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IMPLEMENTING A GAME SENSE APPROACH IN YOUTH SPORT COACHING: CHALLENGES, CHANGE AND RESISTANCE

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ABSTRACT *Despite the potential that Game Sense offers to re-energize and reconstruct youth sport coaching, it has yet to make a significant impact on youth sport coaching in Australia or New Zealand. While research has examined the challenges that teachers face in implementing such innovation in school physical education, little attention has been paid to the identification and examination of factors restraining the development of understanding approaches by coaches in youth sport. Given the importance of community-based sport in countries such as Australia and New Zealand this represents a significant oversight in the literature. In setting out to redress this oversight this paper draws on a series of interviews conducted with Australian coaches over 2002 and 2003 to explore the challenges of putting a Game Sense approach to coaching into practice in youth sport settings. It identifies sport coaching as a complex social practice in which social interaction and a dominant culture of coaching provide significant challenges for coaches wishing to develop a Game Sense approach.*

INTRODUCTION

In countries such as New Zealand and Australia, community-based club sport forms an important part of many children's and young people's engagement in what Kirk (1999) refers to as physical culture. Despite the range of important cultural and social learning that occurs in these settings they have yet to receive adequate attention from researchers in the education field (Light & Quay, 2003). While recent developments in games teaching such as Teaching Games for Understanding (TGfU) have received considerable research attention their application in sport practised outside formal institutions of education has been largely overlooked. Game Sense and other approaches to teaching games and sport that emphasise understanding and context offer exciting alternatives to long-established teaching and coaching practice. 'Understanding' approaches such as TGfU and Game Sense are typically contrasted with 'traditional' technical approaches that focus on the learning of technique prior to playing the game. In contrast TGfU, Game Sense and other similar approaches strive to develop technique and understanding by locating learning within modified games and game-like situations. They offer teachers and coaches a means through which they can highlight and foster positive social learning and the development of the intellectual dimensions of games play while making sport more relevant to the interests and needs of young people than current, dominant approaches (Grehaigne, Godbout & Bouthier, 1999; Kidman, 2001; Kirk & Macdonald, 1998; Kirk & McPhail, 2002; Light 2002; Light & Fawns, 2003). Perhaps of more concern for many coaches, they also offer a means through which coaches can develop more complete and effective players at all levels of competition from grass-roots to the most elite levels (Lauder, 2001; Light, 2004; Wein, 2001).

Two decades after Bunker and Thorpe (1982) published their Teaching Games for Understanding (TGfU) model there are signs that understanding approaches to teaching are beginning to influence the teaching of games in physical education programs and sport coaching. TGfU has guided much of the games teaching curriculum in the UK and Game Sense has strongly influenced the 2005 NSW Personal Development, Health and Physical Education curriculum. The Ministry of Education in Singapore has mandated the Games Concept Approach (GCA) and Game Sense has had some impact upon coaching in Australia (Light, 2004b). There is also growing interest in Game Sense from national and international governing bodies such as the Rugby Football Union and Soccer Association in England (Harvey, 2004). As Harvey (2004) suggests, however, traditional, 'skill and drill' sessions that focus on the refinement of de-contextualised skills remain common in youth sport settings.

Despite the potential that understanding approaches to coaching offer to re-energize and reconstruct youth sport coaching they have yet to make a significant impact in Australia or New Zealand. Increased interest in the application of understanding approaches to coaching over the past decade (den Duyn, 1997; Kidman, 2001; Launder, 2001; Wein, 2001) has yet to see attention paid to the identification and examination of factors restricting and restraining the implementation and development of tactical or game-based approaches by coaches. A number of studies have examined practising and pre-service teachers' responses to TGfU and Game Sense, and their experiences of implementing TGfU/Game Sense and similar approaches across a range of cultural settings (for example see, Butler, 1996; Brooker, Kirk & Braiuka, 2000; Light, 2002; Light, 2004a; Light & Tan 2004) to identify significant resistance due to the ways in which they challenge deeply embedded conceptions of teaching and learning. In particular, the change in the role of the teacher from one of directly instructing in the correct way to perform techniques to one as a facilitator of learning provides for considerable anxiety among many teachers taking on a Game Sense approach (for example see, Butler, 1996; Brooker, Kirk & Braiuka, 2000; Light, 2002; Light & Tan, 2004). Kidman's (2001) interviews with New Zealand coaches also provided some valuable insight into the ways in which established cultures of coaching can make the implementation of Game Sense and other game-based approaches difficult. With a few exceptions (Kidman, 2001; Light, 2004b), however, there remains a dearth of studies that have focused on coaches' experiences of using understanding approaches and identification of the barriers that they face in implementing such innovation.

