

Teaching Games for Understanding

The Importance of Student Emphasis Over Content Emphasis

TIM HOPPER

As a teacher educator and leader of workshops on the teaching games for understanding (TGFU) approach, I am often asked, "What is a TGFU approach to games teaching and what's wrong with teaching skills?" My usual response is that there is nothing wrong with teaching skills if students are ready to learn them. The reason for this question is based on a misinterpretation of the TGFU approach. This article will address that misinterpretation and provide an explanation that was developed by working with undergraduate students who want to understand what TGFU has to offer. Essentially, the TGFU approach focuses on the idea of progressing from tactics to skills, not tactics or skills (Griffin, Mitchell, & Oslin, 1997; Mitchell & Griffin, 1994; Thorpe, Bunker, & Almond, 1986). It is commonly assumed that students in a TGFU lesson merely play games with guidance from the teacher, but this is not the case. In the TGFU approach, skill progression and skill practice are very important. The TGFU approach concentrates on teaching students why a skill is needed before teaching them how to perform a skill. This article will explain how the TGFU approach is a "tactic-to-skill" method to games teaching that synthesizes a "tactical" perspective and a "technique" perspective. Throughout the article, "games" will refer to the array of activities that use an object and that can develop into the culturally valued games that adults play, such as tennis, basketball, and baseball.

Background to the TGFU Approach

The phrase "TGFU" was first coined

in the United Kingdom in the early 1980s. The ideas regarding the approach were spawned by Thorpe, Bunker, and Almond (1986) and drew on the earlier work of Mauldon and Redfern (1981). The TGFU was set up as an alternative to the technique focus of games teaching because, as Bunker and Thorpe (1986b, p. 11) noted a technique approach produces

(a) [a] large percentage of children achieving little success due to the emphasis on performance, (b) skillful players who possess inflexible techniques and poor decision-making capacities, (c) performers who are dependent on the teacher/coach to make their decisions, and (d) a majority of youngsters who leave school knowing little about games.

In general, it was noted that techniques practiced in isolation did not transfer to game settings. The TGFU approach was seen as a way of putting the "why" of a game before the "how." In this approach, students are taught to appreciate the advanced form of the game by participating in a modified game that is appropriate for their physical, social, and mental development. This appreciation invites students to become tactically aware of how to play a game in order to gain an advantage over their opponents. With tactical awareness, the student is capable of making appropriate decisions about "what to do" and "how to do it." When students make decisions to work on a technical skill (e.g., trapping a ball or striking a ball into a certain space), they do it because they are tactically aware of a need for the skill. In a process of appropriate decision-making, students can recursively evalu-

ate and develop their own performance within a game that gradually, with the guidance of teachers, evolves towards an adult level of performance.

Differences Between the Two Approaches

In response to the rhetoric of the TGFU literature, several research studies compared the effectiveness of the skill and tactical approaches (Alison & Thorpe, 1997; Rink, 1996b; Turner & Martinek, 1992), and an entire issue of the *Journal of Teaching in Physical Education* was devoted to research on the subject (Rink, 1996a). Though the results of these studies were inconclusive, it was noted that children in a tactical approach model reported increased enjoyment when learning.

A key concern of the research studies was to effectively discern between a technique approach and a tactical approach. This concern is problematic because a TGFU perspective is about teaching tactical understanding and then combining it with skill development, while a skill approach is about teaching motor skills and then combining them with tactical understanding. The difference between the two perspectives involves the order in which skills and tactical awareness are taught. In reality, one approach becomes the other throughout a lesson or unit of instruction. Depending on how the teacher sees the students responding to the lesson, a lesson may be more tactic- or skill-based.

