



ADOPTING GAME SENSE APPROACH TO TEACHING AND COACHING OF SPORTS IN ZIMBABWE

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Abstract:

Teaching games has always required a holistic approach that focuses on the physical, social and intellectual domains of the individual participant. In this regard, Game Sense Approach can be seen as an approach that allows students to be free to play games while learning, creating a sense of having fun during learning. This leads to a healthy, active and fulfilling life of the learner. This paper looks at the game sense approach in physical education, with a view of recommending its adoption to sports coaching and teaching in Zimbabwe, resulting in promoting changes in the culture of sports engagement. This will eventually develop a mindset shift to game-centred sports coaching in Zimbabwe. The study uses literature search to put its case forward. It recommends that Zimbabwe can successfully embark on coaching development programmes that adopt the game sense approach to sport teaching and coaching. Game Sense Approach empowers teachers and coaches with greater tactical understanding of games, making it much easier for them to effectively teach and coach sport in Zimbabwe. The study, therefore, recommends that Game Sense be introduced in Zimbabwe to allow for those who are involved in sports to have a sound understanding of match conditions and be able to transfer learning from practice to actual game situations. Game Sense can be seen as exposing players to inquiry-based learning which allows players to explore enjoy themselves under natural and authentic learning environments.

Keywords: game sense, game sense approach, teaching, reflective ability, pedagogy, physical education, game-centred coaching

1. Introduction

Game sense refers to the idea of having students being free to express themselves in games while learning, creating a sense of them having fun during learning. It relies a lot on the deep understanding of games by a coach to the extent that it can be misinterpreted as small-sided games. When implemented accordingly, they can result in improved skills outcomes that are linked to the players' response execution to a game situation. Thus, emphasis of game sense lies in the reflection by players to learn specific sporting skills when playing the games. They themselves can learn to develop into complete players, all be it in a less competitive sporting environment. Game sense, therefore, can be said to contain pedagogical features that can provide quality teaching and learning to Physical Education learners and may result in the provision of high quality teaching of the Physical Education curriculum (Light, Curry & Mooney, 2014). One might conclude that Game Sense can yield cognitive outcomes that relate to decision-making in sports and sporting learners' response selection is likely to improve as a result of the enjoyable, motivating and rewarding sporting activities. Their maximum engagement as players in a game context makes them self-reliant and can improve enormously their decision-making processes (Cooper, 2015). This paper looks at possibilities of adopting the Game Sense coaching philosophy in Zimbabwe as a holistic approach that improves Physical Education (PE) problem-solving skills through empowerment processes to learners in game playing contexts. They end up being able to successfully read play and react accordingly in actual game situations.

1.1 Background to the study

Traditional sports coaching approach usually focuses on players as having to learn sporting techniques and skills through narration, demonstration and explanation where the players are actually seen as disconnected from the realities of player experience of the game (Pill 2014; Light et al., 2015). This traditional approach to teaching games is sometimes seen as mechanical, complicated and linear in nature, where game skills are only taught through the transfer of skills from the coach to player(s) (Light et al., 2015). It is unidirectional. The traditional method of teaching sporting games is, therefore, characterized by use of repetitive practice or drills without necessarily presenting the actual sports context within which direct sporting responses can be practiced and applied (Pill, 2014, Light et al., 2015). Thus, transfer of learning skills by the learners is from the practice sessions of the games. This can be seen as problematic in realizing the full development of the player skills. It has been observed that the Game Sense Approach is not yet widely adopted (Harvey & Light, 2015). The argument that can be seen developing is that Game Sense can have some pedagogical features that can be used to improve teaching and learning of Physical Education, as well as helping to inform provisions of high quality teaching and learning right across the practical education curriculum (Light, Curry & Mooney, 2014).

