

Virtual Physical Education: A Call for Action

Brian Mosier

Take a minute and think back to your high school physical education experiences. Dressing out in musty locker rooms, running laps, playing team sports with some kickball or dodgeball peppered in. Now, imagine being today's high school student with the option to take physical education online, otherwise known as virtual physical education (VPE). There is no uniform, and your bedroom is your locker room. You may decide to run laps or dodge balls, or perhaps take up sailing, play volleyball on a beach, go skateboarding, or participate in a pilates class at the local health club. What might you choose?

Although online learning is still viewed as a relatively new phenomenon, the underlying concept of distance education emerged over 160 years ago as correspondence study (Simonson, Smaldino, Albright, & Zvacek, 2006). This type of learning, for many years, was reserved for adults. However, in 1996 the beginnings of virtual schools (K-12 online schools) were being formed by a research project in Canada (Barbour & Reeves, 2009). Clark (2001) defined virtual school as "an educational organization that offers K-12 courses through Internet- or Web-based methods" (p.1). Now, 16 years later, 48 states, plus Washington, D.C., offer significant online learning opportunities for K-12 students (Watson, Murin, Vashaw, Gemin, & Rapp, 2010). In 2010, over 4 million K-12 students participated in a formal online learning program, and enrollments are growing at 46% a year (Ambient Insight, 2011).

In general, proponents of virtual schools believe that online learning empowers students to experience independence in learning and frees up the physical boundaries and time constraints



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that occur in face-to-face (F2F) schools. Further, virtual schools offer opportunities for credit recovery, accelerated learning, conflict avoidance, and the ability to take courses not offered at local F2F schools (Mills, 2003). Critics argue that virtual schools allow F2F schools to give up on troublesome students, as well as take the best and brightest out of the formal classroom. They believe students who choose online education are likely to lose opportunities for interaction and socialization (Vail, 2003). Some of the many forces fueling K-12 online education include national policy initiatives focused on expanding educational opportunities, funding shortages, overcrowded F2F schools, and exploration of alternative routes for education (Rice, 2006).

The National Association for Sport and Physical Education (NASPE) *Shape of the Nation Report* (2010) found that 22 states allow required physical education credits to be earned through VPE. However, with the advent of programs such as Florida Virtual School-Global School and National Connections Academy, VPE has expanded far beyond the numbers indicated in this report. The number of students opting to take

VPE courses continues to show an upward trend. This trend has significant implications for future directions of physical education. Questions such as "What type of students are choosing VPE?" and "Why are they choosing VPE?" need to be answered. Secondary students may be choosing VPE out of convenience (Mosier, 2010), or possibly motivated by the use of technology in physical education (Buschner, 2006). Students have also reported multiple reasons for disliking traditional physical education: lack of quality in traditional programs (Mitchell, Castelli, & Strainer, 2003), boredom (Gibbons & Humbert, 2008), teacher behaviors (Martel, Gagnon, & Tousignant, 2002), low skill level or perceived ability (Olafson, 2002), competitive class environment (Garn & Cothran, 2006), and alienation (Rintoul, 2009). At this point, due to the paucity of research in virtual physical education, one can only speculate as to why students are choosing VPE.

In view of general research in online learning, high school physical education students may not be making such a poor choice in choosing VPE. The U.S. Department of Education (USDE, 2008) presented empirical evidence suggesting that students can benefit from online learning options. The findings revealed that students who took all or part of their class online performed better, on average, than those taking the same course with F2F instruction. It was also noted that instruction combining online learning with F2F elements produced better results than purely online instruction. Picciano & Seaman (2009) believe the hybrid/blended model, which continues to gain popularity in K-12 schools, is an alternate option for districts with concerns regarding online

quality, student readiness, and staff development. Blended learning occurs when a student learns at least in part at a F2F location away from home and at least in part through online delivery with some element of student control over time, place, path, and/or pace. Blended/hybrid models are varied across several dimensions of learning, including teacher roles, scheduling, physical space, and delivery methods (Staker, 2011). An example of such a strategy is presented in Ransdell, Rice, Snelson, and Decola's (2008) *JOPERD* article, which suggests how online health-related fitness (HRF) classes could be used by a physical educator. The authors offer suggestions on development, implementation, and evaluation of HRF courses. They comment, "Because there is so much content related to improving fitness, planning fitness programs, setting and logging goals, and revising programs based on life's events, the course that is perhaps most adaptable to an online format is health-related fitness" (p. 47).

In the age of student choice and teachers providing differentiated learning, a student-centered approach to physical education should be welcomed. Not every high school student enjoys being required to participate in a traditional physical education class, especially in the middle of the school day. Further, not all students are comfortable with performing physical activity in a class setting, but may be successful in a more private setting. In light of the USDE (2005) calling for schools to serve the needs of all students better, VPE has become a way for students to meet physical education requirements. If designed and implemented appropriately, VPE may serve as an alternative appropriate method of instruction. Virtual physical education may promote relevance and positive attitudes for some students. It may also match the learning style of students who

prefer an independent and self-paced curriculum combined with the flexibility to achieve appropriate physical education learning tasks (NAPSE, 2007).

With the increased instruction time due to the demands of high-stakes testing for core subjects such as reading, writing, and mathematics, VPE may become even more popular. Coupled with the knowledge that 12-year-olds' average daily "screen time" has increased to 109 minutes of video gaming and 79 minutes of computer usage (Hersey & Jordan, 2007), and understanding that high school students should be receiving 225 minutes of physical education weekly (NASPE, 2004), further justification is needed with respect to how online programs meet current guidelines and standards. At this point in time, VPE is an exciting and attractive, yet untested, alternative method of delivering developmentally appropriate physical education. While research in physical education pedagogy has made great strides, virtual physical education continues to be an under-researched field (Buschner, 2006; Kane & Wagner, 2007; NASPE, 2007). Virtual physical education has been around for more than a decade, and its global presence warrants the exploration and understanding of its many facets. Until there is more extensive research, we will not know whether the online approach to physical education is an effective way of teaching physical education.

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- Instructors should always require waiver forms to be used in all optional physical activity units within a mandatory physical education class.

- Waiver forms should contain all warnings necessary for the specific physical activity, in this case skating.

- Instructors should provide all recommended safety equipment for the physical activity.

- Students should be allowed to bring additional safety equipment for the physical activity they are engaged in.

- Instructors should follow all suggested maintenance procedures, such as cleaning a surface before use.

- Instructors should provide instruction in proper skating techniques, a skill progression for each day of the class, and safety instructions.

- Instructors should provide and explain a diagram of the skating course.

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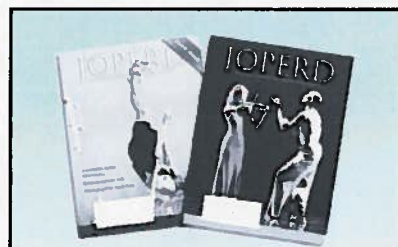
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