Physical Education Between the Necessary and the Compulsory in Artistic Academic Education

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Abstract

The aim of the present paper is to establish the status of the discipline of Physical Education in the artistic academic education curriculum by proposing a solution that may also apply to other academic profiles. In the current system of academic education, the number of hours assigned for practical courses in Physical Education has decreased significantly. Having this in mind, as well as the students’ lack of time that is usually blamed on, as they are caught in several daily activities involving modern technologies tending to “pin” them down for hours, we ask ourselves the following question: should the discipline of Physical Education be mandatory or optional in the artistic academic education curriculum? We must mention that an artist adopts a certain posture during the creative act, which (s)he maintains for several hours a day and which consequently leads to posture deficiencies and, implicitly, decreases the value of their artistic creation.

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1. Introduction

Can a discussion on this topic establish the status of the discipline of Physical Education among students and young artists? In my 14 years of activity with the University of Arts, the status of this discipline has declined as far as its presence in the artistic academic education curricula is concerned. The two hours of practical course per week during the first 2 years of academic studies have been reduced to only one hour of practical courses of Physical Education per week during the first 2 years of studies at the Faculty of Music, the first year of study at the Faculty of Theatre, and during the first year of studies at the Faculty of Plastic Arts, where it is optional.

In order to explain the choice of the two key-words related to this topic, we must mention that something necessary, meaning “needed” and “indispensable”, is different from something mandatory, the latter term

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implying an imposition. Relying on real-life examples, we aim to demonstrate that Physical Education is more necessary than mandatory for the activity of young artists, musicians and actors.

Specialised literature does not provide much information on the discipline of Physical Education within universities with various profiles. As professors teaching at an academic level in the area of Physical Education and Sports, relying on the professional experience gained, we must certainly come up with suggestions and theories founded on a solid practical basis precisely in order to expand this literature.

For instance, in artistic education at the academic level, after art students have acquired the right to assert their creativity in a certain area, they should not be subjected to norms or standards (which, more often than not, are difficult to achieve by skilled athletes) because this would result in demeaning the artist’s status as a human being. Our aim is different. It is known that, in its multiple forms of expression, physical exercise stimulates the creative process. The democratic nature of the current educational system allows a flexible academic curriculum of this much debated discipline.

As a practical discipline, Physical Education has gradually declined in the students’ curriculum for all profiles. As a mandatory discipline, Physical Education exists only in the cases in which the administrative board of an academic institution realises that physical exercise is highly necessary for the students who are “under siege” by modern technology which immobilises them for hours. Of course, the decision to introduce physical exercises in the academic curriculum must also overcome budgetary constraints. Year after year, the “George Enescu” University of Arts in Iași manages to allocate time, space and money to the discipline of Physical Education. In this context, it is a rational decision, but also the result of the benefits of practicing physical exercises during academic courses, felt by the university’s board of directors. The high number of professors attending the courses of physical education, made available by this institution for all the academic staff, is a proof of this statement. This is comforting news which will hopefully bode well for all the universities in Romania, irrespective of their profile.

2. Why is physical exercise NECESSARY in an art student’s daily program?

Some possible answers to this question will be listed below:

2.1. The spinal column

As a complex segment with an important functional role, the vertebral column may be also called the core of the human body. The movements of the spine are produced by the activity of a high number of muscles attached to it or located at a certain distance, such as the neck and abdominal muscles or the posterior torso muscles. The intensive activity of certain muscle groups during the artistic activity, frequently due to body positioning required by the activity in question, may lead to deviations of the spinal column and to serious physiological dysfunctions. The vertebral discs also play a role in several ways in this context:

- through their resilience, they contribute to maintaining the curvature of the spine;
- through their elasticity, they allow resuming balance after the movement ends;
- they distribute the body weight to different segments of the spinal column;
- they attenuate the shocks or pressures the segments of the spinal column are subjected to, especially during motion or physical effort.