Internationally, Physical Education has been critiqued as lacking in educative intent, direction or purpose (Pill, 2014). The critique stems from two observations on the

common practices of PE: i) that lessons are overly focused on movement compliance in sporting performance environments where the teacher predominantly and distinctly uses directive teaching. It implies that the teacher only demonstrates concepts while the learner can only copy what has been taught to them; ii) that multi-activity programme design means that learners can progress in their learning through a series of movement experiences as given by their tutor without time and ability to develop their own competency or mastery of their units of work. In this regard, teaching is meant to transfer concepts and ideas from the teacher to the learner and never vice-versa. Consequently, learners in PE end up learning what they cannot do. It means that they can sometimes find themselves struggling in individual activities that require independent individualistic decision-making and therefore, may fail to make the right decisions of applying their cognitive skills in complex sporting situations. Thus, today there is generally a new thrust that focuses on learners being more physically involved in their learning. The idea of learning PE is to produce learners, who can understand the educative intent where learners are physically involved while also understanding sporting movements, thus working to reduce seeing PE as inadvertently a matter of talent identification rather than competency development in all game aspects. This is what has been lacking in the teaching of PE in Zimbabwe.

During the 1980's, the application of the Learning Theory in PE led to the development of pedagogical approaches, thereby emphasizing the cognitive dimension of sports movement. This was in direct response to the persistent claims that many children learnt little of substance or relevance to PE due to the directive pedagogy and multi-activity curriculum that was used. Although it was recognized that in order for learners to be physically educated, they had to be involved in learning cognitive skills together with the physical and social-emotional domains activities. This has led to claims that cognitive engagement in PE is often more rhetorical than is practical in reality. There have been, of late, moves from 'objectives-based PE curriculum to 'standards- and outcomes-based PE curriculum which has brought further attention to the cognitive domain of learning PE, where learner outcomes are framed using words like *reflect*, *analyze* and *design*.

One of the latest pedagogical approaches of focusing attention on cognitive dimensions of game and sport learning is the Game Sense Approach. It is a major pedagogical shift in teaching PE that focuses on game-centred problem-solving sport coaching as developed in Australia from 1994-1996 by the Australian Sports Commission. It allows learners, as players, to be able to read play, react and recover their sporting positions and equally allowing them to continue game engagement (Pill, 2013a, Light, 2013). In Game Sense Approach, players are expected to adapt to each game's cognitive complexity, and to interpret and respond creatively to game contexts using flexible tactics, strategies and game rules (Pill, 2016).

2. The Game Sense Approach

The Game Sense Approach is a coaching philosophy that focuses on sporting activity that is game-centred rather than technique-centred. According to Launder (2001) Game Sense Approach is the ability to use an understanding of the sporting rules, strategies, tactics and most importantly oneself to solve the problems posed by the game situation or by one's opponents in a game context. Light & Harvey (2016) also defines Game Sense Approach as a learner-centred, inquiry-based approach to sports teaching that provides positive learning experiences and promotes the ability and motivation to learn sporting skills. Game Sense Approach is a method of coaching and teaching PE which uses games as a teaching and learning tool in order to increase the motivation of learner-players, and better develop their game-paced skills, tactical and strategic thinking on certain game concepts. It is meant to develop them tactically and make them able to produce appropriate decisions during a game context. The approach makes learner-players learn and develop their game skills in a way that enhances their decision-making and execution processes (Australian Sports Commission, 1996). It makes learners, as players, understand and appreciate the game better by increasing their technical and tactical awareness within game context (Pill, 2016). The major focus of the Game Sense Approach is on developing total tactical skill in a game as well as increasing the ability to improve decision-making and skills knowledge in the actual game situation. The Game Sense Approach consists of small-sided games that are practiced by learners as players under variable game conditions. Games or match-play situations are created in order to trigger acquisition of requisite game techniques and skills while actual game situation pressure. In this kind of approach, designed practices must progressively challenge and motivate players to develop appreciation and understanding of game strategies that are required in order to succeed in actual game situations. In it, skill and technique acquisition are over-emphasized within actual game practice sessions.