Comparing the TGFU approach to a skills approach oversimplifies the problem of teaching games to students. The comparison ignores the complexity of learning to play a game. Too often when we seek simple an-

swers to complex questions we create polarities to prove that one perspective is better. Good teaching involves taking what a student can do, then challenging the student's ability with a related but more advanced form of the activity. To effectively teach students a game, the teacher needs to give lessons in a progression of skills needed to play the game (e.g., catching, kicking, striking). At the same time, the teacher needs to incorporate a progression of tactical knowledge on how to play effectively within the rules of the game (e.g., how to anticipate where the ball will travel, how to aim for the spaces). The TGFU approach makes us aware that tactical understanding needs to be taught first in order to make the learning of skills purposeful.

In a tactical approach to games teaching, students learn by playing modified games. These games are simplified by making changes to the game structures, such as reducing the area of play; playing with fewer players; adapting rules to players' needs; using lighter, smaller equipment and slower-moving objects (Siedentop & Tannehill, 2000). During participation, students are asked to solve problems related to the game. For example, in a modified tennis game the teacher could challenge the students by asking them, "Where should you go after hitting a ball into an opponent's court?" The answer to this is the center of the opponent's target area, which changes depending on where the ball lands in the opponent's court.

In a technique approach, a skill is practiced in a space by individuals or pairs, with simplified equipment and objects, often aiming for successful repetition of the skill as the primary goal. For example, in the same tennis lesson a teacher could ask students, "How do you keep the ball going in a rally with your partner?" The teacher could then emphasize the following technique points: (1) get the racquet back before the ball bounces, (2) hit a falling ball, (3) hit the ball high, and (4) follow through in the direction of your hit. In a way, this approach is like

a simplified game with a problem to solve. It is a misperception to believe that the technique perspective to teaching games implies "telling" students how to do a skill—a teaching strategy that on its own does not enable meaningful learning. The whole array of teaching styles described by Mosston and Ashworth (1986) can be applied to any technique being learned. So when teaching games, what is the real difference between a technique approach and a tactical approach?

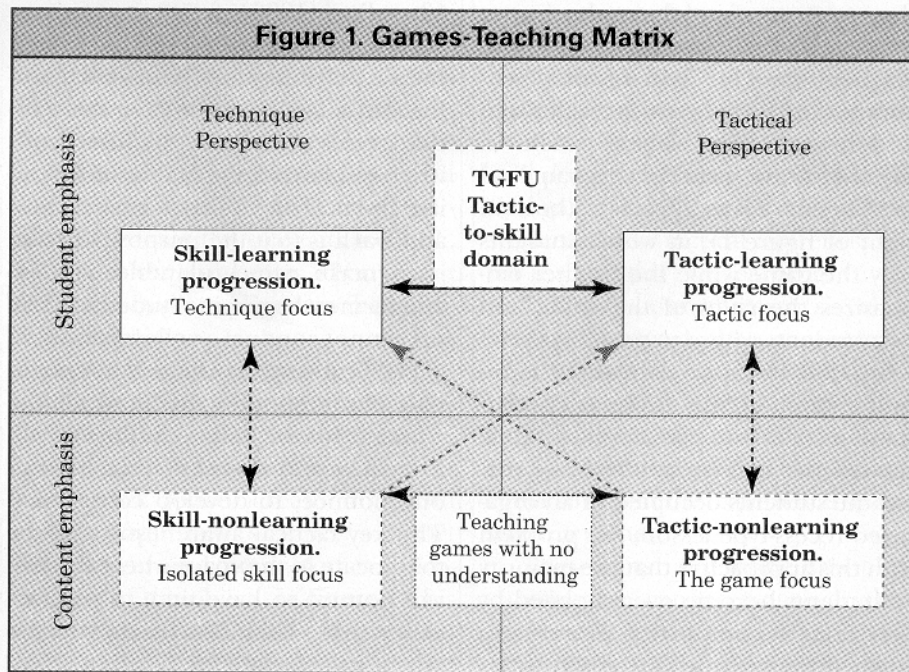
TGFU as a Combined Tactical and Technique Approach

