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The Teaching of Skills in Games and Sports[1]

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Introduction

The teaching of skills for use in a variety of sports, games and recreational activities has historically formed an integral part of a comprehensive physical education program. Whilst there has been a push towards lifetime fitness and physical activities that require minimal skill development, different ways of thinking about teaching related skills allow sport and game play to remain as two of many important physical activity options available to students. In essence, all children should be provided with the opportunities to develop the confidence and competence to choose **not** to play sports or games at a later stage in life, rather than be forced from them because of a lack of opportunity.

Skilled performance in this context is not merely focusing on the technical (physical) execution of an action but is inclusive of the cognitive and affective skills required for successful participation in games and sport. The space available within physical education for learning these many different aspects is limited. "While many traditional physical education programs emphasise skill development and mastery, few students are able to master the many skills in the short amount of time available during physical education class" (McCracken, 2001). The multi-sport approach to physical education curriculum, where sports such as basketball, volleyball, netball, tennis and so on are introduced on a cyclical

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basis (usually around four week blocks) has been identified as problematic. Whilst students are exposed to lots of different sports and their many associated skills, they are not given the opportunity to develop competence and therefore confidence. Those that enter the class with more ability thrive at the expense of less skilled participants. Many students enthusiastically greet the new activity but are soon asking 'what are we going to do next?' A volleyball lesson that has students performing isolated, dislocated and tedious drills (20 digs against a wall, followed by 20 sets against the wall) succeeds in producing students who, when eventually confronted with a game, are anchored to one spot and are focused only on getting the ball over the net. They aren't exactly sure why they practiced the set, when it is supposed to be used or how to get in the correct position to use it.

Re-Thinking Skill Development

Before diving into a discussion on the teaching of 'fundamental movement skills' or the development of 'games sense' in physical education it is important to put the learning of skills associated with games and sports into perspective. Physical Education can be broken down into many component parts including dance, gymnastics, games and sports, fitness, swimming, active lifestyle, interpersonal relationships and personal health. A review of curriculum documents, textbooks and instructional resources associated with sports and games in physical education also reveals an array of teaching approaches to use, including fundamental movement (motor) skills (FMS); games for understanding (GFU); tactical games approach; play practice and sport education in physical education. When we break the physical education curriculum down into parts and approaches we run the risk of teaching within these artificial boundaries and because no one method is ideal we invariably miss opportunities.

Before we know it we are thinking about fitness separately from games and developing movement skills without consideration for when and why they are used.

Choosing the right approach for the right situation can prove challenging particularly when the teacher brings to the task a set of beliefs. Whilst there is no one ideal method to use, a thoughtful teacher will explore (and challenge) their personal beliefs whilst considering the learner, task and contextual characteristics before making a decision (Cassidy, Jones, & Protrac, 2004). The games sense required for the sport of archery could be considered quite simple relative to that required of rugby union. Low strategy sports (target sports, gymnastics, diving, surfing and athletics) require a different approach than high-strategy sports like soccer, basketball or roller hockey (Turner, Allison, & Pissanos, 2001). For most sports and activities it is a combination of instructional methods and a holistic outlook on games and sports that works best.

In the next section a helicopter view of two of some prominent approaches will be used to give the beginning teacher an understanding of the terms and some uniting principles. The intent of this chapter is to place the methods under a holistic umbrella and to ask that as a reflective teacher you embrace all approaches and facilitate the development of skill with consideration for the learner, the task and the environment. Readers are referred to readings on dynamical systems theory to gain understanding of a potential theoretical background that can underpin the following concepts (Handford, Davids, Bennett, & Button, 1997; Magill, 1998; Thelen, 1995)

Fundamental Movement Skills in Physical Education

The fundamental movement skills (FMS) approach comes out of the motor development literature and surfaced in curriculum documents both locally and in internationally. Fundamental movement skills have been classified as common movement activities such as running, throwing, catching, jumping and leaping that emerge out of rudimentary movements observed early in childhood. These skills are said to provide a foundation from which more specialised skills can be established and later applied to sporting, recreational and physical activities (Gallahue & Ozmun, 1998). Launder (2001, p.49) in discussing the Play Practice approach describes these skills as 'working models' of technique in which complex skills are stripped back to their bare bones.

