



How “PE” or “Physical Activity Education” Should React to the Arrival of the Discipline: Kinesiology

Earle F. Zeigler
Western University, Canada
E-mail: efzeigler@shaw.ca

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Abstract

Throughout human history a sort of mind-body-spirit “trichotomy” developed with “affairs of the body” having the lowest status.. A subject-matter termed “physical education” was finally introduced to America in the late 1800s by “physical activity enthusiasts” from European lands. Down through the twentieth century, physical education spawned a variety of other fields within education (e.g., health education). However, unprecedented confusion has prevailed since the question of “disciplinary status” for the field arose about 60 years ago. A disciplinary title, “kinesiology”, was to be substituted for that of physical (activity) education at the university level, a term used only for one course originally taught in the curriculum in the early 20th century. Whatever develops, those “kinesiologists” serving the field of education should understand that their mission is to work as physical activity and health educators with ALL of the children in the schools.

Keywords: kinesiology, physical activity and health education

Why should the physical activity educator within the public education system, a person who is also concurrently concerned also with related health and safety education, not worry about the fact that many colleges and universities are giving the name “kinesiology” to their related administrative units in which their first training unit is located? Lest the reader rise up in anger immediately and declare that I am a traitor to the field in which I have labored lo these past 73 years, my only request is to hear me out. I believe this discussion is necessitated by the unprecedented confusion that has prevailed since the question of “disciplinary status” for the field began to arise about 60 years ago. There is one caveat to what I have just said. My statement of approval holds only if in the process the quality of subsequent *professional* education received on the way to the baccalaureate degree remains at a high level!

To understand the ramifications of the prevailing situation where “complete confusion reigns” in North America as to what the many respective units should be named is a fairly long story. To address it accurately and fairly is the purpose of this essay. Historically, human physical activity has had a simultaneously glorious and shameful existence. It is a part of the very nature of the human world. This is an incontrovertible fact. It affects both the animate and inanimate aspects of our existence. It is a basic part of the fundamental pattern of living of every creature that has ever lived on the miniscule planet called Earth.

Early men and women knew human physical activity was important, but it was often not appreciated until it was gone, or almost gone. Semi-civilized men and women used it extensively in the early societies, as did the ancient Greeks and Romans and all others since. Some used physical activity vigorously, while others used it carefully and methodically. Human physical activity was used gracefully by some, ecstatically by others, rigorously by many when the need was urgent, and regularly by the vast majority who simply wanted to get the job done. Human physical activity was called many things in various tongues. But, strangely enough, it was never fully understood in a scientific sense.

The time came when human physical activity was considered less important in life. “Physical workers” earned less than “mental” workers.. Yet people still admired it when a human performed skillfully on special occasions. Some seemed to understand human physical movement instinctively, while others had great difficulty in employing it well. However, human physical activity in daily life was eventually degraded in modern society to such an extent that well-educated people often did not think that it had an important place in preparation for life. Others paid lip service to the need for it, but they, in the final analysis, would not give it its due. Others appreciated its worth in what could be termed “animal fitness,” but also felt it was less important than other aspects of education.

Nevertheless, planned human physical-activity movements persisted despite the onset of an advancing technological age. Some called it calisthenics. Others called it physical training. A determined Germanic group called it gymnastics, as ancient Greeks had done earlier. A few called it physical culture, but they unfortunately were thought to be men of “ill repute.” Others felt that it had been neglected in the preparation of the human for life. So, they did it a “favor” and called it “Physical Education”! (If they only knew...)

The Aftermath of a New Name

Physical education gradually prospered to a degree with this name, although, for many, this term was embarrassing because it classified PE as a second-class citizen in a mind-body-spirit triumvirate. This idea persisted even though, early in the 20th century, psychologists “declared” that the human organism was “unified.” This effectively killed the belief that the mind and body were separate. However, as they say, long-held beliefs die hard! Nevertheless, physical education struggled on. Then an unexpected development happened: because it gained a modicum of prosperity, organized physical education “spawned” offshoots. Two of these offshoots had been closely related to PE since the early human societies arose; they were known as dance and athletics (i.e., sport). Out of these grew two new offshoots. One became known as recreation to be enjoyed when “free time” first became available, and the other as health & safety education as humans learned more about such concepts. Our “hero” (physical education or PE) helped to develop them significantly, and they—in their gratitude-helped physical education too as they themselves became more important, even vital.

