Introduction

The Teaching Games for Understanding (TGfU) approach was developed in England during the mid-1980s as a response to the prevailing physical education teaching model of the time, commonly referred to as the ‘skill-based approach’.

A skill-based approach is where learners move from a focus on the acquisition of motor skills in isolation towards application of these within a game context. The learning environment only progresses once learners are able to perform the required motor skills. Since then, TGfU has received much attention in the sports coaching pedagogy literature, although the skills-based approach still seems to dominate in practice. This is mostly because of claims that it has the potential to contribute to a wide range of desirable positive learner outcomes, which include the improved learning of motor skills, increased cognitive ability, and enhanced social skill development.

A central component of this model is that it calls for learning to be situated. This means that learners learn the skills required to be successful in a game situation, by practising within some form of game scenario (Kirk and Macdonald, 1998). A suggested benefit of this is that there is a suggested higher level of transfer from practice to game than would occur for a skill-based approach (Memmert and Roth, 2007).

As academic sources are arguably becoming more accessible, thanks mainly to social media sites such as Twitter and Facebook, TGfU is now a model that many coaches who use these sites would have at least heard about, and gathering from what anecdotal evidence suggests on social media, something some coaches would consider to be at the foundation of their everyday practices. However, it needs to be made clear at this point that anything written, which includes my own posts on social media (@EdCope1), is simply a statement of beliefs or opinion, and does not represent what coaches actually do in practice.

This leads me on to the purpose of this short article, which is to provide a critical discussion on the use of TGfU by coaches.

The focus of my discussion will centre on evidence surrounding the relationship between coaching beliefs and coaching practice. I will then move on to discuss the extent to which coaches are aware of what constitutes a TGfU session. This article will conclude with some brief recommendations to assist coaches with their use of TGfU and some methods by which to check they are employing this model in practice.

‘It’s not what you say you do, it’s what you do that counts’

Learner-centred approaches such as TGfU are becoming increasingly popular among the coaching community. Governing bodies of sport and national sporting organisations are key drivers in promoting such an approach through formalised coaching qualifications or various other learning sources they offer (e.g., professional newsletters, research summaries). What has resulted as a consequence is coaches who have developed a better appreciation of the terminology and vocabulary associated with TGfU.

So, I regularly come across terms such as:
• ‘random practice’
• ‘player ownership’
• ‘play’
• ‘freedom’

Unfortunately, evidence suggests that coach discussions of these terms, which they promote as using in their practice, rarely result in these being observable components of practice.

Research has shown how coaches’ self-awareness is often poor, with them unable to align what they think they do with what they actually do correctly (Partington and Cushion, 2013).

For example, while coaches may consider that they use lots of questioning (something that has been suggested as fundamental to TGfU), what they actually do is instruct often, and give high amounts of feedback. The consequences of this are that learners are not being developed in ways their coaches think they are (Cushion, 2013).

There is another issue concerning the use of TGfU, and that is to do with whether coaches actually deliver this approach in the ways that it has been defined and discussed.

Cushion (2013) is especially critical of coaches who understand TGfU to be no more than simply ‘playing a game’. So, TGfU is not simply setting up a game and letting learners play while the coach observes the whole time. Instead, a list of ‘benchmarks’ needs to be in place for something to be classified as TGfU (Metzler, 2005), including the coach:

• using questions to get learners to solve tactical problems
• identifying tactical and skill areas needed from the game form.

In fact, Metzler does this for all pedagogical models (eg Sport Education and Cooperative Learning) in order for practitioners to distinguish between these different models.

I wonder how many coaches are aware of these benchmarks, and if so, whether they reflect on their practice against these to check that they actually are delivering TGfU and not something else?

It has been noted that not all benchmarks have to be met for something to constitute a certain model (Goodyear, 2012). Instead, Goodyear (2012) believes there are a number of core benchmarks, which she terms the ‘non-negotiables’ that must be adhered to if a model such as TGfU is to be classified as such. Because of this, some may argue that it does not matter if TGfU is delivered exactly to the letter.

Where coaches must be cautious is when claiming that learners have developed certain skills as a consequence of being subjected to TGfU if no methods are in place that validate this.

**Developing coaches’ awareness**

Relying on coaches’ thoughts and perceptions alone does not provide accurate reflections of what they actually do. The use of video as a tool to review coaching practice has received empirical support for bridging the gap between beliefs and practice. For example, a study by Partington, Cushion, Cope and Harvey (2015) found that coaches’ self-awareness increased when they were provided with the opportunity to review video footage of their coaching.

The reason for this is that coaches’ reflections were not based solely on their accounts of what happened during practice, but instead were informed by a more objective method. This is necessary as coaches’ reflections are limited to the knowledge they possess.

The other advantage of using video is that it allows coaches to consider their practice against the
benchmarks claimed by Metzler (2005). So, it can serve as a self-checking mechanism of the extent to which TGfU is actually being delivered.

Coaches should consider the alignment between their coaching beliefs and coaching action by video recording their sessions and reviewing these.

While the use of video was at one time expensive and largely inaccessible, given advancements in technology, using this method is now relatively straightforward. It was only in the week of writing this article that I came across a very useful YouTube video posted on Twitter, which was created by staff at The Football Association. This video highlighted the ease of coaches’ videoing their own practice.

**Concluding thoughts**

The purpose of this short article was to discuss critically coaches’ use of TGfU. As more coaches discuss using this model in their practices, it is important to consider the extent to which this actually happens.

I have no doubt that some coaches are employing this model. However, the main point I have made in this article, which I feel is pertinent to come back to here, is that just because coaches say they are doing something, it does not often mean they are.

Therefore, the use of methods such as video recording sessions is necessary to provide confirmation that there is an alignment between beliefs and actions.

**Are you an advocate of TGfU?**

**How do you know you are delivering TGfU?**

**It would be great to get your thoughts so feel free to let me know by leaving a comment below**

**Key Reading**


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