

An Interdisciplinary Approach to the Olympics

Susannah Nichols Hansen

As a seasoned upper school English teacher at The Roeper School, a K-12 school for gifted learners in metro Detroit, I've been fortunate to work with students who come to class with a zest for learning and a capacity for academic challenge. But we weren't immune to the frustrations Covid heaped on the learning process this past year: even my most academically ambitious and determinedly positive students felt the fatigue of simulcast classes and continued restrictions on their social and extracurricular lives. When the energy in a classroom slows down, my instinct is to delve deeper into enrichment and prioritize enjoyment, engagement, and enthusiasm for learning—but it seemed as though every good idea ran into some sort of Covid roadblock or restriction.

If old ideas wouldn't work, what about our new normal could be leveraged as an opportunity? Like many schools, we had adjusted our class schedule in an effort to accommodate the different iterations of in-person, hybrid, and virtual learning that might occur throughout the year. Our schedule allowed for an unprecedented degree of "flex" time and thus the chance to run more experimental classes. I knew that space was ripe for enrichment activities, but I also knew that if I was going to add something extra in such an intense year, it had to be something *I* was truly excited about.

My light-bulb moment came during an afternoon watching World Cup Skiing. The coverage was saturated with hype-ads for the rescheduled Tokyo Olympics, and I thought, why not take the opportunity to do a deep dive into the historical, cultural, and social impact of the Olympics? "*Road to Tokyo* is a semester-long prep course," I wrote in the class description. "Prep for what? To be a citizen of the world. To bring and interdisciplinary eye to historical

events. And of course, to catch Olympic fever."

What is *wasn't*, as I made clear to the class on the first day, was another pile of assignments for them to complete or for me to grade. "Minimum stress for you, minimum stress for me, maximum joy for us all," I told the students. Many students noted that this was the first time in years that the central tenet of a class was discovery and delight in learning rather than grades. Selecting the class was entirely voluntary (some students entered with a passion for sports or history, but many thought it simply "sounded cool" and were looking for something new to add to their schedule), and students earned non-graded course credit on attendance and participation. Despite the initial excitement, I carried some trepidation that students wouldn't maintain their investment—that the demands of other classes or lack of accountability in the form of grades would create the temptation to skip class. And yet, despite the class being a mix of home and in-person learners and meeting just once a week, the vast majority of students bought into the class and were happy to abide by our parameters.

While I didn't have to grade, I did have to plan. Because I love the Olympics, however, the legwork for the course felt more like a break from the grind rather than an additional burden. I started by utilizing my personal, school, and other professional networks to solicit experts to talk to my classes on various topics. The responses far exceeded what I'd be able to accommodate in my sixteen-session class! It wasn't long before I'd established contacts in Games logistics and sportswriting to help broaden my own knowledge base as well as connecting with several athletes willing to meet with my class (a feat actually made far thanks to Zoom).

The students themselves were also an invaluable resource in determining the direction of the class. Their inclination was to lean into the human aspect of the Games: not only the stories of the athletes themselves, but also the way the Games serve as a platform for both injustice and activism. We considered how political agendas were layered onto the execution of the Games, whether in the blatant propaganda of the 1936 Games or country boycotts during the Cold War. We delved in to different forms of protest and speech—the declarative and the subversive. Additionally, one student’s experience at the Maccabi Games had given her insight on the eleven Israeli athletes taken hostage and eventually killed at the Munich Olympics, and she worked with me to create a class session focused on those events.

Each of these speakers and mini-lessons was a Type I experience in itself: “expos[ing] students to problems, issues, ideas, notions, theories, skills—in sum, *possibilities*” (Renzulli & Reis, 2014, p. 27). We examined the way cities had to manage their public services during the games (informed by a data specialist who worked on traffic patterns during the London Olympics and a graphic designer who guided us through the creation of a Games’ visual identity, from logos to pictograms to branding). Thanks to the insights from a writer helping craft the memoir of a Paralympic champion, we delved into the world of adaptive sports. We welcomed Cindy Ofili, a finalist from the Rio 110m Hurdles, and Alex Blankenburg, a Roeper alum who swam in the 2012 Olympic Trials and went on to compete at the college level. Both women spoke about the nuances of their sport and fielded questions from the class on the importance of support networks, handling competitive pressure, and finding a sport-life balance. Charlie White, Olympic gold medalist and Roeper alum, generously joined us for two sessions; first to talk generally about his experiences at the Games and in elite competitive sports, and then to join us in

examining more nuanced issues of social justice and activism at the Games.

The conversations provided a rich opportunity to consider social capital—the powerful influence of both the athletes as individuals and the Olympics as a force in themselves. Particularly in a school for gifted students, a consideration of how people with great talent and resources conduct themselves constitutes important cognitive work. We consistently returned to the question Renzulli & Reis (2014) pose as part of the Operation Houndstooth subtheory of their Schoolwide Enrichment Model: “Why do some people mobilize their interpersonal, political, ethical, and moral realms of being in such ways that they place human concerns and the common good above materialism, ego enhancement, and self-indulgence?” (p. 31).

I added structure with some class mainstays. We began every session with a “Meet the Olympian” segment (and, often, a “Meet the Mascot” followup for a bit of levity). I endeavored to select athletes that either students likely wouldn’t have heard of, such as distance runners Billy Mills or Sohn Kee-Chung. Or, in the case of Wilma Rudolph, perhaps they had heard of her but didn’t know her complete story of not only surviving polio but also winning golds before and after having a child. Often, the athlete’s personal story was a springboard for a deeper discussion: for instance, Kerri Strug’s iconic 1996 vault allowed us to talk about not only gymnastics but also demands placed on young athletes and the tragic abuse that occurred within the gymnastics community. In all cases, I endeavored to represent athletes of different nationalities and identity groups and sought to emphasize the way they had navigated the particular challenges of their lives beyond the athletic arena.

Our sustained community and ongoing conversations made this class similar to an Enrichment Cluster, but could best be classified as a Type 1.5. Unlike a full-fledged

Type II, this class was not product-based, and we weren't solving problems—though active and deep consideration of some of those problems is perhaps a step toward future solving.

The postponed Tokyo Games put us in a unique situation as Olympic watchers: with the Beijing Winter Games starting in February 2022 (and the next Summer Games in Paris only three years off), we haven't been able to so much Olympics in such a short time frame in a generation. So, if "Road to Beijing" seems like an Enrichment Cluster or Type I that you might pursue, start keeping an ear open to the *many* Olympics-news stories swirling, working your network for connections and experts, and listening to what your students might bring to the table. Options might

include a panel on the psychology of athlete performance, a history project on the use of performance-enhancing substances, a guest speaker on the statistical intricacies of scored sports, or an enrichment cluster specifically devoted to watching and debriefing the Games.

The ad executives extol the power of the Olympics, but the extent of the appeal and potential of the Games extends far beyond a well-crafted montage. The flurry of messages I received from students in the weeks leading up to—and throughout—the competition is a testament to the staying power of these lessons, and my hope is that our studies will continue to spark conversation and thought for many future Olympiads.

Works Cited

Renzulli, J. S., & Reis, S. M. (2014). *The schoolwide enrichment model: A how-to guide for talent development*. Prufrock Press.