Bubbles in the Classroom

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Every time I challenge students to think with movement and without words, the first reactions include the familiar blank stares and confused faces. In teaching physical fitness and wellness components, it is often too easy to spend most class time looking at facts and figures that reflect the success or failure of particular lifestyle behaviors. Students often forget that the theories and principles are just results of actually participating in movement activities and experiencing environmental interruptions. A health and fitness class that encourages movement and participation in lifelong activities by providing opportunities to experience them allows me to monitor my students' personal understanding of principles and their application. Experiential education, usually associated with outdoor education environments, additionally allows me to utilize activities that do not require an adherence to rigid structures which call for specific duration, frequencies, and intensities to acquire health-related benefits. More importantly, it demonstrates that an individual's concrete experience of an activity can be beneficial both on a personal and community level, since, as Kolb suggests, concrete experience and active experimentation is usually associated with an open-minded approach to life plus an ability to accomplish tasks (Kolb, 1996). Further, it allows creativity and spontaneity to be as large a part of health and fitness as is target heart ranges and proper nutrition.

Ashley Montagu states that "play is one of the most valuable traits of the human species," and that "play has led to the enormous broadening of perceptual horizons, new discoveries, further exploration, and mastery over the environment" (Montagu, 1989). In a time when social and instructional interactions can become isolating and depersonalized activities because of the increased use of computer technology, experiential education games and initiatives provide a complement that builds a community within the classroom.

One game I have used successfully in classroom settings involves the use of simple bubble-making toys. By having teams produce a variety of bubbles (longest-lasting, smallest, largest, multiple or most) in a variety of situations (standing, sitting, moving) it facilitates an understanding of breath control during movement, teamwork, communication and cooperation. Using such active games, students not only see the physiological effects from physical movement, but are also introduced to the principles of teamwork, compromise and sharing to obtain both personal and group goals. Initiatives, which build on the foundations laid by various games, are complex activities that build trust and problem-solving skills not only for the activity at hand, but for similar situations which would benefit from a similar approach. This first-hand experience changes the abstraction of ideas into practical applicable approaches useful not only for the classroom, but for life as well, if "one has to have experiences before they can be shared" (Reed, 1996).

Another benefit of using experiential methods allows students to view their instructor as a facilitator, whose role is not just to provide answers and dispense knowledge, but to help in the process of dynamic learning and facilitate the natural learning taking place for each individual student.

This allows me to gain measures of trust from the students by exemplifying mutual trust and respect during the activity. As an facilitator I am forced to assume a greater variety of roles than is usually exhibited in the classroom alone, and within the context of an experiential activity a student becomes an active participant in the learning process.

There is a central them inherent in one component of experiential education called "Challenge by Choice." This idea has two main principles which guide the participant in all types of activities: First, trying something is more important than succeeding or failing; Second, each individual decides personal limitations of what can be accomplished, but then attempts to extend the limitations. There are several benefits to this approach. It allows a student to take on challenges that are potentially difficult and intimidating with support and encouragement from their peers. A student has a chance to withdraw from a situation when confidence is lacking or the pressure to perform is great, while maintaining the opportunity to try again. A student has an opportunity to try difficult challenges with the recognition that the attempt is more significant than the outcome (Rohnke, 1991). The inherent idea from this approach is the realization on the student's part that risk-taking and pushing set limits can result in success and even unexpected gains.Certainly not all topics will be easily incorporated as experiential activities. However, activities can take other forms, such as peer instruction, peer challenge, and group-oriented problem solving tasks where students are challenged to take risks in an atmosphere of support and understanding. While incorporating such activities in a classroom reduces time spent on content, the increase in productive group dynamics can improve individual achievement, classroom productivity and raise the quality of work. By breaking down the classroom structure into comfortable environments, students are encouraged to take risks in what they perceive as non-academic situations, which can lead to increased self-confidence and further risk-taking in all situations, including participation in traditional classroom studies.