

## RETHINKING TEACHING GAMES FOR UNDERSTANDING

REVISANDO EL MODELO *TEACHING GAMES FOR UNDERSTANDING*

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### ABSTRACT

There is a concern in a number of quarters that the diversity of thinking within game centred approaches to teaching and coaching of games has begun to divide the community of practitioners and researchers within the games field into silos or camps that harm the emergence of new thinking. This paper will use this concern as a basis for exploring the original thinking behind Teaching Games for Understanding (TGFU) and to establish some essential features of this approach. It will build on this thinking and address the forgotten part of the original focus of TGFU, the emphasis on *understanding*. This aspect of TGFU has been neglected in the literature so this paper will explore its relevance for rethinking the very essence of a game centred approach to games teaching.

In this process, the notion of (1) *understanding of a game* and (2) *understanding in a game* will be raised. This goes way beyond the narrow focus on the tactical – there is much more to understand in the teaching/coaching of games. In addition, the idea of the kind of *understanding* needed by the teacher or coach to enable players to acquire an *understanding of games* and demonstrate their understanding in intelligent performance during a game is an area that needs to be addressed.

It is hoped that this paper will become a focus for stimulating rethinking and developing a shared agreement about the essential features of a game-centred approach and the need for an appropriate pedagogy.

### RESUMEN

Existe cierta preocupación por el hecho de que la diversidad del pensamiento dentro de los enfoques centrados en el juego para la enseñanza y el entrenamiento deportivo haya empezado a fragmentar y

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This paper is dedicated to Alan Launder – the author of Play Practice – who died on 31st August 2014. This was the day before he was due to stay at my house to work on a new book on Teaching and Coaching Games. He was an inspirational teacher who brought a new perspective to our understanding of games.

dividir a la comunidad docente e investigadora en silos o reductos que dañan la emergencia de nuevas líneas de pensamiento. El presente artículo toma dicha preocupación como punto de partida para explorar el pensamiento que subyacía originalmente en el modelo *Teaching Games for Understanding* (TGFU) y para establecer algunas de las características esenciales de este enfoque. Apoyándose en los planteamientos originales, se abordará la parte del fundamento original del TGFU que ha ido quedando en el olvido, el énfasis en la *comprensión*. Este aspecto del TGFU ha sido desatendido en la literatura; es por ello que este trabajo explora su relevancia para reconsiderar la verdadera esencia de un enfoque centrado en el juego para la enseñanza de los deportes.

En este proceso se abordarán las nociones de (1) *comprensión del juego* y (2) *comprensión en el juego*. Esta cuestión pone en evidencia cuán estrecho es fijar el foco exclusivamente sobre la táctica — hay mucho más que comprender en la enseñanza/entrenamiento de los deportes. Además, otro aspecto que necesita ser abordado es la idea del tipo de *comprensión* necesaria por parte del profesor y del entrenador para lograr que los jugadores adquieran una *comprensión de los deportes* y puedan demostrarla a través de un desempeño inteligente durante el juego.

Se espera que este artículo contribuya a estimular la revisión y desarrollo de un acuerdo compartido sobre las características esenciales de un enfoque centrado en el juego y sobre la necesidad de una pedagogía apropiada.

**KEYWORDS.** Teaching Games for Understanding; understanding; games teaching; coaching.

**PALABRAS CLAVE.** Modelo TGFU; comprensión; enseñanza comprensiva del deporte; iniciación deportiva.

## 1. BACKGROUND

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Since the early 1980s when Teaching Games for Understanding project was developed, an array of innovative approaches to teaching/coaching games has gained credibility in the scholarly literature. These approaches are unified around the premise that the best way to learn a game is through a series of game forms that retain the essence of a game but have been modified to reduce the demands of the complex game and to enable the player to grasp the key elements of playing it.

