

Inappropriate teaching practices.(The Physical Education Hall of Shame, part 3)

by Neil F. Williams

Poor teaching practices among physical educators are often due to a lack of critical thinking. Through critical thinking, physical educators can implement developmentally appropriate physical education that fosters recreation as well as learning. Some suggestions on how to eliminate poor teaching practices, such as using inappropriate equipment and allowing student captains to choose teams, are presented.

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It is with the idea of enhancing the critical thinking processes of physical education teachers that a new installment of the physical education Hall of Shame series has been written. Previously, two Hall of Shame articles focused on specific games and activities (Williams, 1992, 1994). In this article, poor teaching practices which reflect a lack of critical thinking on the part of their adherents are identified.

In a recent JOPERD feature (McBride, 1995), several authors explained how critical thinking can become part of physical education classes for students at every level (Blitzer, 1995), from elementary school (Cleland & Pearse, 1995) to middle school (Woods & Book, 1995) to high school (Greenockle & Purvis, 1995). But critical thinking must become part of the physical educator's teaching processes as well. In order to physically educate our students, we teachers must also become Newman's (1990) "models of thoughtfulness" in the way we plan, organize, and teach. It is only through critical thinking and thoughtfulness that we will be able to implement developmentally appropriate physical education and "increase the likelihood of enjoyable, challenging, and successful learning for all students" (Grineski, 1992, p. 60).

Students on Display

This teaching technique is often used for gymnastic routines, rope climbs, or skills tests. It occurs when one student performs a routine or skill while everyone else in the entire class gets to sit and watch. Since only one person is active at any given time, class control, teacher evaluation, and performer safety are all greatly enhanced. But at what price?

Only the strong survive while they are on display. And even though this may be fine for the most talented and confident students, it can be devastating to the fragile self-image of many low- and middle-level performers (Bowyer, 1996). It is possible that more students lose sleep over this teaching practice than anything else we do. It is actually an incredible misuse of time for all students,

since the total activity time for any one student in a 30-minute class is probably going to be under 60 seconds.

Solutions: Use station work, which allows students to participate in several familiar, safe activities while the instructor focuses attention on a small group of students. When students are productively busy and active, they don't have the opportunity to watch one another perform, and many potentially embarrassing situations can be avoided.

One Line, One Ball, One Change

This teaching technique is a close relative of Students on Display. Many of us are saddled with large classes, poor facilities, minimal equipment, and low budgets, and we often use these excuses to justify having a group of 15 or more students line up for a turn at shooting a basketball, climbing a rope, or working on the beam. It's another teaching technique that makes planning, organizing, teaching, and control much easier than it might otherwise be.

But according to the analogy in Henneberger's (1993) discussion of current trends in physical education, "making children wait in line to use one ball is like giving a class one pen...and expecting them to learn to write" (p. 1). All students need to practice, and the more they practice, the more skilled they are likely to become. But that simply can't happen if there aren't enough learning stations and equipment. No classroom teacher would consider the "one pen" idea, and neither should we. Long lines put pressure on each performer to do it right every time because chances are so few and far between. Long lines also waste valuable learning time. There is "little or no opportunity for all students to acquire... psychomotor skills" (Grineski, 1992, p. 35).

Solutions: We need to think creatively and critically in order to devise alternative learning stations and use improvised equipment to maximize class participation and learning. Even if our solutions do not involve "official height, size and weight," the extra practice is worthwhile.

Roll Out the Ball

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If there's one phrase in the history of physical education classes that has more negative connotations of inappropriate teaching practices, let me know what it is. "Roll out the ball." Even as we do it, we have pangs of guilt. But the justifications and excuses are plentiful and convincing: "There are too many students," or "That's what the students want," or "The students need to learn how to organize their own games," or "I've already taught them all the skills - it's time to play the game," or "I'm teaching eight classes a day. Don't expect me to plan every one of them."

For our profession, the implications of rolling out the ball are far-reaching: no planning, no organization, no curriculum, no goals, no objectives - no value. We are entrusted with an important position, so the least we can do is plan and implement appropriate lessons. An individual who has no training whatsoever in physical education can organize a class by saying, "Okay, you five students are blue shirts and you five students are red. Here's the basketball. Go play full court over there. Oh...and call your own fouls." Can anyone remember why we bothered to go to college, anyway?

Solutions: Lessons and classes must be carefully and thoughtfully planned, organized, presented, and evaluated. If they aren't, we just are not doing our jobs.

Inappropriately Sized Equipment

Many physical educators believe that we have to use regulation equipment and official rules in order for our students to properly acquire any skill or learn any game. Often we have no choice: it seems that every elementary school in the United States has basketball hoops which are 10 feet high.

But why can't we adjust the size of the ball or the playing area? Almost every player's performance in basketball, with perhaps the exception of members of the men's high school varsity team, would be improved by using a smaller sized junior or women's basketball, or even a soccer ball, instead. Why do we insist on teaching volleyball in fifth grade with a regulation volleyball, an eight-foot net, perfect player rotation, and a 30-foot service line (Grineski, 1992)? If only one of our students is the varsity quarterback, why don't we use junior-sized footballs for our football-related activities?

