Enlivening the Curriculum of Health-Related Fitness

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©Rebecca Lloyd – Balancing on a rock

There is a sadomasochistic tone to the commercialized industry of health and fitness.” Get moving and stop being a couch potato!” Such admonishments from taut trainers with “abs of steel” require clients to become “the Biggest Losers.” Instructors are paid to scream and whip bodies into shape. Bodies are hardened to the fashionable contours of workout apparel by being dragged through the trenches, through “boot camps,” and “body attacks.” Against such a context, as educators inspired by the joys of movement, we ask about a different approach to health and fitness.

Instead of punishing the body, what if a gentle, sympathetic unleashing of bodily vigor and vitality were promoted? What if becoming fit and healthy became the consequence of feeling the movements that are bodily satisfying, forming motions that are vitally engaging, and experiencing a flow of connection with others?

The present curricula of health-related fitness (HRF) in Education tend to reinforce the wider, societal view by separating physiological functioning from what we would like to identify as the kinaesthetic and somaesthetic registers of consciousness. As we draw attention to the “self-sensing, internalized perception of oneself” associated with the Greek term “soma” (Hanna, 1988, 20) and the aesthetic “here I know what Robinson (2002) means when she describes the fit body as being “strong, […] primarily male” and “significantly rooted in war” to the extent where “the female body’s softness is banished” (14-17). As I experienced a scaled down version of bodybuilding as a fitness educator and emerging competitor who secured the title of Women’s Fitness Champion in 1999, I was drawn into the implicit competition within the socially constructed walls of the gym environment of who can be the biggest or the hardest. I loved being around other strong lifters and preferred it if they were male. I thrived on their energy and feeling just as strong as they were. The more I lifted weights, the stronger I felt. It didn’t matter that I was going to sleep at night in agony. What mattered most was that I stuck to my regime. I loved the feeling of the all consuming push, press, or pull. I just treated my body as something that could be fixed by physiotherapy or chiropractic treatments. I was not willing to change my approach and draw upon the kinaesthetic sensitivities I developed as a former professionally trained ballet dancer, the sixth sense otherwise known as “proprioception” (Sheets-Johnstone, 1998, 154). I exuded the “no pain no gain” approach to becoming fit that Stephen Moore (1996) describes in his exploration of the Gold’s Gym body. Although my pain wasn’t comparable to what Mr. Olympia felt as he ripped his biceps in his bent over row of 405 pounds, I can appreciate the feeling he had the “morning of the contest, a 260 pound Dorian ‘as hard as ever’ as he “emerged from the tomb, or at least the dressing room, with his eyes set on the prize” (Moore, 1996, 105). I, too, was caught up in the process of what I thought was physically perfecting myself. I was making changes to shake off my graceful exterior so that I could walk onto a fitness competition stage and flex my way into winning my women’s fitness trophy and my sought-after place among other hard-bodied leaders of fitness leaders.
and the aesthetic “here and now” (Arnold, 2005, 50) attitude that permits a present moment consciousness, we invite you to consider how the curricula of HRF may be permeated by a feeling, forming, flowing approach that puts us in touch with the “beautiful form in all human activity” (Alter, 2004, 27) At present, quantitative parameters, such as minutes of activity, repetitions of a muscular conditioning exercise, or the relative girth measures between waist and hip (cf. Smith & Lloyd, 2007), indicate the degree to which one is becoming healthy. There is little room for what Shusterman (2008) describes as a “somaesthetic” quality of movement and what Csikszentmihalyi (2000) profiles as the optimal, psychological state of flow.

In fact, present revisions to secondary health and physical education curricula, which aim to increase levels of physical activity and lifelong wellness are now, more than ever, influenced by the scientization of movement (see for example Education Alberta, 2008; and the proposed revisions to the Ontario Health & Physical Education Curriculum, 2009). Youth inactivity and childhood obesity, framed by the problem of “globesity” (Gibbons & Naylor, 2007), fuel the HRF push in schools with its emphasis on indices of body composition, aerobic capacity, muscular strength, endurance, and flexibility (Plowman et al., 2006). The almost exclusive emphasis on such quantitative, physiological indices leaves little room for understanding how one may be “physically educated through and by means of fitness-based activities” (Lloyd & Smith, in press) that focus on a qualitative, enlivening engagement of being present...
If HRF assessment is to inform the learning process, we may consider alternatives to anatomical and physiological quantifications of body composition, cardiovascular capacity, muscular strength, and endurance and flexibility, that date back to the 1950s (Keating, Silverman & Kulinna, 2002, 194).