2.1 Role of the coach/teacher in a Game Sense Approach

The Game Sense Approach is an athlete-centred approach. It is directed at what the athlete does on his or her own. The coach is just a facilitator of learner as he or she merely guides and aids the learner as a player with the autonomy to make decisions and also to manipulate the game contextual environment. This is said to facilitate learning in PE practical curriculum. All game-related learning behavior is the prerogative of players who ought to understand and appreciate the game sense approach (Breed & Spittle, 2011; Pill, 2012). The teacher/coach is there to emphasize decision-making by players within a game situation and to facilitate the creation of game situations for players. However, players need to find their own solutions to the game situations that they will meet. The teacher or coach is there to promote problem-solving and decision-making skills by learner players, resulting in long-term learning processes as learners will discover the things that work well for them in game situations. The approach caters for all levels of learner ability and assists them to choose

the level they wish to exercise their skills while playing a game. Teachers and coaches are limited to technical knowledge support of the development of sporting skills. Here, the role of the teacher or coach should be to merely to ensure that there is maximum participation by the participants and that there is as much fun as is possible during play. Thus, the teacher or coach can design specific activities that replicate actual game situations and demand adherence to the rules during practice sessions (Pill, 2014). They need to possess knowledge, skills and ability to design those practical games, and to analyze learning and make the necessary adjustments. They need to have the ability and skills to make the games effective, productive and to generate requisite questions from the learners (Harvey & Light 2015).

One of the most important aspects of the Game Sense Approach is to emphasize the learner-player's intrinsic feedback after the games in order to evaluate the skills and competencies learnt. Thus, they should be able to control the tasks given to the learners within a game situation in order to develop specific content understanding through skills acquisition and decision-making. The teacher/coach should ensure that learner's reflective ability is developed fully during such games. It is easy for learners to create their own tasks different from the learning context required. Thus, the teacher or coach needs to contain the tasks by designing specific activities from specific objectives that can be replicated game according to game demands during actual game practice (Pill, 2014).

2.2 Process of Game Sense model

The Game Sense model is cyclic in nature and begins with warm up activities that are followed by the actual. After the game, the coach pauses to ask key questions on to the performance of the learners, highlighting technical and tactical skills demonstrated during the game. They can make their perceptual decisions observations. Players progress learning by starting with a warm up, followed by question and answer session that is also followed by the setting of new challenges for the learners, setting practice tasks, game progression observations or question and answer sessions. The cycle can be repeated (Pill, 2016). In game sense games, learners can be grouped into their categories of invasion, court and net, target and striking or fielding games. This means that the strategic principles and tactics are similar for all learners and they can be tackled through actual match games in order to develop specific skills, such as attack and defense strategies, space awareness and other more specific tactics that can apply to all similar game situations (Pill, 2016). Learners, as player, can be guided so that they can get to appreciate and understand different functional movement responses in games through well-considered use of questions that can sharpen and develop their thinking capabilities. It follows that these games can be modified to suit the objectives of learning goals and the ability level of learners (Pill, 2016). Thus, Game Sense Approach focuses on the designing of actual practice situations as set out by the coach, so that the tasks are progressively challenging and motivating to the learner-players in order for them to develop and understand of the intended strategies, skills and rules required if they have to succeed in actual game situations. Modified designer small-sided games that focus

on the complementarity of technical and tactical elements of playing the actual game can be used as opposed to general technique development (Pill, 2016). These match-play situations are meant to trigger individual techniques and skills, and to pressure learners as players in order for them to become more tactically and technically aware for them to be able to make better decisions during actual game situations. In the end, learner ought to learn fundamental skills naturally through inquiry and discovery.

2.3 Benefits of Game Sense Approach

Game Sense Approach can result in improved skill development and outcomes within actual game play situation if it is carefully linked to response execution. It can also result in improved cognitive outcomes relating to decision-making and response selection (Evans & Light 2010). These can yield higher levels of player enjoyment, engagement and thinking, that in turn can realize self-fulfillment in PE sports learning. The approach ensures that players develop self-reliance and better decision-making processes which are of paramount importance when playing actual games (Hodge et al., 2005). Thus, the Game Sense Approach promotes maximum participation from participants and results in better long-term learning outcomes. It ensures that learners reach better ability or competency levels. Both tactical and strategic skills can easily be developed in specific sporting skills (Pill, 2014). What is more, learners as players can experience exactly what they need to learn in order to do what they are intended to realize in knowledge and skills acquisition. They learn to solve game problems better during match-play situations.

