

**TIME AND AGAIN:**  
**TEACHING THE HISTORY OF SPORT AND RECREATION**  
**THROUGH A THEMATIC APPROACH**

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Each winter, I teach a 1000-level course called the “History of Sport and Recreation.” The course covers from the ancient to the present, what one professor emeritus who mentored me as a grad student liked to call the “womb to tomb” of sport. As a world history of some 4000 years in 13 weeks that touches on many topics that come under ‘kinesiology’ – sport, physical activity, health, physical education, leisure, etc. – the course can seem abstract and chaotic. Over 6 years I developed a thematic approach to the course, where a set of recurring issues is explored in the different societies we encounter. Since many of these issues are similar to those faced in our current world, it helps students understand the historical context better, and see the relevance of history.

The first time I taught this course, admittedly just one step ahead of the students in preparing material, I found myself struggling to fill a class, one-third of the way through the semester and having just finished with the ancient world. I decided on a review class where groups of students discussed similarities they saw across the societies we had studied, and then shared with the wider group. This was an “A-Ha!” moment for the students and me. It easily became apparent that similar social issues and problems arose in different times and places, and that these interacted with and influenced the shape that ‘sport’ and recreation took. From that point forward, this course in its multiple re-teachings has been shaped around a number of themes.

There are eight major themes or social issues that we examine. These follow, with brief historical examples from varied time-frames:

- Religion/Religious influences - the Ancient Olympic Games were held to honour the Gods; “muscular Christianity” promoted religion *and* organized sport in the late 1800s.
- Social Structure/Class – slave-holding in the ancient world permitted certain classes to have leisure; team sports in 1800s British public schools served as life training for the new middle class.
- Technological change – Roman architecture led to stadia and circuses; the invention of the printing press enabled the promulgation of rules for different sports.

- Social philosophies/philosophies of the body – different forms of Renaissance humanism influenced physical education; social philosophies underpinned the revival of the modern Olympics.
- Cultural diffusion – the Egyptians borrowed chariots from the Persians and became obsessed with them for recreation; gymnastics systems spread from Europe in the 1800s and 1900s through emigration.
- Nationalism (or something like it) – Ancient Greek city-states invested in athletes for Olympic glory; nations “proved” themselves through international sport during the Cold War.
- Commercialization – indicated by the lavish prizes and rewards offered to ancient Greek competitors, medieval knights, and current professional athletes.
- Militarism/Need for military preparation – in just about every society we encounter, these influenced forms of physical activity and training.

This is a somewhat unusual approach for a general sport history class. Most textbooks in the area, for example, tend to be strictly chronological, and meeting the demands of the larger American market, they often combine philosophy of sport and history into one, with a focus leading to a western-world (read American) view of sporting practices.<sup>1</sup> While we still proceed chronologically for most of the course, the themes are constantly reinforced, and I like to think that it problematizes, or at least de-simplifies, western worldviews.

I tell students about these themes in the first class of the semester, stressing that they will be referred to throughout the course. I also tell them, in that first class, that 50% of their final exam will be one theme-related question:

How was \_\_\_\_\_ a significant influence or major aspect of the development of sport, recreation and leisure throughout human history?

Students fill the blank with their choice of the course themes, and write an answer drawing on the whole semester’s content. Giving them this question in advance stresses the importance of the themes. Students can also pick the theme that they find the most interesting and focus their study efforts on that across the semester.

I always do the class where students discuss course themes in groups after we finish with the ancient world. At the end of the course, we further review each theme across the semester, and spend some time exploring how they are still relevant in the current world of sport, recreation and leisure. Ideally, this comes from the students’ own input during class discussions.

Taking this thematic approach facilitates one of *my* goals for the course – getting students to see sport and recreation as more complex, and more important in society than they are used to thinking. Student feedback suggests it also helps them see the relevance of history to the present. Many of my students have a lifetime interest, if not in-depth involvement, in sport and recreation. Considering history in light of

the themes allows students to make personal connections to history, connections given context by historical structures and circumstances. As Seixas and Peck wrote in an early musing on teaching historical thinking, understanding “[historical] “significance” is about a relationship not only among events and people of the past, but also about the relationship of those events and people to us, in the present, who are doing the historical thinking.”<sup>2</sup>

All of this is very specific to this course. However, taking a thematic approach could prove useful in other history courses, other subject areas and perhaps across a curriculum. Employing themes assists students in forming connection between topics, between the past and present, and it can encourage them to become more active engagers with, rather than passive recipients of, historical information.

### **Endnotes**

<sup>1</sup> As an example of a standard text, see Robert Mechicoff, *A History and Philosophy of Sport and Physical Education: From Ancient Civilizations to the Modern World*, 5<sup>th</sup> ed. New York: McGraw-Hill, 2010.

<sup>2</sup> Peter Seixas and Carla Peck, “Teaching historical thinking” (p. 111). In *Challenges and Prospects for Canadian Social Studies*, ed. Alan Sears & Ian Wright (pp. 109-117). Vancouver: Pacific Educational, 2004.

### **Biography**

Fred Mason is with the Faculty of Kinesiology at the University of New Brunswick. He splits his research and teaching between the history and sociology of sport and physical activity.

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