Consequently, protecting the intervertebral discs against inherent physical effort is a duty towards one’s own body and must be a priority even in the simplest positions, such as sitting on a chair. When a chair’s backrest is inclined backwards, normal lumbar lordosis disappears, the hip joint extends and the effort the intervertebral discs are subjected to increases significantly. The correct position is “in such a way as to maintain lumbar lordosis, which results in a better balance of the spinal column. The technique of a physical exercise is more
correct if the laws of biomechanics meant to protect intervertebral discs against effort are observed” (Birtolon, 1978).

The issue of correct vs. defective posture among children, teenagers and young adults is not new and it will always be a genuine problem because each generation experiences the same growth and development processes related to posture building and the tendency to vitiate it during life at home, at school and at the workplace. Irrespective of the specialisation, an orientation towards an artistic life is a very delicate matter; in some cases (e.g. the study of a musical instrument) it starts at a young age (5-6 years) and continues for the rest of a person’s life.

Maintaining the body in work-specific positions for several hours, day after day, may lead to certain physical deficiencies with physiological implications, unless measures to recompose posture are duly taken. In order to offer a clearer image, some of our art students’ body postures (when playing an instrument or in other artistic activities) are sketched below (see image 1-12).
There are several programs of physical exercises for this purpose, but disseminating them is not enough, as many of them are already well known anyway. What must be found is a motivation to make these persons aware of the importance of physical exercise and also to make them practice it on a daily basis.

“School (the teachers and the school psychologist) have a crucial role in explaining the benefits of regular physical activity and the role of recreational physical activity if practiced since early childhood” (Cosmovici, 1974). Every school should encourage a positive attitude towards physical activity, explain its role and foster sports activities that can be practiced over time.

2.2. Psychophysical stimulation

It is common knowledge that the human psyche and body influence each other and are characterised by constant interaction.

In A Course on the Actor’s Art, Tchekhov (1930) claims that, “regardless of its muscular development, the body can easily disturb intellectual activity, weaken the will or erode affections. As every domain and profession causes some habits, illnesses or work-related accidents, which inevitably affect the workers or the professionals in question, we can seldom strike a balance between the body and the mind (Tchekhov, 1930). Physical exercises performed within a well-organised program, with effort weighted according to the requirements of the human material, can strike such a balance. The saying “Mens sana in corpore sano” (a healthy mind in a healthy body) was devised for a good reason, as this general principle, observed since ancient times, shapes man’s psychological and physical characteristics.

2.3. The acquisition of acrobatic elements by students in acting

Konstantin S. Stanislavski holds a deep conviction in physical education as the basis of theatre training: “one starts with physical education and ends up with acrobatic elements [...] Acrobatics shapes determination.” (Stanislavski, 1951). Actors can only communicate through their body: they can well study, analyse and intellectualize an interesting case for their role; however, this amounts to nothing if they are not able to assimilate and communicate it through the only instrument they have at hand, their own body; what results is, then, physical communication or physicalisation.

2.4. Physical Education is an opportunity for group knowledge and manifestation

The practical course in Physical Education presents an opportunity to unwind, relax, avoid stress and cooperate with other participants in the physical activity. An important group is thereby created for every student, with a strong influence on its members. This leads to the creation of teams playing different games and competing against one another, which reveals behavioural aspects other than those manifested inside the groups which were created during other courses.

3. Why should the practical course of Physical Education be compulsory?

We have identified three day-to-day elements that are usually perceived as deterrents in the above-mentioned situation:

3.1. giving students a strong motivation to introduce a form of physical activity in the daily program, which may include physical exercises meant to tone muscles and prevent spinal column deficiencies and stress.
Parents, teachers and authorities alike always attempt to conceive of Physical Education (sports) starting out from the need to prevent or fight against antisocial behaviour. However, it is precisely the young and healthy students “physically fit and healthy, who have not yet experienced any serious illness, who refuse to be motivated towards practicing sports for reasons of healthcare” (Bota, 2002). This is where we should direct our efforts – to create a clear and well-established motivation in the young artists’ mind. In order to achieve this goal, students must be “dragged” to the practical course of Physical Education. The distance between the classroom and the gym that should be covered by undergraduate students who are studying in the building located at no. 7 Horia Street (Piata Unirii) is relatively big – approximately 2 km. Bad weather, hard times and the current way of thinking lead to low attendance levels at the gym.

