
Novice Coaches Negotiating Teaching Games for Understanding

ADRIAN P. TURNER ¹

¹ *Bowling Green State University, USA*

ABSTRACT

Teaching Games for Understanding (TGFU) scholars have called for field-based studies to provide a contextually informed picture of games-based instruction. While research has examined elite level coaches use of tactical approaches few studies have focused on how novice coaches learn and implement TGFU curricula. The paper provides an overview of findings from a recent year-long study conducted with novice youth soccer coaches in the American Midwest. The purpose of the study was to examine the coaches' experiences of negotiating TGFU. It focused on the coaches' conceptual, pedagogical, cultural and political challenges using Windschitl's (2002) four-dimensional framework of constructivist teaching dilemmas. Conceptual challenges included a specific coach's modified adoption of TGFU practices while maintaining traditional beliefs about coaching soccer content. Cultural dilemmas emerged from the changing role of the coaches and players in a games-based learning environment that represented a shift from the coaches' own learning experiences. Pedagogical dilemmas focused on conundrums that developed during games-based scenarios. Political challenges included parents as stakeholders and soccer league rules. During the study the participants also successfully employed a coaching toolkit to facilitate game development. The paper provides insight into challenges and successes experienced by novice soccer coaches when using TGFU.

Keywords: soccer coaching, games-based approaches, TGFU, game sense

INTRODUCTION

Previous scholarship has suggested that for Teaching Games for Understanding (TGFU) to gain legitimacy in North America there must be a high value placed on field-based research (Griffin, Brooker & Patton, 2005). Research on *in situ* coaching/teaching practice is quite important because it provides a contextually informed picture of the activity (Cushion, Armour & Jones, 2006; Curry & Light, 2014). While several studies have reported on how coaches learn to coach (Nelson & Cushion, 2006; Wright, Trudel & Culver, 2007) there is a lack of research on how coaches learn and implement games-based curricula approaches (Roberts, 2011). An inquiry into Game Sense with elite level rugby coaches revealed a limited impact on coaches' practices and suggested that further research into youth sport settings was warranted (Light & Evans, 2010). A case study with high school soccer coaches in the United States indicated partial adoption of TGFU into practices but suggested future investigations include longitudinal coaching interventions to examine the impact at a grass roots level (Harvey, Cushion & Massa-Gonzalez, 2010). Research has often focused on elite level performance coaches, but few studies have examined volunteer coaches in youth sports and recreational leagues (Wright & Forrest, 2007; Roberts, 2011). Other studies have shown that while games-based approaches may afford coaches opportunities for developing more complete players, the coaches' experiences also incorporate specific challenges that may impact their implementation (Light, 2004).

A number of sport pedagogy scholars who investigate games-based approaches (TGFU & Game Sense) draw from a constructivist approach to teaching and learning (Butler, 1997; Light, 2013). Although there is not one agreed upon definition of constructivist teaching/learning available in the educational literature or teaching practice (Allison, Pissanos, Turner & Law, 2000), constructivism is regarded as “a learning or meaning making theory . . . (in) that individuals create their own new understandings, based upon the interaction of what they already know and believe, and the phenomena or ideas with which they come into contact” (Richardson, 1997, p. 3). The present inquiry is framed within the acknowledgement that the novice coaches already have experiential knowledge and beliefs about the constructs of coaching and soccer content and that framing constructivism in practice may also be viewed within the negotiation of specific dilemmas, “aspects of teachers' intellectual and lived experiences that prevent theoretical ideals of constructivism from being realized in practice” (Windschitl, 2002, p. 132). The purpose of this study was to

examine selected coaches' experiences of negotiating TGFU during the autumn and spring soccer seasons.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Drawing from Roberts (2011) research examining the challenges experienced by coaches, who worked with youth cricketers, while adopting TGFU principles into their pedagogy, the present study will utilize Windschitl's (2002) four-dimensional model to analyze the conceptual, pedagogical, cultural and political challenges facing soccer coaches when using a constructivist-oriented teaching approach like TGFU. The coaches' attempts to understand the psychological, philosophical and epistemological tenets of constructivism represent conceptual dilemmas emerging from their instruction with this model (Windschitl, 2002). Pedagogical dilemmas emerge when there is a shift from more teacher-centred approaches to problem-based activities that require in-depth teacher understanding regarding the content (Shulman, 1987) and learner thinking. Cultural dilemmas are a consequence of the changing roles of both learners and the coach to accommodate a constructivist orientation to the teaching/learning process that is distinctly different from coach-centred instruction focused on drill and practice. Political dilemmas materialize as resistance from stakeholders (e.g., parents, club administrators, other coaches) when accepted teaching/coaching practices are challenged during constructivist-oriented delivery.