The Game Sense Approach is known to also improve learner player-coach relationships whilst creating a positive learning experience for the learner players (Evans & Light, 2008). Observations have already been made that coaching sessions are improved in this approach because relations flow better in high level or intensity situations that is exhibited in match situations (Evans & Light). The approach allows match situations to be replicated during practice sessions and these can motivate well the learner players if transferred to actual game situations. In the Game Sense Approach situation, proficiency and experience of the learners is not initially important. Rather tactical understanding, willingness to learn new things, decision-making and appreciation of the game is important. Learners need to be inclined towards having fun while learning new things.

2.4 Challenges of implementing Game Sense Coaching Approach

Right from the outset, Game Sense teaching and coaching literature has described skill acquisition as the application of technique in the context of game-play situation. Therefore, tactical, technique and fitness components are always meant to be taught contextually in a designer game that represents the whole and offers means to integrate tactical and technical learning in PE (Charleswork, 1993, 1994). This association of skill as the use of a technique to as a means to effectively solve the sports problems can be presented to the learner player in momentary configurations of game-play positions in which the learner is learning skills as an embodiment of competency that is always

realized as perceptions, cognition and movement response. These are also seen as inter-dependent sports actions. This understanding directs PE teaching away from the focus of controlling student movement as skills to the focus on learner's movement understanding. Game Sense Approach therefore, seems to depart from a directive and reproductive focus of sports coaching to become the starting point of individual-oriented learning. There is always need to have learner-players getting to understand better the intended gameplay both tactically and technically. They need to be aware of how to develop these critical skills that can enhance their decision-making processes during game contexts (Pill, 2016). Thus, learner players need to start by accepting the will to test their ideas and apply new strategies and techniques through game practices and through their discussions with their peers (Evans & Light, 2008; Pill, 2008b).

Physical Education (PE) teachers and coaches have always tried to modify game practice situations, by generating teaching or coaching tasks for the learners. They have also used student peer evaluations, self-check lists, questions asked to ascertain learner abilities, and have used themes to group content for PE learning. One could say that the pedagogical Game Sense Approach was introduced as some form of change in focus from prescriptive directive teaching models of performance to supportive, guiding and facilitating strategies of game skill learning as a skills and performance assessment. It is inextricably linked to processes of cognition. Hopper (2003) illustrates this in his depiction of the "anatomy of a game performance".

In the Game Sense Approach, learners' skills acquisition is basically driven by refined use of questioning techniques by the teacher or coach, always challenging them to think critically about how they can improve their skills acquisition and development, until it reaches the ever more sophisticated appreciation and understanding. In this, they use actual game playing dimensions of time, space, application of force and game flow or tempo. The need for, and meaning of, more sophisticated and complex skills and techniques emerges from each individual learner in response to his or her understanding of the complexity of game play situations as he or she develops to meet the game from the simple to the more complex representations over time. This is not to say closed and open sports drills are unimportant in inculcating sports values, skills and techniques in the Game Sense Approach. The pedagogical skills of the teacher or coach of knowing when to use pedagogies like drill practice and play practices in order to improve player game development are important, just as it is equally important for the teacher or coach to impart a skill or technique through carefully designed or selected methodology. The Game Sense Approach is not about throwing merely out the ball to other learners but is meant to make learners appreciate and understand play cognitively. This should develop and empower the learner player to make decisive decisions during games. Thus, one of the pedagogical challenges of the Game Sense Approach is in its purposeful design or selection, and then shaping of games to focus the play on the concepts and movement responses to be learnt.

2.5 Using the Game Sense Approach in Zimbabwe

The distinctive pedagogical feature of the Game Sense Approach is its use of a more purposeful teacher or coach who uses questioning well to guide learners to understand concepts through the discovery methods. This yields better understanding of skills development and game performance. This can be a very useful tool for teacher educators and coaches in Zimbabwe. The second distinctive feature of a Game Sense Approach is seen in its purposeful teaching that allows for transfer of knowledge, skills and techniques from the teacher or coach to the learner using the actual games approach within a sports category and across game categories. This teaching methodology acknowledges that while games may look distinctive due to constraints imposed on them by their rules, or due to the performance environments of each game at a given time within a sports category (for example: cricket and baseball are both striking/fielding games), Game Sense Approach makes sense through its utilization of common rules and principles of play that actually apply in real life. For example, the requirement of the batter to place the ball into space away from the fielder in order to create time for the batter to run without getting out of the game is common to understanding both baseball and cricket. And yet different learners or players may develop their own unique skills, techniques and knowledge application. This conceptual understanding of the nature of game play can enable learners or players in Zimbabwe to eventually be able to adapt to problems presented by each game when learning new games or observing new games, through the recognition of the similarities and differences in the new to games already known. It is however, the PE teacher or coach's responsibility to teach the learner how to transfer skills, knowledge and techniques, and not to assume that learner players will make the necessary connections between the different games.