We suggest that conceptions of body composition may extend beyond measured muscle to fat ratios, and that assessments may include somatic sensations of tightness and ease that relate to the way we posture ourselves in the world. And from this enhanced awareness, we may form strengthening, stretching and cardiovascular enhancing movement experiences that pulsate with corporeal vitality.

At present, the dominant forward flexing movements assessed within the curriculum of HRF such as the repetitive push-up (which shortens and tightens the chest), sit-up (which promotes a forward flexion of the spine), and sustained sit-and-reach test, may act as bodily blocks to the development of optimal health. According to Keating (2003), the design of a personalized workout will most likely consist of exercises experienced in a HRF assessment. Unfortunately, if this is the case, students will become progressively tighter in their chests and rounded in their upper backs. And given the behaviorist, instructional model associated with HRF (Metlzer, 2005), it is unlikely that a student encounters a teacher who will respond to the design of a healthy living plan with respect to the postural implications of the selected exercises and stretches and with the intent of having the student feel his or her way into optimal alignment.

Current exemplars provided for physical education teachers to assist them with the assessment of a student’s personalized active and healthy living plan do not take into account features of functional and experiential anatomy where the synergistic movements add up to a greater projection and sensation of energy in optimal alignment and function. What becomes evident in these examples provided for assessment purposes is a disconnected, mechanistic understanding of the body, for which it doesn’t matter what one does as long as there is progressive overload over time. For example, the highest scoring exemplar features a grade eleven student who writes, “I will stretch before each workout for 5 minutes, do 15 push-ups to start, and gradually increase the number of reps” (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2008, 2). What is missing from this and other exemplars is an enlivened understanding of HRF that is rooted in the process of feeling, forming and flowing one’s way towards optimal health.

**Feeling: Enlivening the Flesh through Breath**

Sensation is not just the messenger of pain, discomfort, and other emotions, but is the link to an extraordinary aesthetic landscape that is our birthright.

—Conrad, 2007, xxiii-xxiv
If we continue to promote the ‘more is better’ approach to becoming fit and the physical hardening that accompanies the counting of disconnected repetitions that form the curriculum of HRF and popular boot camp regimes, we dampen the possibility of sensing and feeling all there is to experience within movement. Dancers, who may be considered experts of sensing “the aesthetics of stance and motion,” develop enhanced sensitivities to “the poetry of movement in everything around them—a newspaper blowing down the sidewalk, a bird landing on the telephone wire—and in everything they do, like setting the table and sipping coffee” (Tuan, 1993, 38-39). Such sensitivities change the way one experiences life as they open up the possibilities of feeling the gentle warmth, waves and gradual surges of pleasure. They also inform us of how certain bodily postures and motions may create feelings of discomfort and dis-ease long before the threshold of pain takes hold.

While a disconnected consciousness surrounds most of our physical education (Myers, 1998) and health promoting practices, such as running on a treadmill while watching television or lifting weights while chatting to a friend, and while such practices lend support to Foucault’s assertion, that “vivid somatic consciousness does not arise unless the body is somehow engaged in violent sensations” (Shusterman, 2008, 38), we assert that the key to experiencing optimal health rests on sensing such simple pleasures as the breathing that expands and inspires a connection to others and to the natural world.

Experiencing the curriculum of HRF from an internal, kinaesthetic register requires awareness of the fluid motions of the vital breath that shape the pathways of expansion and contraction from the musculoskeletal right down to the cellular level. How we breathe influences our posture, how we move, and how we position ourselves in the world. Every inhalation creates form while every exhalation dissolves form. For some, attending to the coalescing and dissolving qualities of respiration shapes the pathway, cadence and intertwining of extension and contraction in mind-body disciplines such as Yoga or Pilates. For others who are open to the insights of quantum science, the “very act of breathing becomes a universal respiration reflecting the basic motif of organismic life” (Conrad,
More than the passage of air, breathing suggests that forming and dispersing actions are what keep us in “fluid resonance,” not only with each other, but inspired by the pulsating stars over our heads (xxii).