In the early years of the 20th century in America, someone knew enough Greek to apply the term “kinesiology” to a course treating the study of human movement in the professional physical education curriculum in North America. Today, 100 plus years later, that name may be the title given not only to that course, but also to myriad departments, schools, and faculties in universities across North America. Interestingly, also, in Ontario, Canada, if a person holding a degree in *physical education* (where he/she took and passed one course in kinesiology) dared to call himself/herself a kinesiologist *without holding a degree with that specific name on the proverbial sheepskin*, that person would be liable to a fine of \$25,000 due to legislation enacted on behalf of the Ontario Kinesiology Association! That’s what I call “progress”!

The term “kinesiology” itself is evidently from the Greek language and means “the study of movement.” Although this is technically correct, the advocates of this name change a generation ago may or may not have known that the verb *kineo* was also a very common Greek verb that describes the movements of sexual intercourse. This the writer learned from Prof. Doug Gerber of Classical Studies The University of Western Ontario, Canada at explained that in Aristophanes' comedy *Lysistrata* the women of Athens are portrayed as going on a “sex strike” to get their husbands to end a war that they detested. As Professor Gerber explained, there “is a long scene between a husband and wife in which the husband desperately tries to get his wife into bed, and the wife uses every trick to hold him off until he agrees to vote for peace.” What was the husband's name? You guessed it. Kinesias. Interestingly, the “Kinesias war” has extended down to the present day...

Then, after two world and numerous smaller wars, and the significant impact of other social forces on society in this or that post-war society, physical education—still a second-class citizen among educators—discovered that its offshoots (recreation and health & safety education) had grown quite large and important in the world. They too were anxious to become first-class citizens, and they made “loud noises “on occasion to inform all that they deserved greater priority in life. Many people—at least a good portion of them— recognized that they were right. However, times change slowly, and this recognition only slightly influenced educational practices.

During this same period, two other phenomena took place that held great import for physical education. PE’s brothers and sisters, athletics and dance, had been performing so well that they had steadily grown stronger and more powerful. Athletics (or “sport” as it is called on some continents other than North America) looked at PE and said: “What a dull clod art thou!” What did athletics (sport) mean by that? Physical activity education, or training for human physical movement, wasn’t very exciting. Actually it could be quite dull, what with its repetitive muscular exercises and endurance activities that promote muscular strength, flexibility, and cardiovascular efficiency. Sadly also, dance (PE’s other “relative”) seemed to feel the same way. PE realized, of course, that s/he had a responsibility to teach young people about developmental physical activity in schools, but could understand it was so much more thrilling to perform for the cognoscenti (as with dance), and even for the multitudes (as with sport). So dance said: “I’m an art. So I think I’d be better served by joining my fellows in one of the performing arts centers springing up *all* around me.” Then, truly troublingly, athletics (sport), although very popular both as an extra-curricular activity, and also out in the public sector, commercially “moved in” and became the major part of many PE classes...

If matters weren’t bad enough, Sputnik – the first artificial satellite – was launched in 1957 and the world has not been the same since. “Science” became the watchword in the 1960s and has continued as such ever since; a development that has had a profound effect on physical education. A president of Harvard University, in a report, sharply criticized professional preparation for physical education as being “shallow”. This resulted in a discovery among many university professors that they no longer wanted to be known as “*physical* educators”. They seemed a little ashamed to be called “that”, believing that it hurt their chance to increase status, which in turn reduced the availability of much-desired grant funding. So, instead, the name “kinesiology” was proposed in various quarters. Then, too, in the 1980s, some state legislators in the United States challenged the quality of courses that included the word “education” in their titles. And—you guessed it!-*physical education* got caught up in the melee. In addition, the American Academy of Physical Education added the term “Kinesiology” up front in its overall title. This move was to be a panacea for beleaguered academics (“if they don’t know what it is, how can they criticize it?”). This led to an assumption that goes: “granting agencies will be more apt to open up their coffers because they don’t know what it is!” so it must be new and “more scientific”.

Note: Since then, not only has the term ‘physical education been dropped from the official title, the Academy is now called the National Academy of Kinesiology!)

