

Challenges and Models for Successful Olympic Education Initiatives at the Grassroots Level

Deanna Binder,
Educational Design International

Introductory Note

Olympic education in its broadest sense encompasses the workshops and leadership training of Olympic solidarity, the research and scholarly study of sport historians and sociologists, the public relations efforts of the International Olympic Committee (IOC), its sponsors and its affiliates, as well as the school curricula, handbooks and projects of Olympic Games organizing committees: National Olympic Committees (NOCs) and National Olympic Academies (NOAs). It also encompasses a large variety of initiatives for children and youth. The concepts presented in this paper highlight these grassroots Olympic education initiatives.

Historical Context

*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 movement which, through the activity of sport and play, would enhance human development and generally make the world a better place to live.*¹

The formulation and spread of Olympism became the Baron de Coubertin's most ardently pursued mission during his lifetime. The term Olympism connotes a philosophy of social reform aimed at peace and international understanding. Coubertin's concept of Olympism embraced sport as a worthy moral and social initiative, one which might

*contribute to a state of harmony and understanding among men.*²

Not all Olympic scholars credit Coubertin as being the sole inspiration behind a revival of the Olympic Games³, but all credit him with imbuing the modern Olympic Games with a philosophy called *Olympism*. This philosophy would make the Games different from any "other variety of athletic competition."⁴ In his efforts to promote the deeper significance of the Olympic ideals and their educational possibilities through the Olympic Games, de Coubertin published 20 books, 30 brochures and about 1100 magazine and newspaper articles. He called eight Olympic Congresses between 1894 and 1925, expanded the program of the Olympic Games by including art competitions, and became involved in the establishment of communal sports centres.⁵ After he left the IOC in 1925 he continued his efforts on behalf of physical education through the Educational World Union, and the International Office for Sports Education, both of which he founded.

Coubertin made ongoing efforts to convince the IOC to take its educational role seriously. Eight out of the twelve Olympic Congresses held between 1894 and 1994 were organized by Pierre de Coubertin to promote his educational objectives for the Olympic Games.⁶ At one level the subsequent leadership of the IOC appreciated the symbols, ceremonies and principles he either created or endorsed which made an Olympic Games different from other world sport festivals. Few, however, understood his philosophy, or supported his campaign to use the Olympic Games as a focal point for the promotion of educational objectives, among them the entrenchment of physical education in the educational systems of his country and in the rest of the world. Mueller reports that although Coubertin was still leading the IOC, the reports of the Olympic Congresses during the first three decades of this century practically ignored their pedagogical discussions, and focused on the technical discussions. Mueller writes, "Thus began a significant change which still continues today."⁷

Shortly before his death in 1937, Coubertin proposed to the German government the establishment of a "Centre for Olympic Studies" in Berlin, independent of the IOC. Carl Diem, the dedicated Secretary General

Olympic Perspectives

of the Organizing Committee of the Olympic Games in 1936, who had worked very hard to integrate Coubertin's educational principles with the organization of the Berlin Games, became the head of the "International Olympic Institute" set up in Berlin in 1938.⁸

Diem and a small group of like-minded Olympic supporters picked up the torch of Coubertin's vision for Olympic education, and kept the flame alive through subsequent decades. In 1961, after almost two decades of discussions interrupted by WW II, and numerous other delays, Carl Diem and John Ketses (Secretary-General of the Hellenic (Greek) Olympic Committee), realized their dream of establishing an International Olympic Academy in Olympia, Greece. Envisioned as a "high school of Olympism," it was hoped the Academy would bring the Olympic ideals closer to youth.⁹ Since 1961, thousands of people have participated in the various seminars and workshops of the Academy.

Year after year, we welcome groups of young people who come here, to the very spot where the Olympic Games of Ancient Greece took place, in order to share in an unforgettable experience under the guidance of Olympism's most prestigious educational institution, the International Olympic Academy.

