

THE INFLUENCE OF GAME SENSE ON A NEW ZEALAND SCHOOL BASKETBALL COACH'S PRACTICE

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ABSTRACT

This paper draws on data generated as part of a PhD study on adolescent girls' experiences of being in a New Zealand school basketball team that identified the importance of their relationships with the coach for their enjoyment of being in the team. Using a combined ethnography and grounded theory approach, conducted over a six-month period, the study identified how the use of coaching that reflected features of Game Sense (Light, 2013) contributed to the girls' enjoyment but without the coach having a conscious awareness that she was using aspects of Game Sense. The study supports the literature on game-based approaches to coaching sport that consistently shows its positive effect on student/athlete enjoyment and suggests that the influence of Game Sense and other GBA on teaching practice may be more widespread than has been suggested (see Pill, 2011).

Keywords: game-based approaches, grounded theory, ethnography, enjoyment, coaching

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INTRODUCTION

The original publication on Game Sense (GS) by the Australian Sports Commission (ASC – den Duyn, 1997) proposed a loose guide to coaching that emphasised using practice games, questioning and promoting thinking, and talking about the tactical aspects of team sports. Almost two decades later, Light (2013) proposed a pedagogical framework for GS structured by four pedagogical features, while also suggesting that there was great variation in regard to the emphasis different coaches' place on these four features. There is no prescriptive model for the implementation of GS with research suggesting that coaches adopt a range of different interpretations of it involving the use of its features suggested by Light while paying little attention to others (see Light & Evans, 2010). This begs the question of whether or not there is actually one authentic approach and if so, at what specific point is the approach taken not the correct GS? How do we account for the influence of GS and the principles underpinning it when it's not 'authentic'?

This article draws on data from a larger study conducted on adolescent girls' experiences of basketball in a New Zealand high school to identify the influence of GS pedagogy on the coach in the study. The study identified positive relationships with the coach as a major reason for the girls' enjoyment of being in the team with other elements of her coaching that they enjoyed aligning with GS pedagogy (Light, 2013). This article thus focuses on the coach's approach to teaching the game of basketball and the extent to which Game Sense influenced her coaching. Using a combination of ethnography and grounded theory methodology the study used participant

observation, field notes and interviews during a full basketball season to generate data.

The Development of Game-based Approaches

A number of different approaches based on games teaching have been developed over the last three decades to solve problems identified with traditional teaching methods, with most originating in Teaching Games for Understanding (TGfU - Bunker & Thorpe, 1982). Throughout the 1990s a tactical model was contrasted with a 'traditional' technical model (see Turner & Martinek, 1992). However, in contemporary debates over GBAs fewer people suggest that there is a clear difference between the two models. In Light's study (2004) on coaches' use of Game Sense in Australia, the participants saw an overlap between the two models, seeing GS as 'good coaching'. Even the idea of a distinct 'traditional' coaching approach is questionable with Light, Evans, Harvey and Hassanin (2015) suggesting that coaches work across a spectrum from a technical approach using only direct instruction on one side to an athlete-centred, holistic approach on the other. Here, we outline some of the fundamental differences between the two approaches.

Traditional Coaching and Game Sense

The traditional approach to coaching typically perceives technique and skills as fundamental to successful play. To allow for a game to be played these skills are trained until they are seen to be performed well enough to play the game, with this approach sitting upon the assumption that technique must be developed in order to play the game (Blomquist, Luhtanen & Laakso, 2001). Traditional models of motor skill performance normally highlight three sequential processes: perception, decision-making and movement execution (Abernethy, Kippers, Mackinnon, Neal & Hanrahan, 1997). When implementing this model the practice of motor skills is accentuated to produce skilful players (McMorris, 1998). It is also characterized by direct instruction with sessions typically divided into an introductory activity, a skill phase focusing on developing and improving skills, and a game.