Figure 1 contrasts technique and tactical perspectives by using a meaning matrix. The matrix shows how a technique approach relates to a tactical approach by highlighting how common misinterpretations of the two approaches often confuse understanding. The matrix is divided into four quadrants. One side of the diagram has a traditional technique perspective to teaching games, the other a tactical perspective made explicit by the TGFU approach. The top half of the diagram shows games teaching with a student emphasis, the bottom half of the diagram shows games teaching with a content emphasis. The stu-

dent emphasis refers to teaching focused on adapting the progression of a lesson to students' needs in learning content. Content emphasis refers to teaching focused on covering content as planned. For example, when teaching a student passing techniques a teacher may cover content by providing demonstrations and critical cues. However, this content has no meaning—no student emphasis—if students have never been involved in a real situation in which they passed the ball to a teammate. A key aspect of teaching is that skills and tactics are taught in a progression from simple to complex, with movement tasks taught to refine students' abilities to play more challenging game structures. (The arrows in the diagram will be referred to later in this article.)

Technique Perspective: Content Emphasis in a Skill-Nonlearning Progression

Focusing on the technique perspective, Bunker and Thorpe (1986b) argued that "often the teacher sees the teaching of techniques as the critical part of the lesson. Indeed lists of skills are presented, week by week, to be ticked off and assessed in an evaluation of the children's performance" (p. 11). In figure 1 this description would refer to the bottom



left of the diagram. This is called a “skill-nonlearning progression”—an isolated skill-focus approach that emphasizes covering content over student learning. Though on paper this approach appears to teach a progression of skills, the reality is that while a progression of skills are covered, they are learned only by the most able students. Bunker and Thorpe (1986b) used this problem to justify the need for TGFU. Although their observation of the worst type of games teaching is accurate, their critique obscures the need for a skill progression. It also alienates effective game teachers who work from a technique focus, offering a set skill progression based on the needs of a relatively homogeneous group of learners. Examples of this are skill development techniques advocated in books on coaching a particular sport (e.g., Claxton, 1999), or used by coaches of teams where children are selected to play the game.

Tactical Perspective: Content Emphasis in a Tactical-Nonlearning Progression

Bunker & Thorpe (1986b) noted that “many teachers have realized that for many children the techniques are of little value and have let children get on with the game, only to realize that they seem to enjoy themselves more with less interference from the teacher” (p. 11). As a result of encountering this scenario, a teacher can be left wondering what to teach. In the worst-case scenario this can lead to the game focus approach (bottom right of figure 1), in which students play the game while the teacher emphasizes the rules of the game and tells students where to position themselves. In this approach, there is no progression in the students’ understanding of how to play tactically. While the teacher may be satisfied by keeping the students occupied in an organized recess-type lesson, the problem with this approach is that the majority of students become overwhelmed by the game’s complexity. Eventually, when the novelty of the game wears

off, even the more capable students become bored or frustrated. Though organized recess has its place (usually during scheduled recess time) opponents of the TGFU approach too often see this type of games lesson as a TGFU lesson. Some teachers, especially at the elementary school level, focus on playing a game in which the children seem active (e.g., dodgeball, relays), but these simple games lack a sense of purpose compared to the games valued by our society (Williams, 1992). They also fail to incorporate the complex teaching skills required when introducing students to tactics and adult game-playing skills.

Tactical Perspective: Student Emphasis in a Tactical Progression

The tactical perspective to games teaching with a student emphasis (upper right of figure 1) focuses on teaching tactical elements of game play in a progression in a gradually more challenging environment. Tactical understanding is complex and has to be taught in progressive elements that relate to the development and experience of students (Griffin, Mitchell, & Oslin, 1997; Hopper, 1998; Hopper & Bell, 2000; Mitchell & Griffin, 1994). In a tactical approach, a teacher teaches from a game form, where, as Chandler (1996, p. 50) comments, “Skill learning is not for playing games; rather, playing games is for skill learning.” In a tactical approach, the standard rules of a game are used only when students are capable of following them. The mindset in a tactical approach is that the purpose of rules is to make games playable. For example, most beginning students of tennis cannot conduct a volley. Following a TGFU approach, the teacher could play a longest-rally game in which the students hit the ball up in the air with a racquet and then hit it again after one bounce, to develop consistency. The key tactical awareness would be to relocate to the space where the ball will bounce to have time to play another shot. Then the teacher would start a game related to tennis, such as