We are living in an age when nearly all aspects of life in a large part of the world are dominated by the sophisticated machines and technology of the end of the 20th century... It is for these reasons that Olympism is so useful and necessary to our society. Blending sport with culture and education, it strives to create a style of life founded on the joy of effort and the respect of universal ethical principles. Its aim is to promote the establishment of a peaceful society with the concern to preserve human dignity (Juan Antonio Samaranch, President, IOC)¹⁰

Former participants of the International Olympic Academy (IOA) became "Olympism ambassadors"

Centre for Olympic Studies

promoting the ideals of the Olympic Movement within the educational and sport contexts of their own countries and cultures. Mueller reports that responses to questionnaires to delegates of the IOA¹¹ confirm that an IOA experience is "an important part of their (delegates) *personal and professional development, and one which they passed on to their own circles in various ways.*"¹² As early as 1968, Spain had founded its "Centro de Estudio Olimpicos" with the Instituto Nacional de Educacion Fisica. The first National Olympic Academy was launched in the United States of America in 1976. By 1995 Olympic educators in sixty-two countries were organizing National Olympic Academies. Initiatives to promote a grassroots understanding and support for the spirit of Olympism often emanate from the enthusiastic and committed delegates of these institutions.

Coubertin's goal of using the Olympic Movement to "contribute to building a peaceful and better world by educating youth through sport practised without discrimination of any kind and in the Olympic spirit, which requires mutual understanding with a spirit of friendship, solidarity and fair play," (Olympic Charter, 1994, Fundamental Principle #6) may be more of a reality now than it ever was. What is important is that these initiatives be developed within the frameworks of appropriate educational principles, and be distributed and promoted in a way that ensures their use.

Education and Learning: Important Principles

Effective education involves a dynamic integration of content (what to teach/learn), process (how to teach/learn) and intent (why to teach/learn). Most educational jurisdictions in the world blend these elements with their own priorities to create educational policies and practices. Often these policies and practices are in constant revision as new curriculum development models or educational trends become popular, or as the political winds shift the priorities. Generally, more traditional approaches use *content* as the starting point for curriculum development. Since the 1980's, however, there has been a profound shift in the approach to curriculum design. With the development of the theories of learning and teaching styles¹³ educators around the world are as likely to ask the question, "How will we engage the interest and participation of our learners?/How can we facilitate the

Olympic Perspectives

Centre for Olympic Studies

process?” as “What do we teach?” To emphasize the importance of the learner in the *process* of education, curriculum documents are being rewritten in terms of what students should learn rather than in terms of what teachers should teach. And when curriculum developers approach the challenge of developing programs that will engage the participation of learners, they face the questions “Why should students learn this?” “Why should teachers teach this?” Creating *intent* to learn, i.e. motivation, in order to engage the participation of the learner is an important component of successful instructional design for any educational initiative-curriculum documents, textbooks, teacher handbooks, lesson plans, or Olympic education programs.

Although educational priorities within any educational jurisdiction reflect important political and social priorities, solid research supports the principles of learning which now guide curriculum development. The Principles of Learning, summarized below appear in the curriculum guides of the province of British Columbia in Canada. Similar statements can be found in the curriculum documents of many different countries.

1. Learning requires the active participation of the learner.

- Learning is natural and enjoyable, but it requires effort.
- Examining one’s own beliefs and knowledge is essential for successful learning.
- Feedback to people about the learning that they demonstrate is very important.

2. People learn in a variety of ways and at different rates.

- As children grow, learning shifts from a focus on self, and from reasoning based mainly on objects and personal experiences, to more abstract ways of thinking. Each child’s approach to learning is to some degree unique, reflecting personal interests, abilities, and experiences; the pace of learning also varies.