In setting out to redress this oversight in the literature this paper draws on a case study on coaches' experiences of Game Sense coaching conducted with Australian coaches over 2002 and 2003 (Light, 2004b). The study aimed to provide insight into coaches' personal and professional experiences of using Game Sense to develop a better understanding of how to successfully implement a Game Sense approach to coaching. Focused on a small group of purposively selected coaches this paper explores some of the challenges they experienced in putting a Game Sense approach to coaching into practice in community-based coaching settings. The body of the paper is preceded by an outline of the Game Sense approach followed by a discussion of learning in and through sport and the ways in which Game Sense can provide positive learning experiences for children and young people.

THE GAME SENSE APPROACH

Bunker and Thorpe's (1982) publication of the Teaching Games for Understanding model two decades ago presented the first systematic approach to teaching or coaching for understanding. TGfU and recent variations such as Play Practice (Lauder, 2001) and Game Sense (den Duyn, 1997) have at their core a concern with the integration of skill performance and the intellectual dimensions of play that include perception, decision-making and tactical understanding. Rod Thorpe regularly visited Australia from 1994 to 1998, where he worked with the ASC and experienced Australian coaches to develop a coaching approach based on the TGfU model known as Game Sense. Successful coaches in Australia were already using many of the ideas and practices that Thorpe brought with him but Thorpe provided a systematic approach and introduced a focus on questioning. The name Game Sense was seen to have more appeal than TGfU, better express its aims and to distance coaches from physical education teachers. Even though the resources developed by the ASC to support coaches provides guidance and sample questions for activities Game Sense is actually less structured than TGfU. Game Sense includes any coaching approaches that are game-based and employ questioning to stimulate thinking rather than telling players what to do.

While focusing on the refinement of 'correct' skill performance technical approaches tend to neglect perception, decision making and the tactical understanding that informs it. They neglect the prime importance of the environment in learning, not just in learning how to play games, but also in any learning. Dewey (1916/1997) suggests, it is not through any direct 'teaching' that learning occurs. It is through the stimulation of the environment that learning, or what Dewey refers to as human 'growth', takes place: "we never educate directly, but indirectly by means of the environment" (Dewey, 1916/1997, p. 18-19). There are fundamental differences between the conceptions of coaching and learning that underpin Game Sense and the traditional technical approach. The technical approach is commonly contrasted with TGfU and while this is useful it does encourage a dichotomy of technique verses understanding that does not accurately represent the wide range of coaching practices used. There is, however, a basic conception of coaching underpinning technical approaches that is different to those underpinning Game Sense. The technical approach assumes that fundamental technique needs to be developed before playing the game. This approach normally involves the coach instructing in the execution of correct technique separate from the game and then placing players in the game to apply the skills. In Game Sense learning occurs in modified games that aim to integrate technical development with the intellectual dimensions of play such as tactical understanding, decision-making and perception. Game Sense contextualizes learning within games or game-like situations and emphasises the environment. It focuses on the game and not on the technique. Although a Game Sense coach may also work on technique it is developed in relation to the game. While he or she may direct players' attention to technique it is either developed within games or worked on outside the game with the relationship between the technique and the game understood by the players. That is to say that even when a coach stops a game to work on technique it is not separate or removed from the game. It is not learning technique for the sake of technique but to play the game better. The traditional technical focus on specific motor responses in the form of technique fails to account for the contextual nature of games in which players constantly interpret and adapt to a dynamic physical environment.