The following game based<sup>2</sup> approaches illustrate the wealth of ideas that has gone into rethinking how we teach games. However, this is not a finite list and there may well be other approaches that deserve to be named. We need to recognise that there is a richness of thinking and practice throughout the world that we can learn from.

- Teaching Games for Understanding (TGFU) (Bunker, Thorpe and Almond, 1986)
- Tactical Games Approach (Mitchell, Oslin, & Griffin. 2006)

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<sup>2</sup> Many game based approaches are not game centered which is interpreted as *teaching a game through shaping game forms as a specific tool for learning* – using representation, exaggeration and modification principles as a focus for shaping.

- Game Sense (Den Duyn, 1997; Light, 2006)
- Tactical Games Model (Metzler, 2005)
- Play Practice (Lauder 2001; Launder and Piltz, 2013)
- Tactical-decision Learning Model (Gréhaigne, Wallian, & Godbout, 2005)
- Ball-School Concept (Memmert & Roth, 2007)
- Invasion Games Competence Model (Tallir, Lenior, Valcke, Musch, 2007)
- Games Concept Approach (McNeill et al., 2008)

These game based variants represent approaches that have been developed to accommodate cultural traditions, to address features of games that have not received sufficient attention or are simply a different way of thinking about pedagogy. Nevertheless, this can cause some confusion. It can be difficult to make comparisons between these different approaches and establish what the differences are or identify clearly why a variant has something specific to offer. As a result, many new converts to a game based approach may stick with just one approach that they are comfortable with. They may fail to recognise the wealth and thinking within the games field and not appreciate the basis on which a specific way of thinking emerged.

In order to address this going back to the early 1980s to explore the focus of TGFU, may provide the reader with an understanding of what the original TGFU team was trying to accomplish. This can illuminate the key features of what is needed to teach games and address what understanding in a game means.

Teaching Games for Understanding was a game centred approach that focused on learning to understand games and how to enable players to become intelligent performers in a game. The pedagogical central focus for this approach was the need to (1) represent complex games in simplified game forms, (2) use modification principles to reduce the demands for learning the game and (3) employ exaggeration to highlight in game forms what is important to learn in a game. This is clearly identified in Thorpe and Bunker (1997) and Thorpe (1986) where they provide many examples of this approach.

In principle, TGFU in the 1980s was a new way of thinking for teachers and coaches because there was a concern that practice in schools was failing far too many young people and there was a need for a new stimulus as well as a new focus: a focus that was game centred as opposed to a technical drill based approach that was seen as inappropriate. It was game centred because it was believed that young people would prefer this approach and also it was seen as a better way of learning.

Most commentators on the idea of TGFU refer to the model of teaching games and quote Bunker and Thorpe (1986). This notion of a model simply identified components of a game - the need for appreciation, tactical awareness, making appropriate decisions resulting in intelligent performance, because they were missing in approaches to teaching games in the 1970s and 1980s. But, Thorpe and Bunker (1997) explained it was linked to "the idea that we can develop a games curriculum based on this model

coupled with four fundamentals" (p.54). This association is rarely made in the TGFU literature (with the exception of Holt et al, 2002) as it usually focuses only on the model. Although, Alan Launder in his books on Play Practice does develop this when he discusses shaping games, this omission has not been addressed adequately.

## 2. DEVELOPING THE IDEA OF UNDERSTANDING IN GAMES TEACHING AND COACHING

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In the same way, that the four fundamentals have been neglected, the concept of understanding is absent from much of the literature. Yet we constantly hear on radio and television as well as reading in the newspapers, players and coaches refer to the need for more *understanding of the game* and *understanding what players can do in a game* (see Dennis Bergkamp in his book *Stillness and Speed* (2013)).

It is important to recognise that understanding<sup>3</sup> was a significant feature of TGFU. Thorpe and Bunker (1997) stress that "throughout the 1970s an approach to teaching games was formulated that placed the emphasis on ensuring that children understood the games they played whilst capitalising on the intrinsic motivation most youngsters bring to playing the game" (page 52). They went on to argue also that "In our experience the person who really understands the game of soccer can appreciate what players are trying to do in a hockey game and is certainly not completely unaware of basketball tactics" (page 54).