3. Learning is both an individual and a social process.

- Learning involves the construction of knowledge and meaning by individuals.
- Social interaction provides opportunities to examine one’s knowledge and beliefs, and contributes to the motivation to learn.¹⁴

Whatever the content of an Olympic education initiative, its success will depend on the degree to which it engages the participation of learners, both teachers and students - teachers because most of them have to learn about “Olympism” before they can teach it, and students, because their intention to learn and to participate are required elements of the educational process.

Olympic Education: An Overview

Olympic education curricula throughout the world reflect two very different developmental approaches. One approach focuses on the teachings of Pierre de Coubertin and “Olympism” as the core content of the curricula. Another focuses on the integration of Olympic themes and topics with content and process objectives of existing educational programs. One emphasizes the content of Olympism; the other emphasizes the integration of Olympic content with existing curricula in order to enhance intention to learn and engage students in an active learning process.

Throughout the history of the Olympic Movement, and through many former and current lectures of both the international and national Olympic academies, the first approach has been championed by Olympic officials, historians and scholars of Pierre de Coubertin.¹⁵ A number of factors have frustrated their efforts. One is that although Coubertin and others have written and lectured copiously on the principles and aspirations of Olympism, the term has eluded a simple and clear definition which could form a basis for practical school/physical education initiatives. Secondly, IOC officials and participants have traditionally been much more interested in the technical aspects of sport than in a social reform movement. Thirdly, efforts which have extended decades to promote Olympic education often failed to take into consideration the practical realities and constraints and educational priorities of the target audiences of an Olympic education initiative. These include educational officials, teachers, students,

Olympic Perspectives

parents, and youth group leaders. As a frustrated Coubertin himself ascertained, there was-and is still-resistance to increasing the attention and importance paid to physical education in regular school curricula.

With respect to the factor of fuzzy definitions of the concept of Olympism, a gradual revival of interest in the promotion of Olympism during the 1970s and '80s lead to an important revision of the Olympic Charter in 1990, including a new definition of Olympism. It also included a clear statement of the important role of the IOC in the promotion of the philosophy of the Olympic Movement.¹⁶

- *Olympism is a philosophy of life, exalting and combining in a balanced whole the qualities of body, will and mind. Blending sport with culture and education, Olympism seeks to create a way of life based on the joy found in effort, the educational value of good example and respect for universal fundamental ethical principles.*
- *The goal of Olympism is to place everywhere sport at the service of the harmonious development of man, with a view to encouraging the establishment of a peaceful society concerned with the preservation of human dignity.*
- *The Olympic Movement, led by the IOC stems from modern Olympism.*

Olympic educators also began to rework the abstractions of Coubertin's "Olympism" by developing lists of universal, practical and relevant goals or aspirations of Olympism.¹⁷ As well as undertaking the work of describing, comparing and analyzing existing Olympic educational programs using the goals and aspirations of Olympism as an analytical tool.¹⁸ A condensed version of Kidd's list of the goals and aspirations of Olympism follows:

1. Mass Participation: the expansion of opportunities for sport and play to create what de Coubertin called "the democracy of youth";
2. Sport as Education: the development of opportunities that are genuinely educational, that assist both individuals and groups in the process of knowledge;

Centre for Olympic Studies

3. Sportsmanship: the fostering of a high standard of sportsmanship, that de Coubertin called "the new code of chivalry". Today the world refers to this same concept as "fair play".
4. Cultural Exchange: the integration of the visual and performing arts into the Olympic celebrations.
5. International Understanding: the creation of a movement whose membership transcends racial, religious, political and economic categories, a brotherhood that promotes understanding and thus contributes to world peace.
6. Excellence: the pursuit of excellence in performance.