In contrast to traditional approaches, Game Sense contextualizes learning within modified games or game-like situations and develops skills in context. This model nurtures both tactical awareness, skill execution, decision-making and awareness at the same time. Instead of putting tactical awareness to the side before the development of sport-specific skills GS starts with a game, which is modified to ensure that all athletes can play and gain understanding of the particular game that they are playing (Light, 2013). It was developed in Australia in the 1990s by Rod Thorpe and the ASC (Webb & Thompson, 1998) and does not follow a model such as TGfU (Bunker & Thorpe, 1982; Metzler, 2011), it is thus open to different interpretations and adaptations (Light, 2004, 2013). It focuses on the game as a whole instead of skills as a component of the game.

Game Sense locates learning within modified games to give relevance to practice by connecting it to the game as a whole. This develops understanding, decision-making and skills that can be transferred to the full game (Jones, 2015; Light, 2013). A wide variety of skills and understanding can be developed from verbal and nonverbal interactions between the coaches and athletes or even between peers, and this surpasses what can be obtained alone, so language and reflection of the experiences are one of the key aspects of learning in Game Sense (Howarth, 2000; Light & Fawns,

2003). Game Sense teaching is an athlete-centred, inquiry-based approach, where the coach acts as an enabler of learning. Games taught using this approach give athletes problem-solving and social skills that they can use in life outside sport by engaging in conversation with their peers and coaches/families. Light and Fawns (2003) argue that GBA such as TGfU and Game Sense can make people change their way of being in the world through interaction and connect with other people, things and places.

METHODOLOGY

This study was a part of research for a PhD that used combined ethnography and grounded theory methodologies. Ethnographic research brings together theory and practice by developing and testing theory in its natural setting (Van Maanen, 2011). It also provides rich insights into human behaviour and interaction within a defined social setting, and these are needed to promote a real understanding of the participants' responses and their experiences (Arnould and Wallendorf, 1994).

Grounded theory has become a popular form of inquiry with its emphasis on the generation of theory that is grounded in the data (Dawson, 2009). It is a systematic process by which the researcher becomes more and more embedded in the data, which is also the case with ethnography. The aim is to develop richer concepts and models of how the phenomena being studied really work (Charmaz, 2006), which was the aim of the study. Grounded theory with its focus on providing information to social actors, has the capacity to generate findings of interest to the people in that same culture.

Ethnographic and grounded theory methodologies as used in this research are extremely compatible (Pettigrew, 2000). They can both be situated within the interpretive paradigm, incorporate data collected in natural settings and they frequently include participant observations (Barnett-Page & Thomas, 2009). Other research exploring human interactions have successfully incorporated features of both ethnography and grounded theory (e.g. French & Williamson, 2016; Olthuis et al., 2014). Researchers have claimed that combining these two methods generates detailed descriptions as well as contributions to theory (French & Williamson, 2016; Pettigrew, 2000). Ethnography provided a framework within which we explored how the coaching style contributed to the girls' enjoyment, with the grounded theory giving structure to the data collection and analysis process to generate new ideas and conceptual understandings.

I adopted a role of participant-observer, as an assistant coach, due to the particularity of the setting of this research. In this setting the participants would train twice a week for an hour and the coach and I would plan the training session. I was mindful that it was a privilege to observe these interactions and did not want to detract from what the team was used to before I started my research, in the first few sessions I had more of an observer role to understand what type of training they were used to. These factors aided my decision to participate actively in the training sessions, when I would see fit and also when the coach asked me to run them through some drills. Another reason why I deliberately chose to be a participant-observer, was the ability to capture typical interactions between the players and the coach with minimal disruption. I was mindful that my presence would alter the dynamic between the coach and the players, particularly if I were participating in the interaction, so I would mostly listen to how the coach would address the players and how she would interact with

them. To assist the reflexivity I thought was needed, I kept detailed notes to assist in accounting for my influence on and interpretation of the data generated.

The Site

The study was conducted in the senior girls' basketball A team within a private secondary school in New Zealand during the 2016 basketball season.

The Participants

The coach (Sylvia) and six girls, aged 14 to 17 years old, were randomly selected from those who volunteered to participate in response to an invitation that was sent to all girls playing in the team to take part in the study. The study had ethical clearance from University of Canterbury, New Zealand. The participants are referred to under the pseudonyms of Anne, Mary, Jessica, Sarah, Sophie, Grace and their coach Sylvia.