Interestingly, this study-of-movement name (Kinesiology), a word taken from the Greek language, had been the name of a course in the professional physical education curriculum for over a century. It could be “fathomed” quite well *kinematically* by most, but not *kinetically* by 99% of us. Now it was also to become *the* name for the department or school in a university where courses related to human physical movement were offered. Advocates were saying: “Let PE be for the name for elementary and secondary school classes; kinesiology should be the “in name” for us scientists in the universities!” (What then was to become of the social-scientists and humanities scholars in our field?) Still another faction, mostly in Canada, seized upon the term “kinetics” and put the word “human” before it. This sounded good too, but it is identical with both the prevailing name for dynamics with physics and that for studying rates of reaction within the field of chemistry. This led some to ask: Why should we muddy the waters further?

The effort to “scientize” PE – a trend that began in the 1960s – gradually became a solid thrust designed to promote defensible *theory* to underlie practice in the realm of physical education and athletics administration. This soon got caught up and slowed by both “scientification” and budgetary restrictions in the 1970s. When this movement returned in the 1980s with enhanced budgets, however, the die had been cast even though many academic departments struggled along with unique and disparate nomenclature that has extended to the present. Also, unfortunately the overemphasis on commercialized sport both within education and in the public sector continued. As related professors in NCAA Division I and II were wont to say: “We don’t have any problem with what’s going on in athletics; they’re ‘over there’!”

The Unhappy Plight of Physical Education: “Good Old ‘PE’.”

All of this “ancient history” made (PE) physical (activity) education become more worried than ever before. Human movement could look back at a long heritage going back to the time in the development of the universe when creatures from the sea moved onto the land mass. In addition, PE could rationalize that people with pure motives simply misjudged the importance of human physical activity. People have always seemed to treat physical educators as less bright than teachers of other subjects, even though deep down they admired physical skill. In addition, they knew that they themselves needed regular physical activity involvement themselves. Nevertheless, when seemingly intelligent people with lesser physical skill themselves discussed PE, their lips tended to curl even though they might themselves be fat (or obese!), or diabetic, or – dare I say it – lazy...

Hence, thinking about the proverbial rose, fringe physical educators increasingly wondered if they would “smell as badly” with another name. Another name was recommended, a new, concocted disciplinary name such as “phyactology” (Fraleigh). Such a name made sense in the absence of a satisfactory name, but “savants” laughed when it was first proposed... Time for reconsideration?

Time for Reflection

Finally PE began to think deeply – that is, as deeply as a second-class citizen with limited intelligence can think. PE’s male proponent had a “twin sister”. This female creature often made different noises as she went her own way during the second half of the twentieth century. She had been telling “the male PE” person that he couldn’t see the forest for the trees. “PE,” she said, “we have really been fools, and we merit our plight. We have been so stupid that we haven’t been able to spell out what we really should have been called. We are involved with human physical activity or *movement*. This would probably not be a good name for an academic department, but developmental physical activity might do well as disciplinary nomenclature for a departmental title in higher education. But by all means let’s make it a term that people can understand!

Human physical movement can be understood when scientists and scholars realize that here is a name that is simple to pronounce, and people can understand it superficially at least. Perhaps the field’s true function can be understood more purposely than ever before using the term *developmental physical activity*. People can be helped to realize that there is more to “movement” than push-ups and jogging, as truly important as these physical activities might be. They can understand, also, that the field has physiological aspects, anatomical aspects, psychological aspects, philosophical aspects, sociological aspects, historical aspects – and many more than could be counted on the fingers of two hands.

This was a most important realization for *physical activity educators* who, weekly, are being more fully under girded by a sound scientific and scholarly basis. This time, the field’s name would be spelled correctly and the case for recognition would be soundly based. The field could be defined as “the interaction of the human and his/her movements” (Paddick). Or, if you will, broaden it to Kenyon’s term: “human movement arts and sciences.” Or the “arts and sciences of human physical activity.”

Good old “PE” suddenly felt very tired. Should s/he change names again? “Kinesiology” sounds so complicated and esoteric. What we are fundamentally, s/he thought, is human physical activity in sport, dance, play, and exercise. Our knowledge base comes from what might be called the movement arts and sciences or developmental physical activity, a field that can help humans throughout their entire lives.

Those who would do good in this world cannot expect others to roll stones out of their path. It’s a hard road that lies ahead. But if this road is to be traversed, it must be done by a determined, united group of qualified, professional physical activity educators under girded by a solid scholarly foundation. If this means that the “academic” or

“disciplinary” name under girding our field within universities will be called “kinesiology,” *so be it!*

How “PE” Should React to “Kinesiology”...