PROCEDURES

Soccer Club Context

This inquiry was situated in a small town in the American Midwest that has a population of approximately 30,000. The town has strong youth sport representation in baseball, basketball, American football and ice hockey. Player interest in soccer has also grown rapidly in the past decade with around 250 participants (ages 4-14) involved in a recreational soccer program run by the town club and another 65 players representing the club in youth league soccer (ages 8-14) against rival teams from other small towns within a 30-mile radius. The 8-10 year-old teams play 6-aside league games with a maximum team roster of 12 players. The offside law is not included during games at these ages. The 11-12 year-old teams play 8-aside league games with a maximum team roster of 14 players. The offside law is introduced at this age group. The 13-14 year-old teams play 11-aside league games with a maximum team

roster of 18 players. All teams play a 10 game season over 2 months. During the autumn the games are in September and October and games during the spring take place in April and May. All teams begin practicing three weeks prior to the onset of each season. The teams train on Tuesday and Thursday evenings for one and a half hours on adjacent fields during the season. As the coaching facilitator (CF) for the travel teams within the club the researcher had a unique opportunity to examine coaches' perceptions of using TGFU during two outdoor soccer seasons. Prior to the autumn season, the investigator provided a workshop on TGFU to all club coaches who wanted to attend.

Participants

The three coaches selected for the study were purposefully sampled from among the workshop participants. Pseudonyms have been assigned for each of the coaches. The Under 8-year-old (U'8) boys team coach (Andrei) was a male in his late 30's. He had earned a doctorate in the natural sciences and previously played varsity soccer in Eastern Europe. He had four years of coaching experience with the club, previously working with older teams (11-14 year-olds). The Under 10-year-old (U'10) boys team coach (Ken) was a church minister in his early 40's. He had played soccer as a varsity goalkeeper in high school and had one year of prior experience as an assistant coach with the same team. The Under 11 year-old (U'11) girls coach (Sally) was in her late twenties and was employed as a sales and marketing manager. She had three years previous coaching experience with the same girls team. Sally did not have a competitive soccer playing background but was the only coach to hold a coaching qualification at the time of the study. She was certified with a "D" license obtained during a 40-hour course from the United States Soccer Association.

Teaching Games for Understanding Program

The soccer workshop attended by the three coaches included an overview of TGFU and a soccer-coaching curriculum based around four Offensive (Mobility, Advancement, Width, Depth) and four Defensive (Engagement/Restraint, Depth, Contraction, Expansion) tactical problems (See Turner, 2005, for an abbreviated curricular example). For each tactical problem, the associated session content included an outline representing the initial game form, game practice (tactical focus), skill practice (technique focus) and modified game. The coaches also learned about specific pedagogical tools to facilitate use of TGFU at the

workshop. These included practice game conditions, rule modifications, and option scenarios to enhance player understanding (see Table 1 for specific examples in the Coaches' Toolkit).

Table 1
Coaches' Toolkit

| Pedagogical tools | Example |
|---|--|
| Condition game/practice to achieve tactical objectives | The ball must be played within 5 yards of the sideline before an attack on goal to encourage width. Specific conditions for different skill levels. |
| Modifying the rules | A player in possession of the ball is not allowed to walk, he/she must either run or stand still - this encourages a runner's penetration or quick passing. |
| Change spatial elements to vary the difficulty of game/practice | Smaller space will make it more difficult for offensive players "space = time = skill". |
| Removal of contact element | Defenders learn positioning and funnelling to create pressure on the offensive players. |
| Dynamic to static | If players struggle in a dynamic/game context retreat to a static technique practice |
| Loading the practice (offense-defense ratio) | When skill level restricts the offensive ratio can be increased to achieve a tactical objective (easier to destroy defensively than to create offensively). A neutral player can be introduced on offense or defense to create an overload |
| Option Scenarios | Example |
| The walk-through | Players demonstrate anticipated movements prior to action in a slowed down version of play |
| Situations | The coach freezes play at a teachable moment and uses questioning (who, what, where, how, why, whom) to facilitate students' tactical understanding |
| Instant replay | When an alternative response might have been used, the players or coach reset play and allow the scenario to be played out again |
| Player-coach | The coach participates in the game in order to manipulate a tactical component |
| Television analyst | The coach encourages the remainder of the group to analyse a small-sided game and reflect on the play |