LEARNING THROUGH GAMES

As researchers in the field have noted (for example, Kirk & Macdonald, 1999; Kirk & McPhail, 2002; Light & Fawns, 2001, 2003; Whitehead, 1990) games offer a potential medium for the integration of physical, social and intellectual learning par excellence. Games and sport inherently involve moving and thinking in ways that are inseparable, require a range of higher order thinking, perception, and bodily and verbal communication. They also involve the meaningful interaction and engagement with the physical, social and cultural environment from which learning emerges (Davis & Sumara, 1997; Dewey, 1916/97; Vygotsky, 1978). Despite the range of problems associated with the increasing influence of elite, commercialised and commodified sport on the practice of sport in schools, if appropriate pedagogy is adopted, team games can provide an ideal medium for integrating cognitive, physical and social/affective learning through a focus on the body. Recent interest in learning theory within the physical education field has seen a reassessment of the TGfU model and what it has to offer in realising the educational benefits that are possible through a focus on the body and its movement. Games inherently involve the body in complex cognitive processes where cognition and movement, the mind and the body cannot be separated (Light & Fawns, 2003). Games play involves the 'thinking body' (Light and Fawns, 2001) in a way that challenges dualistic conceptions of the mind as separate from and elevated above the body. By focusing on the tactical dimensions of games and stressing the integrated nature skill execution with cognition and environment, Game Sense offers a means of integrating cognitive, physical and affective learning (Light, 2003; Light & Fawns, 2003; Pope, 2003).

METHOD

This paper draws on a case study conducted over 2002 and 2003 on a group of six Australian coaches using Game Sense. It is an interpretive case study that seeks to provide insight into the experiences of six coaches' experiences of using Game Sense as a means of contributing toward our understanding of some of the teaching and learning issues involved in the implementation of Game Sense. Five of the coaches had extensive experience in using the Game Sense approach and one who, although being an experienced coach, was only beginning to experiment with Game Sense.

The Participants

The six participants in the study reported on in this paper were all experienced coaches from the state of Victoria and the Australian Capital Territory who were purposively selected. I had come in contact with them through my own work on the development of Game Sense in Victoria over a four-year period and knew all of them on a professional level and some on a personal level. All names used in this paper are pseudonyms used to protect the anonymity of the participants. The participants comprised three male coaches and three female coaches. With thirty years of experience in the UK and Australia 'Lance' works in coach education at a government-funded organization promoting sport at the grass roots level. 'Gary' had been coaching for over twenty-five years and works in coach development at the Victorian Soccer Federation (VSF). 'Steven' holds a senior position in the development of programs at the Victorian Institute of Sport (VIS) and has thirty

years of coaching experience. 'Janet' has been coaching for fifteen years and is a professional netball coach working at the elite level. She provides an example of a coach who is guided by the Game Sense approach but sees a place for 'traditional' technical work in her coaching. 'Glenda' works in the Sport Education section at the Australian Sports Commission and played an important role in the development and dissemination of Game Sense. Softball coach, 'Pam' had only begun to experiment with it during 2002. As an experienced coach of eighteen years, of which eight were at elite level, her initial experiences of working with a Game Sense approach into her coaching provide some insight into the challenges that coaches may face in moving from technique-based coaching to Game Sense coaching.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data was generated through a series of semi-structured interviews and a constant-comparative approach was used to analyse data. Initial interviews were structured and data generated were analysed to identify common themes and ideas that were explored through subsequent, semi-structured, conversational interviews. The initial interviews were structured around a framework of eight focus questions. The initial interviews were of ninety-minute duration but subsequent shorter interviews explored emerging themes. Interviews were conducted at the participants' place of work or in appropriate places nearby when conducted after coaching.

The following section identifies and discusses three prominent themes that emerged from interviews conducted with Australian coaches in relation to the challenges that face coaches in implementing Game Sense. They are the repositioning of the coach, the appearance of Game Sense training as often chaotic and the time required to see tangible improvement in play. By repositioning the coach I refer to the different relationship between coach and players in Game Sense where the coach moves from a position of authority where he/she directs learning to the position of a facilitator of learning. This involves moving from coach/teacher-centred learning to student/player-centred learning.

