

What Educators, Scholars, and Leaders can Learn from the Olympics: Moving Forward with Life-Long Education in an Age of Change*

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Abstract

Olympic Games are held once every four years and they showcase talented athletes from all over the world. To participate in these games, these athletes engage in on-going preparations, trainings, and learning processes. In addition, they improve their personal techniques and market themselves for life during, after, and outside the Olympics for financial remunerations and social recognitions. To a large measure, these athletes learn from each other and try to master their crafts. Interestingly, they represent different socio-economic, religious, educational, racial, and linguistic backgrounds; divergent personalities; and strange personal idiosyncrasies. In spite of these differences, their coming together as athletes beautifies the world, exposes multiculturalism as a global phenomenon, and demonstrates that learning is an important part of life. The critical question is, What are educators, scholars, and leaders learning from the Olympics besides the normal hoopla of individual athletic superiority? In my presentation, I discuss the benefits of Olympic Games and challenge educators, scholars, and leaders to learn from these phenomenal games as we move forward with life-long education in this age of change.

Keywords: Lifelong Education, Educator, Scholar, Leader, Olympics

1. Introduction

The Olympic Games are held once every four years and they attract athletes from all over the world. During these games, people from rich, poor, developed, and developing countries participate equally and zealously. In addition, people from different religious faiths and political persuasions compete against each other in all games, including those games that they are traditionally known to participate and excel in. There are always unique and dazzling events that happen during these games (Obiakor, Watson, & Beachum, 2014). Consider some highlights during the 2012 Olympic Games! In soccer, the Italian team had an impressive striker who was Black and originally from Africa. Mexico, the Olympic soccer champion, was led by a soccer star with a Brazilian root that helped his team to beat Brazil. Senegal and the United Arab Emirates demonstrated some soccer finesse that shocked even the worst skeptics. The United States, Great Britain, Spain, and France had soccer stars and athletes who had their roots from all over the world. In track, there were remarkable stars from The Dominican Republic, Grenada, South Africa, Kenya, Jamaica, The Bahamas, Trinidad and Tobago, the United States, Russia, Cuba, Australia, to mention a few. Amazingly, a White South African track star with physical disabilities (i.e., he does not have two legs, but used assistive technology to run) ran in the track preliminary heats. It was an impressive track event to see the British crowd heroically cheer their long distance runner, a Muslim who emigrated from Somalia (see Obiakor et al., 2014).

In all sports during the Olympic Games, people of different races, cultures, languages, values, and religions are usually featured. The whole Olympic scenario is usually glaringly multicultural and global; and the focus is typically on building a unity of purpose or an esprit de corps that transcends national or tribal boundaries (see Obiakor et al., 2014). In fact, the whole world usually sees itself as a village that exemplifies quality and equity at the very highest level. With all of these obvious reasons for the Olympic Games, there are still BIGGER messages that deserve the attention of educators, scholars, and leaders. To represent their respective countries and excel in their respective events, Olympic athletes have to be life-long learners who believe in life-long education that is intertwined with risk-taking and futuristic change. They have to prepare, train, and master their individual techniques and crafts to truly excel during

the games. In addition, they have to learn how to market themselves to survive financially, psychologically, socially, and professionally during and after the Olympic Games. In this presentation, I focus on what educators, scholars, and leaders can learn from these Olympic Games in today's changing world.

2. Conceptual Frameworks

There is no denying that the Olympic Games bring out the best in all participants; and in these games, there is visible arrogant humility or humble arrogance amongst participants from member nations. Yes, some athletes are usually expected to dominate; however, some are not expected to win. The events usually have nothing to do with one's language, accent, or linguistic sophistication! And, while some bodies are well-built for certain events, the events themselves have nothing to do with how tall, short, fat, or skinny a person is. In addition, they usually have nothing to do with how rich or poor one is, his/her parents are, and his/her country is. Visible elements during Olympic Games are human talent, endurance, capability, resilience, skill, and commitment. Consider the facts that in the 2012 Olympic Games, Gabrielle "Gabby" Douglas, an African American girl from a single parent home won the overall gold in gymnastics. Mexico defeated Brazil to win the overall gold in soccer. Jamaica swept the gold, silver, and bronze medals in the 200 meters race. American women won the overall gold in soccer, gymnastics, and the 4x100 and 4x400 relays. In fact, one could see similar feats in the overall game where people of different countries, races, colors, cultures, languages, and religions excelled (see Obiakor et al., 2014).

