

'Compulsory' physical fitness: what students think

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Student teachers, when asked to evaluate the outcome of a 6-week compulsory fitness schedule, revealed that an active life-style changed their attitudes towards themselves and others, and also influenced their own approach to their work. Of the participants, 94% were determined to continue with an equally active life-style in order to retain their positive sense of well-being.

As teachers, could we not help children to be more physically perceptive and therefore appreciate to a greater extent the many advantages of feeling physically fit? In the previous article, Dilys Went has described the health education option course for 4th-year students at Warwick University, and this article discusses the 'positive fitness' element. Opportunities for physical fitness abound, as the University enjoys excellent sporting facilities, where a wide variety of activity clubs operate. As the majority of 4th-year students live on campus, it is relatively convenient for them to make good use of these facilities between 8.30 a.m. and 10 p.m.

Students on the Health Education Course have differing backgrounds in physical education. Most have had a 30-hour primary professional course, whereas others are secondary main or subsidiary PE students. It was decided that the most meaningful experience for all the health education students was to be actively engaged in their own fitness programme. So the first nine hours of

Health Related Fitness are allotted to the needs, benefits, and effects of exercise, plus the understanding of the various components of physical fitness and how they may selectively be put into practice.

The PE students have extra responsibilities to act as advisors to non-PE students, which gives them an added dimension to the course. This system is conducive to students operating in small groups with mutual support and encouragement.

Personal selection

Students are able to select individually, with guidance, the aspects of physical fitness in which they wish to improve. This personalised approach appears to be the least threatening. They undergo the relevant testing and measurements, all of which are double-checked in order to establish a degree of accuracy. Much help is given to the important area of administering motor ability tests and employing the correct techniques when making physique measurements. The methodology is well supported with handouts,

visual aids, demonstrations and displays of relevant norms and percentiles.

They are now in a position to devise their individual 6-week physical fitness schedule. The minimum time suggested for their activity is four 20-minute sessions per week. A variety of activities are encouraged, plus the inclusion of at least one individual-activity session. This allows better concentration on the activity and greater awareness of its immediate effect on the body. There is no supervision to ensure that these activities are accomplished, but almost without exception students devote more time than the suggested minimum to their training schedule.

Students set themselves initial realistic target figures, which can be amended according to progress or lack of it! Many of them combine their fitness schedule with 'healthy eating' habits, drawing from work covered earlier in the health course, and they receive much support from each other. Tutorial help is available, and the students duly update their diary of fitness-related activities.

At the completion of the six week schedule, post-testing and measuring takes place, and all figures are again double-checked. The students are required to fill in questionnaires concerning their physical fitness programme, and are able to analyse their physical and physiological strengths and weaknesses.

Individual comments

The anonymous questionnaires provide interesting feedback information worthy of review. By far the most revealing answers appeared in response to the question *Would you consider ever embarking on another fitness programme in the future?* Of the 66 students, 62 were quite determined to continue being equally active, but for a wide variety of reasons. The answers have been summarised into four main categories, which appear in order of popularity.

1. Physical well-being The overwhelming response was that it made them feel good: they enjoyed feeling healthy and being more active, and it was a waste having achieved this physical status if they did

not maintain it. The less specific answers were that they felt better generally. Many expanded on the 'after glow' of exercise, and this, coupled with the raised metabolic rate, seemed to alert their general outlook.

2. The effect on their everyday life-style The schedule gave a pattern and order to life which helped to discipline their lives: "I feel in control of myself and my working day, and the activities became part of my life and not an extra. I became more confident mentally and physically. I could achieve more and better in other spheres of life. I was able to work harder without feeling tired. I could cope more easily, and life in general improved. I felt happier."

3. Challenge of the schedule Some valued being generally fit in order to enhance their specific sporting performance, while others found themselves embarked upon new-found activities and interests. Many were well-motivated by having specific aims and target figures to achieve, and thus found it very satisfying when progress could be monitored. This renewed their determination to persevere.

4. Enjoyment of actual activity Many enjoyed the actual exercise itself; a few appreciated knowing how to improve their fitness, and some welcomed the companionship intrinsic to many of these activities.

Other responses and effects of a more individual nature are also worth commenting upon: the ailing and injured all took part, using specially-devised programmes producing various measures of success. They included one post-operative knee injury case and another with a torn ankle ligament, together with two chronic back sufferers who are now quite normal and taking part in all their original sporting activities. Some students were surprised to find themselves more socially accepted because they too were now joining in activities within their group or club.

One young lady valued the energetic physical side of housework and enjoyed working against the clock. Two people

dispensed with their cars in order to cycle, jog and walk, so they actually had money in their pockets at the end of the course. Many remarked that they had slept so much better during the 6-week period, whilst others found their new confidence useful at subsequent job interviews.

Group support and well-being

The students' evaluation reflects many of the aims and objectives of the course, but it is refreshing for the tutor to hear this from the student. It appeared obvious that the majority of the success could be credited to group support and general enthusiasm.

Having completed a 6-week health-related fitness schedule, it seemed inevitable that students would be better ambassadors of health and fitness when teaching in their own schools. Time was well spent incorporating active learning into the course rather than theorising in depth. All participants have found out what it feels like to gain an improved state of physical fitness, and feeling and recognising this state of well-being seemed to be the major motivation for continuing the fitness schedule. Being told that one was also looking more attractive confirmed this resolution!

Perhaps PE teachers should pause more often amongst all the vigorous activity that they promote to give the pupils time to appreciate how they feel before the lesson, midway through, and after the lesson? It would tell the teachers quite a lot! It would also help the pupils to reflect upon their attitudes towards different activities, thereby helping their wise selection.

How often can teachers and other pupils consciously observe active children smiling as they work, or displaying expressions of concentration and absorption, or of nervousness? Do teachers read and interpret this usefully, and are children often enough given the opportunity to recognise and analyse how they feel? Offering knowledge and realisation of sensory perception could help children to appreciate that a healthy, fit physical status is worth earning and maintaining.