Thinking Seriously About Using the Funnies in Physical Education

by Brett J. Holt

This article discusses teaching strategies based on newspaper comic strips. After defining and suggesting ways to categorize comic strips, the author makes suggestions for how physical education teachers might integrate the comic strip as a very powerful medium for instruction in Physical Education.

What is the Comic Strip?

Comic strips are most often a short sequence of drawings that tell a story. They have become one of the most popular features of daily newspapers in America.

For as long as we have been recording our history, humankind has been telling stories and jokes through the combination of words and pictures. But it was not until a little more than a hundred years ago that we began to produce in the newspapers a distinct art form that permanently wedded the two in a way that would engage and entertain millions of people the world over (Inge, 2004).

The impact comic strips have, or are capable of having, is perhaps unquestionable; they have been part of popular culture for more than 100 years. According to Sofalvi and Drolet (1986), more than 98 million people read the comic strip section of the newspaper, with speculation that over 28 million children read them as well. It is likely, some 20 years after that report, even more people read the newspaper comics now; only with the advent of the internet, and numerous websites dedicated to comic strips, people no longer need to even subscribe to a newspaper to gain access to them. In fact, a May 2000 PRNewswire release claimed that Garfield, by Jim Davis, is distributed to over 2600 newspapers worldwide, with an estimated 260 million daily readers.

With such popularity, it is easy to imagine the effect the comic strip, as a medium of communication, has on people. In recent decades physical educators have seen fit to comment, criticize, and utilize other media such as television and music. It seems about time they develop an understanding of comic strips and begin to utilize this medium as well.

Comic Strip Themes for Physical Education

The following categories were created for this article to show how comic strips might be classified for utilization by physical educators:

1. Sport/Recreation: Several syndicated comic strips regularly depict characters involved in sport or recreational activity. For instance, Dagwood (Blondie, by Dean Young & Dennis Lebrun) is frequently found engaged in a game of golf. Likewise, on numerous occasions Charles M. Schulz (Peanuts) shows Charlie Brown playing football or baseball, or portrays Snoopy as once again playing hockey on the frozen birdbath. Sports is the underlying theme of every Cleats strip by Bill Hinds. Though physical educators may also easily identify with the recurring sports theme in Tank McNamara by Jeff Millar and Bill Hinds, in which Tank (the title character) is a sports reporter who once played professional football.

2. Physical Activity/Fitness: Comics that either reference or depict physical activity and fitness can be used to promote physical education. National Standards 3 and 4 (NASPE, 2004) discuss...
the importance of participating in regular physical activity and maintaining a health-enhancing level of fitness. Children and adults may be encouraged to participate in physical activity and fitness activities if they witness some of their favorite comic strip characters engage in such activities.

Although Cleats is identified above as a sport-related comic strip, on occasion Bill Hinds breaks away from the sport theme and shows a character at a health club/gymnasium. Luann, by Greg Evans, also has a tendency to place one of Luann’s friends (Dirk) working out with weights at the health club.

3. Physical Education Class: An exact reference or depiction of physical education class is something physical education teachers may wish to seek out, but often the most difficult to find. Few cartoonists reference physical education classes in a positive light. However, with a little patience it is possible.

In Foxtrot (Bill Amend, Oct. 28, 2004) a young boy asks his mother to sign off on his physical education homework of 100 sit-ups. He only did four and his mother explains to him that four does not equal 100. The strip ends with a punch line about binary numbers. Although physical education was referenced, it seems to be in the context of task avoidance rather than valuing physical activity.

4. Other: The “Other” category might refer to issues within education in general, such as questionable behavior management strategies or study habits. For example, Peppermint Patty (Peanuts, Oct. 22, 2004) concludes that October is too early in the school year to be failing tests, and that maybe she should study more often.

Though many comic strips are set in grade school settings, few make specific reference to physical education. Comic strips most closely associated with school based themes seem to be Peanuts, Foxtrot, Luann, Zits by Jerry Scott and Jim Borgman; Curtis by Ray Billingsley; For Better or for Worse by Lynn Johnston; and the ants in Johnny Hart’s B.C.

Using the Comic Strip in Physical Education

The following are examples of how a physical education teacher might use comic strip in a class.

1. Use comic strips to discuss positive and negative connotations that may influence participation in sport and physical activity. For instance, a strip with cheating in the punch line could be used to bring up a sportsmanship topic. “What seems so powerful about the daily strips is that they are a rich source of complex information communicated in a simple manner” (Fischman, 1998, p. 56). If comic strips are as powerful as Fischman suggests, the physical education community cannot allow strips that deal with sport and physical activity negatively to go unaddressed. Physical educators should use such opportunities to address and reinforce positive aspects of physical education, physical activity, sports, and fitness to their classes.