In the UK the teaching of physical education in the national curriculum is expected to develop an *understanding* of how to succeed in different physical activities (games, athletics or dance), yet in the physical education and games literature there is no explanation of what understanding means in practice. If understanding is an important part of children's learning in physical education and games in particular, why has the profession spent so little time in articulating how teachers can organise learning or providing informed guidance on how to achieve understanding and make appropriate assessments? If it is seen as important, the idea of understanding in the teaching of games and what it means in practice needs to become a focus for re-thinking and assessing its relevance to practice. However, a lot of work needs to be done in order to address this task and articulate what understanding means.

## 3. WHAT IS MEANT BY UNDERSTANDING

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Most of the literature on understanding is located within philosophy journals and one of the key authors is Grimm (2006, 2010, 2013). Grimm identifies the idea that understanding is about *grasping* and *seeing* in which one is able to grasp mentally how the different aspects of a system or structure depend upon one another and is to able

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<sup>3</sup> See the following sources for early thinking on understanding in games – Entwistle (1969), Kirk (1983) and in Spanish McNamee (1992).

to anticipate how changes in one part of the system will lead (or fail to lead) to changes in another part as well as see new possibilities.

So what kind of name do we have for this sort of *seeing* or *grasping* based accomplishment if not understanding? It could be argued also that we have a natural desire to *make sense of things*, and there is a distinctive intellectual satisfaction that comes from having *made sense of something*. Thus, we could make the claim that there is a genuine value in the experience of having made sense of something or of getting things right. *Understanding* in the context of a game means that a player is able to *grasp* the essence of a game and how it functions, learn to see possibilities within a game and *make sense* of the whole spectrum of learning to play a game well and provide the key to unlocking intelligent performance in a game.<sup>4</sup>

However, the idea of understanding must be located within the concept of games as problem solving activities. In the TGFU project specific situations that emerged in the course of a game were seen as problem-solving activities where the player had to solve the practical problems presented by the opposition during a game. In other words the player had to solve the puzzles that emerge in a game to outwit the opposition. Outwitting your opponent(s) became the focus for furthering understanding and identifying what it involved.

In practices, the teacher or coach is a quizmaster who designs game scenarios in the form of puzzles to be solved that represent what a player will usually encounter in games. The teacher or coach is engaged in a *crafting process* in which they develop the ability to sketch solutions to these puzzles so that they can *shape game forms* that create scenarios for practices. They have to recognise a need to tackle problems from different angles and use their imagination to sense new possibilities in how they can organise learning.

They need to remember them as a menu of possibilities and create images in their mind of these possibilities so that they are locked into their thinking so that the challenges that learners will face are made clear.

The player needs to apply what they have experienced and learnt in such practices to real game situations and demonstrate being skilful in the making of intelligent practical decisions. After a while the player should be able to gain the capability to pose the questions and the puzzles that need to be solved by them – to understand the game, how it can change and how it can be changed.

This attempt to promote understanding illustrates what can be achieved. But what is its relevance for today? We need to facilitate opportunities for our students to *grasp* how the different aspects of a game depend upon one another and to anticipate how changes in one part of the game will lead (or fail to lead) to changes in another part.

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<sup>4</sup> The idea of understanding in the teaching of games has been explored in more detail in the following publications Almond and Ayres (2013) and Ayres and Almond (2014).

*Seeing* is also an ability to anticipate or see what things could be like. In other words we need to find ways in which we can help our students *to make sense* of what can happen in a game. In 1994 Rod Thorpe spoke at a conference in Australia where he said *it makes sense to play games* and then he made an important point that we need to *make sense of games*. This is a key component of the notion of understanding. Rod Thorpe's presentation and insightful comment was the beginning of the Games Sense approach in Australia. However, in striving to make sense of games, has the Games Sense approach been translated into practices that truly recognise this and address the need for a better understanding of games?