Data Generation & Analysis Methods

The study used participant observation and field notes to initially collect data and to construct the first round of interviews from which initial codes and then focused codes were developed. This data was constantly compared, contrasted and tested in subsequent rounds of data generation, including ongoing noted observations and field notes, leading to the identification of theory grounded in the data (Charmaz, 2006). Through this process we identified aspects of the coach's approach that suggested the influence of Game Sense. The data used in this article came from a category that emerged during the initial coding process in the main study but which was later discarded as the GT process developed.

Using ethnographic techniques, such as interviews, observations and field notes, and a journal/diary, provided an opportunity to better understand the experiences of the participants throughout the season. The naturalistic approach to interviews and observations allowed the data to be generated in the setting of the team and school where the research was undertaken.

Analysis, using a grounded theory approach, of this data was used to develop the questions for the first interview in a series of three rounds. The interviews were conducted during school lunchtime over the season and were of approximately 30 to 40 minutes duration. One interview was also conducted with the coach at the end of the study giving a total of approximately 800 minutes of interview data.

FINDINGS

The coach, Sylvia, knew little about Game Sense (GS) or other GBAs but her approach to coaching reflected much of the GS approach. Conscious of avoiding what he sees as the prescriptive-models-based approach to teaching and coaching (see, Metzler, 2011) Light (2013) proposes a GS framework comprising four main features. These are: (1) designing a learning environment, (2) an emphasis on questioning to generate dialogue and thinking, (3) providing opportunities for collaborative formulation of ideas/solutions that are tested and evaluated, and (4) developing a supportive socio-moral environment. Through the observations on training sessions, the first author noticed that the coach, Sylvia, employed some of the features of GS that seemed to make a significant contribution to the girls' enjoyment of being in the team which were supported by subsequent interviews. The features of her coaching that suggest the influence of GS or other GBA on her coaching were: (a) designing an appropriate

learning environment and managing learning, (b) providing opportunity for collective problem-solving within a supportive environment and (c) considering the whole person, developing strong relationships and promoting dialogue.

Designing the learning environment and managing learning

In sports coaching, GS coaches replicate elements of the real game to contextualize practice, give it meaning, promote engagement in practice and to assist in transferring learning in practice to performance on the field (see Jones, 2015). Noted observations of practices and games by the first author identified sustained focus, engagement and commitment from the six girls and their teammates at all sessions that seemed to be due to the use of practice games that were relevant to the competition game and that involved an appropriate level of challenge (Light, 2013). Sylvia planned training sessions using mainly small-sided games, where she would try to mimic the same pressure and intensity of a real game and this engaged the girls:

I just love when we are playing against each other, especially when we are playing doing fast break drills. 3 on 2 is my favourite because you have to pass the ball and finish really fast or else the third defender would come in and we would have to play 3v3. It makes you hustle on defence because you want to stop the ball and have time for your teammate to get back and also it makes us work on our passing and finishing especially closer to the rim. (Mary, int. 3.)

She did not emphasise questioning but did seem to be able to effectively adjust the level of challenge for each game to promote engagement and maximize learning (Light, 2013). She also tried to make training fun, changing and modifying the rules of the game to make it more engaging and to maintain appropriate levels of challenge (Light, 2017). When the first author asked her about her approach to training she said that, "These small-sided games put them in the same mentality of a Tuesday night game, which means they have to learn how to work together and make decisions under pressure while also making the team support each other regardless of the outcome". Noted observations and interviews with the girls suggested that good relationships between them and with the coach promoted cohesion and a sense of collective purpose.

All of the girls nominated fun as the key factor that made training and playing enjoyable for them as Jessica explains: "I think training is fun because of the different games we do. It keeps you focused on doing your best and is never boring because you have to focus and do your best all the time" (Jessica, int. 1). The enjoyment in training and their closeness in tight games suggests the meaning basketball had for these girls, which seemed to be stimulated by being in the A team of the school and the collective success of being promoted to the top division in the region, with a culture of effort and commitment being the top factors for the girls. Commitment to the team, maximum effort at training and in competition games, was a common theme throughout the study with the girls. This is evident in the following quote as is their enjoyment of learning through competitive practice games:

What I like about the team is when everyone comes to training, we just have a great time together, we catch up and we make jokes, but when it's time to train we work hard. I think Sylvia is really cool to let us do our own thing during the warm-up. For example, she gives us options and we choose what to do. My favourite drill is 'Animal', I think it is the perfect combination of hard work and

fun. We play 1v1v1 inside the key and once you score three points you can get subbed by someone else. To me it feels like I'm always improving for the team and, of course, you never want to let the team down, so that kind of drill is perfect to push yourself try new things, like reverse a lay-up that I've never done before and last Tuesday I did it because we were trying it on the training. (Sarah, int. 2.)