the “Castle game” (Hopper, 1994). In this game a small pylon (the castle) is placed between two players. The players are given the following basic rules: (1) the ball must bounce once, (2) the ball must be hit up in the air above the hitter’s head, and (3) the players must hit the ball alternately. The students could be asked to play the game and figure out the answer to “Where should you go after hitting the ball?” The answer to this question is “opposite your partner’s target—on the other side of the pylon.” This tactical awareness causes students to anticipate their partner’s shots before they hit the ball, thus giving themselves time to prepare for the next shot. This tactical progression focuses on helping students learn to hit the ball consistently and to learn about placement in relation to a target and how to position oneself in anticipation of a partner’s shot (for further examples of tactical progressions, see Hopper, 1998; Hopper & Bell, 2000).

Technique Perspective: Student Emphasis in a Skill Progression

The technique perspective to games teaching with a student emphasis (upper left of figure 1) focuses on teaching techniques to improve skill performance and game play in a progression in a gradually more challenging environment. Lessons in skill refinement are provided to enable students to move from an elementary movement pattern to a mature movement pattern (Gallahue, 1996). A critique of traditional skill learning can alienate effective game teachers who work from a technique focus in their games teaching and offer a skill progression based on the needs of the student. Examples of this are skill development advocated by movement approaches to teaching games, such as those discussed by Gallahue (1996) and Wall and Murray (1994). In such an approach, a student is given a broad, open task such as “select a ball of your own choice and show me how you can keep the ball in the air after one bounce.” As students attempt to keep

the ball going, the teacher can work on refinements such as sending the ball higher to create time to work on technical skills such as bending at the knees before hitting the ball, hitting the ball with a flat surface, and getting beneath the ball early. If the task is too difficult for some students, these students can be guided to catch and send the ball, or the ball can be changed to one with less bounce. Other students can be encouraged to hit the ball without a catch. Students could then be asked to hit the ball over a line or toward a target as the teacher further refines their skill. Eventually, this task will be used in an application game like the castle game, already discussed. In this way, the application game gives purpose to hitting the ball up in the air. However, Berkowitz (1996), who is considered a successful "technique" games teacher, explained how she learned to integrate "technique" games teaching with "tactical" games teaching. She emphasized that skills cannot be taught without tactical awareness. As she stated, "Technical skill work still has its place, but never in isolation—always as it would be in the game and mostly as a means to accomplish the tactical problem" (p. 45). This sentiment brings us back to the goal of the TGFU approach—to teach tactical awareness.

Criteria for Teaching TGFU

The technique focus and the tactical focus are linked as two essential components of games teaching. The teacher of games must have knowledge of both skill progressions and tactical progressions. The ability to shift between the two perspectives means that teachers of games transform the content knowledge into forms that are pedagogically powerful, yet adaptive to the variations in ability and background presented by students. Content emphasis, in either perspective, results in a misinterpretation of how to teach students to play games. The arrows in figure 1 highlight how the movement in games teaching is aimed at the gray shaded area between the technique and tacti-

cal approaches—the "tactic-to-skill" area. However, as stated at the beginning of this article, separating tactics and skills is hard to do. For one student, learning to be consistent at keeping the ball going after one bounce may be a tactical awareness game, but to another student, this may be a boring skill practice that seems too easy. In teaching tactical awareness, the key that leads to meaningful skill learning is the type of attitude to play that learners adopt when attempting a task (Asquith, 1989; Hopper, 1996). Teachers have to understand their students in relation to their individual level of game play and their tentative understanding of a game.

