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Creating Active Futures

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Game-centred models and teaching in culturally diverse settings

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Abstract
This presentation draws on the observations and experiences that we, as teacher educators, have had using Teaching Games for Understanding (TGfU) as a pedagogical tool with generalist pre-service teachers in two different sites: Malaysia and Australia. TGfU is a game-centred pedagogy in which students learn the ‘Why’ of game playing before the ‘How’ of the skills associated with the game. This concept is based on a student-centred approach to learning. The benefit of this pedagogy to generalist teachers is the notion that they are not required to be a master of many sports. This narrative relates the observations and experiences of teacher educators of Malaysian and Australian generalist pre-service teachers confronted with teaching and learning TGfU for the first time in their culturally specific contexts. The two key issues arising from teaching the TGfU model were: the disparity in the cohorts’ experiences arising from institutionalised conceptions by the pre-service teachers of what and how learning occurs in physical education; and the pre-service teachers’ difficulty with implementing the TGfU model in a practical situation. Crossing the cultural divide for the Malaysian and Australian pre-service teachers required them to explore more fully the range of approaches to teaching and to recognise a more student-centred approach as a valid and authentic tool. As both teachers and observers of this process, our intention was to examine the two cohorts’ learning and subsequent teaching with the aim of developing better understandings of the challenges when teaching TGfU in tertiary settings.

Keywords: Game-centred, Culture, Apprenticeship of observation, Pedagogy

Introduction
To date there has been an abundance of literature informing teaching and learning in physical education through Teaching Games for Understanding (TGfU). As the concept nears 30 years since its inception (Bunker and Thorpe, 1982), it is being adopted in countries around the world under various guises. These include, but are not limited to Game Sense (Australian Sports Commission, 1999) and Launder’s (2001) Play Practice in Australia; the Tactical Games Approach in the USA (Mitchell, Oslin & Griffin, 2005); and Singapore’s Games Concepts Approach (Light & Butler, 2005). However, little research has been undertaken outside of Australia, UK and USA to address the issue of culture and the teaching and learning of TGfU (Light, 2005; Light & Tan, 2006).

The intention of this study is to contribute to this dearth of information by offering an analytical narrative of the authors’ experiences in teaching the theory and practice of TGfU,
which we will refer to as a game-centred model, in two culturally diverse settings. Pre-service teachers’ attempts to then implement this game-centred model into school settings in their own countries will also be considered in light of these issues.

The authors’ teaching occurred in the primary pre-service setting – one in Australia and the other in Malaysia. Similarly, both involved university students learning to learn using this constructivist and cooperative teaching approach in physical education for the first time, with a view to utilising it in their future teaching. Similarly, the pre-service teachers’ subsequent experience involved children learning in primary schools using the student-centred approach for the first time within their respective countries.

The authors experienced some initial barriers to teaching in the Malaysian setting. These included language; lack of equipment; cultural expectations of both the teacher and the learner; and most significantly, Malaysian pre-service teachers’ limited background experiences of student-centred learning. The student-centred games teaching model was completely incongruous with their previous learning experiences. These previous learning experiences, often referred to as the “apprenticeship of observation” (Lortie 1975) will be discussed further in this paper in relation to both the Malaysian and Australian pre-service teachers.

Distinctly different, yet not diametrically opposed were the authors’ experiences with the Australian students. These students also brought to the setting a range of learning experiences, but adjusted more quickly to the student-centred manner in which the game-centred aspect of the unit was conducted. The authors suggest that similar experiences in other method areas may have contributed to their level of comfort with this pedagogy.

The discussion evolving from this paper intends to highlight issues for further scholarly attention in relation to crossing the cultural divide in a pedagogical sense in relation to TGfU or similar models for teaching game sense.

**Literature Review**

The teaching and learning of games in physical education attract a significant curriculum allocation. Werner, Thorpe and Bunker (1996, p.28) suggested that approximately 65% of physical education curriculum time is allocated to games. The way in which we teach games, therefore stands to have a significant impact on the lives of the students we teach.

Despite its longevity, TGfU is still an emerging pedagogy in Australian physical education. Borne from a constructivist perspective (Kirk & Macdonald, 1998), TGfU challenges traditional ways of ‘doing’ within games in the school physical education setting. It is a tactical and cooperative approach to learning through games rather than a skill-based approach. It is based on an assumption that students need to know not only how, but also when and why to perform skills in games (Bunker & Thorpe, 1983). This approach utilises modified game play as a means of early engagement with the activity. The teacher takes on the role as a facilitator rather than the pedagogue who might frequently be engaged at the front of the class in explanations and demonstrations. Light and Georgakis (2006) admit that physical educators have moved slowly to adopt this student-centred approach, showing some
resistance to the model. Being an enormous shift from how teachers themselves learned (Light & Georgakis, 2007) is one significant reason for this reticence to ‘jump ship’ from a traditional style of teaching to this more progressive and essentially different way of doing. After all, values once formed are difficult to change, particularly after the first 10 years of teaching (Ennis & Chen, 1995).