RESULTS

1. Re-positioning the Coach

Many of the difficulties identified by the participants in the study arise from the ways in which Game Sense coaching challenges a dominant coaching culture in which the coach is seen as a figure of authority who passes down knowledge to his/her players. While the coaching culture in Australia is changing the image of a good coach as one who is outwardly passionate, commanding and in charge is still strong. Lance works in coach education at a government-funded organization promoting sport at the grass roots level. He works with a range of sports at junior, grass roots level. He suggests that the Game Sense coach sets the environment to maximise learning and has a good idea of what he/she expects the players to learn but needs to 'step back and let them learn'. He says that the emphasis in Game Sense placed on asking rather than telling places responsibility back on the players for their own learning and involves them intellectually in their training. He feels that coaches and sports organizations have taken the game away from children and in doing so made it less relevant and less appealing. He spoke of seeing young

players deeply engaged, emotionally, physically and mentally, in their own 'knock up games' prior to the coach's arrival after which motivation and engagement drops significantly. He suggests we need to 'give the game back to the kids' and that Game Sense provides a good way to do so.

This (Game Sense) is not a letting go of power but a sharing; 'we are in this together, it's a team approach'. The coach becomes the eyes of the team to inform them, it's a shared building of knowledge. It may be that the experiences of the players far outweigh my experiences because the game changes and it's about how I can facilitate learning.

Gary works in coach education at the Victorian Soccer Federation (VSF). He suggests that many coaches may see the less authoritative position of the Game Sense coach as contradicting what they, and others who may evaluate their coaching, see as good coaching. As he suggests, this view of 'good' coaching arises from a dominant culture of coaching that goes beyond one particular sport:

When I first came out here (to Victoria) we had (AFL) coaches like Hafey and Barassi and these guys. You have coaches who think that's the model for coaching. You have to remonstrate, scream and shout, get in people's faces and this was a coaching culture adopted by a lot of soccer coaches. This culture means that there are times when I have been sitting there and people have said it looks as though you're not interested in the game...If you're in the coaches box you're almost obliged to jump up and down-that's the perception of what coaching is about.

The role of the coach and the ways in which he or she interacts with the players is very different to the image of coaching outlined by Gary above. Game Sense coaching involves a process in which much of the decision-making that would traditionally be done by the coach is shifted to the players. The Game Sense coach sets the environment to stimulate learning and shapes players' understanding and skill development with the aim of developing coach-independent players who are empowered to make their own decisions on the field and at training. This involves the coach stepping down off centre stage and this often requires them 'biting their tongues' as Gary suggested:

With old style coaches it's all very negative. 'You do that again and you'll be sitting here next to me'. There is this old culture of, 'I'm going to tell you what to do', but we want our kids to make choices and decisions for themselves in games...We want to produce players who are independent-where it doesn't matter if the coach gets sick or goes to hospital-where they don't worry if they look up and the coach is not there. It shouldn't make any difference... I hate in games when something happens and the players look across to the coach or bench and ask what they should do. We want them to make the decision. Now, yes, we might stand up and say don't bloody go, come back if we think it's the wrong choice and sometimes we have to bite our tongues as coaches because like all coaches you get involved.

Glenda reinforces the ways in which the behaviour of the Game Sense coach and his/her relationship with players can be at odds with a still dominant coaching culture. Glenda works in the Sport Education section at the Australian Sports Commission (ASC) and was deeply involved in the development of Game Sense. In her dealings with a wide range of coaches she noticed how the different position of the coach and the empowerment of the players can cause problems for some coaches used to the directive approach in which they see their role as passing on technical knowledge:

There have been comments that Game Sense is just about 'playing games all the time' without any real learning going on. Some people struggle with when to step back and let players develop understanding and when to step in and teach the techniques of the game, in amongst the tactical learning that is going on.

One of the problems for coaches taking on a Game Sense approach is the way in which the focus in Game Sense is on the players not the coach. This can also be a problem for players who are unused to being empowered and taking responsibility for their training. Players used to a directive technical approach may well have expectations of the coach that differ from the role he/she typically assumes in Game Sense. Many coaches may also feel uncomfortable or even threatened by this change in focus as Lance explains:

With the technical approach the coach can be a lot more involved during the session because they're directing what's going on. They are more hands on. For the Game Sense coach it's the preparation and observation that come to the fore and your ability to manipulate the environment but not necessarily manipulate the players. And that's a challenge for all coaches.

