

Coherence in the General Education Experience through the Inclusion of Physical Education

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Abstract: The purpose of this paper is to share how physical education (PE) offers a unique place of interdisciplinary connections, contributing to coherence in the general education (GE) experience, and to demonstrate the overall value of PE, serving as a rationale for its inclusion in a GE program. A definition of GE is provided, followed by an historical overview of GE in the United States, identifying predominant GE curricular models. An example of how coherence in the GE experience can be obtained through the inclusion of physical education is provided through the examination of a GE model at a California public university.

Key words: general education, coherence, physical education

1. Introduction

A physical education (PE) activity course is a component of the general education (GE) curriculum found in some colleges and universities, often under an area related to life skills. Early calls for the inclusion of PE in the GE program can be seen in Johnson's (1952) seminal GE book, *General Education in Action*, in which he dedicated an entire chapter to the importance of PE activity in the GE program, and in which McGrath (1952; p. xxiv), a former Commissioner of Education from 1949–1953, echoes that call. In a study conducted by Warner and Koepfel (2009), approximately 18% of 72 higher education institutions examined, including research and master's comprehensive universities and liberal arts colleges, required a PE and Health course in the GE curriculum. Many of the benefits of participating in physical activity are well known, some of which include improved cardiovascular, pulmonary, musculoskeletal and cognitive functioning, weight management, psychological well-being, and disease prevention (Insel & Roth, 2008). However, the benefits extend further still. Recent research findings suggest that there is a relationship between time spent in physical education and improved academic performance (Carlson et al., 2008; Tremarche, Robinson, & Graham, 2007). Moreover, Pritchard and Wilson (2003) have found a positive relationship between student wellness and academic performance. And when these benefits are coupled with the finding that lifestyle behavior patterns are influenced

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and established during the late adolescent and college years (Dishman & Dunn, 1988; Pearman & Valois, 1997), the dedication of a unit of the GE curriculum to PE is easily justified. However, these benefits do not encompass the extent of the reasons for including PE in the GE experience.

2. Historical Perspective

Examination of the history of GE reveals a colorful picture. While definitions vary, it can be broadly stated that GE is a required curricular component which is separate from the major, minor, or other requirements for most degrees, and is associated with knowledge and experiences which are to be attained by all students at a particular institution. In the U.S., two models of GE have been most widely implemented: the core curriculum model and the distribution requirements model (Bourke, Bray, & Horton, 2009). The core curriculum model is a unified collection of courses which all students are required to take. These prescribed courses are more general in scope and are designed to meet broad-based objectives (Bourke, Bray, & Horton, 2009). This model is underpinned by an assumption that a distribution (or a selection across areas) of courses alone is not enough to ensure a consistent learning experience that integrates concepts across the disciplines in the GE curriculum (Boyer & Kaplan, 1994). Alternately, the distribution model is designed so that students select classes from a designated menu of courses (Smith, Brunton, & Kohen, 2001), underpinned by an assumption that selecting and taking courses from required areas, rather than requiring a prescribed course sequence, will provide a formative experience that offers the kind of breadth that will ensure the institution's desired overall student outcomes.

The core curriculum was the predominant model prior to the 1960s (Latzer, 2004). However, pivotal events of the 60s such as the *Dixon v. Alabama* federal court case of 1961, which resulted in the end of *in loco parentis* – the capacity to discipline and expel students in public institutions of higher learning without due process (Boning, 2007), and the adoption of the Higher Education Act of 1965, whereby college education became more accessible to students from disadvantaged backgrounds (Cunningham & Parker, 1999), fostered a national posture toward public higher education which gave rise to a movement toward the distribution model (Boning, 2007). This growing diverse adult education movement of the times was characterized by student expectations for a curriculum that was meaningful and relevant, considered multiple perspectives, and addressed requisite knowledge and skills of the professional world (Gaff, 1983).