To assist teachers in locating this attitude to play, the following criteria for teaching the tactic-to-skill progression has been developed. Based on Bunker and Thorpe's (1986a) original curriculum model for TGFU, the teacher should consider the following:

1. Perform a suitably active warm-up, in which the skills to be used in a game are practiced. In figure 1, the warm-up activity would be in the skill progression area. Students begin with locomotive skills and simple manipulative skills using an object that connects to the main focus of the lesson. The warm-up gradually increases in intensity (Wall & Murray, 1994).

2. Then the students play a modified game suitable for their developmental abilities and skill levels (Thorpe & Bunker, 1989). In figure 1, the modified game represents a shift into the tactical progression area with a focus on tactics. This tactical perspective causes the students to think, with teacher guidance, about what they have to do as players in the modified game.

3. Working with the students' responses to game play, the teacher develops student awareness (depending on the type of game) of how to cover and attack space, create time and reduce opponent's time, support teammates, and apply force appropriately to the object. In figure 1, this represents a shift into the tactic-to-skill area, where skill learning and

refining becomes meaningful activity that students are willing to perform when needed.

4. As required, the teacher can guide students into developing skill progressions and developing further tactical awareness as the modified game is made more challenging and the structures of the game develop closer to those encountered in the adult form of the game.

5. However, this fine balance between tactical awareness and skill learning does not always work as planned. A modified game may still be too complex for some or all of the students, or even too simple, thus becoming a tactic-nonlearning progression, as shown in figure 1. At this point the teacher has to change the learning environment to suit the needs of the students. This can be achieved by either simplifying the game structure to return to the "tactical progression" area, by changing the conditions of the game to make it more challenging, or by focusing on skills in the "skill progression" area that would enable the students to play the game.

6. Whenever students practice skills, a teacher must be wary of falling into the common trap of teaching technical cues that have no meaning to the students (Bunker and Thorpe, 1986b). The skill-nonlearning progression happens only when students are not mentally engaged in the needs of the game. When this occurs, a refocusing of how the skills are being practiced may be needed to move into the skill progression area, or a new modified game may be needed to shift the students into a tactical awareness area for meaningful skill learning.

7. If steps one through six above are not observed, then games teaching can become caught in the "teaching games with no understanding" trap, where a student does as he or she is asked but rarely seeks opportunities to repeat the experience or even watch a game.

These criteria describe how physical educators can integrate everything they know in order to teach games and develop what has been termed

pedagogical content knowledge (Chandler, 1996; Griffin, Dodds, & Rovengo, 1996). Pedagogical content knowledge implies "the capacity of a teacher to transform the content knowledge he or she possesses into forms that are pedagogically powerful yet adaptive to the variations in ability and background presented by students" (Chandler, 1996, p. 51).

Conclusion

When teaching games, a teacher should move around the model in figure 1, adapting the lesson to try to shift learning into the play-rich, "tactic-to-skill" area. It is too easy for teachers to focus on content, believing they are teaching tactics or techniques, when in reality they are covering material but not engaging the learner. The key in games teaching is to move the lesson away from the lower half of the model in figure 1 into the "tactic-to-skill" area, where the students learn to appreciate the game and the skills it requires.

Teaching skills is essential for students to be better game players. Teaching tactical understanding is essential to allow students to understand how to use the skills they are acquiring and why they need these skills to play a game. The TGFU approach has created a perspective that challenges physical education teachers to understand the deep intellectual structures of playing and learning to teach a game effectively (Chandler, 1996; Griffin, Dodds, & Rovengo, 1996). The physical education profession should not waste its time measuring skill versus tactic concerns, seeking a simple answer to the complexity of games teaching. As a profession, it should embrace the complexity of, and teach, game play. What is needed is research into how a tactic-to-skill approach to teaching games enables students to acquire skills and develop conceptual understanding of game playing, and makes game playing and its appreciation a reality in their lives.

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Tim Hopper (thopper@uvic.ca) is an assistant professor in the School of Physical Education, University of Victoria, Victoria, BC, Canada V8W 3P1.