Light and Georgakis (2007) reported that many teaching programs in universities are embracing the range of pedagogies now recognised as more inclusive, student-centred approaches. Ours is no exception. Pre-service teachers come to our teacher education programs with varied experiences, influenced by years immersed in the social settings of sports and school (Kirk & Tinning, 1990; Light & Georgakis, 2007; Templin & Schemp, 1989; Tinning, Macdonald, Wright & Hickey, 2001). These years of experience are referred to by Lortie (1975) as “the apprenticeship of observation”. At least thirteen years of observation and evaluation of teachers in their own learning settings provides pre-service teachers with “default options” or “a set of tried and tested strategies which they can revert to in times of indecision or uncertainty” (Tomlinson, 1999 as cited in Borg 2004, p.274) in their own teaching practice. The apprenticeship of observation contributes to the preconceptions pre-service teachers bring to teacher education programs.

Values shaped from years of their own participation in school physical education and sport programs which are often negative (Light, 2002; Light & Georgakis, 2007a), create an initial barrier to learning and enjoyment, but can often quickly be broken down initially using a game-centred approach. Light (2002) agrees that some students will remain unconvinced as to the educational value that games can have, averse to physical education based on previous negative experiences. However, many find that the inclusive nature of game-centred teaching is more enjoyable (Light & Georgakis, 2007) and the often ignored “complex thinking skills” required in games, as described by Howarth (2000, p.270), can generate genuine interest for students of TGfU or similar models.

The contextualised nature of learning means that attempting to make comparisons between the Australian and Malaysian settings requires an understanding of the culture of both settings. Kirk and Macdonald (1998) suggested that learning is strongly influenced by the social and cultural contexts in which it takes place. In defining culture, we found that the literature offered a range of definitions. The authors chose a definition best suited to both contexts and to learning in physical education as “the set of values, conventions, or social practices associated with a particular field, activity, or societal characteristic” (Merriam, 2009). Despite being a dictionary definition (Thomas, Nelson & Silverman, 2005), this multi-faceted definition of culture also serves as an operational definition as it ideally reflects the complex nature of learning in any situation.

Methodology

This narrative serves as a form of action research – an opportunity for self-reflection of our current practice working with primary pre-service teachers both in Australia and Malaysia. A narrative was selected as an initial means of understanding the phenomenon of teaching pre-service teachers in another country and culture quite different from our own.
The Australian and Malaysian students – both enrolled in this Australian university’s teacher education programs in their respective countries, were taught very similar game-centred teaching concepts over a semester period in learning groups of approximately 25. They received instruction in the form of a one-hour teacher-directed lecture and a two-hour student-centred practical once a week over the semester, supported by online journal articles for further reference.

Both groups subsequently implemented five games sessions with the assistance of a partner or small group in a primary school setting using a game-centred pedagogy. The teaching practice was designed in a pair or group format anticipating that pre-service teachers would work with only a small group of children to enable them to feel supported in their first attempts at teaching. This occurred in the Australian setting but was not the case in Malaysia as the students were confronted with groups of thirty to forty children. This group size is not uncommon to primary schools in Malaysia. Learning groups at each school were supervised by a university lecturer.

Consultation with, and feedback from both the Australian and Malaysian lecturers in the respective university settings offered pre-service teachers a forum for discussing issues related to their teaching. In the school setting, informal feedback was also offered by supervising classroom teachers who remained with their classes during the sessions. University staff encouraged on-line discussion in Australia and partner discussions in Malaysia as the university lecturers were not able to be present at every lesson.

In this study, discussions around these experiences are based on the authors’ understanding of learning in an Australian university culture in conjunction with rich data that already exists around teaching using game-centred pedagogies in Australia, UK and USA, but which are only beginning to come to light with regards to the transportation of these pedagogies into other culturally-diverse settings (Light, 2006).

**Learning in the university setting**

Although the learning constraints of both settings were similar, there was variance in the conditions existing between the two. In the Malaysian setting there was very little equipment for use in schools or for university practical classes. In many cases, improvised equipment such as rolled up newspaper for bats, and quoits instead of balls, were used. In both the school and university settings in Australia, equipment was in abundance. Activity ideas weren’t limited by equipment or space.