Solutions: Like basketball, volleyball, and football, many of the activities and games we teach are strength-related. Smaller, lighter balls will help eliminate some of the strength factors and improve students' performance. In addition, especially in volleyball and soccer, appropriately sized equipment will reduce the pain inflicted during

activities. Smaller equipment not only increases the safety of our classes but also helps students develop correct technique and skill.

Lower nets and rims, smaller courts, closer service and free-throw lines, and modified rules strike fear into the hearts of the purists, but official regulations are only secondary considerations in our teaching - the welfare and development of our students are foremost. If we eliminate dribbling from basketball, it improves the performance of the least skilled and mitigates the dominance of the most skilled, who then have to pass more.

The real games, the ones played on television and by our varsity teams, are only for a very small percentage of our students. The large majority, the ones in our physical education classes, will do much better with seriously and thoughtfully modified versions of games. We should adjust our games, wherever possible, to make them more inclusive and developmentally appropriate (Helion & Fry, 1995).

Exercise as Punishment

If teaching a physical education class with one ball is like teaching a writing class with one pen, using exercise as a form of punishment must be like forcing a student to write, "I promise to be a good writer" 500 times on the blackboard. If one purpose of our physical education programs is to promote positive attitudes toward appropriate lifetime physical activity, exercise as punishment is certainly counterproductive. Short of humiliating a student in front of his or her peers (as in Students on Display), there probably isn't anything we can do that will discourage and alienate students more quickly and thoroughly than having them run laps or telling them to "give me 20..."

Solutions: There are dozens of other discipline-enhancing tactics and strategies we could use if we applied critical thinking to the process. Students who misbehave are likely to already be unhappy with our classes and physical activity. If what we're currently doing is not working, why do we think that punishing students with exercise will improve the situation?

Student Captains Choose Teams

This affective domain Hall of Shame teaching practice turns our students loose on one another in psychological warfare. Even "Dear Abby" (Van Buren, 1995) and Ann Landers (1991) have received and printed letters about this one. Adjectives such as humiliating, embarrassing, degrading, emotionally scarring, painful, and damaging

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were used by writers to describe this practice, and Landers (1991) wrote, "I don't know how the gym teachers could [be] so insensitive" (p. 18).

Solutions: Let's keep this one brief. There are many other ways to form teams in physical education class, and all they require is some basic decision making and grouping by the person best qualified to organize the class - the teacher. It's much more time-effective for teachers to assign teams. While it may be interesting to see how our students perceive one another's abilities, there is no need to subject our students to this institutionalized psychological torture. May this practice go the way of dodgeball and duck-duck-goose - far away.

Physical Education Class as Sports Camp

The main focus of physical education over the past century, particularly in the secondary schools, has been sports-oriented athletic team activities such as football, soccer, basketball, softball, gymnastics, wrestling, volleyball, and the like. The rationale driving many schools' curricula today is still rooted in the premise that physical education classes are the place where future varsity athletes are born. However, most adults rarely, if ever, participate in most of these activities after they have left high school. Our educational programs must focus on what our students need to succeed and participate in the real world.

Annual studies by the National Sporting Goods Association (NSGA) have been available for the past several years, and they indicate that physical educators today are largely ignoring the sport-oriented leisure activities that adults pursue. According to the NSGA (1994), the top 14 sport-oriented leisure activities for adults in 1993, in order of popularity, were:

1. Exercise walking
2. Fishing
3. Swimming
4. Bowling
5. Camping
6. Exercising with equipment
7. Bicycle riding
8. Billiards/pool
9. Aerobic exercise
10. Golf
11. Motor boating
12. Dart throwing
13. Hiking
14. Running/jogging

A quick look at the list reveals that very few of the activities that adults actually participate in are included in our physical education curricula at any level. A closer look further indicates that none of these 14 activities are team sports - they are all activities that a person can do alone, or with someone else if desired.

Solutions: How can we physical educators expect to be taken seriously by school boards, parents, communities, or students, if what we are teaching has no future application for the vast majority of our students? At a time of

widespread recognition of the need to develop the long-term values of health, the environment, and fitness, why do we insist on providing curricula based on outdated perceptions of varsity sports? We need to think carefully and critically about our overall curriculum and the individual lessons and teaching practices within that framework.

Let us all, as professional physical educators, try to apply those same critical thinking skills - the ones we are trying to develop in our students - to our own teaching. Let us strive to become models of thoughtfulness. It is a challenge for us to "rethink" how physical education might be taught" (McBride, 1995, p. 23), but not much has to change except the thought processes we use to approach our subject matter.

In using critical thinking, we will still be able to achieve our goals of improving motor skills, developing physical fitness, and increasing cognitive and affective learning. But better than that, we will also be able to promote positive attitudes towards appropriate physical activity and fitness, which will help our students lead longer, healthier, more productive lives. Critical thinking may be the key we need to finally lock up the physical education Hall of Shame.

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