Teamball—a third generation of Teaching Games for Understanding

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Theme: Professional development of physical education teachers and Background

In the mid 80s the ‘Loughborough group’ developed the Teaching Games for Understanding (TGfU) concept. The concept has since been subject to research and scientific discussion as well as it has formed part of ballgame settings around the world.

The comparison between the TGfU and other conventional teaching approaches has often formed the point of departure for research and discussions in order to test, which approach could be classified the best. This starting point has proved not to be appropriate for the establishment of research designs and have not improved the quality of the teaching and learning of ballgames. Instead the research should be focused on the different knowledge that is derived from different approaches. The TGfU concept has remained almost unchanged for a long period. Recently it has been developed through the application of a situated learning theory. This paper aims to contribute to a further development of the concept by applying learning theories and research results to the concept.

The teamball concept

Researchers, lecturers and scholars at University of Southern Denmark have (inspired by the ‘Loughborough group’) used the TGfU in the teacher education curriculum since 1997. We applied the principles of learning theories to the TGfU concept such as ‘Cultural learning’, ‘Situated learning’ and ‘Community learning’ to the TGfU concept. Having the TGfU intension of making good games players capable of understanding the basic code of ballgames, we applied the team as the learning environment, the communication in the game and the reflection of the players. We named this teaching and learning approach ‘teamball’. The term reflects our perception of ballgames as a social activity performed in a community.

Players are constantly communicating during a game. In fact they are unable to not communicate at all times during the game. That is why we see ballgames as communication systems and define ballgames as a system of relations based on communication. The basic pedagogical focus of the learning process should thus be directed towards communication and relations.

The team is central. Learning ballgames is a matter of active participation and taking an active part in the dynamic communication system. An example from a school setting: If a less experienced player has the central position as playmaker it’s critical that the experienced players use their skills and game knowledge to throw ‘catchable passes’ so the playmaker can perform his skills at the very best. Of course the total game performance will be dependent on the skills performed by the playmaker. However, the features of the communication system and its interplay with the learning process tend to be even more important. In this sense we find that the ball is a main communication media for the team. This implies that a message saying ‘you’re not part of this system’ has been sent if no ball is passed to the less experienced players or if it is an uncatchable pass. This is a non-learning situation where none of the players are learning ballgames.

Communication (in general and in ballgames) consists of three parts: An informant, a message and a receiver. Examples of communication in ballgames can be as follows: an informant or player sends a message by passing the ball to a receiver. This goes whether the ball is passed to a team-mate in an interactive game or an opponent in a net-wall
game. So at first sight the communication is quite simple. But when adding relations to it, communication turns out to be a very complex matter. The information (the pass) is both communication and metacommunication. In the interactive game the pass has sometimes the intention of sending one specific message to the team-mate and another message (...that is misunderstood) to the opponent. Thus understanding ballgames is primarily to understand the communication system and its inherent relations.

In order to teach ballgames in this context we need to be able to simplify the complex ballgames in a way that maintains the relations and the communication codes. We do so by analysing ballgames into ballgame phases. For example all interactive games consist of three phases: The ‘passing game’ with focus on creating space and time within relations. The ‘goal scoring game’ with focus on the high-risk game play within relations and the acceptance of this. The ‘defence game’ with focus on diminishing space and time for the opponents.

The learning process consists primarily of practice in ballgames. Integrated in this practice is the reflection of the players. We have developed a long range of tools to make the students reflect on the ballgames and their own learning process. ‘Self-observation’ and observations of other teammates are part of all game practices. All students have a ‘Game-twin’, another student whom they observe closely during the game and with whom they discuss questions concerning communication and relation in the actual ballgame.

Research results

In recent years we have started a research programme concerning the teamball teaching and learning process in different settings. The research result focuses on the student’s motivation and participation in the ballgames and their understandings of ballgames. Conclusion of one of these research projects will very briefly be described here.

Engell and Hansen did a structured intervention focusing on student’s reflection in a teacher education setting within two different groups. In an action research design they intervened in the learning process in two groups each of 25 students. The intervention lasted one year and the results were derived by four reflection-logbooks during the period (one logbook every second or third month). Each reflection-log consisted of questions and student-answers concerning 5 – 10 central issues connected to the learning process.

Engell and Hansen found specific increased learning outcomes concerning the student’s ability to construct their own knowledge of ballgames. One student comment shows this:

“…The reflections have in a way personalized the theory of ballgames. The textbooks have given me the general knowledge, but it’s the reflections that have provided me the specific knowledge of ballgames… The reflections give an opportunity to reflect my intuitive knowledge. That’s a thing you just don’t think about before being asked and reflect on it. (Jeppe, a first-year student, SDU).”

The student gives an example on how reflection has changed his learning process and given him other knowledge and deeper understanding of ballgames. The project findings conclude that this deeper knowledge is of great importance for the player’s games sense and their game performance. At the same time this deeper knowledge is important concerning the teacher education programme because the student’s perceive intellectual and pedagogical knowledge of the ballgames.

Perspectives

The teamball concept provides a holistic and complex approach to the teaching and learning of ballgames. The approach has its point of departure in the understanding of ballgames but this is only the beginning. The teaching and learning of ballgames has been taking to deeper learning levels such as competencies of connecting theory and practise and the ability of the students to rethink ballgames themselves. Thereby the students are prepared for adapting ballgames to the needs of specific groups and the different environments.

The teamball concept has worked well in an educational setting, but it also needs to be applied to health related settings as well. In this respect our research so far tends to point out that the players actually are more physical active in the teamball approach compared to other approaches.

One of the barriers in applying the approach to the teaching of ballgames in primary and secondary schools is the teacher’s lack of experience and competences. Thus they can be resistant to choose the Teamball concept and tend to stick to a more traditional approach.

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13 We use a classification system of ballgames inspired by Almond et al. 1986
14 In this part we are inspired by Schön, 1983 and his “reflection in action” and “reflection on action”
15 Engell and Hansen, 2007
16 Examples of questions to the students concerning the passing game: Describe your personal strategy you use to make yourself a good game player. Describe your partner twin’s strategy. How can you improve your game understanding?
References