Pressure on coaches for results is also likely to make them feel anxious about how they appear. Coaches are part of communities built around their sport or their profession and are constantly being watched and evaluated. Few professions place anyone under such intense surveillance and scrutiny. Even the unpaid coach of the local under 9 soccer team can feel the pressure of a community's expectations of behaviour and evaluation of results on a weekly basis over the season. Gary suggests that club committees and the parents of children playing in clubs often have a well-established perception of what a committed coach is that is at odds with the behaviour of a Game Sense coach. Glenda has been involved in the development and promotion of Game Sense by the ASC and confirmed the difficulty that many coaches had in letting go of power. As she noted, coaches typically feel that they are supposed to, as she said, 'know it all':

Game Sense can be somewhat threatening to coaches who are used to the traditional role, where the coach is supposed to 'know it all'. Game sense encourages players to find answers for themselves, rather than the coach being the 'font of all knowledge', which can be a difficult concept for some people.

2. The 'Disorderly' Appearance of Game Sense Training

All of the coaches in this study commented on the difference in appearance between a typical technique-focused training session and a Game Sense session. They suggested that the appearance of a typical Game Sense training session is at odds with a dominant view of what effective training looks like:

Too many parents organised drills looks good. It looks like their kids are learning but Game Sense training can often appear messy and chaotic. But that's how games really are. Games are organised chaos. When kids are playing a game of soccer it's chaotic and they're the conditions you have to train kids to play in. It's no use training kids in neat organised lines because it breaks down in the game. They can't transfer improvement in training to improvement in the game because it's so different (Lance).

Approaches to teaching and learning that are neat and well-ordered often attempt to reduce learning to a simple and linear process (Light & Fawns, 2001). Standing players in neat lines running along predetermined lines and drilling a particular passing technique may look good to the club administration or parents of children and junior players but does not lead to better game performances. Steven holds a senior position in the development of programs at the Victorian Institute of Sport (VIS) and has thirty years of coaching experience and teaching physical education. He suggests that, in the case of children's and junior sport coaching,

Each kid is unique, yet the skill-based approach treats them like one size fits all. You've got to provide opportunities, stimulate them, help them create.

Learning in Game Sense training takes time and is often not readily apparent to the observer who is unfamiliar with Game Sense as Gary explains for soccer:

...if you want to impress the committee then set up drills because its all a pre worked out plan. Run here knock it in there, run around the back and join that group there. The committee will look at you and say 'he's pretty good, the players are moving along, it looks good'... The drills and activities probably look good but for long term benefit and understanding of the game we have to go down the Game Sense way.

Game Sense training is typically less ordered than 'skills drills' and is comparatively chaotic because it holds a closer resemblance to the game. On the other hand, Steven feels that this chaotic environment, is not only more like the real game, but that it provides the stimulation to produce better players:

It looks messy for some people. In going into this approach you've got to be comfortable that things aren't going to be perfect all the time. There's always going to be an element of chaos but out the disorganisation comes a high level of performance. If you keep closing things down and correcting things you shut down the athlete and the team don't develop.

The concern that coaches might have with a dominant perception of what good coaching is identified here by Lance, Gary and Steven suggests that many coaches may be concerned with observers' misinterpretations of their coaching as just 'rolling out the ball' and not doing their job and this may be a factor in limiting the uptake of Game Sense among coaches.

3. Time Constraints

Pam is a softball coach with eighteen years of experience and eight of them at elite level. In 2002 she experimented with working a Game Sense approach into her coaching but had concerns with the more technique-intensive nature of softball and the time required to develop these skills within the context of games. She likes the ways in which Game Sense motivates players and made training more fun but felt that, in order to get beginning coaches through a level one coaching course, a more technique focused approach was needed. Level one coaching refers to the introductory national coaching accreditation in softball with level three the highest.

In Kidman's (2001) study on empowerment approaches to coaching in New Zealand junior sport coaches, Hugh Galvan and Paul McKay noted how the extra time taken to develop players with tactical approaches such as Game Sense presented problems with players and parents who wanted to see immediate results. They suggest that the pressure for results can tempt coaches to find 'quick fix' solutions. Coaches in this study confirmed that a Games Sense approach takes longer than technical approaches to get results but felt that it achieves desirable long-term results. Gary and Lance both identified problems that can arise from tensions between the longer time that Game Sense can often take to show improvement in team performance and demands by committees or parents for instant results in competitions.