While the aforementioned dynamics seem to be attractive to those interested in the nuances of Olympic Games, athletes must learn new techniques to excel in their events. They must be well -prepared, trained, and very ready to participate and excel in these games. In addition, they must prepare themselves for life after the games. As a result, they must become life-long learners who work hard and have the common sense to achieve their goals. To a large extent, life -long learners are visionary people who challenge the status quo and step outside their comfort zones to move themselves and their lives forward. These learners are usually inquisitive "work horses" and not "thorough breeds"---they search for truths that are unending and strive for perfection in their crafts, even with their imperfections. Interestingly, successful educators, scholars, and leaders also strive for perfection in their chosen profession in an imperfect world. They continue to learn and grow while recognizing their deficiencies.

In addition, they understand that when fail to engage in life -long learning, they become less innovative, less creative, less productive, and fail to leave their comfort zones. In the end, they become cemented, enveloped, and entrenched in traditional retrogressive values that lead to meaningless living (Obiakor & Algozzine, 2014). Further, they fail to see beyond their eyes, limit themselves on what they can do, live within their narrow confines, and view change as a dangerous encounter, especially in valuing human differences, strengths, and energies (Obiakor, 2001b, 2014). Since they are not risk takers and change agents, they develop external locus of control and blame others for their downfall and failure (see Obiakor & Algozzine, 2014).

3. Becoming Life-Long Learners

Who are life-long learners? Learning is a part of life; and everyone has the potential to be a life-long learner. People who continue to learn become great life- long learners and change agents (Obiakor, 2008). These individuals are usually action- orientated and go beyond knowledge and comprehension to value application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation (see Obiakor, 2001b). They are like Olympic athletes who prepare and train consistently to better themselves. Logically, they are not mentally static; and they believe in personal growth and change. John Dewey (1958) noted if education is to be education, it must be a continuous process of growth. In more ways than one, it must involve change. This idea was corroborated by Chittister (1999) when she wrote:

The thought of constant change colors our sense of the future. We wear it like a logo as we race from place to place, and now, in our time, from idea to idea, from concept to concept, from social revolution to social revolution----- change, after all, is not a given. Change follows in the wake of something that preceded it, quiet as a shift in the wind. It does not just happen; it is not a timed process. "If we're just patient; if we just wait long enough it has to come," we say when we do not want to be responsible ourselves for the change. But, change does not just come; change is brought somehow. (p. 53)

Some decades ago, President John F. Kennedy of the United States of America pushed forward the Peace Corps of America to reach out to the remotest areas of the world. Surely, some leaders have been able to translate global discourse into meaningful school reforms to advance humanity. Consider the roles of the

United Nations (UN) in resolving conflicts all over the world; the World Health Organization (WHO) in promoting health and well-being in the world; the World Bank (WB) in stabilizing the world economy; the United Nations Educational and Scientific Organization (UNESCO) in buttressing education programming at global levels; and the United Nations Children's Educational Funds (UNICEF) in advancing educational programs for young children all over the world. Clearly, all these organizations initiate programs that are intertwined with life-long learning at individual, community, institutional, national, and global levels. Still, our cups seem to be globally half- full or half -empty, depending on who is looking at it; and we seem to always rationalize why we have not been able to solve critical school problems that have global implications (see Obiakor et al., 2014).