One may begin to experience breath by locating the depth of its travel. Is it resting in the upper quadrant of the lungs or moving downward in the direction of the underbelly? Using the hand as a guide, consider tracing the pathway of the respiration cycle and the gestural shape it makes: Is it a linear journey from the downward phase of intake to the expelling upward release, or does it take on the helix-like crisscrossing of ocean currents of energy which resemble the shape of “the winged Hermes staff with the twined serpents” (33); the symbol of western medicine? The philosophy of Hatha-Yoga suggests the latter, as the points of intersection become energy centers otherwise known as “chakras” (Rosen, 2002). While much can be said for understanding and tuning into the various properties of each energy centre, knowledge of the specific function of each chakra is not essential for the beginning breather. Simply imagining the flow of the water-like current of the breath coiling up and down the spine is enough to add a vitality sustaining and provoking dimension to what could initially be conceived as a linear, dead-end pathway.

Feeling the pathway, amplitude, and steady cadence of the breath in sedentary positions may serve to deepen respiration, but ultimately, if the curriculum of HRF is to be enlivened, this growing somatic awareness needs to be contrasted with our assessments of body composition as a function of muscle to fat ratios. Sensing one’s body composition beyond this HRF reductionism, students may learn, for example, to connect to a kinaesthetic sense of posture. Hodgson (2001) suggests that

Fitness begins with posture. The human body stands upright, against gravitational pull, and needs to learn how to control and harness the tensions that result from this conflict. Balance and harmony should be the keynote to good stance, as elsewhere. Recognizing the structure of the body and working always with a regard for its symmetry, individual posture is a prime consideration and the basis for all activity.

—Hodgson, 205, 206

If the curriculum of HRF were to include postural analysis, conceptual connections may be made between the way we stand in everyday life and the meaning behind and within the multiplicity of our extending and contractile capabilities. Breathing into various body parts invites us to soften tensions that have an unconscious hold (Hanna, 1998) on how we comport ourselves in everyday life. In anatomical terms, we are likely to experience either the “shoulder (proximal) crossed syndrome” or the “pelvic crossed syndrome” (Hammer, 1999, 417-418). But for those who better understand postures in somatic terms, these same imbalances can be thought of as (a) the “red light” or “startle reflex, a fear, or withdrawal response in which we instinctively hunch forward to try to protect ourselves” and (b) the “green light reflex” which is “caused by the tightening of the muscles in the back of the body” as we “arch up and back slightly as we prepare to move into action” (Dreaver & Provasoli, 1999, 396).

To alleviate tensions associated

As you breathe in, you may feel a natural elongation and stretch of your spine. When you exhale, do you feel a grounding sense of release? Simply tuning into these sensations in anything you do from sitting and writing to walking and cycling has the capacity to transform a potential depleting and exhausting experience into one that
To alleviate tensions associated with such imbalances, we may invite students to breathe into and mobilize their various joints. Coupling the breath to motions of elevation and depression, protraction and retraction and well as circular wave-like motions of circumduction thus provides students with sensory information about the multiple ways they can expand or shorten musculature connected to their various bony protuberances. Rather than perpetuating the learning of anatomy from an objective distance (see for example the newly proposed Ontario Exercise Science Grade 12 health and physical education course available through the Ontario Ministry of Education, 2009) students may begin to appreciate that “[a]lignment is a condition that you want to feel into” (Johnson, 2000, 38).

Consider the difference, not only with respect to confidence building but also in relation to the ability to somatically process cues for alignment, if sensation were to take precedence over, say, external cues barked by a boot camp instructor or physical education teacher insisting “shoulders back” or “abs in.” By subtly experimenting with wave-like elevations, depressions, protractions, retractions and circumductions of the shoulder blades for example, students may move away from the harshness and excessive end-range tensions associated with military postures, such as jamming the shoulder blades down and together, and feel the mobile freedom created by widening and floating them into a stress-free position. When neutral alignment is attained through such proprioceptive means, we open ourselves up to experiencing postures and positions that carry optimal radiations of vitality and functional energy (Johnson, 1996). And the more that we are able to relieve extraneous tensions and refine our postures for breathing, the more likely it is that we will sense the inherent joy and vitality within movement itself (Sheets-Johnstone, 1999; Stern, 2004).

Forming

Linking inspiration to the coalescence of form and expiration to the dissolution of form, as Conrad (2007) has done, helps us understand more fully the development of cardiovascular, strength, and flexibility promoting movements. Rather than conceptualizing HRF as a set of planned exercises that focus on strengthening individual areas of the body with the long-term risk of creating homeostatic misalignment, as in counting the number of push-ups one can complete without considering the overall balance between pushing and pulling motions, the interplay of breath and form helps us approach the curriculum of HRF with an inspirational, organic feel (Lloyd, Garcia Bengoechea & Smith, in press). To breathe in is to experience expansion and extension. To exhale is to experience contraction. While some mind-body practices accentuate certain phases of respiration such as “lengthening the...
inhalation or holding the breath after inhalation [...which has an] effect of energizing [...] and] heating the body” (Desikachar, 1995, 39), it is also advised that a balance be always present between the phases of the breath since “too much fire without elimination can create disturbing patterns of energy. To receive that which is new energy, we must first release that which is old and no longer benefits us” (Desikachar, 39).