Janet felt that Game Sense required a lot of patience on the part of the coach and saw it as more of an investment in player development rather than a short cut to winning in the short term. In her role as coach of a development team this was not really a problem for her but is, as she points out, likely to be an issue for other coaches:

There is pressure to win and get results quickly but I am lucky because there is recognition that we have a development program here and it takes time. Here winning is not everything and we take into account the long-term benefits for the athletes. We develop athletes over 3-4 years and get excellent results. There is more pressure on other clubs where team results matter more than the athlete's development so they don't have the same time to develop athletes.

Gary argues that the Game Sense approach demands more work and time from the coach but is worth the time and effort as understanding begins to develop before him or her:

To do a Game Sense approach initially takes a lot more work, but once you've got it going then it starts to flow. Sometimes for 5-10 minutes it can be all disjointed and it's not quite working, but then suddenly it clicks. When I'm coaching this way I've set the environment. I've got the players working well and I stand back applauding, saying, and

“guys; brilliant, well done.” It’s a positive environment. That is one of the keys to successful Game Sense coaching.

DISCUSSION

For youth sport coaches implementing innovation such as Game Sense may not be an easy task. In order to see Game Sense and other similar approaches practised more widely it is necessary for researchers and those involved in teacher and coach education programs to develop a better understanding of the subjective and social nature of coaching as a form of social practice and the range of challenges that coaches wishing to try such new approaches face. Like teaching, coaching is a complex social process and not merely an individual concern. It involves far more than the simple transmission of knowledge and has been oversimplified both in the coaching literature and in coach education programs (Cushion, Armour and Jones, 2003). As Cushion et. al (2003) suggest, there is a hierarchy of power in coaching organizations within which learning is seen as an unproblematic process and knowledge is conceived of as an object passed down to coaches through coach education programs and then to children and young people by coaches. This is, however, an inappropriate conception of knowledge and learning that bears little resemblance to the ways in which young people in contemporary societies learn.

As an innovation Game Sense not only challenges coach’s individual beliefs of what they have come to know as good practice. It also challenges the beliefs held by other significant people involved in junior sport communities and the entire structure of most coaching organizations in Australia and New Zealand. Coaches operate under constant surveillance, under the individual scrutiny of parents, club officials, other coaches, sponsors and players. Their practice is shaped by the dominant discourse, the collective critical ‘gaze’ (Foucault, 1977) of the communities within which they work and live. This study suggests that coaches interested in adopting a Game Sense approach may have to deal with more than the ways in which it challenges their own long-held beliefs about good coaching embedded over their lives as players and coaches. Coaches work in social settings within which relations between themselves and their players, and between themselves and others involved in the communities that typically constitute youth sport clubs shape their practice. Concern with others’ expectations of how a ‘good’ coach behaves and what ‘good’ training looks like indicate coaches’ sensitivity to the gaze of the community and the embedded beliefs of coaching culture that coaches need to deal with when taking up a Game Sense approach.

There is a dominant culture of coaching that is invariably at odds with the philosophy and ideas that underpin Game Sense (for example see, Cassidy, Jones & Potrac, 2004; Jones, Armour & Potrac, 2003). As the interviews in this study suggest, Game Sense challenges the values and beliefs of entire coaching cultures and structures. Just convincing coaches to take on new approaches such as Game Sense at a conscious level is only the start. The physical education, and general education literature can reveal how the implementation of curricula change can be problematic. Studies on beginning teachers’ attempts to initiate change and implement innovative practice such as TGfU and Game Sense invariably confirm how dominant school cultures and structural barriers combine to place overwhelming pressures on new teachers, diminishing their visions and commitment to change (Evans & Clarke, 1988; Macdonald & Glover, 1997). As is

the case with implementing change in teaching practice, coaches need ongoing support for their attempts to develop new approaches to coaching. Those involved in physical education teacher education and coach education programmes also need to recognise the complexity of coaching as a social practice and the ways in which it is shaped by its cultural context. Moreover, there is a need to take into account the range of social, cultural and structural factors that can impede coaches' attempts to implement innovations such as Game Sense. Further research into the subjective and social nature of coaching will assist and encourage the implementation of Game Sense and other conceptual approaches that hold such promise for children's and youth sport.

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