In order to make available opportunities for players to understand and become intelligent performers, teachers and coaches need to be aware of the important features of a game that need to be addressed. A list of possibilities needs to be identified. Below, is a list of some features that need to be *grasped, made sense of,* and to be able to see what they mean in practice and to develop the ability to anticipate how a game can unfold. They represent only a small fraction of what needs to be understood.

#### Understanding *of the game*

- The rules of the game, their interpretation and how they can influence play.
- Strategy, tactics and principles of play
- The principles of play within a game and recognising their relevance to specific situations
- How to work as a team and for the team – collective responsibility.
- Why you can play this way or that way
- Where one's own players are and where they are likely to move towards
- The shape and flow of a game
- What roles and responsibilities individual players can have:
  - In attack and defence
  - When one hasn't got the ball
  - Restarts
  - Change overs

#### Understanding *in the game*: the need for learning how to outwit opponents

- Recognising how your team can play - what options are open to you
- Recognising how the opposition play
- Being responsive to changes in a game.
- Making connections between the way a game is being played and the strengths and weaknesses of the opposition and one's own team

- Seeing what possibilities are open to you
- Deciding when to do something (as a team / as an individual)
- Recognition that what is tactically possible must be technically possible (Alan Launder in *Play Practice* 2001).

We need to recognise that in all of the above aspects of a game *you can make sense of a game* and achieve a level of understanding without playing the game. This is where games are very different from subjects like history or mathematics. This sort of *knowledge about* games and how they can be played needs to be seen as a separate capability from intelligent performance within a game. They need to be considered as different sides to one coin. You cannot demonstrate intelligent performance without playing but you need understanding to underpin it.

In the early days of TGFU the idea of *games making* (Almond, 1983) was developed because it was seen as an opportunity for young people to understand the role of primary rules<sup>5</sup> so that they could see how games can have unique features that make them distinctive and different. If you change the primary rules you are creating a very different game. However, the role of secondary rules illustrated how some changes in rules can improve the way the game is played without it becoming a different type of game. Secondary rules are changed as a result of experience to make the game fairer and to improve the flow of play. *Games making* encouraged young people to devise their own games in groups and explore the creation of primary rules and to recognise how secondary rules shape the game. Once a game was devised each group was given the opportunity to explain their game to other groups so everyone could try out the new games. This form of explanation was seen as an important tool in deepening their understanding of games. At the time this was seen as a radical way (a different pedagogy) for giving young people the opportunity to explore their own ideas and to learn from each other – in other words giving young people responsibility for their own learning and helping them to become more independent. In addition, games making was seen also as a useful tool for assessing young people's understanding of the tactical and decision making features of a game.

The low level of physically activity play amongst young people is an international problem. One possible explanation for this is that physical education teaching does not appear to encourage young people to take responsibility for their own learning. The short time that young people have for physical education in a school effectively

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<sup>5</sup> Primary rules identify the type of game and its essential character together with how winning can be achieved (Almond, 1986a). These rules distinguish between specific types of games and formed the basis for the classification of all games used in TGFU (Almond, 1986b). If you change the primary rules you create a new game. Secondary rules arise out of experience of playing the game and can be open to some degree of interpretation. They can be changed without altering the essential character of the game. These ideas were a central feature of the original idea of games making.

discourages the practice of independent learning. If teachers (and coaches) can encourage players to practise on their own, it should increase levels of physical activity and play a big part in developing more technical competence. However there needs to be some sort of guidance to bring this about.

The following components can provide a framework to support players.

