

Towards an Olympic pedagogy

Dr. Jim Parry

2003 Invited professor of the International Chair in Olympism (IOC-UAB)

A paper prepared for the
Centre d'Estudis Olímpics (CEO)
Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona (UAB)
November 2003

Dr Jim Parry
School of Philosophy
Leeds University
Leeds LS2 9JT, UK
Tel: (+44) 113 343 3272
Fax: (+44) 113 343 3265
E-mail: s.j.parry@leeds.ac.uk

Towards an Olympic pedagogy

How should Olympism be taught? What is Olympic Education?

The concept of 'education' requires some elucidation. Often it is used to mean 'giving information about' or 'instruction in' some specifics, and this is in contrast to a more general idea of education which sees its task as the development of personal attributes and qualities of mind.

Thus, it may well be thought that the task of Olympic Education is simply to *tell* - to make people more aware of the Olympic Games, the structure of the Olympic Movement, and perhaps some of the ideals espoused and problems encountered. Many Olympic Education initiatives seem to be taking this kind of approach. Certainly, the production of Olympic Education materials is heavily information-based. However, some believe that Olympism could well make a major additional impact on the school curriculum on a much broader front, addressing the student's intelligence, character and whole personality.

It is a commonplace to distinguish three views of 'education' within differing conceptions of 'physical education':

- (i) Education *of* the physical (the development of health, strength, endurance, skill etc. through physical training, exercise and practice).
- (ii) Education *through* the physical (the development of desirable characteristics of personality and mind through physical activity).
- (iii) Education *about* the physical (the development of rationality and understanding in the forms of knowledge that constitute the field of physical culture, or human movement studies, or kinesiology).

Besides quite neatly encapsulating three very different sets of claims regarding what PE is and how it is to be justified on a school curriculum, it must be noted that the three slogans obscure under the same sign three very different conceptions of education:

- (i) refers to physical '*training*'.
- (ii) refers to attempts to ally the aims of physical education with the aims of 'general education', for which I think we may read '*schooling*'.
- (iii) refers to a cognitive model, that refers to the development of rationality and qualities of mind, which we may, perhaps tendentiously, call '*education*'.

This account yields two related observations. Firstly, it cannot be said too often that the very term 'physical education' constitutes a claim: namely, that the specified physical activity *is* educative. Secondly, to show that physical activity *develops* people in various ways is not the same as to show that it *educates* people.

Even at this very general level, then, our conceptions of PE and its rationale present quite clearly to students our views as to what sort of activity is legitimate and what value it might have in their schooling. In particular:

1. approaches which lead us to over-emphasise physical development; or the physiological benefits of exercise, or the 'health-related' aspects of participation, all risk imposing a limited and morally deficient conception of what PE might be, omitting reference to what is educable, rather than physically trainable.
2. approaches that lead us to emphasise the socially educative benefits of sports promotion do look beyond the merely physical, but they direct our view towards just extrinsic ends, rather than allaying social benefits to personal and moral development.
3. approaches which lead us to emphasise the development of rationality and understanding direct our view towards just cognitive development, thus undermining the central role of activity (and indeed physical activity) in moral learning.

So I would like to suggest that Olympism is best served by educative practices which operate not only through the medium of information, but also through the universal language of values enshrined in organised physical activity, thereby providing a platform for PE teachers to achieve a number of important aims:

- (i) to further their traditional concern for the whole person whilst working at the levels both of activity and of ideas (because the practical work can be seen as a kind of laboratory for value experiments).
- (ii) to show coherence between approaches to practical and theoretical work (because the physical activity is an example of the ideas in practice).
- (iii) to explore in upper years ideas implicit in work in lower years (i.e. the practical work which encapsulates the ideas can be taught well before the children are old enough to grasp the full intellectual content of the ideas).

I would wish to commend to teachers and coaches the principles of Olympism not just as inert ideas to be passed on to their pupils via cognitively based methods, but as living ideas which have the

power to remake our notions of sport in education, seeing sport not as mere physical activity but as the physical activity of an educated and ethical individual.

Towards an Olympic Pedagogy

But for this we need an Olympic pedagogy. If the Olympic conception of the human being (its philosophical anthropology) is accepted, we still stand in need of a theory of Olympic pedagogy. The idea is that the promotion of Olympic values will be seen to be the educative task, and sport will be seen as a means. Each one of these values, being articulated at a high level of generality, will admit of a wide range of interpretation. But they nevertheless provide a framework that can be agreed upon by social groups with very differing commitments. The task now is to see how the values of sport and Olympism can be promoted in practice.