The three coaches in the study practised using TGFU with peers at the initial workshop. Previous research indicates that it takes significant time for practitioners to feel comfortable with TGFU (Diaz-Cueto, Hernandez-Alvarez, & Castejon, 2010). After the autumn season (September-October) the investigator met with the three coaches four times over the winter months (November-February) in a period designated for peer support, providing an opportunity for coaches to discuss and synthesize their insights into their practices. Each coach “thought aloud” about his/her decisions and actions when reviewing the videotape of one coaching session from the autumn season at a 45 minute meeting with the researcher. Coaches also received four teaching/coaching practitioner articles published on games-based teaching. The coaches discussed these articles at another of the four meetings during the off-season in a group interview with the researcher as part of a “community of practice” (Jarrett & Harvey, 2014). During the spring outdoor, season (April-May) the participants were encouraged to develop their own TGFU curriculum for their individual teams using a coaching plan format provided by the researcher, who acted as a sounding board during this process.

Data Collection

During the study each coach kept a semi-structured journal during the autumn season (September-October) and recorded impressions of using TGFU with their individual teams (U’8 Boys, U’10 Boys, U’11 Girls). At the end of the autumn season the coaches provided copies of their journals to the researcher. The researcher videotaped three of each coach’s team practices and made audio taped field observations at these sessions during September and October. During the autumn season each coach was videotaped at least once in late August, mid-September and either early or mid-October. An audiotape interview (15 minutes) occurred with each coach on the training ground after each practice. The CF held TGFU support meetings with the coaches during the winter months (November-February). The coaches again kept a journal during the spring (April-May) and provided copies to the researcher at the end of the season. The researcher videotaped three of each coach’s team practices and made audiotaped field observations at these sessions. During the spring season each coach was videotaped at least once in late March, mid-April and either early or mid-May. An audiotape interview (15 minutes) occurred with each coach after each practice during the spring season.

Data Analysis

Verbatim transcriptions of field observations and interview tapes were coded into tentative conceptual categories manually using the constant comparative analytic technique (Patton, 1990). Data obtained from the coaches' journal entries served as a source for triangulation. Comparison and merger of initial categories occurred until no additional discrete categories existed. Following this initial level of analysis, data generated were analyzed to identify common themes and ideas specific to challenges and successes associated with learning and delivering TGFU. Theoretical explanations were sought for these emerging categories by testing them against Windschitl's (2002) four-dimensional model of constructivism. The researcher spent a year in the setting and also served as the coaching facilitator for several years before and after the project in a period of prolonged engagement. Trustworthiness of the data was also established through multiple coders independently coding the data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Subsequent discussion of the data analysis categories led to interpretive coherence. A negative case search was also employed to identify incongruence within the themes (Miles, Huberman & Saldana, 2013).

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Conceptual Dilemmas

The results of this study revealed a disconnect between the TGFU model and the principles underpinning the coaching practices of one participant. Initially, there was an indication of the coach adopting elements of TGFU while retaining very different fundamental ideas about subject matter, coaching and learning to those espoused via a constructivist-coaching model.

Andrei: Well what I must admit when they are playing scrimmages it's easier to control them basically. They get involved in it very much and they don't need supervision very much, may be they need some advice but you can kind of mix it, I mean you can be working with one group (2 vs. 2 game) and then working with the other group (2 vs. 2 game) and be sure that the other group is fine.

CF: More so than when they were in the drill waiting their turn?

Andrei: Ah yes that's an advantage of the game compared with drills OK but unfortunately to bring something to the game you have to learn it first using the drill (Andrei laughter). First it's the drill, I think, and then the game.

CF: But tonight sometimes they were in the game and came out to drill and went back to the game?

Andrei: Yes that was a very good combination I think. I can see the reason, I can see the sense, and I can see definitely a lot of positive moments from the approach.

In this situation the coach appeared to be using a "tinkering" (Huberman, 1995) approach. He selected elements of TGFU and adjusted these on the basis of his own coaching goals (in this scenario to facilitate player control). In a separate instance the same coach was more dogmatic in his conceptual opposition to the tactical and contextual nature of TGFU.