During the interviews the girls said that they felt training was always different and sometimes a little too hard but that they were ready to give their best because they didn't want to disappoint the coach or the team, with a strong sense of prioritizing the team over the individual. In the training sessions Sylvia explained to the girls how everything they did in that session connected to the game, which is a feature of Game Sense that gives practice meaning (Light, 2013). This is one of the features of GBAs such as GS that highlights the importance of tactical and strategic comprehension for successful coaching and that empower players to be independent and motivated learners. In the interview with Sylvia, she said that: "I try making it enjoyable. I think I'm a really intense person, and I make the trainings hard for them, but they can come to me with any problem related to their basketball or personal life, they know that" (Sylvia, int. 1). Sylvia expected her players to be committed in training and when she felt they were not pushing hard enough she would be very firm with them. While this seems to conflict with the coach–player relationship promoted in much of the literature on Game Sense (Evans, 2013) there was a sincere, respectful and trusting relationship between the coach and players with her always helping them with whatever they need.

Provide opportunities for collective inquiry and a supportive environment

Sylvia provided something of a mother figure for the girls who could be demanding of effort and performance but who cared about them and made this obvious. When Sylvia reprimanded players they knew that this was not meant to be personal. During competition game timeouts or even in hard training sessions she would tell them why she called them out and also give an explanation, and when asked about it she said: "I try to explain it's about what happened in that situation. They know that I'm not attacking them personally. There's a difference, they understand that's how I act as a coach and I'm only trying to improve their game" (Sylvia, int. 1). During the course of the observations the first author noticed that the girls didn't take to heart what was said and they understood that she was there to help them improve and get even better: "I believe there is a trusting relationship between me and the girls, and, of course we have to trust each other we know that we care about one another. That's why I always talk to them before and after the games or practices" (Sylvia, int. 1). This shows that, not only was she showing them the way she wanted them to play but also creating a supportive environment where she could be honest with the athletes without any of them losing their engagement. This seems to line up well with the relationships between coach and players promoted in the Game Sense literature and the nature of it as an holistic approach (see Light, Evans, Harvey & Hassanin, 2015). As has been suggested, to fully realize athlete potential the coach should care for athletes as people (Jones, 2009).

During some of the weekly practice sessions Sylvia would regularly use pick-up games to mimic the Tuesday night game, to replicate the mental, emotional and physical pressure that is characteristic of competition games and have the athletes learn to deal with these conditions. She would promote being calm, thinking,

communicating and playing as a team. She did not use much questioning, which is a feature of GS (see, den Duyn, 1997; Light, 2013) but when she used small-sided games she would give each team time to work together, by talking with each other. Sometimes she would ask them to analyse what was going on and find their own solutions, in order to develop a higher understanding. This seemed to help these girls to understand the connection between practice and competition games and empowered them to a degree. They all said they enjoyed this approach to learning to understand and analyse the game: "I think by playing 3v3 and talking about what can we do to improve, helped me a lot to realize what I can do in the actual game. And now I find myself analysing every single part of the game while I'm playing" (Mary, int. 2). The interview data also suggests that this interaction strengthened the connections and communication between them as members of the team: "I love how open we are on the court, we talk to each other and we have fun together. I think that comes from training together and pushing really hard. I feel like win or lose we still have each other backs, and I love it" (Grace, int. 2).