In this same period of time, while IOC and participants at various international and national Olympic academies were once again expounding the benefits of the educational potential of the Olympic Movement, and advocating Olympic curricula based on the principles of Olympism; school educators, youth group leaders and visionaries within Olympic organizing committees were recognizing the motivational potential of an Olympic Games for learning. Programs which are characteristic of this second approach to Olympic education began, not with Pierre de Coubertin's Olympism, but with an identification of existing curriculum topics, themes, goals and objectives where there was congruence with the events and spirit of an Olympic Games. A variety of Olympic education materials were developed to assist the teacher, youth group leader or Olympic educator to integrate "Olympic studies" with their existing programs.¹⁹

*(We wanted to) use the Olympic Games as a framework and motivation for creativity, for pedagogical work and for developing new competence.*²⁰

The Olympic Games created the "golden situation" for learning.²¹

...the mystique of the Olympics that creates so much interest and enthusiasm through the mass media can be a powerful motivator for learning. Special events like the Olympic Games create relevance for classroom assignments. The Olympics can become a focus for studies of ancient cultures in Social

Olympic Perspectives

Studies, for problem-solving in Mathematics, for writing Olympic-moment stories or role-playing interviews with athletes in Language Arts, and for illustrating or sculpting athletes in action in Fine Arts...²²

...an Olympic theme can be an effective teaching strategy. Concepts in history (e.g., classical Greece), in geography (Olympic participants, locations of former Olympic Games), in literature and creative writing, in art, music, mathematics, sciences (e.g., biology) can be related to Olympic studies. In most school systems, Olympic studies components can be integrated without interfering with the prescribed curricula.²³

As one of the most pressing global educational themes, fair play campaigns and campaigns to reduce violence and racism bring Olympic and school objectives throughout the world together. Furthermore one of the important contributions of Olympic-related educational projects is the support they offer for physical education.

*Physical educators in most systems consistently do battle to convince administrators and decision-makers that education for a lifetime of active living is just as important to mental and emotional health as mathematics or biology. Regrettably physical education often remains an isolated component of a school curriculum, both in elementary and secondary schools.. Its importance to lifelong health and well-being is still sadly undervalued. With an Olympic theme, sport and physical activity become the focus of study in a number of subject areas, giving school-wide legitimacy to physical activities and competitions of all types.*²⁴

A Successful Olympic Education Model

Criticism of some of the examples of Olympic curricula which exemplify the second approach, focused on a

Centre for Olympic Studies

lack of attention to Pierre de Coubertin's goals for Olympic education in these programs, and also on the inadequacy of content to fully achieve the stated objectives of the program.

*When viewed overall, the Olympic questions of ethics education in the elementary binder (of the Calgary Winter Games educational program) have not been directly addressed. References have been hidden within individual chapters, and receive only oblique and fanciful attention. (unofficial translation from the German)*²⁵

These same researchers, however, also noted the rather overwhelming popularity of these programs among teachers. In a survey conducted by the Canadian Olympic Association, 97% of teachers responded strongly in the affirmative to a question about whether they would use the material again.²⁶

These two observations highlight the challenge for Olympic educators in choosing between the first and second approach to Olympic education. In the first approach, curriculum development would begin with the important content to be included, i.e. the goals and aspirations of Olympism. Activities which promote understanding and actualization of these goals would be developed. Physical education would be an important focal point. Unfortunately, the experience of decades would seem to indicate that in the reality of school systems around the world, a program built in this way would receive limited uptake by teachers and school officials.

The reality is that all Olympic education programs are optional resources for teachers and schools. Whether any of the materials in any Olympic education program is used, depends on whether a particular teacher or a particular school finds ideas or activities in the resource which will be useful teaching tools. When teachers are directly involved in the development of Olympic curricula, as in the second approach, their main objective is to integrate Olympic topics and themes with the content, processes and required outcomes of the existing curricula, assuring their usefulness to other teachers. They look for congruence between the Olympic Games and Olympic philosophy, and the

Olympic Perspectives

existing objectives and content of their programs. They use the Olympic Games to create intention or motivation for learning. The challenge for curriculum developers using the second approach is to assure that the material in the program achieves both sets of goals: that it creates intention to learn, involves students actively in the processes of learning, and assists teachers in the realization of their own content goals, while informing, promoting and activating the goals and aspirations of Olympism.