Andrei: I decided I will just stick to my scheme and basically well I am not focusing on the game so much unless I can see really big problems, otherwise I'm going to stick with my scheme and continue working with them in the same direction. So basically the game is not dramatically changing my main approach.

In this example the coach rejected the theory underpinning TGFU due to his philosophy (Roberts, 20011). He was not willing to manipulate the learning environment based on the issues that emerged from the game. Other scholars have found teachers and coaches with similar beliefs (Light, 2013, Davis & Sumara, 2003). In a study by Harvey et. al., (2010) with two high school soccer coaches he also showed how the coach's habitus, (dispositions and experiences), were used to filter new knowledge. This was evident with the same coach (Andrei) in the present study.

Well basically there are a lot of common mistakes they make in the game, I mean I passed through it, when I saw my friends playing they've been passing through the same problems, it's basically like the same set of problems, and before you start making them think creativity on the field you have to fix your basics I would say. I would say that a lot. It's like Chess OK, before they start to think on the board they have to know how to use the figures on the desk right. Because if they don't know about (can execute) passing and how to stop the ball, what kind of creativity can you expect from them?

The coach advocates a traditional approach where techniques are practiced and developed until they are performed well enough to enable the game to be played (Light, 2004). Specifically, Andrei suggests some level of control of a soccer ball is essential before putting a player in any form of tactical learning experience. The position of inferior technique constraining the use of game tactics is a perspective advocated by some leading scholars in physical education in the United States (Rink, 2010) and used as a caution regarding unconditional acceptance of TGFU. A recent study concerning the beliefs of Chinese teachers utilising TGFU revealed a similar concern for several of the teachers (Wang, 2013). This was not the case with all of the teachers in Wang's research or the other two coaches in the present study. Ken and Sally did not share the same conceptual dilemma. For example, they were both cognizant of the importance and benefit of the TGFU approach on players' passing development.

Ken: Well it's like passing if you did a skill in a non-game drill, but then you get to the game and there's so many emotional variables and adrenaline that are going on that what they learned by passing 1 on 1 in a warm-up that's fine but if you are trying to coach passing, it's nothing like the game. The ball's not bouncing, their adrenaline is not going, they're not moving the same way it's completely different.

Sally: They can't make their own decisions because the game's not like it was when they were passing the ball back and forth (unopposed). It's very difficult for them to think ahead in the game. In 2 vs. 2 it's important for them to learn to think quickly because there's only one other player to pass to, not only do they have to think quickly, but the person who's looking to get the ball has to think to move too. So you know I'm going to get the ball, and this is what I'm going to do with it next, that's very hard for them.

In their appreciation of skillful performance Ken and Sally were more closely aligned with Complex Learning Theory (Davis & Sumara, 2003) underpinning Game Sense and other games-based approaches. They appeared to perceive the learner and what is learned as inseparable and that the learning of skills in games should occur in dynamic and unpredictable tactical situations (Light, 2013). This finding differs from Roberts (2011) study with cricket coaches where technique and skill development were rarely a focus for content development in the coaches interpretation of TGFU.

Cultural Dilemmas

The coaches were previously introduced to the tenets of a TGFU approach (Bunker & Thorpe, 1986) and cognizant of the potential danger of developing teacher/coach dependent performers. Sally attempted to “re-culture” the learning environment by using conditioned game rules in her attempt to move away from coach-centred instruction. In commenting on a practice that began with two, 3 versus 3 modified games she indicated:

I just always feel like I’m yelling at them to push up during our matches and practices when we transition to offense and I want them to do that on their own, so I put cones (discs) across the middle (mid-line) of the field and told them that they all had to be on the offensive half of the field in order for a goal to count when a team scores.

While Sally changed the focus to a task constraint in her attempt to scaffold player responses, in the modified game as part of TGFU, she was unable to incorporate players’ input into the learning process. Ken also struggled initially to change his relationships with players in the TGFU learning context. As he indicated early on during the autumn season:

Probably because I yell at them a lot and may be because they are looking to me for too much instruction during the game that I am becoming aware of right now that there can be a reliance on me too much. Trying to transition through the season away from that, obviously you are always coaching during the game, but there’s a little bit too much reliance.

Coach Ken’s awareness of this tendency led him to adopt a questioning strategy in an attempt to draw his players into the decision-making process and provide them with more input in the learning context on the training ground. In this questioning example he used a 5-aside, 4-goal game (2 x 2-metre goals per team) on a 30 by 25 metre field. He paused the modified game at a teachable moment (Metzler, 2005) in an attempt to promote his players game understanding.

