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The Domain of Physical Education as a Discipline

By G. LAWRENCE RARICK

Man's curiosity about the unknown is probably as old as man himself. Yet it is only in relatively recent times that man has been able to offer plausible explanations of what he observed in nature. True, scholars in some ancient civilizations sought logical explanations of what they observed. They noted that there was order in the universe. They observed relationships and were concerned with causes and predictions. But it was not until well after the Dark Ages that science as we know it today began to flourish. Systematic observation provided data against which hypotheses could be tested. Theories were developed and scientific laws established. The scientific method was born.

With the advent of the scientific method, knowledge accumulated rapidly. From the very beginning, scien-

tists classified like things together for systematic and detailed study. Thus separate fields of knowledge began to emerge on which scholars concentrated their attention. Some probed the mysteries of the universe, others examined the nature of matter, some studied living things. Each in his own field sought to extend the scope of knowledge. Knowledge thus gained has become part of our cultural heritage, passed from generation to generation in formal courses of study, each dealing with a closely related body of knowledge. Thus we have come to recognize segments of knowledge as disciplines.

As knowledge and technical skill advanced, new disciplines began to emerge. Today any first-class American university will offer an imposing list of courses in from seventy-five to a hundred fields of study. The last two decades have witnessed a marked increase in the number of fields of study, each with its own courses. What, then, does constitute the domain of a discipline? Fifty years ago the answer would have been relatively simple. Today it is highly complex except for the long-standing disciplines. We have come to realize that even though we live in an age of specialization, it is difficult to isolate one branch of knowledge from another. This is true even for such well-established disciplines as physics and chemistry. On the surface it would

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seem that the lines here are neatly drawn. Yet there is some overlap, for the chemist must be informed about the intimate structure of matter, and the physicist must be informed about the transformations which matter undergoes. In fact today every self-respecting chemistry department offers at least one course in physical chemistry.

How have new disciplines emerged, and how have they been able to stake out their respective domains? Most often this has been done by developing a clearly defined segment of knowledge from an already existing discipline. Such, for example, occurred in microbiology, molecular biology, and, in the early days, botany and zoology. Each owed its origin to biology—the parent. Some disciplines of relatively long standing came into being without any apparent break from a parent discipline, such as astronomy, anthropology, psychology, and physiology.

Other fields have the dubious distinction of just now being on the threshold of becoming disciplines. For example, a brief commentary in a recent issue of *Science* points out that professors of computer science are sometimes asked whether there is a computer science, and if so, what it is. According to these professors, it is a science which studies computers, investigating them with the same intensity that others have studied natural phenomena, using the intellectual curiosity which is characteristic of all scientific inquiry. It is pointed out that while computers themselves belong to engineering and hence have a profes-

sional orientation, there is a difference between the study of computers and the application of the resulting knowledge.² In a sense this is the problem facing physical education today: the professional as against the disciplinary orientation.

In many quarters there has been a genuine concern about overspecialization and a recognition of the need for a synthesis of knowledge. Proponents of this viewpoint hold that students and scientists must view natural phenomena not in isolation, but in relation to other areas of inquiry and to the world at large. This has resulted not infrequently in a merger of disciplines, a breakdown of traditional disciplinary boundaries. We now see broad areas of study, such as geophysics, biochemistry, medical genetics, and medical physics. Similarly, the trend toward interdisciplinary research is gaining momentum rapidly. With this trend, the traditional concept of a discipline may have to be abandoned.

Physical education today is generally identified as a profession in much the same way as engineering, law, and medicine are. Just as Webster defines medicine as "the science or art concerned with the prevention, cure or alleviation of disease," physical education is defined as "education in its application to the development and care of the body, especially with reference to instruction in hygiene and systematic exercise." In both, the major emphasis is on application of knowledge rather than on scholarship. How the knowledge is used is of little concern to a discipline. As Henry points

out, the content of a discipline is "theoretical and scholarly as distinguished from technical and professional."¹ Over the years this has not been our orientation in physical education. We have for the most part been doers, not thinkers.

It is nevertheless evident that physical education has within its scope a body of knowledge which is not the concern of any other academic discipline. It is equally clear that there is much that is borderline (handled in part by other disciplines). Most certainly human movement is a legitimate field of study and research. We have only just begun to explore it. There is need for a well-organized body of knowledge about how and why the human body moves, how simple and complex motor skills are acquired and executed, and how the effects (physical, psychological, and emotional) of physical activity may be immediate or lasting.

The question is sometimes raised: Is one justified in including the execution of a motor skill in and of itself as an integral part of a discipline? The mechanics of the skill can be observed and studied, the physiological responses monitored, the feeling states noted. These are areas of legitimate study and research. On the other hand, do we need to clarify for ourselves the level of cognition that is required in learning and executing semi-automatic motor skills? Perhaps we need to ask what level of insight and of understanding is required in a behavioral response in order for it to qualify as a part of an academic discipline. Can we justify as

a part of our discipline behavioral responses which are for the most part automatically controlled even though there is conscious direction of certain aspects of the movement and interpretative and affective controls which give to the movement refinement, meaning, and beauty?

All would agree that physical education is concerned essentially with exercise, active games, sports, athletics, gymnastics, and dance. Yet one would be hard pressed to build a case to support this categorization as a logical framework within which to develop concepts, hypotheses, theories, and laws. Reference to the organizational framework of a long-established discipline might be useful here. The classical organizational pattern of physics is straightforward and logical. Its focus is on matter and energy. It is developed around core ideas, theories, and laws, neatly categorized into five distinct areas: namely, mechanics, heat, light, sound, and electricity. This provides a systematic approach in the search for orderliness in nature.

Physical education needs to come of age. As yet there is no agreement as to its focus. Nor does it have a clearly defined body of knowledge or scope of inquiry. Physical education does, however, have a focus: namely, human movement (i.e., bodily movements in sports, active games, gymnastics, and dance) and its correlates. This aspect of man's experience is our domain. No other discipline explores it. Thus we may state the following:

1. Physical education as a disci-

pline is concerned with the mechanics of human movement, with the mode of acquisition and control of movement patterns, and with the psychological factors affecting movement responses.

2. Physical education is concerned with the physiology of man under the stresses of exercise, sports, and dance and with the immediate and lasting effects of physical activity.
3. The historical and cultural aspects of physical education and dance occupy a prominent place in our discipline. The roles of sports and dance in the cultures which have preceded ours and in our own culture need to be fully explored.
4. Lastly, in physical education we are aware that man does not function alone. Individual and group interactions in games, sports, and dance are an important area, one which needs our attention. As yet we have no rationale for explain-

ing the diversified behavior patterns of individuals and groups as either participants or spectators.

We have a considerable body of knowledge to draw upon. However it is widely scattered and at the moment not well-structured. An immediate need is to bring order out of chaos. If, in fact, we are serious in our belief that there is an identifiable body of knowledge which belongs to what we call physical education, we need to begin at once to build the general framework for structuring this body of knowledge. With this accomplished, we can perhaps more clearly pinpoint the future direction of our research and other scholarly efforts.

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No field of learning is completely static. Unused accumulations of intellectual treasure tend to wither and to lose their value.

New dimensions of inquiry add to the working capital of a field. Some fields change more rapidly and fundamentally, at any given stage in history, than do others. The best clue to the current meaning and definition of a field lies in the problems its professors are studying and, more particularly, in the problems they see for further investigation.

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