

Why do coaches still shy away from using TGfU and CLA in their sessions?

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TGfU

Athletes must think for themselves if the coach 'moves the goalposts' and modifies the familiar conditions of a game or exercise – which forms the basis of TGfU

- **Using TGfU and CLA requires coaches to be proactive and to step out of their comfort zone.**
- **The games-based pedagogical models are not more widely used because many coaches lack the confidence to experiment with them – due to a lack of deep understanding of the principles involved.**
- **Approaches like CLA and TGfU improve decision-making skills and an athlete's ability to problem solve under pressure.**

We are confronted by a perpetual stream of choices every day of our lives.

Faced with choosing between two possible courses of action, it is human nature to plump for the easy option. Life is far less complicated that way.

In our busy, 21st-century lives, the maverick side of our personality is rarely activated. We prefer to go about our daily routine on autopilot.

You want a Sunday paper from the local shop, which is a three-minute walk away. Do you grab your trainers or your car keys?

You're in the surf shop on holiday in Cornwall. Do you hire out the bodyboard, happy in the knowledge

you will catch almost every wave, or the surfboard, knowing you will plug away all week and maybe stand up for the cumulative total of four seconds?

Your child begs you to show them a magic trick. Do you quickly Google: ‘The world’s easiest magic tricks that will blow your child’s mind’, or do you invest a bit of time and energy in learning how to juggle?

You are a volunteer coach planning your first session of the new season. You have heard some good things about games-based or alternative approaches to learning, and, in the off season, have done some research into TGfU and CLA.

You have two options. Are you brave enough to incorporate the theories into your coaching, or do you stick with your tried and trusted drills, which have never let you down in the past?

Convincing coaches of the power of learning using game situations rather than traditional drill-based instruction is a tough assignment, but passionate advocate [Matt Wood](#) is fighting the good fight on behalf of the coach education sector, and hankers for the dawning of cultural change and a time when coaches no longer embrace the easy option.

TGfU should not be a four-letter word!

Coaches have long been put off by the fact that these models, and the strategies interwoven within them, are challenging to learn.

They are seen – mistakenly, as we will soon discover – as the territory of the scholar, as much of the material out there is in the indigestible form of academic research, consisting of pages and pages of single-paragraph, jargon-rich language packed with in-text citations and footnotes.

The general consensus is that deconstructing the complexities of TGfU and CLA requires an expansive knowledge of the subject.

And if coaches cannot fully understand the principles involved, how can they hope to modify games to meet the specific learning objectives of their team, and explain the technical aspects of the learning to their athletes, or answer their searching questions?

Little wonder some coaches are apprehensive, and resort to the easy option of scrutinising their time-worn coaching manual for session tips or repeating the same drills they were taught as a player.

More user-friendly literature is required to educate coaches.

‘It **is** complex, but it doesn’t have to be complicated,’ says Matt – who is a lecturer in athletics at Cardiff Metropolitan University and a former National Coach Mentor (Speed) with England Athletics.

‘It’s complex in the sense there are two or more interconnecting parts. It could be written in a way that it comes across as complicated therefore, but actually it isn’t.’

Definitions and learning objectives

TGfU is an athlete-centred framework, where the **game is used as the teacher**, with conditions imposed in the game exposing athletes to opportunities for learning.

Athletes learn when and how to use their skills, the importance of making their own decisions and the implications of those decisions.

The coach still has a role to play as the designer of problems. By modifying the rules of the game – the

number of players, the equipment, the playing space, for instance – the athletes must customise their behaviour to develop their understanding of tactical concepts. The aim is to create a more adaptive, autonomous type of team.

CLA looks at the interaction between the athlete and the environment. It considers how the constraints acting on that player result in a noticeable change of behaviour.

Again, it helps athletes manage their emotions better in pressure-cooker environments, learning to make rational decisions through problem solving under pressure, which can help conquer competition nerves.

Certainly, both models require coaches as well as athletes to think for themselves. But for those who bite the bullet and experiment, it is worth the effort.

Matt explains: ‘The level of analysis is different. So, with TGfU, you are looking at how the game and the player interact, whereas with CLA, you are looking at how the player and the environment interact.

‘With CLA, the coach is very much the designer of learning, manipulating the landscape the athletes work within.

‘With TGfU, the behaviour you want results from the modifications you have made to the game.

‘Both approaches quite often get misunderstood as there seems to be less coaching going on. There’s definitely less instruction going on, and it requires more implicit learning and an athlete to apply their own thought process to it.’

Coaches should not feel under pressure to use the TGfU or CLA approaches throughout a session. Matt says he will use CLA if he is introducing a new skill or if there is a certain opportunity he wants his athletes to explore.