The Game Sense Approach is definitely a new pedagogical approach that still has to be fully explored in Zimbabwe for purposes of coaching and teaching different games. In Zimbabwe the coach or teacher sports games is usually in charge of the game plan and yet must allow players to stick to use their own creativity without changing the game plan. Learners and players will need to be exposed to Game Sense Approach which can have an impact on the type of game play during actual games. Thus, the Game Sense Approach in the Zimbabwean situation can allow players to make their own important decisions depending on how play progresses, without changing fundamentally the overall game plan.

The reason why the Game Sense Approach can be a useful approach in coaching in Zimbabwe lies in its tenets that guide learners' or players' autonomy in game situation decision-making. It moves away from the directive and reproductive coaching that has always been used in most games in Zimbabwe, to a more pedagogical shift or approach that focuses towards problem solving (Breed and Spittle 2011; Pill, 2012). In this athlete-centred approach, players themselves take control of all game-related behavior and can test new strategies presented by the coach through environment manipulation, resulting in the total improvement of their physical competency and cognitive complexity in actual game situations. They have the ability to interpret new

tactics, new techniques and new sport strategies (Pill, 2012, Light et al., 2012). Thus, teachers and coaches in Zimbabwe may need to design game situation practices in a way that progressively challenges and motivates learners or players in order for them to develop appreciation and understanding of strategies, tactics, skills and rules required to succeed in actual game situations.

Purposeful design of games as learning contexts must then focus on developing skills performance, for individual players or learners, the whole team or class engagement in cognitive, physical and relational team game development. The Game Sense Approach focuses on shaping play and player-development through guided inquiry. It does not detract one from physical development or the development of sporting skills. Teaching through the Game Sense Approach recognizes individual skills development as information-in-action. Exposure to this approach in Zimbabwe will help to develop individual players who can creatively contribute to the development of sports in Zimbabwe. An idealized technique repeated in an open or closed drill is not information-in-action skill, but has meaning within the context of the performance environment where the movement occurs, the context is the game. According to the Ministry of Sport and Culture in Zimbabwe, schools are encouraged to register as clubs so that players and athletes are developed and engaged throughout the year. This approach could be useful.

3. Conclusion and Recommendations

In conclusion, teachers using the Game Sense Approach must appreciate it and understand that sports development possesses a cognitive complexity in it as an approach which can be developed to produce better thinking capabilities of learners and players. The approach was also developed for practical reasons and not just from a theoretical point of view. Players in different sports categories need to make use of perceptual assessments for them to be able to anticipate and read well game play under compressed time and space performance contexts in order to make relevant and complex motor responses during a game. Implementers of the Game Sense Approach must understand that it takes time for players to learn, game sense requires greater time for instructional knowledge and game understanding by the coach as it may be misinterpreted as small sided games (Pill, 2016). Since there is complementarity of technical and tactical elements of skill development that can be achieved through effective use of Game Sense Approach, it will indeed be worthwhile for Zimbabwean teachers and coaches to give it a trial for best practice. The Game Sense Approach still needs to be fully understood by many sporting educators if it is to be successfully implemented and Zimbabwe should consider embarking on coach development programmes using the Game Sense Approach to teaching and coaching. There is need to adopt a coaching perspective shift that will align teaching and coaching to the new dispensation of Game Sense Approach in Zimbabwe as this will allow those involved to have a good understanding of match conditions so that transfer of learning may be shifted from practice to game. Game Sense approach empowers teachers and coaches

with greater tactical understanding of the game and can promote change in the sport development leading to development of a mindset shift to game centred coaching in Zimbabwe.

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