



Increasing the Value of Physical Education

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The Marginalization of Physical Education: Problems and Solutions—Part 2

Increasing the Value of Physical Education: The Role of Assessment

DOUGLAS COLLIER

*Stakeholders must see evidence of program effectiveness
if they are to value the content being taught.*

The following four articles complete this two-part feature. In the August issue, after an introduction by Feature Editor Alisa R. James, Mary L. Henninger and Kristin B. Carlson suggested strategies for boosting physical education's value in K-12 schools. Next, Luz M. Cruz and Susan C. Petersen discussed diversity issues. Part one concluded with Lauren J. Lieberman and Cathy Houston-Wilson considering ways to improve the status of adapted physical education.—Ed.

In 2004, the National Association for Sport and Physical Education (NASPE) stated that, "The primary goal of assessment should be seen as the enhancement of learning, rather than simply the documentation of learning" (p. 3). The following year, Lund and Veal (1996) noted that "a powerful form of accountability is assessment and grading" (p. 26). Together, these comments indicate a need for assessment systems that reflect improved instructional practices, lead to a culture of continuous improvement in physical education, and demonstrate that students are learning important instructional content.

At this point in time, the need for carefully constructed and appropriate assessment systems in physical education could not be a higher priority. The current high-stakes, standards-based educational environment requires clearly articulated and measured student outcomes. In addition, the present economic environment has led many states to cut their educational budget and reduce their offerings, even eliminating subject areas that have less value in the eyes of educational stakeholders.

Physical education has traditionally held less value in the educational system. As Welk (2008) reminded us, the public perception is that, despite clear evidence that as a nation the United States is dangerously unfit, physical education is not necessarily part of the solution. One reason for this is the lack of assessment of student learning. Therefore, we must let *all* stakeholders know, with absolute clarity, what has been learned. If we accurately document the learning of valuable content, we will decrease the marginalization of our subject matter.

This article will begin by posing the question, where do you and your program stand with regard to the type of assessment and evaluation and the degree to which they are conducted? The article will then provide constructive and attainable steps that can be taken by physical education teachers to effectively assess, evaluate, and grade their students.

A Commitment to Assess and Evaluate Learning

The benefits of sound and well-designed assessment practices that focus on student achievement have been well documented and usually fall into the following three general categories: (1) improvement of teaching and learning, (2) reinforcement of national and state standards, and (3) the documentation of learning (NASPE, 2004). Although the importance of the clear documentation of learning cannot be

overemphasized, it is assessment's clear link to improvements in teaching and learning that are of most importance.

Although assessment and evaluation are not the same, the terms are often used in combination with each other. Assessment is the process of gathering information from multiple sources to make educational decisions about students (Lund & Tannehill, 2010). Evaluation entails the use of information to make a judgment about the products and operation of the instructional process (Rink, 2010).

When regarded—as it should be—as an integral part of the teaching-and-learning process, the importance of assessing and evaluating targeted outcomes (e.g., NASPE content standards) in an appropriate manner becomes apparent. While the question of what these outcomes should be has been addressed by NASPE, the manner in which they are to be assessed and evaluated, and even *if* they are to be assessed and evaluated, remains extremely problematic. The following question must be asked: if the assessment and evaluation of students, teachers and programs is unquestionably important, why is it not being done effectively?

Veal (1990) noted a number of barriers to assessment that are equally, if not more, relevant today. Veal proposed that both beginning and more experienced teachers encountered problems with assessment, which she placed into three categories: (1) socialization, (2) teacher beliefs, and (3) learning how to effectively assess and evaluate. Problems related to socialization include the very real contextual issues confronted by most physical education teachers, such as inappropriate equipment, large class sizes, insufficient time, and an educational environment that is not supportive of quality assessment. That is, teachers are often socialized by veterans and administrators to view assessment as an onerous and less-than-valuable undertaking.

The second problem relates to tightly held belief systems. Whether because of their own physical education background, inadequate or incomplete preservice education, behavior modeled and reinforced by others early in their career, or a combination of factors, the belief system of individual teachers greatly affects the quality and appropriateness of their assessment. Therefore, teachers often prefer to assess students based on effort and improvement as opposed to achievement of specific learning objectives. Early work by Placek & Dodds (1988) as well as more recent writings (Lund & Kirk, 2002; Johnson, 2008) indicate that physical education teachers were, in general, predisposed to value appropriate behavior, enjoyment of activity, and participation rather than the learning of content in the psychomotor, cognitive, or affective domains.