Another concern about a global model for the development and implementation of Olympic education is based on an observation that educational systems and cultures throughout the world are so different, and that any Olympic education initiative would have to be custom-made to suit particular educational jurisdictions and cultures. From a bureaucratic perspective this is probably an accurate assumption. The first response of educational officials to a suggestion of making Olympism a part of their curricula is to note that there is already too much content in the curricula, and teachers don't have time anyway. It's true. They don't. Which is why Coubertin and other have never had much success imposing their particular philosophy on already overloaded and sometimes fossilized educational systems.

It has been the experience of this author, however, that the grassroots leaders-teachers and leaders of youth groups- in countries on every continent welcome the suggestions and materials which help them create intention to learn through the integration of Olympic and sport themes, issues and information. Olympic themes, ideas and issues can help them teach what they are supposed to teach, if their focus is on creating intention to learn, actively involving the learner in the process of learning.

Teachers in many school systems also:

1. Encourage mass participation in physical activity by helping every student become physically fit and able to maintain an optimum level of bodily health;
2. Promote sport as education by reinforcing the importance of teamwork and cooperation in achieving common aims;
3. Teach fair play and sportsmanship;

Centre for Olympic Studies

4. Support cultural exchanges as a way of developing appreciation for and encouraging talent in the performing and visual arts;

5. Promote international tolerance and understanding. Studies of other cultures are featured in most school curricula, and there is increasing emphasis on multiculturalism and on reducing racism;

6. Encourage excellence. Often the emphasis in schools is on academic excellence, but recent educational research highlights the importance of helping students develop self-esteem by becoming the best that they can be in whatever they undertake.

At least some of these goals and aspirations of Olympism appear in various ways, and with varying degrees of emphasis in the curriculum documents of most educational jurisdictions throughout the world. Certainly they are a common concern for today's teachers.

An Olympic theme can be linked to any games day or special event in any community. During a workshop for teachers in Cuzco, teachers of Inca ancestry were eagerly discussing the potential of integrating some Olympic symbolism with their traditional ceremonies of the sun. Such initiatives may give pause to certain purist Olympic scholars, but they certainly highlight the potential of Olympic education to bridge cultures and systems.

The revised Olympic Charter, 1994, notes that the "*goal of the Olympic Movement is to contribute to building a peaceful and better world by educating youth through sport practised without discrimination of any kind and in the Olympic spirit, which requires mutual understanding with a spirit of friendship, solidarity and fair play.*" (Fundamental Principle #6). Creative instructional design will assure that future Olympic education programs meet not only the criteria of schools for effective learning resources, but also promote, through every activity, the goals and aspirations of the Olympic Movement.

