

Olympic education in practice

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The International Olympic Academy

The practical manifestation of the educational vision of Pierre de Coubertin was the creation of the International Olympic Academy in Ancient Olympia, on a site a javelin's throw from the ancient stadium, due to the efforts of Carl Diem and Jean Ketseas. The goals of the International Olympic Academy, (in article 2 of its charter), are expressed as follows:

“The creation of an international spiritual centre in Ancient Olympia which shall cater for the conservation and spread of the Olympic Spirit, the study and application of pedagogic as well as social principles of the Games and the scientific foundation of the Olympic Ideal comprise the goals of the International Olympic Academy.” (Filaretos, 1987, p 28)

The centrepiece of IOA activity was to be a yearly meeting of the Main International Session for Young Participants, which would be the place from which the Olympic ideals would be renewed and taken out into the world. Its activities include, among others:

- this annual International Session of the IOA, lasting fifteen days, with the participation of young men and women sent by National Olympic Committees;
- the annual six-week International Post-graduate Seminar
- special sessions for organisations related with Olympism, such as National Olympic Committees, International Athletics Federations, Sports-Medical Associations, Sports Journalists' Unions, referees, coaches and many others;
- the extension of hospitality to organisations and groups visiting Olympia for educational reasons, such as: universities, colleges, athletic associations, etc.

Apart from its own sessions, and the cumulative effect of the activities of its participants, the IOA has been responsible for motivating, supporting and monitoring the development of National Olympic Academies.

The IOA was established in 1961. At its first Session, thirty students from twenty-four countries took part. This occasion coincided with the end of the excavation of the ancient stadium at Olympia - an idea of Carl Diem's in 1957 - and its opening to the public. The entire IOC, after holding its Session in Athens, came to Olympia for the event. Participants in the early years lived and worked in tented accommodation, but there is now on the IOA premises a substantial campus, including accommodation for over 200 people, large lecture hall with multi-translation facility, a library, study rooms, and many sporting and social facilities.

Many reunion meetings of former participants at IOA Sessions have been organised over the years, and more recently this has been formalised into a biennial meeting of the IOA Participants Association, which works to maintain contacts and information exchange in the

interests of maintaining and furthering Olympic Education activity in the participants' home countries.

One NOC: The British Olympic Association

Each NOC has different traditions and qualities, which makes generalisation difficult. Let me offer one worked example by describing how my own NOC, the British Olympic Association, actually functions in regard to its educational responsibilities. Firstly I shall describe its 'objects', and then discuss its activities, in order to begin our task of exploring ways in which the task of Olympic education might be approached.

Objects of the British Olympic Association

The BOA has six 'objects':

- i) To encourage interest in the Olympic Games and to foster the aims and ideals of the Olympic Movement, with particular reference to youth.
- ii) To organise and co-ordinate British participation in the Olympic Games.
- iii) To assist Governing Bodies of Olympic sports in Britain in the preparation of competitors for the Olympic Games.
- iv) To provide a forum for consultation among the Governing Bodies of Olympic sports and the Sports Associations and a means of representing their views to others.
- v) To organise and co-ordinate the celebration of an Olympic Day.
- vi) To subscribe, guarantee or lend money to any association or institution for any purpose calculated to further the objects of the Association or to benefit amateur sport in Britain or for any charitable purpose (BOA, 1987, p 12).

As can be seen, the very first object stated refers in the widest possible way to Olympic education and the next two refer directly to preparation for and participation in the Olympic Games. This seems to reflect the relationship between the two advocated by de Coubertin, who saw the Games not as an end in themselves, but as a means for the promotion of a certain view of what sport should be about. In the light of these objects, how does the BOA actually function?

Role of the British Olympic Association

i) Olympic Games Preparation

Naturally, participation in the Games themselves requires an immense effort from an association that is both independent from and not funded by government. The four-yearly cycle is therefore based mainly on ensuring participation of and funding for teams at Summer and

Winter Games. Great Britain is the only country apart from Greece to have attended all Games (although there is currently some dispute over this point on nationality grounds), and has won gold medals at all Summer Games.

