



## **Integrating Literacy into Physical Education: Why it Matters and How to Do It**

### **The Times They Are A-Changing**

**By Charles Silberman**

As times have changed, so too has the role of physical educators. My first physical education teaching job was in a very old and small Catholic private school. The school sat at the corner of a major road that took you from the city to the suburbs, and the school was closest to the city. The school was virtually on an island surrounded by three streets and a shopping center—and there was no gym. All I had to work with was a parking lot with a backdrop of a major discount thrift store and a small room with a big pole in the middle of it. If a soccer ball was kicked too hard, it would wind up in the street. To say it was ideal is a misnomer.

I had been hired to replace the teacher who founded the physical education course at the school. The teacher was old school. She recommended I do games like push cans with sticks to build fine motor skills. The equipment was severely lacking of anything modern. My primary focus at the time was to modernize the program and teach sport skills. Fast forward to today and it is no longer just enough to teach sport skills. It is no longer enough to focus on physical skills alone. The new expectation, outside of a lifetime fitness-based approach to a physical education program, is the integration of common core subject areas into PE. There is no way around this, and it is not going anywhere any time soon. So as the old saying goes, “If you can’t beat them, join them.”

This is not to say that integrating common core subjects is not important. They are absolutely critical to the development of the whole child, which is why we must take this change of direction seriously. According to the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA), the average reading literacy score for fifteen-year-old U.S. students is 498 (out of 1000 possible points). That’s enough to make the United States [rank twenty-fourth](#) out of the sixty-five educational systems ranked in that category. Furthermore, the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, which provides data to PISA, states that “Socio-economic background has a significant impact on student performance in the United States, with some 15% of the variation in student performance explained by this, similar to the OECD average. Although this impact has weakened over time, disadvantaged students show less engagement, drive, motivation and self-beliefs.” Not only are students in the U.S. not performing well internationally, but economically disadvantaged students are struggling more on an emotional level as well. Why is this important to know?

This is important to know because, as Thomas Freedman's [best-selling book](#) says in its title, "The World is Flat". What he means by this is that the notion of growing up and only competing for jobs in your own local or national economy is long gone. With the advancement of technology, jobs are now being outsourced to other countries for cheaper labor. This is no more evident in the job market than in the gig economy where anyone with a skill can join a freelancing platform, such as [Fiverr](#) or [Upwork](#), and sell his or her services to anyone, anytime, anywhere. This means the job market our students are entering is extremely competitive internationally. And it is everyone's job, including the PE teacher's, to prepare students with the skills to compete. Aside from math, literacy is the most fundamental skill any student needs to succeed in a global economy.

### **Literacy in a Modern World**

Literacy used to be defined solely as knowing how to read and write. According to the [National Council of Teachers of English](#), literacy is defined differently in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In order to be considered literate, students must be able to:

- Develop proficiency and fluency in the use of technology;
- Build intentional cross-cultural connections and relationships with others to pose and solve problems collaboratively and strengthen independent thought;
- Design information and share it with global communities to meet a variety of purposes;
- Manage, analyze, and synthesize multiple streams of information;
- Create, critique, analyze, and evaluate multimedia texts; *and*
- Attend to the ethical responsibilities required by these complex environments.

In other words, students must be able to think critically, communicate, and reason. This is a major shift from just being able to read and write.

What does this new definition mean for physical educators? As physical educators it is now our responsibility to integrate components of literacy into our classrooms. This does not mean we become reading teachers—that would be counterintuitive. This means we take critical elements of the new definition of literacy and seamlessly integrate them into our daily teaching. We do this to not only support the holistic growth of the child but also to help them obtain the knowledge needed to understand what a healthy life is and how to lead one.

If you think about it for a minute, this makes complete sense. Being able to live a healthy life takes a host of skills and abilities that literacy teaches. Students must first intellectually understand what it means to be healthy. This will take an understanding of both reading and writing. Then, they must be able to obtain the proper help and information from others to live healthier lives. This takes communication. Then, they must be able to have intelligent conversations with others about being healthy, which takes accountable talk and reasoning. It is a process that happens over

their K-12 experience, and each teacher plays their role in teaching different aspects of health-related information using literacy components.

### **Taking Action**

Until now, I have written about the role literacy plays in a child's development, why it matters in physical education, and what literacy means in today's modern world. But what are you supposed to do with that information? How do you break it down into actionable steps to integrate literacy in a physical education classroom? The short answer is that you are probably already doing some of the things you need to do. If you are doing the turn and talk strategy, exit cards, written assessments, task cards, and other similar activities, you're on the right path. The long answer is that you're probably not doing enough. Integrating literacy takes a thorough understanding of the literacy components, including what they are, how to teach them, and what they look like in the physical education classroom. Integrating literacy also means creating year-long lesson plans that seamlessly integrate all components into your physical education program on a daily basis. In some cases, this may mean a complete overhaul of how you're teaching.

Sound like a lot? It's not as complicated as it sounds. With the right guidance and proper tools, you can start integrating literacy into your activities in no time. In order to do that, you are going to want to find an easy course you can take on your own time and at your own pace. You want something that gives you a deeper understanding of the true impact integrating literacy has and the consequences if not done correctly. And you probably want a course that lays out the components in digestible bites that eventually guide you through developing your own literacy integration plans.

The good news is that such a course does exist and it can be found on PE Central, the premier health and physical education website. The course is called "Integrating Literacy into Physical Education: Why It Matters and How to Do It". It is a self-paced course that covers all of the aforementioned information you will need to know in order to find true success in integrating literacy into your physical education classroom. You get 15 continuing education hours for completing the course. Plus, you have an instructor who is an expert in the field guiding you along the way. To learn more and enroll, visit

<https://ssww.teachable.com/courses/integrating-literacy-into-physical-education/>