Endnotes

1. B. Kidd, "Paper presented to the 1985 Olympic Academy of Canada," University of British Columbia, June 23-24, 1985, p. 1.
2. R. Barney, "Born from Dilemma: America Awakens to the Modern Olympic Games, 1901-1903." *Olympika: The International Journal of Olympic Studies*, Vol. 1, 1992, p. 120.
3. See D. Young, "The Origins of the Modern Olympics," in *The International Journal of the History of Sport*, Vol. IV, No. 3, 1994, pp. 271-300.
4. Pierre de Coubertin, "Religio Athletae," *Bulletin du Bureau International de Pedagogie Sportive*, Vol. 1, 1928, pp. 5-6. For a discussion of Coubertin's concept of the Olympic Games as a type of religion see Arnd Krüger, "The Origins of Pierre de Coubertin's Religio Athletae," in *Olympika: The International Journal of Olympic Studies*, Vol. II, 1993, pp. 91-100.
5. N. Mueller, "30 Years of the International Olympic Academy (IOA) - The Legacy of Pierre de Coubertin and Carl Diem," in N. Mueller, *International Olympic Academy (IOA), 1961-1990*, Lausanne, International Olympic Committee, 1992, p.III.
6. N. Mueller, *One Hundred Years of Olympic Congresses: 1894-1994*, Lausanne, International Olympic Committee, 1994.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 16.
8. Carl Diem with John Ketseas, the Secretary-General of the Hellenic (Greek) Olympic Committee (HOC) planned the first torch relay for the Berlin Games. The torch relay has become an important educational and inspirational symbol of the Olympic spirit. It is one event which young people in any part of the world can simulate.
9. N. Mueller, 1992, p. IV.
10. *Ibid.*
11. J.A. Samaranch, "Address to the 32nd Session of the International Olympic Academy," *International Olympic Academy, Thirty-Second Session, 17th June - 2nd July 1992*, p. 26.
12. According to Mueller, surveys of former IOA delegates were carried out in 1968-70, 1973, 1989 and 1990. See N. Mueller, 1992, p. XV.
13. *Ibid.*
14. A. Gregorc, "Learning/Teaching Styles: Their Nature and Effects," in *Student Learning Styles and Brain Behavior*, NASSP Monograph, October/November, 1979. See K. Butler, *Learning and Teaching Style in Theory and Practice*, Columbia CT, The Learner's Dimension, 1984/86 for a practical

discussion of the classroom implications of Gregorc's work.

15. Province of British Columbia, Ministry of Education. *Enabling Learners: Highlights - Year 2000: A framework for Learning*. 1991.
16. N. Mueller, "Olympism as a Subject for School Education. Pedagogical Thoughts on an 'Olympic Curriculum' Within National School Programs," Paper presented to the International Olympic Academy, 9th International Session for Educators, July 5-12, 1990.
17. *Olympic Charter*, Lausanne, International Olympic Committee, 1994, pp.10- 11. (Fundamental Principles 2,3 & 4).
18. B. Kidd, 1985, pp. 4-14, and N. Mueller, 1990, pp. 2-5.
19. M. Spangenberg, "Olympische Erziehungsprogramme für die Schulen. Ein internationaler Vergleich unter Berücksichtigung der Lehrziele, didaktischen Konzepte und pädagogischen Wirkung," unpub. Diplomarbeit (draft), Fachbereich Sport der Johannes-Gutenberg-Universität, 1994.
20. Before the Los Angeles Olympic Games of 1984, for example, the United States Olympic Committee produced *The Olympics: An Educational Opportunity: Enrichment Units (K-7, 7-9, Senior High School); Come Together: the Olympics and You* (learning resources for elementary, junior and senior high schools) were distributed to schools by the Calgary 1988 Olympic Winter Games Organizing Committee; *OL på hjemmebane: bakgrunn, fakta, oppgaver* became the learning resource for a national Olympic education initiative by the Lillehammer Olympic Organizing Committee. Olympic Day and Olympic Week packages have been produced by the USOC and the German National Olympic Committee among others. Many NOCs and NOAs have launched Olympic Day celebrations with active participation by school children, produced posters, booklets, pamphlets and "goodies" for teachers, schools and youth group leaders, and worked with educational networks to distribute and promote their materials.
21. K. Helland, "The educational programme during the Olympics in Lillehammer - intentions and experiences before, during and after the Olympics," Paper presented to the International Olympic Academy, 2nd Joint International Session for Directors of NOAs, Members and Staff of NOCs and IFs, June, 1994, p. 1.
22. *Ibid.*, p. 11.

23. D. Binder, "Implementng Olympic Curricula in National School Programs," Paper presented to the International Olympic Academy, 1st Joint International Session for Directors of NOAs, Members and Staff of NOCs and IFS, May, 1992, p. 7.

24. Ibid., p. 8.

25. D. Binder, 1992, p. 11.

26. M. Spangenberger, 1994, p. 47.

27. Canadian Olympic Association, unpub. Survey, 1990.