Within this effort, though, there is still a place for Olympic education: the BOA seeks to provide a training camp opportunity for all potential Games participants, and the officer in charge has arranged Olympic education seminars during the camps. At the International Session of the IOA in past years, athletes who have been invited in order to reflect upon their Olympic experiences have often reported that they first encountered Olympic principles in the Olympic village, and sometimes only realised this when it was too late (i.e. when they were back at home).

This suggests, firstly, that the early Olympic education of the athlete is often shamefully neglected by responsible agencies (school, higher education institution, coach, sport federation, NOC), whereas there is a tremendous opportunity for Olympic education as a genuine part of athlete preparation.

Secondly, it suggests that the Olympic Games themselves function as our primary educational symbol, since they are the site of the quest for excellence in a spirit of mutual understanding and cultural enrichment.

This is true especially for the athletes and others fortunate enough to be involved at first hand, but also increasingly for those millions of media consumers who may now experience the event vicariously. This raises serious questions regarding media representations and the Olympic education of journalists, which we will mention again later.

ii) Education Committee

Apart from its role in contributing to the celebration of the Games twice in each Olympiad, the BOA follows the spirit of de Coubertin's words by pursuing educational commitments all year round. In the past, this took the form of an Education Committee, which in some countries might be called the National Olympic Academy. Its aims were as follows:

- liaison with the International Olympic Academy
- selection, preparation and briefing of delegates to the IOA
- support of IOC educational initiatives
- preparation and dissemination of educational materials
- organisation of an Olympic museum and library
- support of Olympic Heritage initiatives
- celebration of an Olympic Day

- organisation of an annual British Olympic Academy Workshop
- organisation of discussion groups, meetings, day schools, lectures, courses, etc.

However, there are problems with the implementation of this kind of programme in Britain, owing to the peculiarities of our system. In some countries the National Olympic Academy can simply become an extension of the education system, since the national PE Academy trains both teachers and coaches in the same higher education institution (sometimes on the same courses). In Britain there is no centralised PE training system such as this and it has only recently become possible for a coach to study his sport to degree level.

In some countries there is just one body responsible for all aspects of sport provision and development. In Britain we have the BOA, the UK Sport (the former Sports Council), the Central Council for Physical Recreation, and the National Coaching Foundation. Of course, these bodies make some attempt not to duplicate their efforts and to harmonise plans, but with the best will in the world, the system looks designed for irritation. (I concede that there are benefits of a non-centralised system, too, as Moscow 1980 taught us.)

What, then, can the NOC do to fulfil its educational duty? Naturally, there will be great differences between NOCs regarding the level of resources available for educational work, but there is much that can be done through good organisation and well-placed effort even where there are scarce resources.

Possibilities For Action

A National Olympic Academy

i) The Idea of an NOA

The first thing, of course, is to set one up! At the last count there were more than eighty, but this means that there are still over a hundred NOCs that do not have one. But what is an NOA?

Some countries adopt a 'mini-IOA' model - they hold a short residential conference devoted to similar themes to those about to be discussed at the IOA's next International Session. If held early enough in the year, participants might be offered the opportunity to enter an essay-writing competition, the winner's prize being a place in the delegation to the IOA.

A different idea of the NOA would suggest a 'committee model' - whereby a committee of the NOC takes responsibility for the pursuit of a range of tasks defined by educational purposes. This is a much wider remit, making the NOA the focus of the NOC's educational activity. This

would include the holding of an annual conference, but would also involve work in some of the areas discussed in the following sections.

ii) Relationship between NOC and NOA

If the NOA has grown from within the educational system of a country, there may be a problem regarding its impact upon the work of the NOC, which may proceed as if the NOA did not exist.