Technological tools have truly made the world smaller; however, today, they are still not available to ALL. There is still a digital divide in the world---we need educators, scholars, and leaders who believe in long-life education to deal with this sad phenomenon (Obi, Obiakor, Drennon-Gala, & Magee, 2013). Despite this impediment, technological tools of all kinds are now used by educators, scholars and leaders to prepare people for participate in this changing world. Technologies are now a part of our life-long activities in every facet of our society---they are now inevitable and indispensable in our learning processes (see Obi et al., 2013). Many Olympic athletes have been known to leave their countries of origin to go to technologically advanced countries to beef up their training and preparation. To many of them, it has become a matter of survival to journey beyond their narrow confines. In the same vein, many educators, scholars, and leaders have immigrated to countries that will help advance their skills and reward them for their hard work. It is no surprise that African nations and other not- so- developed nations are consistently experiencing some brain drain. It is critical that we work together as a global village to reduce the impact of immigration and brain drain in our world without creating unnecessary boundaries that would restrict life-long learning. While life -long education is important, in our life journeys, we must be prudent because all that glitters may not be gold. Maybe, we all need to follow Parker Palmer's (2000) advice of finding our "sacred center" as life- long learners in our journeys of life. In the words of Palmer (2000),

Most of us arrive at a sense of self and vocation only after a long journey through alien lands. But this journey bears no resemblance to the trouble-free "travel packages" by the tourism industry. It is more akin to the ancient tradition of "pilgrimage"—"a transformative journey to a sacred center" of hardships, darkness, and peril...In the tradition of pilgrimage, those hardships are seen not as accidentals but as integral to the journey itself. Treacherous terrain, bad weather, taking a fall, getting lost ---challenges of that sort, largely beyond our control, can strip the ego of the illusion that it is in charge and make space for true self to emerge. If that happens, the pilgrim has a better chance to find the sacred center he or she seeks. Disabused of our illusions by much travel and travail, we awaken one day to find that the sacred center is here and now—in every moment of the journey, everywhere in the world around us, and deep within our own hearts. (pp. 17-18)

4. Future Perspectives

Olympic Games are wonderful opportunities for world class athletes to showcase their talents. These athletes come to these games from different developed and developing countries and carry along with them cultural, linguistic, religious, socio-economic, political, and racial baggage. In addition, they seem excited to share their skills and personalities with the world; and to a large extent, enhance our multicultural understanding of the world in which we live. While all of these are cherished attributes of the Olympics, we tend to forget that they are life-long learners who are very prepared, trained, and ready to expose their talents. In addition, we tend to forget that this is their profession; and as professionals, they must always prepare, train, and master their crafts. A logical extension is that they have to market themselves for their personal and financial survival. My hunch is that educators, scholars, and leaders have a lot to learn from these Olympic athletes (see Obiakor et al., 2014).

In educational cycles, we need teachers and practitioners who understand that everything has everything to do with everything since no behavior occurs in isolation (Obiakor & Algozzine, 2015). As educators and professionals, it is important that they

(a) know who they are, (b) learn the facts when they are in doubt, (c) change their thinking, (d) use resource persons, (e) build self-concepts, (f) teach with divergent techniques, (g) make the right choices, and (h) continue to learn (Obiakor, 2008). Additionally, we need all kinds of programs and tools to be abreast of the times in the general and special education of All learners (Obiakor, 2012). For example, in special education, educators and related professionals must continue to learn new ways to:

1. Identify their students.

2. Assess their students.
3. Label/Categorize their students.
4. Place their students.
5. Teach their students.
6. Work with parents of their students.
7. Collaborate, consult, and cooperate with colleagues in designing and implementing their students' Individualized Education Plans (IEPs).
8. Intervene equitably when their students have problems (e.g., Functional Behavior Assessment, Behavior Intervention Plan, and Response-to Intervention).
9. Reach their young children without categorizing them.
10. Work with adolescent and adult learners, as needed.
11. Address the needs of culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) learners
12. Meet the needs of children and youth from vulnerable backgrounds without thinking that "poor" students have "poor" brains.
13. Provide services for students who are at risk of dropping out of school and becoming societal problems.
14. Narrow achievement gaps of students by any necessary means.

