

SEMBLANZA

Taking Teacher Education Outside the Box—The John Cheffers Story

Tom Martinek

University of North Carolina at Greensboro; USA

In 1974 my career path abruptly changed. After seven years of teaching in the public schools I made the decision to begin work on my doctorate at Boston University. This was a major career change for me motivated by a strong need to help improve physical education in the schools. To do this I saw myself in a position at a university or college where I could prepare others to be great teachers. It was at Boston University that I met John Cheffers who became my advisor, mentor, and friend. Our partnership was to become one where I learned more about myself, kids, and the unique role that physical activity and sport could play in helping children and youth become what Robert Coles calls “good people.” He was one of the very few professionals in our field who sought to better understand the human condition of young people. He knew the challenges that youngsters faced, especially those that resided in underserved areas of our cities and rural communities.

Viewing sport as an ally, John used it as way to help youth develop self-confidence and the requisite life skills needed to successfully face the pressures and temptations they face in their lives. He also believed that sport could ignite the will to step out, be a role model, and lead others. This philosophy was born from his early experiences as the head athletic coach for Zimbabwe, then called Rhodesia. His coaching exploits of the multiracial team were detailed in his book: “A Wilderness of Spite: Rhodesia Denied”. This team was denied entry to Mexico for the Olympics by the Mexican government, and was, de facto, banned from the Olympic Games at this point. This event crystallized John's strong belief that politics and social injustice should not interfere in sport.

John came to Boston University in 1972. Receiving

his Masters of Education in 1970, and his Doctorate of Education in 1973, both from Temple University in Philadelphia, John moved north to Boston where he acquired the professor position at Boston University. While there he crafted an undergraduate and graduate program in teacher education that was both visionary and unique to our profession. He believed that teacher education must seek new and higher ground in preparing people for school teaching. He immediately sought new ways of getting students ready to face the challenges inherent in teaching public school physical education. Because of his leadership, the focus of teacher training suddenly extended beyond just preparing people to teach physical skills but also life skills that help children become contributors to their community and beyond. Indeed, most parents, coaches, teachers, and recreation leaders believe that teaching life skills to youth requires that the right context be created for the right things to happen. John did just that.

My first lesson from John was a memorable one. It occurred during one of many closed office sessions. I asked him what it takes to be an effective teacher educator at a university. His response has stuck with me to this very day—it resonates stronger than ever: “If you want to educate students about teaching kids you must have them work with real live, breathing, sweating kids. Most importantly, you must also have them accept their own fallibility.”

Indeed, John was truly ahead of his time. He created a laboratory school where children from the inner-city schools of Boston were bused twice a week to Boston University's campus.

The program, known as the Tuesday-Thursday Physical Education Program, became the centerpiece (the main classroom) for preservice teacher training and a venue for research for faculty and graduate students. For almost three decades the program was recognized nationally and internationally for its unconventional teaching and learning environment. It also was one of BU's longest-running community service initiatives involving the city of Boston's underserved populations. The intent of program provide three essential components:

1. A stress-free physical activity program for at-risk kids from the inner-city of Boston who did not have a regular physical education program,
2. A unique clinical experience for the preparation of pre-service teachers and associated professionals at graduate and undergraduate levels,
3. Ample opportunity for longitudinal research into the social dynamics of teaching children and youth.

It is the third component of the Tuesday-Thursday Program that set John apart from fellow professionals. The call for more in-depth and sequential research in physical education was strong. Scores of John's graduate students, armed with various research strategies, have been able to produce a tapestry of research products. All these products focused on student empowerment and decision making and how they, in a number of interconnected ways, impacted the social dynamics and growth of racial and economic disparate groups of students.

John's passion for exploring teaching within the larger context of life molded other learning experiences for his undergraduate students. He also involved his graduate students—I was one of them-- in addressing the heightened social and political issues facing Boston public schools in the mid-seventies. One of these issues was the desegregation of Boston's public schools. In 1975 a Massachusetts federal judge ruled that all public schools must be racially balanced. Opposition to the judge's ruling was fierce.

Many thought that there was little value of busing children from one barren school setting to another simply to have Black children sit next to White children. Consequently, dynamic and innovative programs were developed and funded to help integrate groups successfully. John's Tuesday-Thursday Program was selected to help integrate Black and White children through sport. Undergraduate and graduate students were intimately engaged in this exciting initiative. They provided learning experiences that would help engender positive relationship among the groups. In addition to providing twice a week sport programs, they also planned and lead a residential field experience. This experience required middle school and university students to travel up to a residential camp ground three hours north of Boston. All would eat, sleep, and participate together for an entire week.

Various cooperative activities were provided and would focus on a major theme. One of these themes was creating a hypothetical "model village" where everyone, regardless of race, gender, or religious beliefs, could live together. Working in small "program groups," plans were set by the middle school students on how schools would operate. Undergraduate teacher education students would facilitate program group discussions and draw upon the experience to solidify their own knowledge about the fears, joys, and indifference of kids from very different backgrounds. In sum this experience epitomized the way John looked at professional development. It was more than books and lecture---it was about doing, feeling, reflecting, and self discovery.

Although John is retired now and is leading the "good life" on his sheep ranch in Australia he continues to stay active--especially at the international level. As creator and past president of the Association Internationale des Ecoles Superieures d'Education Physique (AIESEP) from 1984 to 1998, he continues to be an advocate and voice for the association. His influence continues in many other ways as well. His past students continue to lead research, and humanize professional practice.

For them (and me) having John as a mentor continues to instill a healthy view of how teaching and research should be. We have gained from him a much broader way of preparing teachers for the 21st century where context, values, and vision matter; they must become the centerpieces for what we do in our professional lives. From a personal perspective, John's encouragement throughout my professional life and his push to try ideas out—that is, think “outside the box,” has given me the strength to persist with these ideas in order to make a difference in kids' lives—as he did.

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