If we reconsider how the breath may create a pathway to forming our various expansions and contractions within the motions that form the HRF curriculum, we may understand viscerally how a push-up motion, an exercise that shortens and tightens the chest, should be coupled with an exercise that promotes a retractive rowing of the shoulder blades to create a dynamic sense of bodily balance. Beyond the aesthetic creation of sculpting the outer layers of form, moving with a balance created by breath-centered awareness also provides a sense of connectivity and meaning in the gestures and motions that form the curriculum of physical education as well as those of everyday life. For example, while push-ups and rowing motions naturally translate into the strengthening of sending and receiving actions contextualized within games, they may also connect, motionally, and emotionally, to the actions of pushing a friend or a loved one away or, alternatively, drawing them close. Continuing this path of contemplation, we may also make a parallel connection between a game that loses the sense of rejuvenating vitality if one player continually dominates possession of a ball and an embrace that squeezes out the possibility of taking another breath.

Conceptualizing all movement in relation to the balance and motile qualities of respiration has the potential to enliven more than the curriculum of HRF but the elementary and secondary curricula as well. Elsewhere we have critiqued not only the disconnected movements that form the design of HRF assessment, but also the mechanistic, disembodied way in which the elementary physical and health education curricula and resource guides present fundamental movements of the body (Lloyd & Smith, 2005). To breathe in is to expand and to exhale is to contract, an “original kinetic bodily pairings” which Sheets-Johnstone (1999, 157) also relates to the opening and closing of one’s mouth or the simple bipedal action of placing one foot after another. If we are able to conceptually frame all movement forms around such conceptions of the breath, we may revise lists of fundamental movements that objective bodies can do such as “receiving: e.g. catching, collecting; retaining: e.g. dribbling, carrying, bouncing, trapping; sending: e.g. throwing, kicking, striking” (Alberta Learning, 2000, our italics), and view them in relation to breath-inspired pairings. At present, support documents are provided to teachers that encourage the planning of a lesson around one fundamental movement skill at a time such as ‘throwing’ (see for example www.phecanada.ca). By encouraging teachers to conceptualize movement in relation to ‘original kinetic bodily pairings’ that trace us back to the phases of flowing respiration, lessons on ‘throwing’ would naturally include receptive actions of ‘catching’ and the natural flow that emerges. As variations in tempo, force, grace, flexibility and intertwining of relationality inform the maturing process, visceral, fluid and flowing connections can be made within and across various curricula. Actions related to sending and receiving can thus be connected to the pushing and pulling motions emphasized within the HRF curriculum at the secondary level.

**Flowing**

A student who is able to maintain a connection to breath-led movement, whether balancing synergistically her muscular expansions and contractions or becoming attuned to ebbs and flows on a cellular level, comes to understand the rhythmical qualities of movement. The motions of such a student become seemingly effortless, extending from one position to the
next in bursts, rushes, ebbs and flows that energize, synergize and resonate with the demands of the milieux of action.

Rudolf Laban, a former dancer, choreographer and movement practitioner from earlier part of the last century was the first to incorporate concepts of effort (i.e. force, timing and flow) as well as principles of bodily awareness, space awareness, and relationality within the process of becoming physically educated (Laban & Lawrence, 1974; Laban, 1948). Within the framework of a mechanistic curriculum, however, the intentions behind Laban’s concepts have never been truly realized. But now, as our interest revolves around enlivening the HRF curriculum, we return to Laban’s interest in vitality and degrees of liveliness as correlations of the emotions and the intellect (Hodgson, 2001, 66). Influenced by Delcroze, and Delsarte, Laban’s work reveals the harmonies of body and soul, particularly as that harmony is expressed in the release of natural and vital rhythms within the body (Hodgson, 2001, 68). Laban’s description of a dancer’s movement approaches what Conrad includes in her cosmic breath and what Merleau-Ponty (1968) describes as an elemental intertwining of the flesh of the body and the flesh of the world.