In scholarly arenas, we seem to be bugged down by irrelevant and unnecessary debates (e.g., discussions on quantitative or qualitative research in our studies). It is an illusion to think that the more numbers that we have in a study, the more reliable or valid the study is. For example, in special education, we use intelligent quotient (IQ) scores to label, categorize, and place students. We tend to forget that these tests are culturally, racially, linguistically, and socio-economically biased (Obiakor, 2001b). As life-long researchers, it is critical we use creative research methods that have pedagogical implications. As a researcher, I continue to use case study approach in my studies because I have come to understand that statistical significance does not depict importance in any study (Obiakor, 2001a). I am also beginning to use personal narrative in my studies. I do understand the weaknesses of these research approaches; however, people cannot be defined based on units of measures—they might not be good or accurate predictor variables since they lack reliability (i.e., when a test produces consistent results) and validity (i.e., when a test measures what it purports to measure). And, even when a test is reliable, it may not be valid (Obiakor, 2001b). When studies are completed, we need to teach and mentor potential scholars how to report their results by writing journal articles, book chapters, and books (Obiakor, 2001a; Obiakor, Algozzine, & Spooner, 2010). People learn to write by writing---no one is a born scholar. To succeed as a writer, one has to be life-long learner (see Obiakor, 2001a; Obiakor et al., 2010). It is our responsibility to improve our scholarly journeys by:

1. Choosing our own areas of research interests.
2. Telling our own stories and allowing people to tell their stories.
3. Mentoring new and growing scholars when we think we have arrived.
4. Reducing the noise regarding quantitative and qualitative research studies.
5. Teaching people to write.
6. Networking with other scholars.
7. Knowing the impact of our works in our respective professions.
8. Engaging in works that advance humanity.

It is critical to know that leaders are made not born. We should create healthy environments that grow leaders; and like Olympic athletes, they need to be prepared and trained. We must nurture new thinkers, risk takers, and change agents (Beachum, 2011; Beachum & McCray, 2011; Obiakor, 2001a, 2001b). Our world is changing at a startling pace with technology at every nook and corner. We need educational programs at colleges and universities to look for new ways to prepare futuristic leaders who are willing to shift their paradigms. While our world is progressing, there are still traces of wars, inhumanity, racism, xenophobia, religious fanaticism, terrorism, to mention a few. Colleges, universities, and organization must prepare leaders to:

1. Be good followers.
2. Learn and grow.
3. Understand the world that we live in.
4. Shift their paradigm.
5. Go beyond their comfort zones.
6. Collaborate, consult, and cooperate with others.
7. Be prudent and exhibit common sense.
8. Make the world a better place.

9. Be abreast of the times.
10. Continue to learn.

5. Conclusion

In my presentation, I have noted the advantages of Olympic Games. These games have many wonderful implications. As indicated, Olympic participants come from different countries and bring with them exciting divergent personalities, traits, backgrounds, and national origins. They look for innovative and creative ways to prepare, train, and improve themselves even in the face of all odds. They take risks and shift their paradigms and try their very best to maximize their potential. They are unafraid to make mistakes and they simply make themselves life-long learners to achieve their goals. That is why I believe educators, scholars, and leaders can learn from them. Clearly, we must encourage life-long education. We cannot solve our world's problems by being retrogressive in our thinking; and we cannot eradicate achievement gaps in education in our respective communities if we do not improve the academic and life outcomes of children, youth, and adults. We need serious paradigm shifts in reeducating ourselves; and we need to rethink the traditional policies, decisions, and approaches that have created separate and inequitable educational systems in our world. Finally, we must resist the temptation of condoning educators, scholars, and leaders who engage in myopic deficit-thinking that is based on the morally corrupt and repugnant perspective that sees fellow humans as intellectually, culturally, and racially deficient. In the end, we can learn from the Olympic Games by cementing the fundamental belief that all humans can learn and maximize their potential, but at different levels. I am optimistic about the future of education in the world in which we live. As a result, I end my presentation with a poem that I recently wrote titled, "Still I Learn" (Obiakor, 2015), a title influenced by Maya Angelou's (1978) classic and powerful volume of poetry, "And Still I Rise."

STILL I LEARN

*Yesterday was the same, And today, in the same frame,
I talk and work Faster in my speed
Painted with my colors And, faster in my dreams.
Still I learn!*

*Hoping against hope Every day I learn Allowing me to cope
With stressors and pressures All over me.
Still I learn!*

*What yesterday really happened?
What today really happened? I see tomorrow in my pains
As sadness reigns.
Still I learn!*

*Yesterday was the same, And today, in the same frame
I talk and work Faster in my speed
Painted with my colors And, faster in my dreams.
Still I learn!*

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