

ASSIGNMENT #1

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Folk Medicine  
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John Jones, who teaches a course entitled "Wellness" through the Office of Independent Study at Western Kentucky University, was my initial contact for this assignment. He recommended that I observe a class in aerobic exercise which meets on Fridays at 11:45 am, at a dance studio on the lower level of Diddle Arena. I visited the class on Friday, March 23, 1984. After the session ended, I asked the instructor, Mary Gulson, several questions regarding her teaching experience and attitudes. Both my observations of the class, and the teacher's responses to questions will be integrated in this report.

Mary Gulson has taught aerobic exercise and aerobic dance on the undergraduate and independent study levels for approximately 1 1/2 to 2 years. She also teaches elementary and physical education courses. Her emphasis on total fitness is the same in all her classes, no matter what the age or level of her students. This emphasis on total fitness carries over into her teaching methods; she articulates to the class what parts of the body or muscle tensions each exercise is helping. A breakdown of exercises into the back, leg, arm, stomach, groin and upper and lower spine areas incorporates the aerobic class' structure. <sup>However,</sup> ~~the~~ structure does not appear to be formal ~~to~~ the students because of the social setting of the class, the rhythmical and continuous nature of the movements, and the musical accompaniment. Thus, the instructor can emphasise total fitness and body conditioning in a "pleasurable way." Gulson claims that aerobics offer a support system which other sports, such as running, do not.

There is a rapport and understanding between instructor and students. My observations bear out the truth of her statements.

Before describing the class' participants, I would like to briefly describe the physical setting of the class. The dance studio is in the lower level of Diddle Arena near the basketball court. It is a large room which may be divided by screens into two smaller rooms. The left-hand side of the room has a wall with mirrors from floor to ceiling; in front of this mirrored wall are several long benches. All other walls are either bare or with windows. On the left-hand side of the room the floor is of wood; on the right-hand side of the room it has linoleum.

As the participants enter the room from either doorway, they find a spot which gives them approximately five feet space in all directions. This area will give them the freedom to move forward and back, or to stretch in certain exercises. There are twelve men and women participants; the maximum number allowed in such a course would be thirty. The dress of the participants is appropriate to the nature of the exercise - sweatpants, shorts, t-shirts, leotards and tights, canvas sneakers or jogging shoes. They are each seated on a towel, in the same fashion that participants in calisthenics are seated on a cushioned surface or mat. In order to maintain eye contact with the instructor all students face one direction - the mirrored wall. They are thereby able to watch Mary Gulson as she performs the exercises, and they are able to see themselves in the mirrored wall, and evaluate their performance. A tape/radio player with two speakers is placed on the benches behind the place where Gulson

sits. As I glance around the room, I notice that the age ranges from the early thirties to the sixties. This particular session is offered to university employees, and community members. University students take aerobics courses on ~~other~~ days and times of the week; this time slot is particularly useful to university employees. For some of the participants, aerobics is a new experience while others have repeated the course several times. Instruction is the same for all levels of learners.

In hindsight I have realized that the course had three break-downs: 1. several warm-up exercises and stretches which are done while people are seated; 2. standing exercises and stretches; and 3. a return to the kind of exercises done while seated. As has been mentioned, exercises correspond to the back, leg, arm, stomach, groin and upper and lower spine areas. The actual pace of the movements is both controlled and reinforced by the accompanying musical selections. Selections are based on songs from Michael Jackson, the Eurhythmics, Lionel Ritchie, old and recent Motown selections, and instrumental pieces. The order of the selections appear to match what the instructor is trying to emphasize. For example, she begins the warm-up exercises with a western-sounding instrumental piece. As the class progresses, she uses selections whose rhythms are quicker and more defined than in the earlier pieces. As the participants are "loosening up" in a noticeable way, she incorporates dance movements and clapping into the usual exercises of arm-swings, bends, flexes, lunges, running, and kicks. Students appear to enjoy the added additions and flourishes

to the regular exercises. The pleasure that they feel shows in their facial expressions, while any dissatisfaction is expressed verbally or through body language.

Verbal exchange is hampered for several reasons. The continuous movement, the accompanying music, and the adjustment of breathing to each new exercise all limit participants' speech. The instructor gives her directions aloud, even as she performs the exercises. Along with giving directions, she also gives words of encouragement, brief personal statements, and information regarding the benefits of each exercise. She is very responsive to the class, and tries to bring a positive, supportive element to the idea of "getting in shape." At times, a participant will ask a question or give a joking remark. For the most part, however, they concentrate on keeping up with a pace which challenges everyone but the instructor. Because of this pace, Gulson jokes about being a "difficult" teacher; no one seems to be uncomfortable about the way that the class is run.

The drawback to my experience in observing this aerobics class is that I could only observe, and not interview people. There were no breaks in which I could ask people what their motivations for taking the course were. Several people offered me their opinions when they found out that I was interested in an "inside story." Generally, they were looking for a way to maintain fitness that could also be pleasurable. They "felt good" about the aerobics class. The popularity of the course attests to the way that it suits people's needs and attitudes of "well-being."