- Teaching young people to love being active will promote a desire to seek out opportunities to practise in their own time.
- Knowing what to concentrate on in your practice. How do you recognise what is important?
- Think of yourself as an artist or one who wants to develop their craft: - pose the following questions and see them as puzzles:
  - What do I need to work on?
  - How can I develop my techniques and skills?
  - How can I make them better?
  - What are my weaknesses? e.g. poor left foot.
  - How can I be as an all-round player? What do I need to do?
  - How can I organise my practice sessions?
  - Do I have any ingrained practice that I need to modulate?
- Problems or difficulties in practising- ask yourself:
  - Why can't I do this or that?
  - Why am I making mistakes?
    - What mistakes am I making?
    - Why can't I do x, y or z?
    - What can I do to overcome them?
- Build breaks into your practising, take a rest, reflect and think about what you are doing or simply recharge your batteries.
- *Playfulness* is an essential part of practice because it facilitates the assimilation and accommodation of learning.

Nevertheless, such a step will need careful consideration together with an understanding of young people. The first step is for teachers (as well as coaches) to build time into physical education classes (or coaching sessions) to recognise that young people need to learn to practise on their own. It must become a key part of pedagogy. Underpinning this pedagogy is the recognition that understanding is an accomplishment and achievement of the student. This implies that learning to be independent is central to the process of understanding. This is why games making and practising on one's own are important pedagogical tools.



This raises an important distinction in understanding. The discussion has focused on understanding by the young person of understanding *of a game* and understanding *in a game*. Nevertheless, there is also another form of understanding that needs to be addressed. This *form of understanding* builds on understanding a game and is associated with the pedagogical processes used by the teacher or coach. How can teachers and coaches develop their understanding of games and provide appropriate conditions for their players to acquire understanding (1) *of a game* and (2) *in a game* and become intelligent performers? This understanding can only be achieved if teachers and coaches put in place *enabling environments supported by an enabling attitude* (the pedagogical stance of the teacher or coach) for the process of generating understanding and creating opportunities for intelligent performance to emerge. One key factor is the *imagination* of the teacher or coach to transform players' understanding of playing a game and translating it into forms that promote and generate intelligent performance – the imagination to see possibilities. This is where we return to the four fundamentals and in particular the notion of *shaping games*. They represent key components for constructing a games programme that foster understanding of the game leading to intelligent performance in the game. Instead of focusing on and highlighting the model of TGFU, the four fundamentals represent the heart of the TGFU approach.

Nevertheless, it is the process of *shaping games* that we need to carefully address because it represents a key aspect of the pedagogy of a teacher or coach. But, in order to address this there is a need to do far more work on understanding a game and what it means to demonstrate understanding in a game. This task will require a comprehensive collaborative effort to develop a shared common focus that was a feature of the emergence of TGFU.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

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This paper has used the revisiting of the original TGFU approach to highlight a number of key features of a game-centred approach. First of all the idea of four fundamental components for developing a game-centred approach needs to be seen as an essential issue that has to be addressed. As a result, we will be able to see creative ways of stimulating imaginative ideas for making games accessible to all young people.

The original focus on *understanding* was important because far too little time has been devoted to developing ways of promoting (1) *understanding of a game* and (2) *understanding in a game*. This goes way beyond the narrow focus on the tactical – there is much more to understand. This raises the important point about the understanding needed by teachers and coaches. They need to be aware of ways (besides current practice) to enable them to become intelligent performers of the art of teaching/coaching. Bruner (2007, p. 9) makes this point very clearly “one always knows the world in the light of the perspective one has chosen (or has had imposed upon one!). There are always other ways of knowing (even of *seeing*) it. These *other ways*

constitute the realm of possibility.” Therefore, a shared *understanding* of games needs to be developed so that teachers and coaches can test their interpretations against a standard.

One final point, in the theoretical literature: there is a multitude of inspired thinking that can play a key role in developing more coherent approaches to the teaching and coaching of games. However, they rarely penetrate the world of teachers and coaches who can so easily perpetuate the same old practices. This paper has focused on the development of practice as a basis for uniting research and practice.

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