‘I am not necessarily doing it all the time, but I will always have the guiding principle that the behaviours of the athletes are governed by their interaction with the environment.’

Framework over guesswork

Frameworks are central to any coaching system as they help coaches structure their sessions.

You can apply your chosen framework to any situation, helping you make decisions and learn from your mistakes.

‘If a coach doesn’t have a framework then it’s guesswork, and if it’s guesswork then it is hit and miss,’ says Matt.

‘Lots of coaches will have an approach that has probably been developed from their own beliefs or experiences, how they were coached, things they’ve read.’

You can draw an analogy with religion, and followers of a particular faith who live their life by stringently adhering to a set of core human values.

It is important coaches pick a framework that resonates with them, one they are emotionally attached to and wholeheartedly believe in.

‘What TGfU and CLA approaches do is offer coaches that framework: a guiding set of principles they can then develop, modify and make their own over time.’

Some model examples

So, we know that in the TGfU approach, the game is the teacher, whereas with CLA, the learning (or adaptation) occurs due to the interaction with the individual and the environment.

And the literature tells us that athletes develop long-term behaviours from this type of guided discovery – forming solutions to problems that they have come up with themselves from their own experiences, rather than the narrow-skilled product of monotonous drills that accompany explicit instruction.

So how do they work in practice?

Matt cites an example of CLA he uses with his own athletes.

‘The overwhelming thing I do is set different task constraints. So the height of the hurdles I use, the spacing between the hurdles, the number of objects they go over or the number of steps they take between the hurdles. I manipulate those in order to effect a specific part of sprint hurdles technique.

‘In a team sport, you might want to manipulate the constraints of space with your football team because you want them to play in a long, thin formation. That will help them to explore the opportunities available to them when they are being pressed because there are no wingers available or they are playing on a narrow pitch.’

In an example outside of sport, designated safety officers sometimes use a constraints approach in fire drills. Typically, everyone will file out of the same few exit points in the same orderly fashion. But what happens if you block one of those exits with some tables and chairs (to represent a locked door in the event of a real fire, or the fire itself)?

Employees (or pupils, if the drill is in a school) are forced to think on their feet. Do they dismantle the obstacle or look for their nearest alternative exit? This experience – and reflecting on it afterwards – will mean, should that scenario ever materialise, they will be mentally better equipped to overcome the problem, without resorting to panic.

With regard to TGfU, Matt recalls the approach taken by a friend who coaches volleyball.

‘The traditional approach is for new players to line up and learn skills in isolation, for example, how to serve then how to dig etc. With a TGfU approach, the coach goes straight into a modified game of volleyball. The modifications may include rules, space, number of players, scoring. The design of this game depends on the outcome the coach is aiming to develop in the players.

‘Questions are used by the coach to promote learning: “Good. What did you do to get the ball over the net into the opposition half?”’

‘The team sport or court-based players might understand certain aspects implicitly just by having a go. Therefore, they are going to learn at a faster rate than someone who is unfamiliar with that environment.

‘Beginners’ volleyball lends itself to a game-based approach, therefore, rather than an explicit, repetition approach where certain individuals might get bored.’

Dos and don'ts of training the brain

Research has found that the most effective way of learning is to manufacture meaning from our own actions. This generates new neural connections at a significantly faster rate than the traditional instructional style of coaching, ensuring memories are more deeply ingrained in our brain.

Learning by rote doesn't exercise reasoning skills, and instructions can fly in one ear and out the other. And even if the words and behaviour finally stick, ‘move the goalposts’ even slightly so that familiar scenarios become unfamiliar, and you hit troubled waters.

It's about knowing the principles so you can work out the answers, rather than just knowing the answers.

You have revised mechanically for your GCSEs, and then discover to your horror the questions in the exam are phrased differently than in the past papers you have so studiously pored over. You are under pressure to work out the solution quickly. In that situation, you will absolutely struggle. But if you understand the principles behind the theories, you will be able to apply them in any situation. You become more adaptable.

A slightly different example, again from the world of education.

How many star maths pupils are able to apply their knowledge of the subject to solve real-life problems, I wonder. They may be whizzes on paper, or with their calculators in hand, and adept at trotting off their times tables parrot fashion, but how many can apply these principles when they are thrown off guard?

They may get a correct answer when asked to calculate how many full-size snooker tables will fit into a room that is 24 metres square, if they are told the specifications of the table are 12 foot by six foot. But if you were to lead them into a room and ask them to estimate how many snooker tables it would take to fill the empty space, their calculators would be useless as, arguably, they would not be able to fathom the dimensions of the room. Floored before they've even begun.