In Great Britain the NOC includes a representative from each Olympic sport. Since the involvement of so many of the Committee comes via the Sport Federations, there is a similar danger: that educational matters might become relegated to the concern just of the NOA (or Education Committee). There are a number of possible strategies here:

- invite NOC/IOC members to join the Education Committee, and to support the activities of the NOA
- ally the NOA Annual Conference with some other event (e.g. a National Olympic Congress)
- seek to introduce educational issues at all levels of operation (e.g. training camps, media briefings, etc)
- seek continually to involve the NOC in educational work

The Education System

i) Physical Education in the School Curriculum

The BOA has not had to argue (until very recently) for the place of physical education on the school curriculum. We are fortunate that there has been a long tradition in our country of support for games, athletics, swimming, gymnastics, outdoor pursuits and dance in schools. However, where such a tradition is absent, developing or (as now in Britain) under threat, it is surely the first educational duty of an NOC to argue in its support.

Physical education in schools is where most children gain their first experience of organised sport; it is where much initial coaching takes place, and it is the foundation for good attitudes, habits and practices. In Britain many of the Sport Federations employ Education Officers whose specific task it is to develop their own sport by supporting the work of PE teachers. They might provide introductory materials, structured teaching advice and, in some cases, an awards system.

In particular, children who have been brought up in the spirit of honest competition and fair play have the opportunity through sport to implement and display those ideals day by day in practice. The end-of-year School Sports Day, inter-school and area competitions are also occasions when Olympic values may be demonstrated in practice. Some of these events actually call

themselves 'mini-Olympics', stressing again their moral as well as their competitive nature. Where such events do not already exist there is a leadership opportunity for NOCs and SFs.

ii) Olympism across the School Curriculum

However, we must recognise the continuing importance of work in other subjects that supports Olympic education in schools. The IOA recognises this through its courses for educators, and the BOA has organised short courses, workshops, lectures and discussions for teachers of all subjects, and has produced teaching materials for primary and secondary levels. The emphasis here is on interdisciplinary work focused on Olympism and the Olympic Games, with suggestions for teachers in the areas of history, geography, literature and the arts, science, maths, etc.

Excellent materials were produced in Canada and the USA to accompany the Games of 1984 and 1988, and since then host cities routinely include the development of such 'education packs' in their remit. However, any materials available are better than none - the main task is to put something in the hands of teachers, even if that means simply the distribution of NOC brochures, information packs, newsletters, briefings, reports, etc. Latest technology now permits simple access to web-based materials, such as those produced by the IOA, by Sydney 2000, Athens 2004, the Olympic Museum in Lausanne, the Olympic Studies Centre in Barcelona, and by the AAFLA.

Better, of course, would be the production of a local education pack to meet local needs. In some countries very good materials have been produced for educational purposes through the voluntary efforts of past students at the IOA.

iii) Higher Education

Our NOA is targeted especially (but not exclusively) on students in higher education, since we see future teachers as a very important resource for future Olympic Education.

We have also instituted a 'contacts' system, whereby one person (usually a permanent member of staff) is identified within each institution of higher education who agrees to liaise with the BOA and to publicise its activities within the student population, especially those students training in physical education. Contacts may help us by:

- recruiting for the British Olympic Academy Workshops
- publicising the existence of educational materials and resources available through the BOA and elsewhere
- arranging for the organisation of a local Olympic Day Run
- and in many other ways.

Perhaps their most important function, though, is to press for a substantial element of Olympic Education in the courses followed by all students in their institutions.

iv) Resources

One main task of the NOC/NOA is to ensure that there is sufficient provision and availability of educational materials and resources to meet the needs of educators. As well as those mentioned above, the NOC might already have prepared booklets that explain the role of the NOC, the fundamentals of Olympism, certain historical details, etc.

The IOC provides a small number of copies of the Olympic Charter and publishes the Olympic Review and Olympic Message, all of which provide good material for students. It is to be hoped that the IOC's new Olympic Library and Study Centre in Lausanne will address the issue of supporting the work of NOAs, since much excellent material remains difficult to acquire; and that the emerging network of Olympic Study and Research Centres will function as a rich resource for those seeking to provide educational services.