Ken: Gavin (pseudonym), what were you just yelling?

Gavin: Switch it

Ken: What does ‘switch’ it mean Gav?

Gav: If they are on this side of the field and you are hanging out on the other side of the field and there was no one guarding you they can get the ball across to you.

Ken: So why would that be good for them to switch it at that moment?

Gav: There was no one guarding you.

Ken: OK, because most of the people were on this side and we had to switch it to this side. Do you understand?

Group: Yeah

Ken: So that was a good little lesson there, that was an excellent call, good using your voice to say 'switch it'. So do we all understand if somebody says 'switch it', what should go in your brain?

Bobbie (pseudonym): Move to a different field and get open.

Ken: Well, yes if you have the ball, (players voices attempt to interrupt coach by providing input) let me talk, and somebody is yelling 'switch it' and you are standing on one sideline, what do you think you should do?

Bobbie: Send it the other field.

Ken: Or other side of the field if it's a normal game because a lot of our passes are going up and down the field instead of sideline to sideline. Does that make sense?

Group: Yes

Ken: So the switch is going from one sideline to the next because usually the defense cannot switch that fast and you can catch them off guard, they (opponents) have caught us off-guard before, OK.

In this example the coach encouraged his players to make sense of the game context. He was also perceptive about the needs of his players and he capitalized on a specific player's remarks during the modified game and used these as a basis for his coaching. However, Ken solicited answers to convergent questions, provided immediate feedback on the adequacy of players' responses and sought out a player who provided perceived correct answers. This reveals the use of an IRE or IRF (initiate – response – evaluation / follow-up or feedback) scenario (Forrest, 2014). The player response represents the confirmation of what the coach

wanted to hear, presents knowledge as fixed rather than an exploration of possibilities. As Ken later indicated in his interpretation:

I think they know some answers I want, so I have to figure out a different way to ask questions, cause it's like, 'passing, passing, passing'. Kind of like a Sunday school answer 'Jesus, Jesus, Jesus' so I need to work out a different way to question.

The coach acknowledged how students rendered "right answers" rather than thinking effectively as other Games Concept Approach scholars have noted in their research (Wright & Forrest, 2007; Roberts, 2011). The use of an IRE sabotages opportunities for deeper content understanding via narrow interpretations of TGFU and/or adoption of the Tactical Model for games teaching (Mitchell, Oslin & Griffin, 2013). One alternative suggested by Forrest (2014) is the use of more divergent questions via the use of a "reflective toss" where a range of possibilities is related to the opening question. By early in the spring season Ken's orientation had evolved as he began to invoke a more open structure during his coaching:

I'm allowing them to self-direct one another, asking the question and seeing during the game period them correct one another. OK, what is wrong, and then self-coaching one another. They get it, you know, maybe they're not in the right position but another player understands what they are doing.

In this example Ken is affording his players an opportunity to debate ideas and empowering them to be decision-makers on the field. Other leading proponents of player-centred coaching advocate his position (Kidman & Lombardo, 2010; Light, 2004). By allowing players to verbalise their thinking knowledge is brought to a level of consciousness and provides an opportunity for all players to internalise it so that it may later be displayed during game performance (Harvey et al., 2010).

Pedagogical Advances

All three coaches also made pedagogical advances in their use of TGFU. At the beginning of the study in mid-September Andrei's concern was primarily player compliance when questioned about task progression. He had progressed from a 2 versus 1 task to a 5 versus 5 game in his coaching session. It was suggested that incorporating a 3 versus 2 game might have helped with the learning progression. He responded by indicating that:

To stay focused it's easier to control them when there are three, when there are four or five it's very difficult to control them because two or three take it seriously and one starts fooling around and he falls down from the scheme. I think it's not going to work here, right now.

By March his impression was focused on the importance of continuity in designing a learning environment within a TGFU coaching session that adopted a similar instructional format as the previous one in the autumn. The coaching session progressed from 3 versus 3/ 2 versus 2 games, to 2 versus 1 tasks, to 3 versus 2 tasks, to a 5 versus 5 game and his focus was quite different.

Well what I really like was how the parts (of the session) connected to each other. There is no break in the exercises (segments) and you kind of solidified their knowledge with the experiences a little bit. So I think it worked well, and then it started to work especially well when players were involved in the scrimmages during practice.

Ken also suggested the development of a specific theme through the course of a coaching session was a benefit of TGFU during the spring season.