Assessment gives crucial support to the academic credibility of physical education.

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The third problem relates to the complex issue of learning how to be an effective teacher and, more specifically, effective with regard to assessment and evaluation. Both preservice and novice teachers must take the theoretical information that has been presented to them in the classroom—often without the chance to adequately apply what they have learned—and apply it in the complex ecology of a physical education class.

Although the history of assessment and evaluation in physical education has not been a stellar one and significant barriers remain, philosophical and pedagogical changes are taking place that allow us to be optimistic about how assessment will be better aligned with learning objectives and tasks. As a profession, we are beginning to understand that if assessment and evaluation are carefully designed and effectively administered they will (1) promote student interest and engagement, while concomitantly decreasing off-task behavior (Lund, 1992; Wright & van der Mars, 2004); (2) allow students to know and understand the reasons for their present level of performance, as well as what is required to improve this performance (Boyce, 1990; Miller, 2006); and (3) give the physical education teacher accurate information regarding the effectiveness and/or appropriateness of their instruction (Johnson, 2008).

As has been noted by Gallo, Sheehy, Patton, and Griffin (2006), a strong commitment to well-designed assessment is required if any positive change is to take place. In light of the lack of value currently assigned to physical education, it would be wise for teachers to commit to a philosophical shift and change assessment and evaluation practices not only to enhance instructional processes and student learning but to add worth to the field. While teachers committing to change is imperative, providing them with sound strategies that can be implemented relatively easily is also important.

Stiggins, Arter, Chappuis, and Chappuis (2004) have outlined five dimensions that will provide the underpinnings for strong assessment:

1. *Clear Purpose.* Why the assessment is being conducted, who will use the results, and in what fashion the results will be used must be clear to all stakeholders. Also, how does the purpose of this particular assessment fit into the larger educational picture?

2. *Clear Targets.* What is being targeted should be clearly articulated and defined in such a way that students, teachers, and administrators agree as to what the target is.

3. *Sound Design.* As assessments must be designed to reflect student achievement accurately, teachers must ascertain whether the chosen tool is appropriate and ensure that it is used in a manner that allows them to make appropriate inferences. Specifically, is the chosen tool valid, reliable, and appropriate for the purpose at hand (i.e., is there a balance between practicality and accuracy, given how high the stakes are)? Does the assessment adequately sample student performance to a degree that allows accurate assumptions regarding the student's abilities, and is the chosen assessment free of bias (a charge that has been leveled against physical educators who evaluate students on loosely defined, subjective impressions of effort, attitude, and/or participation)?

4. *Effective Communication.* It is important that communication with the intended users be planned as an integral part of the assessment. The results of the assessment and evaluation should be accurately recorded and readily understood by all the stakeholders.

5. *Student Involvement.* Students should be involved in multiple aspects of assessment including, but not limited to, peer-assessment, self-assessment, tracking their own progress, and goal setting. Additionally, student involvement would include a discussion of his or her target skills and how these skills would be assessed.

An understanding of how these five elements interact to increase the likelihood of student learning has been referred to by Melograno (2007) as *assessment literacy*. The remainder of this article will examine the importance of embedding the assessment in instruction, as well as issues related to grading that add value to physical education.

Embedding Assessment in Instruction

When teachers regard assessment as vital to effective teaching, assessment more easily becomes a natural part of physical education. Embedding assessment in instructional tasks helps promote student learning. In addition, it is important to keep the *context* of the lesson or unit in mind. If an assessment technique is chosen irrespective of class length, the number of lessons in the unit, the number of students in the class, or the students' age, developmental level, and behavioral skills, it is destined to fail (Johnson, 2005).