The IOA 'Blue Books', containing the collected proceedings of International Sessions since 1961, are a goldmine of information, debate, commentary, Olympic experiences and scholarship. However, they do not have a wide circulation, and even some NOCs do not have a full set. It is hoped that a website for IOA publications will make this important material more readily available.

The Arts

i) Art Competitions

Some NOCs organise annual national painting, poetry and essay-writing competitions. In Britain in 1997 the painting and video competitions were organised across 17,000 schools. In other years there have been painting and poetry competitions.

ii) Art Exhibitions

Some NOCs promote the cultural aspects of sport by holding theme exhibitions at national galleries or museums, featuring sculpture, photographs, paintings, posters and film.

iii) Official Olympic Artist

Some NOCs appoint an Official Olympic Artist for each Olympiad. Great Britain has had a painter and now a sculptor.

The Media

i) Media Liaison

Obviously, it is of the first importance that good relations with various media are established and maintained, and that media officers of NOCs and sports federations are well versed not only in matters relating to the sports aspect but also in the values of Olympism and Olympic Education. If sports officials and administrators do not suggest or refer to such themes then it would not be surprising if the media ignored them, too.

One recent initiative in Britain is a new radio station, Radio 5, which was set up to deal mainly with sport and education issues. The BOA set up a Young Olympians club via this medium, and occupied a regular slot in the programme.

ii) Media Representations of Olympism and Journalist Education

The educational mission of the Olympic Movement is to some extent in the hands of media journalists, and by extension in the hands of NOC Press Officers. Of course, Press Officers have their own duties and responsibilities to think about; but if they do not also try to give exposure to Olympic ideals, then it is not clear why they are working for an NOC. NOCs have a responsibility firstly to the Olympic Movement. This must entail that their Press Officers seek to do an Olympic job, seeking to contribute to the educational mission of the movement. This is not an easy task, since the media have their own aims and agenda, and 'good news' stories are difficult to promote.

Youth Work

i) Young Olympians Club

As mentioned above, Britain now has a Young Olympians Club, which is for some children a correspondence club, for others based in school groups, and for some involves attendance at youth camps.

ii) Olympic Youth Camp

Britain regularly sends a contingent to the Olympic Youth Camp during each Games. However, important as they are, such camps benefit only a fortunate few. We have also tried to provide short camps of a few days' duration for Young Olympians around the country, including talks, visits and sporting activity.

Olympians

i) National Olympians Association

Following the IOC initiative of designing two lapel pins (one for former Olympic medallists and one for all ex-Olympic athletes), many countries have organised a 'Pin Ceremony' to formalise the distribution of them. As a result, many have set up an Olympians Association, with a view to an eventual International Olympians Association.

This is an excellent initiative and it provides a good opportunity for education. Such an association can focus the effort of those Olympians who wish to help, making them available for use. We used our own Olympians Association for the first time in 1992, with excellent results.

ii) Athletes' Commission

Similarly, a National Athletes' Commission might be approached to provide visits to schools, sports clubs, sports events, etc, and to work towards NOA liaison. The NOA might in return offer expertise in the organisation of an Annual Athletes' Conference to discuss matters of particular concern to them.

Olympic Solidarity

All NOCs are able to bid for funding through Olympic Solidarity to host courses for the education and training of athletes and coaches. Whether this is on a regional, national or continental basis this is clearly an excellent opportunity not only for the exchange of technical information, but also for co-operation under Olympic principles and sponsorship.

Such courses might be for athletes, coaches, administrators or officials, and might be on the subjects of sports medicine, sports administration, aspects of coaching, etc. One feature of particular importance is that, even where courses are offered through one SF, aspects of Olympic Education are always included. Perhaps Solidarity courses are a model for all Olympic sports.