A young child who has developed a robust overarm throwing pattern in a variety of contexts should have greater confidence and success when attempting more complicated sporting actions linked to this skill. Sports skills such as the tennis serve, volleyball serve, javelin throw, lacrosse pass, baseball pitch, badminton clear, netball/basketball shoulder pass, softball/cricket field throwing, soccer goalie throw, an American football pass and even a beach cricket throw can all be viewed as alternative forms of the overarm throw that employ the same basic pattern.

A prominent argument for the introduction of fundamental movement skills is to redress the issue of trying to teach too much poorly given the time constraints associated with Physical Education. In developing these fundamental skills that apply to many sports and activities it claims to help students develop an adaptable set of movement abilities that can be

applied throughout life and across a range of activities. Interestingly, approaches that have consistently been placed at opposite ends of the teaching style continuum create an argument based upon this exact same principle (eg. develop the fundamental tactics that can be applied to many games).

The focus on fundamental movement skills has come under attack in various corners for it's evaluative, prescriptive and potentially gendered undertones. As already discussed, no one approach is ideal and an unfortunate consequence of the push to develop fundamental movement skills was the unintentional but overt focus on technique at the expense of understanding associated with application (socially, tactically, cognitively). Assessment of technique performance was privileged leading to comparison, the power to intervene or remediate rested with the teacher who often resorted to a skill-drill approach and claims of gender bias have been made (Burrows, 2004; Wright, 1997; Wright & Okely, 1997). These issues arose because people focused themselves on one particular theme and didn't reflect upon its broader application (individual, task, and environment).

It is important to remember that teaching the overarm throw will not mean a child will become a competent and confident tennis player. Developing the skill of kicking a stationary ball will not produce a lifelong soccer participant. There is much more to the playing of games than the learning of technique. The reality is that children do not need to master the basics before moving on to the more complex task of using them in a 'real' context. We shouldn't always do the skill drills first and then play the game. The development of fundamental movement skills are not

restricted to those published in curriculum documents and nor should they be aligned with chronological age (Burrows, 2004). So rather than highlighting the problems with developmentalism and fundamental movement skills, let us take a step back and explore how their enhancement might contribute to engaging more children in games and sports.

To take a fundamental movement skill like the catch and simply teach it in isolation using a variety of drills until mastered is a rather simplistic (reductionist) view of a complex issue and ignores many other social, emotional and cognitive processes. What is experienced before and after the 'learning' of the catch, the way in which the catch is taught, the other skills being developed at the same time and the environment in which it is developed all impact upon its ultimate application. This is why when discussing the 'learning' of a fundamental movement skill, we are not merely thinking about developing the robotic mechanics of one action (although some texts are guilty of implying this). The context of the learning, the activities used, the social interactions, the feedback, the tactics employed and the style of teaching all play a significant role in turning a fundamental movement skill into a lifelong skill that can be applied to many sports and activities. So whilst on the surface we see the simple skill of the catch being further simplified into component parts (see table ?? – example below), the reality of effectively teaching this skill is far more complex.

Insert an example of an FMS and its components here

In most FMS texts, skills are essentially broken down into a set of components so that users (teachers and learners) can determine loosely what the skill should look like, where the performance is at, set achievable goals and get some feedback on the quality of the performance. Many people do not know how to hold their hands when catching or how to use their arms to generate force when jumping. The 'Play Practice' approach outlines the importance of creating a verbal, kinaesthetic and visual picture of the task at hand (Launder, 2001) so as the learner and teacher can gain feedback about performance. This model of performance should be viewed as a guide to help shape the learning environment without being so overly prescriptive as to stifle individuality.

The process of breaking complex things into their component tasks is nothing new of course and the same philosophy is applied to breaking words down into sounds or letters when teaching literacy or major games down into fundamental elements of defending space, creating space and so on. This process however has led to criticism centred on an overly scientific approach, one that has led to a skill – drill mentality. The worry here, is that the teacher will become overly focused on individual components and assessment, and in doing so, teach the movements outside of any meaningful context.