Authentic assessment (Miller, 2006; Wood, 1996) is an approach that has received widespread support in the educational community. Authentic assessments can be embedded in instruction such that students "perform real-world

tasks that demonstrate meaningful application of essential knowledge and skills" (Mueller, 2011, par.1). An example of inauthentic, contrived assessment would be to have a tennis player drop and hit a tennis ball from a stationary position, using a forehand stroke, to a designated target in the opponent's backcourt. According to the rules of tennis, this task would never occur in an actual match. Assessing the quality and/or accuracy of a student's forehand stroke during an actual tennis rally would be a far more authentic way to gauge his or her skill level with regard to the forehand. In this second example, the assessment is embedded in the task. The teacher would have the opportunity to observe the stroke, how the student moves to the ball, handles low and high balls, hits to different parts of the court depending on his or her and the opponent's court position, and chooses the right spin and pace to use on the shot.

Authentic assessment not only increases the likelihood of judging a student's true abilities while performing meaningful skills that will be used in the "real world," but also reduces the often subjective nature of assessment and evaluation. Additionally, the ongoing and authentic nature of this approach will hold students more accountable for their performance during physical education and lead to increased on-task behavior.

Grading: Issues to Consider

A grade is simply a mark that is used to inform students and parents about a student's progress. They are used by administrators to determine whether a student was successful in an educational experience and by teachers to hold students accountable for student effort and achievement (Rink, 2010).

There is no doubt that physical education presents a number of unique challenges when it comes to accurately grading students. These include, but are not limited to, a large number of students often spread out over significant distances and an existing assessment and evaluation culture wherein such variables as attendance, showering, and good behavior have traditionally counted for a majority of the grade. This last point has much to do with two particularly negative outcomes for our profession. First, there is the public perception that physical education is not a subject area that is to be taken seriously. Understandably, people will look suspiciously at a field of study where passing the course often requires little more than turning up wearing the appropriate clothing, giving minimal effort (often subjectively determined), and acting in a loosely defined, respectful fashion. Although very important, variables such as these are *prerequisites* for learning to occur and should not be considered learning goals to be evaluated and factored in for a grade (Melograno, 2007).

Secondly, students quickly learn what is valued by the teacher and thus expected of them. If students are held accountable only for such managerial skills as dressing out and arriving to class on time, that is where their efforts will lie. Too often, this is where our evaluative and grading efforts have gone in physical education. The question is, of course,

are students going to learn important material related to physical education if we are not holding them accountable for this learning? Too often, the answer is no. But, even if we loudly protest that our students *are* learning, without any data, how do we know?

O'Conner (2002) has provided a number of guidelines that should be kept in mind when grading students, especially in a climate of high stakes, standards-based physical education:

1. Relate grading procedures to standards.
2. Base the final grade on a number of assessments that relate to the student's individual achievement, not on their achievement relative to other individuals. That means no bell curve.
3. Relate factors in the grade to achievement. Simply stated, important reporting variables such as dressing for class, participation, and attitude should be reported separately, if desired, but should not be a component of the final grade.
4. Sample student performance. Although a single, high-stakes assessment is clearly inappropriate in determining a final grade, every assessment does not have to be used for a summative or evaluative purpose.
5. Provide a number of assessment opportunities. While you should give precedence to more recent evidence, give students more than one opportunity to demonstrate their skill.
6. Examine the numbers carefully. Keep in mind that extreme scores have a disproportionate effect on the final score. Therefore, consider using the median or mode, as opposed to the mean.
7. Carefully record and maintain records. Whether using rubrics, portfolios, journals, or written tests, the data should be recorded accurately and stored carefully.
8. Involve students. It is imperative to let students know how, when, where, and why they will be evaluated and involve them in the process (as self- and peer assessors). Keep them apprised of their progress throughout the term.

Summary

To sum up, we assess, evaluate, and grade for a number of reasons. First, our assessments provide information about student learning and performance. Second, we find out about the quality of our instruction and our programs. Last, but not least, if physical education teachers fail to assess or base grades on variables such as being prepared, effort, and participation, we are setting our profession up to be marginalized further. In 1987, Hensley, Lambert, Baumgartner, and Stillwell stated, "It is likely that the survival of our profession may, to some extent, depend on the efficacy of our measurement and evaluation effort" (p. 61). Twenty-four years later, we find ourselves carefully examining the role of assessment and evaluation with regard to the ultimate survival of our field.

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