

THE OLYMPIC IDEA AS EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITY

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In Ancient Olympia in Greece, the International Olympic Academy hosts a general session on the theme of fair play for 300 young athletes from all over the world. International experts present papers, and participants engage in small group discussions on the grounds of the Academy not far from the site of the ancient Olympic stadium. In Russia, the Olympic Games are a required course for students in high school. Topics on the course include the ancient games and ancient Olympic sports, and the history, highlights and problems of the modern Olympic Games. In Singapore, a National Olympic Academy involves 200 physical education students in a simulation of an Olympic Games Opening Ceremony, complete with handmade flags, a torch and improvised cultural program – followed by discussions on multicultural applications in school curricula. In South Africa, a teacher adapts an activity in the “Mind, Body and Spirit” theme of an international teacher’s resource book based on the Olympic idea to inspire his students to hike vigorously up the mountain behind the school. In Peru, coaches in Cuzco discuss the potential of a school theme on the Olympics to motivate Inca young people to apply their excellent oxygen-carrying physiques in high altitude running competitions. In Australia, an interactive CD-ROM called *aspire* invites young people to examine environmental issues related to the construction of facilities for the Sydney Olympic Games through the medium of virtual technology. All of these are examples of the Olympic philosophy¹ in action for educational purposes. I participated in one way or another in all of them, and can confirm the imaginative and compelling appeal of the Olympic idea as education for both adults and children.

What is Olympic Education?

¹ As Wirkus (1992) points out, “Olympism” has neither the methodological or conceptual foundations to be called a “philosophy.” De Coubertin understood this and explained that his Olympic philosophy was really a “state of mind.” German Olympic education scholars avoid the use of the word “philosophy” and use the phrase “Olympic idea.” The same practice will henceforth be followed here.

“The Olympic idea cannot be understood without an understanding of its educational mission.”²

Most Olympic scholars give Pierre de Coubertin, a French educational reformer, the credit for articulating and promoting the educational ideas of the Games that came to be known as *Olympism*. The original version of the Olympic Charter, written by de Coubertin and his International Olympic Committee (1896), listed four general aims:

1. To promote the development of those physical and moral qualities which are the basis of sport
2. To education young people through sport in a spirit of better understanding between each other and of friendship, thereby helping to build a better and more peaceful world
3. To spread the Olympic principles throughout the world, thereby creating international goodwill
4. To bring together the athletes of the world in a great four-yearly sports festival, the Olympic Games.

The reforms in teaching and instruction methods that de Coubertin wanted are based on the idea of the unity of mind and body in the development of human beings and self-improvement through participation in sport. Fair play, friendship, peace and international goodwill belong to the list of values that are incorporated within the concept of *Olympism*. The late 1900s was an era of reform and of a naive and growing belief in the influence of formal schooling on the development of young people in Europe and North America. Impressed by educational reforms at English schools such as Rugby, de Coubertin became convinced that the locus of school reform should be sport and physical education. He launched a campaign to have physical activity included in his nation’s educational curriculum. The Olympic Games were intended to be an event that would bring great athletes together in order to inspire participation in games and sport by other young men.

For Pierre de Coubertin and those who helped him establish the International Olympic Committee and the modern Olympic cycle, the Olympic Games were not simply to be an athletic event, but the focal point for a broadly based social

² Gessman, R. (1992). Olympische Erziehung und ihre schulische Umsetzung. Olympische Erziehung in der Schule unter besonderer Berueksichtigung des Fair-Plan Gedandens. Dokumentation zur 1. bundesweiten Lehrerfortbildungsveranstaltung des NOK fuer Deutschland, Olympia 1.-15.9, 1991.

movement which, through the activity of sport and play, would enhance human development and generally make the world a better place to live.³

From the first Congress in 1894, when the International Olympic Committee (IOC) was formed until his retirement in 1925, de Coubertin made ongoing efforts to convince the IOC to take its role on behalf of physical education seriously. Eight out of the twelve Olympic Congresses held between 1894 and 1994 were organized by Pierre de Coubertin before 1926 to promote his educational objectives.⁴ Ultimately he began to realize that the IOC would never be able to address his ideas, that it was preoccupied with technical details. In 1925 De Coubertin resigned from the I.O.C. and organized other organizations to promote physical education—the International Bureau of Sports Pedagogy and the Union Pédagogique Universelle.

