Teaching Games for Understanding (TGfU) – Are all coaches playing the game?

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Teaching Games for Understanding (TGfU) is a coaching concept that has been around since the 1960s. The benefits of this pedagogical approach are well documented so why then is it still not a well accepted and implemented approach?

Over the years, a number of issues related to student learning have been raised with a ‘movement skill first approach’, including low levels of student engagement, low transferability of knowledge and a lack of understanding of the game itself. In the 1980s, Bunker and Thorpe proposed TGfU in the face of the more traditional drill-based models.

What is TGfU?

The basic premise of TGfU is the use of a games-based approach to learning skills, which gives the participants more awareness of where and how to use these skills, rather than merely performing them in a sterile, drill-based environment. TGfU can be further described as a sequential cycle of teaching based on the premise that game understanding and decision making are not dependent on the prior development of sport-specific movement techniques.

Games-based approaches, which claim to promote active involvement in problem solving through game play and game progression, and the use of questions, discussions and reflection, have attracted strong interest due to links with constructivist teaching practices. There is plenty of research that suggests that we do not learn by passively receiving and then remembering what we are taught. Instead, learning involves actively constructing our own meanings. We invent our own concepts and ideas, linked to what we already know. Participants need activities that require them to make personal sense of the material and so construct their own meanings. Further research shows that learning activities that require active processing improve recall by as much as a factor of 10, are more enjoyed, and create deeper learning.

If one applies this to the TGfU model in a sporting environment, it is possible to see that this environment of an active, context-specific and participant-centred approach can lead very easily to participants showing the ability to make their own decisions, allowing them to see the implications of those decisions and being able to construct a meaning that would demonstrate a much higher likelihood of being able to realise when and where that decision would be effective.

Why is TGfU criticised?

For some coaches and academic writers, there are still some areas of critique and gaps in research when it comes to TGfU. This, however, seems to be more linked to poor implementation as opposed to the effectiveness of correctly used TGfU methods. Some coaches viewed it as having merely a relation to the game, rather than encompassing a player-centred pedagogical approach, with some evidence missing relating to the demonstration of higher level thinking and the application of new knowledge in new situations.

Central to TGfU are participant-centred questioning and reflection. However, at times, reflective practice
is detached from the reality of practitioner practice. In this sense, coaches often employ a fairly superficial level of discussion, with little analytical underpinning. With sessions often short on time or with coaches trying to get through a sometimes unrealistic amount of delivery or dealing with sporadic attendance of participants, it is understandable that the session sometimes just goes through the motions. It can be seen as difficult to stick to the TGfU model in many environments where coaches and participants just want to get the session done and support mechanisms do not exist or people simply cannot understand the philosophy. In addition, some coaches may see their sport as unable to lend itself to the TGfU model.

Why am I an advocate of TGfU?

For me, it is always important to think of the long term benefits particularly in younger participants. I argue that if you are a coach who is delivering drill-based sessions then you are neglecting to develop the person and the many other skills, experiences and benefits that can be found within a sports coaching environment, which TGfU can encompass and that are often quoted around sport participation.

In addition, delivering a TGfU-based session as a coach can become much more straightforward as, while a game is running, you could:

- condition the rules of the game (e.g. time limits, scoring methods, types of skill)
- change the playing area
- alter the numbers per side
- change types of equipment used.

Some or all of these can alter the level of challenge for the participants and, along with questioning the participants at varying levels around their decisions, can give them much more autonomy in their development.

Here is a video on the New Zealand approach to TGfU coaching, which demonstrates and discusses some of the rationale behind employing it:

Personally I believe strongly in four central pillars in coaching:

1. active
2. games based
3. participant centred
4. fun

All of the above run strongly within the tenets of TGfU.

The TGfU model allows participants to not only learn, strengthen and develop skills, but in situations and environments where other important skills are also addressed (such as teamwork, communication,
spatial awareness, decision making and leadership to name a few). It remains a mystery to me as to why this method is not employed more in coaching situations.

Perhaps it is the feeling of a lack of control, handing over decision making and skill development to the participants, or the idea that if there is not a sea of cones with players executing skills with no mistakes then they are not progressing? Perhaps coaches think it takes too long, and they just what to see a skill executed correctly and move on?

Whatever the reason, I strongly believe that in the longer term, if we can coach through engaging, fun and participant-centred methods such as TGfU, coaching skills in the context that we expect them to be performed in, then surely this will allow everyone to enjoy sessions more and be more successful both in the sport and as a person, which, as a coach, should be ultimately what we aspire to achieve.

Are you an advocate of TGfU? Maybe you think TGfU is unrealistic to adopt in your coaching environment? What do you think of this post? It would be great to get your feedback. Let me know by leaving a comment below.

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