioculturales emergentes.

Palabras clave: Educación Física. Contenidos escolares. Lenguaje. Semiótica. Currículo.

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CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The authors declare that this work involves no conflict of interest.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Arnaldo Sifuentes Leitão: Conceptualization; Formal Analysis; Investigation; Methodology; Visualization; Writing – Original Draft; Writing – Review & Editing.

Mauro Betti: Conceptualization; Formal Analysis; Investigation; Methodology; Visualization; Supervision; Validation; Writing – Original Draft; Writing – Review & Editing. **Gilson Santos Rodrigues:** Visualização; Escrita – Rascunho Original; Escrita – Revisão e Edição.

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Rogério de Melo Grillo: Conceptualization; Formal Analysis; Investigation; Methodology; Visualization; Writing – Original Draft; Writing – Review & Editing.

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FUNDING

This study was not supported by funding sources.

DATA AVAILABILITY

The data that support this research are available in the body of the article.

HOW TO CITE

LEITÃO, Arnaldo Sifuentes; BETTI, Mauro; SO, Marcos Roberto; GRILLO, Rogério de Melo; SANTOS RODRIGUES, Gilson. The Contents of Physical Education in the Area of Languages from a Semiotic-Pragmaticist Perspective. **Movimento**, v. 31, p. e31064, Jan./Dec. 2025. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.22456/1982-8918.147764>

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