Olympic education and the meaning of “Olympism” within the context of Olympic sport returned to the agenda of the IOC in large part through the efforts of the International Olympic Academy. For decades, scholars there have engaged in discussions on the meaning of the term “Olympism” and on definitions of “Olympic Education.” Alumni of the IOA have initiated national academies in their own countries, and have continued to promote the educational mandate ideas of de Coubertin’s “Olympic idea.” There is now general agreement on the main pedagogical ideas of Olympic education. These include striving for excellence in physical endeavours, fair play, learning acceptance and respect for diversity leading to international understanding, and integration of culture and sport. Environmental awareness has been added to the list in the past decade.

Thus Olympic education is ethical education. It is, therefore, much more than learning the facts about Olympic Games or Olympic sports, ancient or modern. The Olympic Games provide a pedagogical context for the teaching/learning of certain values: values related to health and participation in physical activities, values related to fair play, values related to multiculturalism and diversity, values related to culture and beauty, values related to care and protection of the environment. The preliminary findings from my current research on an international Olympic education project seem to indicate that these values are shared in most cultures that currently participate in

3 Kidd, B. (1985). The legacy of Pierre de Coubertin. Unpublished paper. Vancouver, B.C.: National Olympic Academy of Canada, p. 1.

4 Mueller, N. (1994). One hundred years of Olympic Congresses: 1894-1944 (Ingrid Sonnleitner-Hauber, Trans.). Lausanne: International Olympic Committee, p. 13.

Olympic Games, although the specifics of how they are taught and learned varies widely. The fact that the Olympic Movement is beset by ethical dilemmas related to doping, cheating, corruption and commercialism only emphasizes the importance of addressing the need for a proactive and pedagogically responsible Olympic education initiative in the countries where billions are spent in the pursuit of Olympic medals.

Main Components of Olympic Education

In attempting to define “Olympic Education” the most important question to ask is “for whom?” Who is being “educated” by an Olympic education theme or program? It is the answer to this question that defines what Olympic education is for particular sectors in the community. The fact that there are many different answers to this question means that there are many different versions of Olympic education. Olympic education for athletes who are competing for Olympic Games will be quite a different program from Olympic education for young children in schools. Olympic education for sports media will have very information and activities from an Olympic education module in a coaching program. A traditional, didactic, teacher and single textbook-centred educational system will have a very different approach to Olympic education from educational systems that are more learner-centred and able to work from multiple resources and with advanced technology.

It is my hope that in this section of the FIEP Bulletin, titled “Olympic Forum” professors and teachers from many countries of the world will share their Olympic education initiatives – for athletes, for the media, for coaches, for the community, and of course for schools and children. Gradually, this Bulletin will thereby assemble a number of examples of good practice and begin to answer the question “What are the components of Olympic education? The next Olympic Forum will explore the progress of a project of the Greek Foundation of Olympic and Sport Education to bring an international teacher’s resource book to the schools of the world. The results of the research in this project have provided interesting information about the application of Olympic theory in diverse cultural contexts, and also about whether an educational theme based on the Olympic idea can contribute to changes in students’ behaviours.

A Conclusion With a Personal Touch

When I began working on the Olympic curriculum project for the Calgary Olympic Winter Games (1988) I thought that the Olympic Games was an athletic event—the

pinnacle of elite sport competitions. As such, from my perspective as a teacher and curriculum writer, they provided an excellent context for some relevant and interesting activities for schools, especially in our city where the Games were being held. What was completely unknown to me then was their roots in an educational reform movement. It is this compelling aspect of the Games, with its echoes back to ancient times, that has made them something quite different from every other sport event during the one hundred years of their modern history.

Since then I have been engaged in many activities related to Olympic and fair play education. I have consulted worldwide on Olympic education, lectured several times at the International Olympic Academy, and am the editor/author of the following books:

- *Come Together: the Olympics and You* (1986 & 87), three binders of materials which connected the theme of the Olympic Games to interdisciplinary themes in physical education, health, social studies, language arts and science—written for the Calgary Olympic Winter Games Organizing Committee
- *Fair Play for Kids: A Handbook of Activities for Teaching Fair Play*. (1990 & 1995). Fair Play Canada.
- *Keep the Spirit Alive: You and the Olympic Games*. (1995). A publication of the IOC Commission for the International Olympic Academy and Olympic Education.
- *Celebrate the Spirit: The Olympic Games*. (1995). Orca Books – with Cleve Dheensaw.
- *Be A Champion in Life*. (2000). Athens Foundation of Olympic and Sport Education.

I am currently completing a PhD program in Curriculum Studies at the University of Alberta in Canada. My research focusses on the question of whether the Olympic idea is an appropriate context for international cross-cultural curriculum initiatives. I look forward to your communications. Until then...