Behind external events the dancer perceives another, entirely different, world. There is an energy behind all occurrences and material things for which it is almost impossible to find a name. A hidden, forgotten landscape lies there, the land of silence; the realm of the soul, and in the centre of this soul stands the swinging temple. Yet, the messages from this land of silence are tremendously eloquent and tell us of ever-changing forms and shapes about things and realities important to us all. What we generally call dance also comes from these regions, and the dance-conscious person is truly an inhabitant of this land, consciously and directly drawing strength for living from its inexhaustible treasures. The remaining people can but get a taste of this vital nourishment through the enjoyment they derive from artistic works of dance.

—Laban, 1975, 89, 90

One does not require a dance teacher to experience that “movement is the essence of life… […] an outward expression of the living energy within” (Laban, 1948, 101). Under the care of an educator who draws attention to the vitalizing qualities of the breath, students may learn to dance their way through any movement such as a push-up where undulations of the landscape may be sensed through waves of pressure oscillating between one’s fingertips and the far reaches of the palms. Sensations that may be intensified through what Mullis’ (2006) describes as the “principle of opposition” alive within aesthetic moments that afford the sustainability of “precarious balance” in variations of challenge (e.g. feeling the intensified affects of weight transfer in one’s palms if the push-up hinges to that of Yoga’s ‘downward facing dog’ or inverts in the direction of a balanced handstand). With enough encouragement and attention to the breath-invoked sensation of movement, further refinement is possible, especially if conceptions of Conrad’s cosmic breath are fully embraced. And so, as students depart from accustomed practices of counting one hardening repetition after another, they may instead attune themselves to the quality of their breath in the rhythmical motions of horizontal risings and fallings. Within such motions, “the quality of the breath is extremely important because it expresses our inner feelings. If we are in pain it shows in our breathing” (Desikachar, 1995, 13) and if we are to move toward the experience of pleasure we may sense whether our breath becomes shallow, deep, elevated
or slowed. The holding of one’s breath, a common practice in stressful situations, is a central indication that one is not connecting to the visceral flow of movement.

To experience the fluidities of movement, not only in the progressive skill-building way that Csikszentmihalyi (2000) profiles, but also in relation to what Leder (1996) describes as our “deeper visceral foundation” (203), we might connect consciously to the fluid passing of breath in various

Welcome rays of morning sun as you disrupt my cocoon of numbness and smile at me through heavy hanging slits of forest green. Let me be energetically lifted by your rays of sparkling warmth that penetrate the folds of my flesh, folds that have survived tremendous stretching and shrinking since the pregnancy and birth of my second son. I am moved by the magical sound of silence that enables me to suspend my mothering responsibilities to soak in a sun-drenched moment and somatically connect to my own physicality. I tiptoe toward my sliding patio bedroom door and gently sweep a panel of fabric aside to provide my freshly uncoiled yoga mat with a view of the rising sun. Bodily memories of my former life as a professional ballet dancer and women’s fitness champion, two opposing endpoints of supple sensitivity and hardened exteriority, fuse together as I actively experience an
moments of our day. If the breath is flowing, we experience the ebbs and flows of vitality entering our bodies as we engage in the cosmic dance of respiration. From combative sports to juggling and, yes, even lovemaking, sensing the fluid flow of energy of the breath in everything we do may reverse apprehensions and “the anguish of having a body on this earthly mission” (Conrad, 2007, 27). Simply remembering to breathe steps us away from the fallacious “more is better” ride to ecstasy or the addictive sensation of the weight-room “pump.”

If the breath is flowing

Optimal health is about much more than the attainment of a physiological capacity for strenuous movement. The kind of physical functioning accentuated in present HRF curricula needs to be complimented with an inspired capacity for movement that connects such functioning to movement feeling, which is to say, to kinaesthetic and proprioceptive senses of form. Breath, that most essential function of living forms, provides direct, visceral inspiration. Breathing life into functional movement, it becomes possible to appreciate the vast range of postural, gestural and expressive forms that extend well beyond the confines of games, sports, and even dance. Breath is more than the exchange of gases. It is the flow of energy and vitality that rightly distinguishes health and wellness. Feeling, forming, and flowing our way into an enlivened curriculum, we assert that the key to experiencing optimal health rests in the simple pleasures of sensing the delicate perturbations within our breath, and the postural, gestural, and expressive elaborations of breathing, that connect us to this human and more than human world.


[2] The “pelvic crossed syndrome” consists of weak abdominals and gluteus maximus muscles in conjunction with tight iliopsoas (hip flexor) and erector spinae muscles that cause a forward or anterior tipping of the pelvis (Hammer, 1999 417-418).

References


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