Contrary to being the opposite of other 'contextual' approaches (GFU, SEPEP); FMS are best developed through exploration within different environments and can be learnt using student centred approaches. Teaching children to step forward in opposition during the overarm throw is not dependent upon the instructor telling the student what, when and

how to do it. This element of throwing can be effectively taught using a 'hands off approach' that requires shaping the learning environment in such a way that the learner solves the problems associated with achieving the task at hand. Alternatively, game rules can be modified so that 'quality' and not 'quantity' of performance becomes the focus.

In some cases these components that describe FMS's will serve as a basis for comparison, testing, reporting, benchmarking and potentially lead to marginalisation and a narrow teaching focus. With this in mind the components should be viewed as a useful aid for teaching and learning rather than a source of comparison favouring those with an 'advantaged' life experience.

What must be clear is that the teaching of movement skills requires a context if it is to be meaningful or relevant, a point that is argued strongly by advocates of other teaching approaches. Once children have progressed past getting the 'idea' of the skill, FMS like all skills, are best learnt in a context for which they are going to be used. Modified games, rather than isolated drills, would best create this context. Whilst many children with the right amount of motivation, opportunity and practice (even if it is in the backyard) will discover an efficient FMS performance, this appears to be the exception and not the rule. Directly telling, shaping and drilling the learner into a correct performance might seem expedient but it ultimately becomes a false economy that lacks meaning and application. Part of the Physical Education teacher's role then becomes that of facilitator, one who guides the learner away from an aimless search and funnels it through creating meaningful experiences within a dynamic environment.

Games for Understanding

The Games for Understanding approach (GFU) was made popular in Australia by Len Almond, Dave Bunker and Rod Thorpe at Loughborough University in England. It is an instructional model that aims to introduce children to games situations early in the learning process so that knowledge (declarative and procedural) is acquired facilitating tactical decision-making (Turner & Martinek, 1995). In this approach it is not assumed that tactical or strategic awareness in games must wait for the development of sophisticated skills (Werner, Thorpe, & Bunker, 1996).

The task of the teacher is to present a game which children can enter with some of the skills already developed. Improvement is then achieved through understanding what the game is about. Participants learn how to make tactical decisions based upon the game conditions at the time. Technical skills, rules and equipment are modified so players can concentrate on developing tactical awareness. Skill execution and game performance are further refined, but only after a student sees the need for a particular kind of technical skill. Skilfulness during game play can then be defined as tactical and strategic understanding in addition to correct execution of the motor response (Werner et al., 1996).

A premise with this approach is that many major games can be broken down into categories that highlight similarities. Invasion Games such as soccer, netball, and basketball; Net/Racket Games such as tennis, squash and volleyball; Striking/Fielding Games such as softball and cricket, are grouped according to common tactical requirements. In this sense the major games with their diverse fields, rules, skills and equipment can be broken down into fundamental tactical principles that can then be

managed within the constraints of a physical education class. If this sounds similar to the philosophy behind FMS, it is. The FMS approach constitutes the fundamentals of the technical side of sport while the GFU approach constitutes the fundamentals of the tactical side of sport. The developers of the GFU approach highlight this point in saying "… just as skills, like throwing, will transfer across games, so will tactical knowledge" (Werner et al., 1996).

Without overtly stating it, GFU advocates taking the focus off the more complex skills found in sports through using the FMS. This is so learners can gain an appreciation of the tactics, decision making and performance principles without getting bogged down in complex technique. In reducing the technical demands of the game through using FMS, participants can concentrate on learning the tactical components. Given the limited time available, advocates believed it better to help children learn the nature of games, so that this could foster a love and further understanding. The task was to create environments (game forms) that were simple enough for beginners but which could be developed progressively to allow the adult version of the game to emerge (Launder, 2001). This principle of teaching basic understandings (a little) well, at the expense of teaching major games (a lot) ineffectively has now been repeated.