If we consider available equipment in terms of the apprenticeship of observation, there was little impact on the two cohorts’ ability to teach using the game-sense pedagogy. Malaysian university students have learnt using little equipment in their own schooling and will therefore have developed what Tomlinson (1999, as cited in Borg 2000, p.274) referred to as “a set of tried and tested strategies”, or a practical versatility in being creative with equipment. Likewise, the Australian cohort did not need to adapt at all, having similar constraints in the primary settings as they did in their learning at both school and university. The group most affected by the difference between the settings was, in fact the authors, who had transported this pedagogy into a setting where conventions differed greatly from what they knew and had experienced. Once immersed in the setting, the authors’ level of
experience and flexibility allowed them to adapt to working with little or no equipment and resources in modelling the game-sense pedagogy.

The Australian cohorts were primarily taught by the Australian university staff, who have had significant experience in teaching using a game-centred pedagogy. This was discrepant to Malaysia where the lecturers and students workshopped the concepts with the Australian lecturer and then continued to explore the game-centred model in the university and school settings with their Malaysian supervisors. Most Malaysian staff had no experience working with a game-centred model in the university setting – the exception being one individual who was well versed in TGfU through attendance at an international conference and the experience of working with the model at the elite sporting level where TGfU is well-entrenched in Malaysia. Game-centred pedagogies are not visible in the Malaysian primary school setting though, as the intellectual curriculum such as languages, sciences and maths are prioritised and physical education is often delivered by teachers untrained in physical education (Rashid, 1994 as cited in Marshall & Hardman, 2000). In comparison, game-centred pedagogies in Australia are more frequently utilised across sport at all levels and in primary and secondary schools. However, game-centred models were not being used in the primary schools where either cohort of students did their practice teaching.

The make-up of the Australian student cohort was less diverse than that of the Malaysian group. Australian university cohorts in pre-service education regularly draw upon people from a range of cultural and religious backgrounds, however PETE programs in Australia differ slightly in that they often attract Anglo-Saxon enrolments (Tinning et al., 2001). This was evident in the make up of the Australian cohort who had chosen physical education as an elective unit with the view of qualifying themselves to teach physical education in schools.

Unlike the comparatively generic Australian cohort, the Malaysian pre-service teachers were an extremely diverse group of people from Muslim, Buddhist, Malay, Indian and Chinese backgrounds. They had come to university from a range of school settings which included Tamil, Chinese and National schools. In considering the background each pre-service teacher brought to this setting, it is important to note that each of the above-mentioned schools speak its preferred language, excepting in Mathematics and Science where English is the mandated language for teaching and learning. Thus, physical education in Malaysia is taught in a range of languages. This factor in particular increased the diversity of the group.

This had implications for physical education specific language used by the Australian lecturers in the Malaysian setting. The authors found that the Malaysian pre-service teachers were interested in speaking English to improve their language skills but occasionally a student would be required to interpret the workshops for those who were challenged by speaking and understanding English. Periodically, questions relating to culturally specific understandings in teaching, learning and sport were raised. In these situations, the Malaysian lecturers sought to clarify certain subject matter with the Australian lecturers in order to find common ground. Most conundrums were resolved through peer teaching Malaysian lecturers who in turn informed their pre-service teachers.
The similarities between the Australian and Malaysian cohorts though, were that both contingents were rich with a range of apprenticeships of observations (Lortie, 1975). Whilst both Australian and Malaysian cohorts attracted groups with different values and societal practices embedded in their culture that reflect how they were taught in their schooling years, teaching in the Malaysian setting had some added complexities. The apprenticeship of observation of the Malaysian cohort was predominately teacher-directed learning. The authors used an explicit teaching technique to model both a traditional teacher-directed mode of delivery and a student-centred approach to encourage discernment by the Malaysian cohort. It also took some time and encouragement for the pre-service teachers to develop the confidence to answer and ask questions and contribute to discussion but it was apparent through their responses that they had understood the workings of the student-centred model in application.

In addition, some of the Malaysian cohort came from religious and gender-segregated experiences of learning in physical education but were being asked to work together in the University setting for this program. This challenged the learning culture of these pre-service teachers as conventions were thrown aside and values and social practices were challenged. The issue of mixed gender learning was examined by the Malaysian pre-service teachers. The outcome was an overwhelming agreement that both children in schools and themselves as learners would stand to gain from participating cooperatively in games. These pre-service teachers were expected to collaborate, discuss and share as is consistent with the game-sense based pedagogy (Wright, McNeill & Butler, 2004). It was evidenced through their practice that both Australian and Malaysian pre-service teachers embraced this in practical activities.