Overlaying this shift between models, Boning (2007) has described a pendulum-like swing in GE reform surrounding the concept of coherence, and noted Johnson's and Ratcliff's (2004) proclamation that coherence is an "unfinished agenda". Coherence in GE can be characterized by its underlying premise that students should be able to integrate knowledge and make connections across and within disciplines and to the real world, rather than merely receive isolated bits of information (Boyer, 1987; Stark & Lattuca, 1997). Boning described a pendulum swing between periods of integration, or coherence, and periods of fragmentation, in which student interest was accommodated through increased electives and reduction in specific GE required courses. In the midst of this repetitive pendulum-like swing between trends, the current GE reform movement was galvanized by the Carnegie Foundation in its 1977 report, *Missions of the College Curriculum*, in which GE was characterized as a "disaster area" (p. 11), and in which it was stated that "...if colleges cannot define what they intend to accomplish in general education, cannot specifically describe how it will benefit students... and cannot deliver an effective general education program, they should seriously consider eliminating it entirely" (pp. 184–185). Coherence is an issue that has persisted over 200 years, and continues to be regarded as an "unfinished agenda" (Boning, 2007; p. 13).

Certainly, there is flexibility for colleges and universities to design and implement a general education experience in unique ways. Every accredited higher education institution must deliver a required GE program of some form to its students, though specific requirements are not prescribed by accrediting bodies. Instead, the institutions have been universally charged with delivering a GE program that helps advance their educational mission (Warner & Koeppel, 2009). Echoing this charge, Leskes and Miller (2005) have characterized an optimal GE program as an important manifestation of the institution's mission, containing the following three primary elements: (1) a clear programmatic purpose, (2) a clear reflection of the institution's distinctive mission, and (3) specific goals and outcomes of learning. Whichever curricular model of GE an institution of higher learning chooses to implement, a GE experience that is meaningful, relevant, and rich with opportunities to integrate and apply knowledge and skills, all in a way that reflects the mission and values of the institution, is common ground on which all who seek to improve GE can meet.

3. Purpose

The purpose of this paper is to share a perspective for how PE offers a unique place of interdisciplinary connections, contributing to coherence in the GE experience. This explicit purpose is underscored by a more implicit one — to demonstrate the overall value of PE in the GE curriculum, serving as a rationale for its inclusion in a GE program.

4. GE at California State University Stanislaus

The platform from which this perspective will be shared is that of the GE Program (a distribution model) at California State University Stanislaus. In preparation for the institution's recent accreditation review by the Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC), the Department of Kinesiology Curriculum Committee drafted a paper to clearly articulate the ways in which PE activity courses align, as a 1-unit GE requirement, with the university's GE goals, as well as serve as a place for integration across disciplines – and life. These connections are shared below.

The overarching purpose of the GE Program at CSU Stanislaus, in combination with a major course of study, is to ensure that graduates:

- will have achieved the ability to think clearly and logically, to find information and examine it critically, to communicate orally and in writing, and to reason quantitatively;
- will have acquired appreciable knowledge about their own bodies and minds, about how human society has developed and how it now functions, about the physical world in which they live, about the other forms of life with which they share that world, and about the cultural endeavors and legacies of their civilizations; and
- will have come to an understanding and appreciation of the principles, methodologies, value systems, and thought processes employed in human inquiries. (California State University Stanislaus, 2009; p. 51)

More specifically, the General Education Program is designed to ensure the following goals:

- (1) **Subject Knowledge.** To provide an educational experience that will enhance students' understanding of the disciplines' basic principles, methodologies, and perspectives.
- (2) **Communication.** To provide an educational experience that will enhance the ability to communicate.
- (3) **Inquiry and Critical Thinking.** To provide an educational experience that will enhance critical thinking skills and will contribute to continuous inquiry and life-long learning.

(4) Information Retrieval and Evaluation. To provide an educational experience that will enhance the ability to find, understand, examine critically, and use information from various sources.

(5) Interdisciplinary Relationships. To provide an educational experience that will enhance students' understanding of a discipline's interrelationships with other disciplines.

(6) Global or Multicultural Perspectives. To provide an educational experience that will enhance the ability to look at issues from multiple perspectives and/or that will describe the discipline's impact on or connection to global issues, AND/OR

(7) Social Responsibility. To provide an educational experience that will help students understand the complexity of ethical judgment and social responsibility and/or that will describe the discipline's impact on or connection to social and ethical issues. (California State University Stanislaus, 2009; p. 50)

“To provide a common educational experience for students, regardless of major field of study” (California State University Stanislaus, 2009; p. 50), the GE program is organized into five areas of study: (1) Communication Skills, (2) Natural Sciences and Mathematics, (3) Humanities, (4) Social, Economic, and Political Institutions and Human Behavior, and (5) Individual Resources for Modern Living. Each area offers students opportunities to select from a variety of courses to meet each sub-category within the area. However, within Individual Resources for Modern Living, the area is organized to require students to take a 1-unit physical education activity course, with opportunity to choose from a variety of activities such as judo, lifetime fitness, swimming, and jazz dance. This requirement reflects the underlying institutional value that a learned individual has knowledge of and appreciation for her/his body, and that engagement in physical activity is an important part of the college experience — and infers that it should be a habit to be practiced for a lifetime.