Motivation is one of the elements requiring the practice of some kind of physical activity during the academic cycle. Physical exercises should be presented in their most appealing form: team races, championships, prizes, music in the presence of the professors, friends or family.

Another factor distracting most students/young artists from practising physical exercises is time. Admittedly, after the implementation of the Bologna system in artistic academic education, the number of years in the academic cycle has decreased and, implicitly, the number of subject matters has also been reduced (a highly debated issue). Art students often prefer to stop attending some classes that, in their opinion, do not have a strong impact on their future career. Physical Education is one of those classes.

4. Study methodology

In this really problematic situation, a case study methodology was applied, in an attempt to answer the following questions:

- How can art students be motivated to participate in the Physical Education practical course?
- Why does the mandatory Physical Education practical course take precedence over the optional course?

Answers to these questions were sought during the students’ programs of physical activities within the Physical Education practical course. The following methods were applied:

- presenting the theoretical principles behind physical deficiencies;
- explaining and demonstrating the physical exercises which contribute to fortifying the human body and correcting certain physical deficiencies;
- creating an attractive environment by means of sports competitions and thematic games;
- eliminating mandatory trials and adapting specific trials with customized results scales devised to record progress;
- encouraging students to become actively involved in various extra-curricular physical activities;
- recording attendance and participation in activities in the trainer’s book;
- creating an optional program to practice physical exercises open to all B.A., M.A. and Ph.D. students as well as to the teaching and clerical staff by granting them free use of the multifunctional gymnasium of the “George Enescu” Arts University; this was offered as a proof of our effort to motivate the young artists and convince them of the need to practice physical exercise.

5. Conclusions

As a result of the research conducted as part of this case study, which involved observation, recording of data, interviewing, comparison and statistical data processing, we can present the following findings regarding the participation of art students in the Physical Education practical course:
Following the development of motivation through theories and attractive physical activities, the students’ attendance increased by 10% (337 of a total of 450 able-bodied students capable of physical effort, which is 45 students more than in the previous year) as compared to the previous academic year (2011-2012) when attendance was only 65%.

The fact that this discipline is mandatory has led to a 75% attendance in the academic year 2012-2013 (337 of the 450 able-bodied students attending for a period of 10 weeks up to the conclusion of the present research, as 75% of the total number of able-bodied students attended the course). The figure results from the statistical processing of the records of the students’ attendance.

From the interviews, 60% (202 of the total 337) of the students who attended the course (75% of the total) stated that they did physical exercises out of pleasure and because they were aware of the necessity of doing so. While 15% of the students (50 students out of the 337 students attending) stated that they attended the course because it was mandatory and not obtaining grades for this subject matter would have had negative consequences (they would no longer get a scholarship, they would need to pay extra fees for re-sitting examinations etc.).

As part of the optional (non-mandatory) program devised for the practice of physical exercises offered to all the students and employees of our institution with no pressure regarding attendance (B.A., M.A. and Ph.D. students, teaching staff and clerical staff interested in doing physical exercise), we had 120 persons attending, most of which were members of the teaching staff in the Faculty of Arts. The fact that the gymnasium is very close to their offices and is thus very accessible may be one of the possible explanations for their high attendance levels.

It should be stated that the necessity to have Physical Education classes implies the necessity of attendance. However, given the various impediments (lack of time, the distance between the gym and the students’ homes, the lack of a strong motivation to practice physical exercise), for the time being it is better to introduce only mandatory physical activities instead of the traditional Physical Education classes in arts higher education in order to ensure an increase in the percentage of students attending classes in the years to come.

References