Considering the whole person, interaction and positive relationships

Sylvia's coaching style reflected something of the athlete-centred approach (see Kidman, 2005) that considers the athlete as a thinking, feeling person with a life outside the sport and is influenced by the humanistic and holistic approach that characterizes athlete-centred coaching approaches (see Kidman, 2005; Light, Evans, Harvey & Hassanin, 2015). She considered the influence of the girls' lives outside basketball and took time at the beginning or end of the practice session to talk to any of the girls, most of the times small talk to make them feel like they belonged to the team and that they cared about each other. Sophie said that, "If someone has a bad training, or something is happening at home, like it happened to me a few times, we are there to support each other and Sylvia is always around so we can talk to her about anything". When asked about how she cares about her players Sylvia describes herself as a mother or educator before being a coach:

"You obviously want to create an environment that promotes fun, if not they won't be coming back next year, but also you want them to learn to play hard, you want them to learn to play as a team. I sometimes feel more like a mother or educator than a coach because we have a few players that don't have a very stable family environment and I have to be very mindful about what is happening in their lives" (Sylvia, int. 1).

The need to make training enjoyable to retain the players was influenced by the fact that basketball was not any of the girls' main sport. Their main sports included netball, long-distance running, rowing, etc. and during the observations of the Tuesday night competition games the team demonstrated what the first author, as an experienced player and coach, felt was great tactical understanding and decision-making that seemed to come from their engagement in the training sessions. It was part of the team culture. These observations were confirmed when the girls were asked what they enjoyed the most about training and games in interviews:

"I like how fun and how competitive it is, and being a runner where I only depend on myself to improve... but here I can work with my teammates and we all improve at the same time. I improved after each practice because I bring my competitive nature from running to basketball and I feel I improve every time

we train, just because of how hard it is and we cover every aspect of play. I think intensity is important because if you train hard you will play with the same mind-set" (Anna, int. 1).

DISCUSSION

Sylvia struggled to articulate any knowledge about GS or other game-based approaches, and most of her training sessions were based on past experiences as a player and how she was coached that were adjusted and changed through the years. However, throughout the observations and interviews it became apparent that her approach reflects elements of GS and other GBA. It was also clear that her coaching style made a strong contribution toward the deep engagement of the girls and their enjoyment of playing basketball and being part of the team.

Over the duration of the study almost every training session focused on learning through games, with Sylvia providing opportunities for the girls to discuss tactical aspects and skill aspects in the context of the game in team talks. From the perspective of the first author, who worked as the assistant coach, this was very effectively transferred to the Tuesday night competition games that also suggested the extent to which the girls had been empowered to work through problems as a team. At these games he noted how, during breaks in the game, they would huddle and discuss the situation to find the right solution for the problems that characterize any invasion game. Sylvia also cared about her players as people with lives beyond basketball, which promoted a warm and trusting relationship between her and the girls, and between them. She did not use training games exclusively and would regularly use direct instruction and skill work with a focus on technique, which is more characteristic of a traditional coach-centred approach.

Although Sylvia did not seem to have read about GS or have had any formal coach education in it or any other GBA her practice reflected much of GS pedagogy. If asked whether or not Sylvia was using an authentic GS approach we would probably have to say no but if asked whether or not her approach reflected elements of GS we would say yes. Light et al. (2015) suggest that we need to recognize how coaches work across a spectrum from traditional directive, skill drills to GS, instead of trying to categorize them as traditional or GS coaches. Aguiar and Light (2015) argued along the same lines to suggest that if there is an authentic model for GBAs, when looking into teaching practices, that teachers should be empowered with fundamental knowledge of learning to explore, discover and interpret the possibilities for learning different GBAs. They also suggest that teachers should be empowered with the ability to constantly analyse their own teaching to find the best solution to suit different situations. This then allows them to be able to refine their teaching to different contexts and different needs, which in turn gives them the freedom and autonomy to interpret and implement GBAs. This looser, and more inclusive perspective on coaching and teaching is likely to identify more widespread influence of GS and other GBA, and to empower and support teachers and coaches to develop innovation and reflective practice than the prescriptive models-based approach.

FIRST AUTHOR'S BIOGRAPHY

Ricardo has a Master's in Youth Sports Training from the University of Coimbra and this guided him towards the endeavour of a PhD. He is currently in his last year of his

PhD at the University of Canterbury in New Zealand. The data presented in this paper is part of the data collected from his doctoral thesis from April 2016 to October 2016.

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