Issues around gender and participation were not evident in the Australian setting. Pre-service teachers were already familiar with working in mixed-gender groups and using a student-centred approach to teaching. They had investigated constructivism as a pedagogy in their first year of their teaching course and had been relatively well-acquainted with learning in a more student-centred manner through their own apprenticeship of observation, having been immersed in it for the most part of their primary and secondary learning experiences. Unfortunately, not many of them had experienced this student-centred style of learning in physical education. As previously alluded to, there are still many teachers in Australia reticent to embrace the new ways of thinking and doing involved in teaching using a student-centred pedagogy in physical education (Light & Georgakis, 2007), possibly based on their own apprenticeships of observation.

The authors’ experiences in the Australian setting attested to the fact that the Australian cohort had immediately engaged with the student-centred pedagogy as part of an acceptance of the conventions of learning in this university’s culture. Mixed gender working groups and learning through student-centred pedagogies were commonplace practices for these pre-service teachers.

Teaching and learning in the primary school setting

Undertaking this narrative analysis exposed some issues worthy of further discussion. Even though our questioning of, discussion with, feedback from, and observation of pre-service teachers in both settings indicated their understanding of the game-centred model in
practical classes, this did not correlate with their teaching in the primary school settings in most cases.

Observation of the micro-teaching environments in primary schools in both countries revealed that many pre-service teachers were grappling with class control, safety and the use and distribution of equipment, unable to apply the teaching model to the primary school environment. In addition, the apprenticeship of observation still had a highly significant effect on their practice – especially when put under pressure in a new and often nerve-wracking situation, as is the case with pre-service teachers working in schools for the first time. Many reverted to what was comfortable or the “default options” referred to by Tomlinson (1999, as cited in Borg 2004, p.274), reflecting that in many cases, both cohorts’ apprenticeships of observation in physical education had been in a teacher-directed style of learning.

In addition, the students they were teaching in schools were also undergoing their own apprenticeship of observation and in some cases, in the situation of Grade 6 students, have had at least 5 years of their own apprenticeship already built into their understanding of what it is to learn in physical education. Butler (1996), in her study of teacher responses to teaching TGfU for the first time, indicated that teachers were concerned that students were unable to change to a student-centred model if their background was in learning skills in a traditional manner.

For the pre-service teachers, any meaningful change in teaching requires a conceptual shift in the way instruction is presented. Fullan (1993) argued that change does not have a blueprint, it is not linear, and is loaded with uncertainty. Innovation of any new instructional format is problematic at best. What, how, and why innovations work – particularly transferred into a culturally diverse setting, are valid questions.

The barriers to our teaching in Malaysia are somewhat consistent with the barriers the Malaysian pre-service teachers were confronted with in their own teaching practice in primary schools. Issues of language in a multilingual system; cultural expectations associated with groupings, new game-centred specific language and the practice of questioning and discussing; and an apprenticeship of observation in teacher-directed learning were hurdles to be overcome in both the university and primary school settings.

In the Australian setting, there were no obvious hurdles to the authors’ teaching of pre-service teachers. However, for the transfer of this practice into their teaching of primary school children, the Australian cohort required a real conceptual shift to occur. This is likened to the conceptual shift required for the Malaysian pre-service teachers, however the Malaysian setting is complicated by the cultural issues mentioned above. Breaking down the apprenticeship of observation requires substantially more time and practice for the pre-service teachers – time not available within the semester in the crowded curriculum of the university teacher education programs.
Conclusion

In drawing this analytical narrative to a conclusion, it is apparent that many issues have arisen that are worthy of further research. The breaking down of the apprenticeship of observation in order to move forward is a complex issue. A conceptual shift from an experience so heavily embedded in teacher-directed learning is not easy, nor clear-cut as to how it is best approached. Certainly, the added complexities associated in transporting a new pedagogy into a learning environment that is culturally inconsistent to what the authors know, understand and are well-practised in, requires further attention.

Crossing cultural boundaries for these authors meant reviewing the core of what TGfU or a game centred approach is about - student–centred learning. The Malaysian pre-service teachers were empowered by the student-centred model as they had only known a traditional and authoritative style of teaching. The Australian cohort were not as confronted, nor as excited by the model as it was not significantly different to what they had already been presented at university regarding student-centred learning.

What became particularly evident though, was both groups’ inability to reproduce the model in their own teaching. Lack of opportunity to practice will certainly have affected both groups of pre-service teachers’ abilities to implement the model effectively. We are commenting on their practice after only one unit of learning in the university setting and five sessions of implementation. Primarily though, given the opportunity to teach in the school setting, teaching through the game-sense model is only one priority for the pre-service teachers. Many other obstacles contributed to their inability to teach in a composed and confident fashion which included basic group management skills in the outdoors, understanding and teaching content, modifying lessons to cater for a range of abilities to name a few.

References


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