4.1 Physical Education Activity Courses at CSU Stanislaus

The PE activity courses offered in the Department of Kinesiology at CSU Stanislaus foster development in four domains, including cognitive (i.e., intellect) (Bloom, 1956), affective (i.e., emotion, attitude, values) (Krathwohl, Bloom, & Masia, 1956), psychomotor (i.e., motor skill) (Harrow, 1972), and fitness (i.e., cardiorespiratory endurance, muscular strength and endurance, flexibility, and body composition) (Lacy & Hastad, 2007). Within each of these four domains, students are expected to accomplish specific objectives appropriate to the context of the activity. The following is an overview of how the GE Goals are integrated in PE activity courses at CSU Stanislaus.

4.2 Subject Knowledge

Within the cognitive domain of physical education activity courses at Stanislaus, students are expected to learn history, rules, strategy, tactics, safety, and etiquette appropriate to the context of the specific activity. Demonstration of this knowledge occurs through written/oral examination and practical application, such as game play and competition.

4.3 Communication

Success in physical education activity courses at Stanislaus requires that verbal and nonverbal communication skills be developed and utilized. As an intersection between the cognitive and affective domains of physical education, students are required to communicate clearly and concisely with teammates and opponents in critical situations in practice, play, and competition, maintaining rules of engagement, fair play, and etiquette.

4.4 Inquiry and Critical Thinking

Physical education activity courses at Stanislaus provide a unique opportunity to intersect all four domains, cognitive, affective, psychomotor, and fitness, in an applied fashion, with inquiry and critical thinking as an

underlying theme. When students use knowledge acquired from an activity course to design and implement their own personal training program for a lifetime of enjoyment, or to engage in competitive or recreational play, they are applying concepts, theories, principles, and laws. Successful application of these constructs requires a foundation of inquiry and critical thinking.

4.5 Information Retrieval and Evaluation

Successful inquiry and critical thinking requires information retrieval and evaluation. In addition to required texts in physical education activity courses at Stanislaus, students utilize additional sources of information (e.g., internet or other print sources) for successful application of rules, strategy, tactics, and design of training programs. Students in the activity courses are provided a foundation of knowledge to evaluate the accuracy and usefulness of information retrieved.

4.6 Interdisciplinary Relationships

In addition to PE activity courses sharing skills that are essential in all disciplines such as critical thinking, communication, and information retrieval and evaluation, there are important relationships fostered in activity courses at Stanislaus that exist between physical education and other disciplines. Physical education provides a unique opportunity to express and apply knowledge through human kinesiology. Participation in physical activities provides opportunities to apply concepts, theories, principles, and laws from physics, biology, psychology, philosophy, logic, mathematics, communication, and more.

4.7 Global or Multicultural Perspectives

Human movement, through dance, games, and sport, occurs across the world. Through participation in a physical education activity course at Stanislaus, origins of the activity are examined. Through this historical overview, where an activity often evolves into different forms in different regions of the world, multiple cultures are explored and considered.

4.8 Social Responsibility

In physical education activity courses at Stanislaus, a common component of the courses is an introduction to the health and wellness benefits of regular physical activity. In addition to physiologically-related factors, economic, social, philosophical, and ethical issues related to the impact of the health and wellness of individuals on our society are addressed.

5. PE's Contribution to Coherence and the GE Experience

Despite early calls for the inclusion of PE in the GE experience, and the many far reaching benefits of physical activity, Warner and Koepfel (2009) found that less than a fifth of colleges and universities examined included PE in their GE programs. While typically only a 1-unit requirement, this relatively brief experience can set a foundation for important background knowledge and behavior patterns, yielding engagement in and enjoyment of physical activity for a lifetime.

Beyond the many associated health and wellness benefits, PE activity courses can offer coherence to the GE experience. Through their interdisciplinary nature, PE activity courses can enrich the GE experience, providing a place for infusion and integration of concepts, theories, principles, and laws from across disciplines. Cognitive knowledge and skills can be expressed through movement, providing a refreshing context for intellectual engagement. Physical education provides an opportunity to connect with ourselves and with the world around us, in meaningful ways unique to all other disciplines.

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