Try asking the players in your team to point to a feature on the landscape 125 yards or 300 feet away and see how accurate they are.

Think of the calculator as a metaphor for a coach (the object that provides all the answers), while the classroom is, in effect, the training ground. When you cross the whitewash as an athlete (or you leave the classroom), you can't take the coach (calculator) with you. If there's a problem, you're on your own.

The big freeze against Iceland

Euro 2016

England heading for defeat against Iceland in Euro 2016

It happened, famously, or rather infamously, to the [England football team](#) against Iceland at this year's European Championships.

There can be no argument that England have better players than Iceland. But what happened when they encountered a team of supposed minnows who outfought and out-thought them in the first half? When Roy Hodgson's men fell 2-1 behind and were chasing the game against a side who put 11 men behind the ball, with the stakes high and the pressure cranking up by the second, panic set in. It was palpable.

The pressure exposed the players' ability to execute skills, and the pre-match game plan was thrown into disarray.

Presented with an in-game problem they were unprepared for and hadn't explicitly practised, they were unable to adapt and work out a solution. Incredibly, there was no plan B to fall back on, and the team imploded in spectacular fashion.

Many coaches, says Matt, stick too rigidly to the [10,000-hour rule](#) – the principle that 10,000 hours of deliberate practice are needed to become world class in any field.

They are forgetting that the amount of 'deliberate practice' varies significantly between individuals and that the quality of the practice design has an important influence on the learning.

'There is also too high a value placed on the reproduction and repetition of movements or passages of play (rehearsal) over practising variation and understanding the principles of a particular movement or a game situation,' says Matt.

'A reproduction approach doesn't acknowledge the fact that one athlete might join their programme and already have those skills. So they do not need to be practising, they need to be challenged on how to apply those skills to one or more complex situations.

'The culture in athletics, for example, is to have a drill-based programme. Repeat this hurdle drill a thousand times a week and that will make you a great hurdler. In actual fact, what we need to do is understand the principles and a thousand different ways to achieve that outcome, rather than the same thing again and again.

'We know in athletics that you are **not** doing exactly the same movement again and again. The very best athletes are adapting all the time. But we have robotic, very mechanistic ways of doing things.'

It is difficult for coaches to escape their past and move away from the idea that, 'Well, it worked for me when I was an athlete or player so why do we need to change?'

But, says Matt, 'we are working in a different society, different constraints, different people with very different underlying physical qualities, and we're trying to create a different type of sports person, who are adaptive, can think for themselves and are not [robots](#).

'Certain sports are very formulaic, like American football, where rehearsing plays becomes the big thing, but they are few and far between.'

The philosophy of coaches, then, should be, if it ain't broke, break it.

Like England rugby union coach Eddie Jones has, with breath-taking results.

'He has come in with a fresh viewpoint, which has changed everything,' says Matt. 'Everyone has had to reorganise themselves and try a bit harder. He has stirred things up by upsetting the system.'

A voyage of discovery

The hope is that, in the near future, as more and more people apply the theories of TGfU and CLA in their coaching, good habits will spread.

Matt is confident this will happen, facilitated by online videos, blogs, coaching degree graduates well versed in games-based approaches and theories of learning and a greater variety of CPD workshops.

Governing bodies, he says, also have 'a big role to play'.

'It's still a theoretical part of coaching, which is why the stuff that's written is in a complex language. It's the theorists writing about it and not always the practitioners. But in time, there will be lots more applied examples.'

And Matt is prepared to let nature take its course. Indeed, any attempt to jump ahead several stages in the process could have negative consequences.

He warns: 'It's a case of a little bit of knowledge can be a dangerous thing. So if I give my students examples of CLA and offer them the opportunity to go away and apply it themselves, they will find it very hard. They tend to modify it by existing examples.'

'We really need to spend a lot of time with them so they understand the principles of it, and then they can apply it in every scenario.'

'Coaches who just want lots of examples want to short cut the process.'

The final word to ConnectedCoaches member Simon Green, who summed up CLA brilliantly when commenting on Richard Allen's [blog](#): 'It is a great method of developing players and taking them on a voyage of discovery.'

That voyage, like this blog, may be long and winding but, hopefully like this blog, it will, in time, prove immensely fulfilling.

Have you found this article helpful? Please share your views on TGfU and CLA

Next steps

TGfU is a new addition to UK Coaching's ([formerly Sports Coach UK](#)) evolved [Coaching Children 5–12: The Next Generation](#) workshop. The workshop also features other key children's coaching concepts: the 'C' system model, cognitive considerations for coaching 5-12 year olds and understanding the importance of child physiology.

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