If that were the end of the story, and “everyone lived happily ever after”, that would be a wonderful result. Regardless of the introduction of a “foreign name,” the terminology employed does correctly translate as “the study of movement.” However, we are finding today that kinesiology has also become a convenient “umbrella” for a growing variety of professional and possibly disciplinary oriented people who believe that it is the ideal term for them to use as they working assiduously to see to it that it is presumably used correctly by the people truly entitled to use it for their purposes. One of this group of kinesiologists could well be the director or coordinator of a physical activity and health education program that includes intramural sport competition that is included as a required subject in the school curriculum from kindergarten on up through Grade 12 of the secondary school curriculum. Such a person would begin as a student by matriculating in, and graduating from, a four-year university program in a recognized educational unit that was entitled to put the word “kinesiology” on his/her diploma upon graduating. Presumably, then, over and above such disciplinary training, the person involved then would have to pass a sufficient amount of theory and practice courses that would qualify him/her to be granted a teaching certificate in the North American state or province in which such professional service as a teacher would occur.

Most of these “kinesiologists” today have as their goal the provision of professional service to humankind through the medium of human movement. They are typically qualifying themselves professionally—based on the information stated in their website—to serve in areas of professional practice as a certified kinesiologist or in one instance as a researcher in the discipline of kinesiology) as follows:

- Clinical Kinesiologist
- Ergonomist
- Rehabilitation Coordinator
- Private Consultant
- Clinic Manager
- Work Site Analyst
- Researcher
- Business Owner
- Occupational Health and Safety Specialist
- Work Disability Consultant
- Vocational Rehabilitation Specialist
- and many others...

Note: The term “researcher” implies that *only the person* in this category had qualified as a graduate of a program granting a disciplinary degree... All of the other terms used relate to either a profession or a trade. Interestingly, the term “professional educator in physical and health education”, does not appear in this listing, although only.

Further, in the words of the Ontario Kinesiology Association

Certified Kinesiologists assess human movement, performance, and function by applying the sciences of biomechanics, anatomy, physiology, and psychomotor behavior. They work in a variety of roles and are employed in both the public and private sector. They are professionals who have obtained a university degree from a recognized university. Kinesiologists are typically involved in the rehabilitation, prevention, and management of disorders to maintain, rehabilitate, or enhance movement, function or performance in the areas of sport, recreation, work, and exercise. Kinesiologists also provide consulting services, conduct research, and develop policies related to rehabilitation, human motor performance, ergonomics, and occupational health and safety (information adapted from www.oka.ca).

At this point in this discussion of how members of the field of *physical activity and health education* within the education profession should react to what has happened to the curriculum known as physical education that began in 1861 in America. I wish it were possible to postulate that “all would live happily ever after!

Further, and this really concerns me, I believe that physical activity & health educators should be “kinesiology graduates” in the sense that they should truly understand human movement technically (i.e., both kinematically *and* kinetically) *as well as, socially and philosophically*. If this were to happen, then perhaps people who serve the field of physical activity & related health education within the education profession could separate themselves from should be considered as ancillary coaching duties and responsibilities. In addition, these “kinesiologists” serving the field of education in this way should understand that their mission is to work as physical activity and health educators with ALL of the children in the schools.

Looking to the Future

As we look to the future at a time when physical activity education and related health and safety education is needed so greatly at all levels of education, I truly believe that we should reach agreement in this ongoing struggle that has been going on in connection with related terminology describing who we are and what it is that we do.

I well recall the communication I had back in 1994 from the erstwhile dean who served the Faculty of Kinesiology at The University of Western Ontario so very well, Dr. Bert Taylor. He believes that “the name change was inevitable and necessary”. He felt that “it gave us [at Western University] instant credibility on campus and most certainly with the science granting agencies.” As he explained further, “we were pigeons as ‘PE’ holed up with the concept of athletics and not regarded as a true academic discipline.” Taylor argues further that “some of the exceptional young researchers we and others have been able to hire would have been lost if we were still ‘PE’.” Finally, Taylor stressed that we truly belong as “one strong unit” within a faculty of health sciences.

However, we must not haggle and debate the issue any longer, since the sun is already quite high in the sky... Long live *human physical activity*, because without *it* you're dead!