Muska Mosston: One

Sara Ashworth

A person’s greatness is generally measured by the degree to which he or she positively affects others’ lives. Muska Mosston—my friend and colleague for 25 years—altered every aspect of my life.

In 1969, at the AAHPERD Southern District Convention during the keynote address, Muska presented the now-classic example of the concept of exclusion and inclusion in education. In a guided discovery teaching style, he sequenced questions, using his belt as a prop, and engaged the audience in analyzing a common experience: going over a rope. Holding his belt in a horizontal position close to the ground, he asked, “What happens when we ask children to go over a rope at this height?” The audience responded, “All the children go over and we raise the rope.” In his trademark guttural voice, Muska offered a resounding, “Yes!” With drama, he continued: “What happens to the children as we lift the rope higher?” His demonstration led the audience to conclude, from this educational conception of a single standard of performance, that children were destined to be excluded from participating in the learning experience.

With the horizontal belt held high, he then asked the audience, “What can be done with the rope to create a condition for inclusion of all learners?” A variety of predictable responses followed:

“Have each learner tell you where to place the rope.”
“Have lots of ropes available.”
“Place the rope at a middle height.”
“Go under the rope.”
“Remove the rope.”

For each response, Muska provided additional clarifying insight, continuing the participants’ search for the answer. During a cognitive pause, he repeated: “What can be done with the rope to create a condition and a challenge for inclusion of all children?” With awe a voice from the very back row quietly responded, “Slant the rope.”

The exhilaration of producing that response, and the realization of the implications of that concept, left me captivated emotionally and cognitively. The humanity and dignity expressed by the concept of inclusion of all learners in the learning process overwhelmed me. At that moment, I became a professional devotee of Muska’s work.

A 50-year Impact

Muska began teaching at the age of 18 in a small village in Israel. His gymnasium was comprised of eucalyptus trees and sand dunes. With a humble reservoir of supplies, Muska managed to design a physical education program that is still remembered by his students. He designed activities which included, challenged, dared, lulled, and always developed his students physically, emotionally, cognitively, ethically, and socially. Muska’s personal focus on each child within the village earned him a legendary reputation. After an absence of 48 years, he returned to his village, where former students reminisced about the teacher who inspired, challenged, and delighted them so many years before.

After the Israeli War of Independence, Muska, at the age of 25, came to City College of New York to study.
Who Made a Difference

He designed his own eclectic program, selecting many courses outside the typical physical education requirements. Intellectually, he was stimulated by scientific structures and anatomy and physiology.

Muska's prominence in the field of physical education began during his years at Rutgers University, 1963 to 1970. In the early 1960's, large scientific structures which connected and explained events were not the norm. Muska began coaxing the field to re-examine the teaching practices implemented and the activities selected in physical education classes. Activities mainly excluded and offered single-standard designs and teaching methods which primarily benefited skilled performers. Muska proposed new teaching options which encouraged learners to discover alternatives which were beyond the norm and outside the established set of rules.

At one presentation to gymnastics coaches, Muska demonstrated his students' cognitive and physical alternative approaches to the vault. The coaches objected to the "absurd" alternative of running into a roundoff, back handspring into a flying back handspring onto the vault—approaches that are now the norm.

Challenging the Profession

Muska's role in physical education was to begin paving a path for change. Innovation requires challenging the entrenchedment of existing practice. Prophets of change are destined to confront resistance. Muska strived for new possibilities; he could not be confined or restricted by static rules or resistance.

In 1969, Muska presented a paper, Mission, Omission, and Submission in Physical Education, in which he made predictions about the fate of physical education if it did not alter its content designs and teaching practices. Resistance and lack of positive feedback by peers caused Muska to become more adamant in voicing his challenge to change. He became his greatest supporter, the one critics said. "Arrogant," "obnoxious," "self-centered" were labels which served as obstacles and which isolated Muska from the mainstream and from decision-making positions. In spite of the philosophical badgering and battles with the field, Muska's passion and conviction in the power of physical education and its impact on the learning process remained steadfast and undaunted. Tenaciously, he continued presenting and offering solutions to revitalize and redirect physical education.

Meanwhile, the book Teaching Physical Education, free from the stigma of author personality, spread the concept of the Spectrum of Teaching Styles throughout the world. It gradually became an internationally recognized structure for understanding the nature of teaching. In a dignified ceremony in 1984, Dr. Risto Telama, from the University of Jyvaskyla in Finland, presented Muska with an Honorary Doctorate and University Medal of Honor. It was with this recognition that Muska began relinquishing the need to defend and obsessively protect and project the notion of a spectrum—a repertoire—of deliberate teaching styles. Each recognition brought greater calmness and tranquility; it re-established a pride, even a reprieve from past inflammatory judgments and exclusions. By relinquishing the pain of the past, he freed himself to share the wisdom of his unique perceptions and experiences about physical education, the structure of developmental movement, alternative teaching styles, games, and institutional designs for efficient teacher preparation programs. Although Muska basked in the glory of the last decade of recognition and contribution, he was eager for more opportunities to contribute to the field of education.

It has taken more than 30 years for some of Muska's ideas to be accepted as the norm. Much of his work has yet to be acknowledged and implemented. He has offered paradigm shifts which fundamentally alter the way we perceive the structure of teaching and movement. Muska provided us with what is possible. Now, "it is up to us to seek to expand the very boundaries of self" and participate in implementing ideas that offer children education with dignity and opportunity.

—Sara Ashworth is an associate professor in the Department of Teaching Education, Florida Atlantic University, Boca Raton, FL 33431-0981.