I think a strength of it is I had to think of one thing—advancing the ball forward and thinking through how does that all fit together instead of they need to work on foot skills, I need to get some conditioning in and then I need an offensive and defensive drill.

This concept has been noted in reference to Game Sense coaching where the separation of content into skills, tactics and decision-making is avoided as all components inform each other as part of a holistic approach to learning (Light, 2013). The coaches' interpretations of TGFU also contrasted the prescriptive Tactical Model (Mitchell et al., 2013) predominant in the USA. Ken and Sally noted that TGFU incorporates both flexibility and complexity as fundamental components in this approach to coaching.

Ken: I think with this system it's like putting the framers in the sandbox. You know this is what you want to do, you want to have this segment, this segment and then as the coach you have a lot of room to play in, so it's what I saw, the game piece, this

piece and this piece, but I have a lot of room to play in. It's not a rigid system it's flexible but it gives you some rails to go on, or the sides of the sandbox to play in.

Sally: TGFU is more of an overlaid approach where there's different levels of teaching game skill. You know it takes a lot more thought as to where are my kids at, what games are going to best teach these skills and you know there's not just mastery of a skill, there's development of a skill where you'd have an initial introduction to the skill through a game and then you say, OK, here is where they are at, the next game or drill is going to build on that and it's going to make it more complex.

All three coaches initially experienced some trepidation about implementing TGFU as other scholars have noted in preservice and inservice physical education teacher education settings (Diaz-Cueto et al., 2010; Gubacs-Collins, 2007). By the culmination of the autumn season they appeared more comfortable. As Ken suggested:

I think the thing that I finally got over is that if this game that I made up stinks then oh well. Like I've tried it and I've got to get over the fact, because I don't think I'm going to grow as a coach and the kids aren't going to grow. It's very safe for me to put together a skill-drill based practice but I've tried drills and I'm like well this isn't working so with this other approach on the fly I can adjust, put a cone here and sometimes it did work, wasn't a problem and they get it. But I think we have to get over the fact of just like 'egg on our faces' we could look like idiots sometimes if the modified games don't work but unless we try we're never going to be stretched and the players won't improve.

All three coaches became adept at using small-sided conditioned games as a part of their TGFU coaches' toolkit over the duration of the study. They all attempted to manipulate task objectives (e.g., number of touches on the ball, stratified scoring), playing rules (e.g., spatial constraints like playing channels), equipment (e.g., number of goals/balls), and the number of players in modified games/practices (e.g., offensive/defensive ratio, neutral players) in accordance with previous research advocating the use of small-sided and conditioned games to enhance the acquisition of movement and decision-making skills (Davids, Araujo, Correia & Vilar, 2013). However, the coaches also experienced a major pedagogical limitation in their utilization of TGFU regarding their inability to modify games.

Pedagogical Dilemmas

The coaches all had great difficulty in reconditioning a game/practice when it broke down for tactical (offensive and defensive) reasons. As Ken stated:

Oh yes I'm much better planned, thinking through what needs to happen but I don't have as many tricks in my basket as when I don't have what I anticipated happening in 3 vs. 3, and thinking it through in the same stream of idea instead of what I had planned.

In an equivalent scenario Sally also had a conundrum evolve in a three versus three game. In her modified game she had marked a 5-metre channel along one touchline (running the length of the field), with any one offensive player permitted to enter the channel with the ball. There were also 2-metre wide goals offset at opposite ends on the other side of the pitch. The coach's intent was to help each team offensively to use space on the flank (away from the goal that the team was attacking) to help invade the defending teams territory and subsequently create a scoring opportunity. When asked about the limited success of the modified game Sally commented:

It was kind of slow, I think there was something I could have done to make it more successful, but I don't know what that would have been. It seemed that what I was trying to get them to do was too challenging, I don't know if they were that developed to kick the ball that far.