To use an example, in the sport of lacrosse, before introducing the awkward and difficult to master lacrosse stick, the game might be introduced using the FMS of throwing and catching (often with a baseball mitt). The assumption here is that most children will have greater initial success learning the game using the throw and catch (both FMS), than they would if they had to pass and receive an object with a lacrosse stick.

By incorporating the throw skill here, children are also developing the basic overarm pattern required to perform the more complex lacrosse pass at a later point.

Contrary to being at opposite ends of the teaching range, the similarities of both FMS and GFU approaches are obvious. Whilst both advocate a simplification of the major game into more manageable parts, they are both dependent upon each other for learning. Teaching FMS through a GFU approach makes a lot of sense.

Play Practice Approach

Expanding upon the GFU approach is the Play Practice approach to teaching sports skills which argues we should 'teach through the game and in the game' (Launder, 2001, p.55). The Play Practice approach, as the name implies, harnesses the power of play to motivate participants. Complicated techniques and rules are simplified and the game is played at the very start of a session. The Play Practice approach cleverly positions itself in the centre and appears to be a way forward for both the technically and tactically minded. It also borrows ideas from the Sport Education in Physical Education Program (SEPEP) model to incorporate a more holistic approach to sports such as culminating events, student responsibility, and promotion of good sports. Essentially Play Practice lets the context of the activity dictate the style of teaching to be adopted.

More so than it is in the GFU approach, Play Practice acknowledges that technique like competent controlling and directing of a ball (or game object), forms an important part of being a skilful player. It highlights the use of a 'working model' for technique and acknowledges the role of

informed evaluation and augmented feedback. Like the GFU approach it also acknowledges the place of understanding. Effective decision making both on and off the ball are considered an essential element alongside of technique.

Unlike traditional teaching in which motor skills are separated from tactics, skilled performance in the play practice approach is defined as "the combination of games sense with technical ability to achieve a specified desired outcome" (p.41). This means a technically proficient player can still make tactical mistakes and therefore be unskilled. With skill presented in this manner it becomes contextual.

Play Practice builds upon an early positive play experience (modified game) in much the same way as the GFU approach does. This creates an opportunity for the participants to appreciate the fundamental nature of the activity (rules, techniques, and tactics); it grounds the experience and makes future learning more meaningful. It also provides an opportunity for the teacher to view the game as a whole and identify where the strengths and weaknesses of the group are.

The Play Practice approach goes on to highlight many of the teaching and learning strategies used by physical educators. The message here is that setting up the practice environment is only the beginning. Competent educators are required to consider many elements and perform a range of tasks in delivering any teaching approach successfully.

It is worth mentioning Mosston's spectrum of teaching styles here as it offers the developing teacher a range of teaching modes to draw upon

(Mosston & Ashworth, 2002). Styles like guided discovery used in conjunction with Play Practice, GFU, TGA and FMS are extremely useful in developing understanding of the technical, tactical or strategic principles associated with games and sports. The spectrum offers physical education teachers a chance to experiment with their teaching style and can liberate those who feel stuck in a teacher centred, direct instructional model but don't know how to move out of it. Having a repertoire of teaching styles to draw upon affords the teacher a valuable tool in which they can achieve the processes outlined in the above approaches to teaching games and sport.

Conclusion

Whilst many similarities in philosophy, theory and practice underlie all of the approaches explored in this chapter, there is no greater point of convergence than the expressed failure of what has been termed 'traditional' or 'multi-sport' approaches to the teaching of skills and games within physical education. The learning of skills in situations far removed from their ultimate environment; and the 4-6 week rotation through different major sports, has been consistently criticised. Exposing students to a variety of games and sports should make way for more educationally sound practices that foster the learning of capable participants.

We have read about the importance of the environment, the task and the learner throughout this chapter and whether we are teaching technique, games sense or hopefully both, the interaction between all three needs consideration. This chapter has shown you that FMS are used heavily in the contextual approaches to learning game skills. That Mosston's spectrum of teaching styles is intertwined with the tactical games

approach and that if the basic principles of good pedagogy are applied; there is no need to choose one way over another. The good teacher will look at the task, the learner and the environment to help them decide on the best approach.

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