2. Assess the affective domain through comic strips. “Unless teachers address affective goals in their programs, students may be skilled and may even be knowledgeable but may choose not to participate” (Rink, 2002, p. 11). Assess the affective domain by giving students a comic strip that depicts a character engaged in sport or physical activity with the thoughts/words/captions removed (use white-out). Students fill in the bubbles with how they would feel if they were the character engaged in the activity shown. For example, “Imagine you are Charlie Brown (Peanuts by Charles M. Schulz) and you are about to kick the football; when Lucy, as always, pulls it away and you land on your back.” With the bubbles whited out, “Think of what the characters are saying/thinking and place your own words in the bubbles.” This provides the physical education teacher with insights into how students would or do feel in such a situation.

3. “Comics relax students, making them more open to learn” (Klatt, 2000, p. 52). If this is the case for most students, it may be helpful to share a funny comic strip with students prior to a skill evaluation or written test. Since testing is prone to make students anxious, humor can break the tension and help students relax.

4. Use comic strips as a sample of movement quality. This influences National Standards 1 and 2 (NASPE, 2004) by showing how comic strip characters perform motor skills in ways that are, or are not, proficient. If using a comic strip to show the proper technique of a motor skill, assess students on their comprehension of correct form based on the example. If contrasting depictions (correct vs. incorrect) are available, students might be asked to evaluate which is correct based on skill cues they have learned. For example, Mort Walker’s Beetle Bailey provides numerous opportunities to analyze the quality of the Colonel’s golf swing.

In another example, Ralph Dunagin and Dana Summers (The Middletons, Nov. 15, 2004) extend a football scene over three frames. In the first frame, a boy holds the football incorrectly, gripping it without placing his fingers over the laces. This presents an oppor-
tunity to ask students to identify what is wrong in the first frame and how they would correct it. As the boy executes a throw in the second frame, students might be asked what he has done correctly. In this case, the teacher would help students recognize that while throwing the football, the boy (a) has his eyes straight ahead, (b) is stepping with the opposite foot, and (c) has a very exaggerated follow through. All three cues are evident in this comic strip and would be appropriate examples of how to throw a football correctly.

5. Comic strips can be used to advertise physical education programs. Cut out strips that encourage positive attitudes toward physical education, sport, and physical activity and display them throughout the gymnasium or in classrooms.

6. Have children draw their own comic strips. National Standard 6 [NASPE, 2004] suggests that the physically educated person values physical activity. By encouraging students to draw their own comic strips, they can visually show how they value certain physical activities. This is a great rainy day activity. It integrates art and self-expression into the physical education curriculum while also promoting creative thinking skills.

It’s important to set boundaries or guidelines within which students are to draw their comic strips. For instance, suggest that the students create a comic strip that deals with a particular topic of interest, like exercising for one’s health.

7. Use comic strips to influence positive attitudes toward reading. Though it would be inappropriate to suggest replacing books or newspapers with comic strips, a major goal of school in general is to attract children to reading. Lavin (2004) makes a strong case that literary exploration can be stimulated by reading the comics. A child who picks up a newspaper for the enjoyment of reading the comics may be subsequently drawn to other sections as well.

Webistes With Comic Strips

The following websites are great resources for physical education teachers who would like to collect comic strips:

- http://www.ucomics.com/
- http://seattletimes.nwsource.com/comics/
- http://seattlepi.nwsource.com/fun/
- http://www.chron.com/content/chronicle/comics/archive/showComics.mpl

Summary

This article has described strategies for implementing comic strips into physical education instruction and provided ideas on how to locate relevant materials. Rather than disregard comic strips as a silly form of artistic expression within the popular culture, physical education should consider embracing the medium as a way to promote learning and positive attitudes within their physical education classes.

References


Eight Clues to Future Weight Gain in Children

Researchers have come up with a list of eight things parents and caregivers can look for in a child that may indicate the child’s risk of becoming obese: too much television, not enough sleep, high birth weight, early size, rapid weight gain, quick growth in years one and two, early body fat, and having obese parents.

What’s “too much” television? These researchers suggested anything more than 8 hours a week is too much. “Not enough” sleep? Researchers say a 3-year-old should get 10 ½ hours of sleep a night, for example. Obviously, once parents are aware of the signs, they can take steps toward prevention.

Source: pelinks4u.org