While Sally attributed the breakdown of the game to the players' inability to pass the ball over distance the main problem was that when passing the ball out of the channel to a teammate the offense was simply outnumbered by three players to two. By changing the game to allow the channel player a free pass, or allowing that player to dribble out of the channel, it would likely have afforded the offense more attacking options (Turner, 2014). In this example the coach incorrectly saw a problem with the players technique rather than the modified game. This issue has been highlighted in previous studies revealing limited content knowledge of teachers using games-based approaches (Barrett & Turner, 2000; Jani, Pearson, Forrest & Webb, 2012). It has been attributed to insufficient pedagogical content knowledge by coaches who saw an issue with players' techniques rather than tactical elements of game play (Roberts, 2011). This premise illustrates the complexity in using constructivist pedagogy (Gordon, 2009). The ability to "get the modified game right" is difficult (Thorpe & Bunker,

2008). While the issue for the coach may initially be what does he/she expect the game to look like? (Mitchell et al., 2013); the ensuing problem then becomes how to help players amend the game effectively to allow the subsequent development of play. This issue was also highlighted in Wang's (2013) study with inservice teachers. The teachers believed that a lack of game knowledge, TGFU conceptual understanding, and game modification capability hindered their execution of TGFU instruction. In the present study it appeared that the coaches possessed multiple game modification strategies but they were unable to connect the specific emerging game problem with the appropriate game antidote. In some scenarios, towards the end of the spring season, the coaches were also reticent to use a game condition in the final game activity of a session. As Ken indicated:

That's the area I've put the least thought into, I'm realising is the scrimmage aspect. The first three steps, that how to coach that, or implement certain things, but in the scrimmage aspect I'm not thinking it through as much. I still just want to see if it comes out instead of implementing any restrictions to get at the issue.

Andrei suggested a slightly different perception in regard to conditioning the final game.

If you put too many restrictions on them they will lose their interest. I mean I put those restrictions throughout the entire practice and now I want to let them go with creativity a little bit.

Political Dilemmas

Previous research in constructivist learning and games-based approaches has indicated that both teachers and coaches feel they must "tune" their instruction to meet the expectations of administrators and parents (Light, 2004, 2012; Windschitl, 2002; Curry & Light, 2014). In the United States studies in youth sports have revealed parent-child interaction problems due to overemphasis on winning, parents holding unrealistic expectations, as well as criticizing and coaching their own children (Hedstrom & Gould, 2004). This issue was also highlighted in relation to TGFU in varsity sport in the USA where the focus on winning impacted coach implementation of the approach in high school soccer (Harvey et al., 2010). In the present study the coaches attempted to remain more "off-centre" particularly during league games. As Ken noted:

I'm having to talk less as a coach which is my goal in the games and so they were doing things; the defense was telling each-other to support, they switched fields without being told, so there's things that we've worked on in practice that they're now implementing when we're scrimmaging.

Over the duration of the study it became more common for the TGFU coaches to encourage players to debate ideas. Unfortunately, the coaches' attempts to adopt a player-centred focus were sometimes offset by parental actions. Team parent comments from the sideline at one of Ken's games included:

Parent 1: That's the problem with this club no one teaches defense.

Parent 2: Can't take throw-ins properly, 9 year-old boys, that's pathetic.

Typically these parental outbursts occurred when their children were perceived as not performing well because parents were frustrated at the game score. The comments were quite detrimental to coaches attempting to employ TGFU. As Andrei indicated:

I have been hurting a lot again, hearing from parents or from another coach that some of my exercises (game practices) are too complicated for them, but how difficult is it for them to make a specific number of passes (in a practice game).

In addition to parental challenges the youth soccer league also had some playing rules that were not conducive to TGFU. For example, the goals for U'8-U'12 players were 21 feet wide and 7 feet high. Goalkeepers had very little chance of saving shots and high miss-hit strikes often resulted in goals. Opposing team coaches frequently encouraged their players to shoot high at goal and from distance. The penalty area for U'8-U'10 play was a 12-yard square. The U'8 team goalkeepers, who were rotated during each quarter of the game, were sometimes unable to clear the penalty area from a place kick and opposing coaches would instruct their players to pressure the goal kick by standing at the perimeter of the penalty area awaiting the kick to slowly exit. As Andrei indicated:

We are missing (conceding) 99% of our goals right now because we keep playing through the middle on goal kicks. There is one fast kid upfront (for the opposition), interception, no goalkeepers of course, well there is one guy in goal but not a goalkeeper of course, and that's a goal. So how can they learn to switch the ball from defense to offense at a goal kick?

Due to the failure of the soccer league administration to restrict this primitive defensive tactic (at goal kicks) in the 6-aside version of the game attempts by coach Andrei to employ “building from the back” as a developmental game tactic in soccer as part of TGFU were frequently rendered useless. As a consequence many U’8 teams in the league (including his) would tend to recruit their best kickers to take goal kicks and strike the ball as far as possible to avoid this scenario.