A National Olympic Committee, no matter how great its commitment to its educational aims, must seek to influence the nature of sports provision within its national educational system. For it is in schools and colleges that the primary work of physical education is usually conducted. The provision of courses for teachers and materials for students must be seen as supportive of this primary effort, since the information transmission function of education is not the main mode championed by Olympism, which sees engagement in sport itself as its primary medium.

We therefore need to think also about how sport is mediated to students, since the claim of Olympism is that the medium of sport is itself a large part of the message. We need to think again about how we present and represent sport on the curriculum.

Daryl Siedentop (1994) has outlined what he calls the Sport Education Model. This is

“... a curriculum and instruction model developed for school physical education programs. That may not sound new, (but) sport education is not business as usual. ... sport education has the potential to revolutionize PE.” (p 3)

He criticises the way in which sport is often presented in PE programmes, as a set of techniques or skills to be mastered.

Sport education seeks to provide a richer, more authentic and more fully contextualised experience than is typical during PE lessons. Students learn not only how to play sports but also to coordinate and manage their sport experiences. They also learn individual responsibility and effective group membership skills. Sport education aims to contribute to a humane sport culture that maximizes

participation, under the slogan “sport in all its forms for all the people” (p 4). (This echoes de Coubertin’s dictum “all sports for all people.”)

He sees the goals of Sport Education as seeking to ‘educate’ students to be players ‘*in the fullest sense*’ and to help them develop as competent, literate and enthusiastic sportspeople, which he expands as follows (p 3):

“A competent sportsperson has sufficient skills to participate in games satisfactorily, understands and can execute strategies appropriate to the complexity of play, and is a knowledgeable games player.

A literate sportsperson understands and values the rules, rituals, and traditions of sports and distinguishes between good and bad sport practices, whether in children’s or professional sport. A literate sportsperson is both a more able participant and a more discerning consumer, whether fan or spectator.

An enthusiastic sportsperson participates and behaves in ways that preserve, protect, and enhance the sport culture, whether it is a local youth sport culture or a national sport culture. As members of sporting groups, such enthusiasts participate in further developing sport at the local, national, or international levels. The enthusiastic sportsperson is involved.”

He sees these aims as elevating physical education from a training or competency focus to a truly educative focus, and elevating the teacher from the status of a skill-developer to that of an educator, contributing not only to specific skill-based outcomes, but also to wider values.

The objectives of Sport Education he lists as the following learning outcomes (p 4):

- Develop skills and fitness specific to particular sports.
- Appreciate and be able to execute strategic play in sports.
- Participate at a level appropriate to their stage of development.
- Share in the planning and administration of sport experiences.
- Provide responsible leadership.
- Appreciate the rituals and conventions that give particular sports their unique meanings.
- Develop the capacity to make reasoned decisions about sport issues.
- Develop and apply knowledge about umpiring, refereeing, and training.
- Decide voluntarily to become involved in after-school sport.

An important element (for our purposes in this thesis) is Siedentop’s critical observation that sport in physical education has typically been decontextualized.

“Skills are taught in isolation rather than as part of the natural context of executing strategy in game-like situations. The rituals, values, and traditions of a sport that give it meaning are seldom even mentioned, let alone taught in ways that students can experience them. Students are not educated in sport.” (p 7)

His claim is that the main features of sport as experienced culturally are hardly ever reproduced in physical education classes. A more complete and authentic sports education would include an introduction to such culturally salient features as:

Seasons. Sport is seasonal, and seasons are long enough to allow for significant experience. A sport season encompasses both practice and competition, and often ends with a culminating event.

Affiliation. Players are members of teams or clubs and tend to retain membership throughout the season. Much of the meaning derived from sport participation and a large part of the personal growth that can result from good sport experiences is intimately related to affiliation.

Formal Competition. Sport seasons are defined by formal competition that is interspersed with practice sessions and occurs in different formats: dual meets, round robins, league schedules, and the like. The schedule is often fixed prior to the season so that teams and individuals can prepare appropriately.

Keeping Records. Records come in all forms and shapes: batting averages, shots on goal, steals, unforced errors, kills, times, distances, and the like. Records provide feedback for individuals and teams. Records help define standards and provide goals for players and teams. Records also become an important part of the traditions of a sport.

Culminating Event. It is in the nature of sport to find out who is best for a particular season. The culminating competition provides goals for players to work toward.

Festivity. The festive nature of sport enhances its meaning for participants and adds an important social element to the experience.

The Sport Education curriculum is designed to take into account the above features, making them an integral part of the student’s experience. The student is initiated not just into sports practice, but also into sport as a lived cultural phenomenon, thereby opening up possibilities for Sport Education to contribute to wider curriculum aims, such as a better understanding of the world, a better