Olympic Solidarity has also introduced the Olympic Scholarship Programme for athletes and coaches, the purpose of which is to provide funding for study abroad that will combine academic education with physical training.

Olympic Day Celebrations

i) Olympic Day Run

I can see why this highly successful event comes under the aegis of the IOC's Sport for All Commission, but it is surely also a tremendous opportunity for Olympic education. The BOA's Education staff organise the British Olympic Day Run, and celebrations developed further into 'Youth Olympic Days' around the country (as in the Netherlands).

In some countries there may be the problem that other agencies already organise nationally recognised and very successful annual runs. In Britain we already have the London Marathon, the Great North Run, etc. But this is an opportunity for the NOC in certain countries to establish the Olympic Day Run as the national annual run, and thereby to further Olympic education.

ii) Other Celebrations

So far, however, the BOA has done little apart from organising a run to publicise Olympic Day. Some countries have done much more: some have made it a national holiday, some hold sports festivals, some include arts events, and some gain good media coverage for Olympism.

Heritage

i) Olympic Sites

Some countries are fortunate enough to be the site of some aspect of our common Olympic Heritage, and it must be the concern of educators to identify and preserve this heritage so as to make it available to us all. In Britain we have the historical heritage of Dr William Penny Brookes' Much Wenlock Games and Robert Dover's Chipping Camden Games, both of which receive the patronage of the BOA; some countries take special care to preserve the site of a past Olympic Games; some honour individual events or champions in some way or another (e.g. the BOA is instituting a series of Olympic Plaques to be installed at certain sites).

ii) Olympic Museum and Library

Olympic Games or Heritage sites are often chosen to house a permanent collection of memorabilia and sometimes this may develop into a national sports museum. Elsewhere, as in Britain, there is a separate Olympic Museum and Library that is available to all and very well used, particularly by students. Film and video archives are to be added. The most important point about such collections is that they should not just lie dormant, but rather be made accessible to large numbers of people for educational purposes.

iii) Olympic Experiences

One urgent task is to capture the experience of Olympic veterans by interviewing them while they are still with us and preserving their knowledge and memories for posterity. Their impressions are part of our heritage.

Olympic Study and Research Centre

A 'centre' may be in a particular place (such as a library or museum or university) or it may be an organisation that provides a focus, bringing together various kinds of expertise. In Britain we are currently setting up such a centre, which we hope and expect will be part of an international Olympic Study and Research Network.

IOC Liaison

I have already mentioned art competitions, youth camps, Olympic Day celebrations, Olympians' Pin Ceremonies, etc, but there are other ways in which an NOA might support IOC educational initiatives.

An NOA might seek to organise study trips to the IOC HQ and the Olympic Museum and Study Centre in Lausanne; or it might seek ways in which it could use official IOC publications, films, etc, for educational purposes; or it might actively seek to keep up to date with what resources the IOC offers.

IOA Liaison

I have also already mentioned some ways in which liaison with the IOA provides educational opportunities for us. But it seems to me that there is not yet enough take-up of IOA facilities. Even where Olympic Solidarity support is available, some NOCs still do not send delegates to courses. This is a pity, because the course loses them and their input, and they lose the opportunity to learn with others. The first duty of an NOA is to see what it can do to support the ongoing efforts of the IOA - to keep in contact, to send appropriately qualified and briefed participants to the courses offered, and to use the expertise of those who return.

Of course, there are many other ways of promoting awareness of the ideals of Olympism, and also promoting the practice of ethical sport. For example, Bäskau (1987, pp 146f) points to the Spartakiad movement as one that is capable of reaching millions of people through competitions and festivals of physical activity and effort. Anton Geesink, the Dutch judo champion, has established a mobile Olympic Academy, which is a truck filled with Olympic materials, providing an itinerant service. Increasingly, there are new technological services and possibilities for communication, such as CD Rom and Internet, and doubtless new possibilities will emerge.

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