Summary and Insights Gained

TGFU is a complicated pedagogical approach and novice coaches brought their own experiences and perceptions into the instructional environment in this study. The findings suggest that the introduction of TGFU into a soccer-coaching context at a community level is feasible. The participants were willing to attempt to use innovative coaching practices but there were conceptual, cultural, pedagogical and political challenges impacting their adoption of TGFU. One of the coaches experienced a conceptual dilemma in attempting to utilize the games-based approach. He preferred to equip players with techniques initially in order to enable them to play iterations of soccer and although he noted motivational benefits of TGFU he was only a partial convert to games-based instruction. Due to the prolonged duration of this study, across two outdoor soccer seasons, the coaches appeared to become more aware of the importance of contextual learning to promote players’ game development. Player-centred coaching remains a novel approach in the United States where an autocratic style of instruction still dominates many team sports at all levels of the game (e.g., basketball, American football). TGFU has at its core a focus on player-centred pedagogy and attempts by the coaches to draw players into the decision-making process and provide input into the learning context represented a cultural shift. Initially, the coaches used convergent questioning to facilitate the process where they remained centre-stage in the learning environment. Over time several coaches adopted a more open-ended structure in their coaching. The use of appropriate questioning strategies is a key component in the TGFU model and although there emerged a need for a more effective use of divergent questioning strategies to facilitate enhanced game understanding and player development at least one of the coaches during the spring season provided regular opportunities for players to debate ideas, empowering them to be better decision-makers in the process of learning to play soccer.

The coaches also recognized the importance of continuity in working a theme through the entire practice session. This was likely modeled from the coaching curriculum provided during the workshop that was based around offensive and defensive tactical principles. Over the course of the project the coaches became appreciative of both the complexity and flexibility that are indicative of games-based coaching while similarly recognizing that there remain risks associated with using modified games for learning and that TGFU experiences sometimes yield unexpected outcomes. They were not afraid to fail and this may have been due to the supportive presence of a coaching facilitator. All three coaches employed a TGFU coaching toolkit. The pedagogy included the use of small-sided conditioned games, manipulation of game objectives (including stratified scoring), variations in game rules (including spatial constraints) and modified playing numbers to create offensive and defensive overload situations. The participants used elements from the TGFU programme to facilitate their coaching but struggled to recondition modified games when these imploded for tactical reasons. This finding supports previous research that suggests a coach's tactical content knowledge and the ability to react to unexpected outcomes in the game context is a crucial component for coaching or teaching with games-based approaches. It also may explain why novice coaches with limited pedagogical content knowledge may be inclined to utilize technique approaches that are more predictable than TGFU. The political dilemmas in this study emerged from parents who were incognizant of the importance of seeing "the game as the teacher" in player-focused instruction (where the coach operates with an indirect approach to game learning). Finally, several soccer league rules were developmentally inappropriate for many children and inadvertently detrimental to the principles that underpin learning to play games via TGFU.

Implications for Community Coaching

TGFU requires considerable pedagogical skill that needs to develop over time. Many in-service efforts with teachers and coaches are relatively brief, providing a basic overview of the concepts underlying the approach. In the present study the coaches received support during the off-season (November-February) in an attempt to facilitate games-based coaching over an extended period of time. They also received additional games-based resources to supplement the initial curricular information and on-going support from a coaching facilitator throughout the study. If learning TGFU is a process then they were given an opportunity to develop their abilities over time. The approach requires a great deal of practice to perfect.

Community coaches also require TGFU resources that illustrate specific modified game situations and tactical and technical problems that emerge from these games. It is not enough to provide novice coaches with a coaching toolkit. They need to be equipped with potential learning tasks or games modifications that can solve the emerging game problems.

Constructing “if-then” game scenarios may be helpful for community coaches in the initial stages of learning TGFU. As the coaches develop they need to be helped to design learning situations that provide players with multiple option scenarios and opportunities for the players to justify their decisions in these games-based contexts.

Finally, parent education needs to facilitate an improved understanding of TGFU and the role of the coach (and parents) in an indirect soccer-learning environment. Soccer leagues also need to establish modified rules (in addition to small-sided teams, smaller goals and fields) that encourage the development of creative attacking play from a young age. For example, the positioning of a restraining line about eight metres outside the penalty box, that the defending team cannot cross, until a goal-kick has exited the penalty area would enable a team initially on offense to constructively create a play from a goal kick—the first point of attack in many soccer games.

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