

CELEBRATING 40 YEARS OF TEACHING GAMES FOR UNDERSTANDING

This year brings an important celebration related to games teaching and learning. 2022 marks the 40th anniversary of the Teaching Games for Understanding (TGfU) model, introduced by David Bunker and Rod Thorpe in their initial 1982 *A Model for Teaching of Games in Secondary Schools* (Bulletin of Physical Education).

What is TGfU?

The TGfU model was developed to address growing concerns that pupils were leaving school knowing little about games. Games lessons were highly structured, focused on developing skilful players with limited abilities to make decisions within the game. As Bunker and Thorpe (1986) stated, “It is of particular concern as games, unlike other activities in the physical education curriculum, present problems of ‘what to do?’ and ‘when to do it?’ and not just ‘how it is done?’”. TGfU is a learner-centred games-based approach focusing on developing pupils to attain a level of game competence, promoting enjoyment and involvement.

The TGfU model

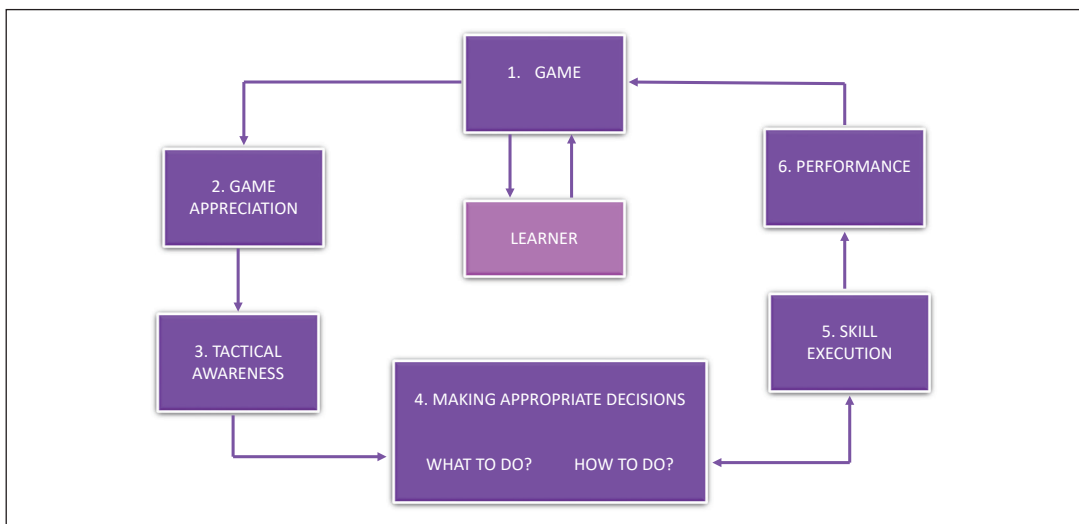
The original model places the learner in the centre of a six step-by-step process in which pupils participate in the decision-making and problem-solving posed by a game (Bunker & Thorpe, 1982).

1. Game or game form: Pupils are introduced to a game or game form that is developmentally appropriate for their age and experience.
2. Game appreciation: Pupils understand the rules of the game since rules give the game its shape.
3. Tactical awareness: Pupils recognise and understand the principles of play (e.g. creating space, denying space, etc.) through problem-solving in game situations.
4. Decision-making: Pupils learn to make good game decisions based on ‘what to do’ (i.e. tactical awareness) and ‘how to do’ (i.e. select appropriate skills and movements).
5. Skill execution: Pupils learn skills and movements within the context of the game and themselves as the learner.
6. Performance: Pupils are assessed based on an appropriate response as well as technical efficiency.

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Practice still matters. The TGfU model does consider practising the skills associated with the game, but these are secondary to being able to understand the tactical problems. A key component is placing pupils in developmentally appropriate modified games of the full-version sport, allowing them to focus on a particular tactical situation (e.g. creating space).

There are numerous benefits of TGfU, some of which include:

- suitable for teaching components of the National Curriculum for Physical Education
- globally recognised and adopted
- offers a holistic learning experience
- develops cognitive understanding
- enables pupils to see links between, and transfer game understanding and performance across, a variety of sports
- pupils are physically active for a sustained period of time
- develops thinking and knowing spectators.

Historical background

TGfU dates back to the educational transformations and growth in sport sciences of the 1950s and 1960s. During this time, there was a paradigm shift within physical education towards the teaching and mastery of sports techniques prior to and in isolation from game play. The mastery approach became popular, but there was a growing concern about children not knowing and understanding games.

In the late 1970s, the key individuals of the TGfU model met at Loughborough University and began to collaborate. In a 30th anniversary recorded interview, Len Almond recollected a critical moment in which he observed Rod Thorpe teaching postgraduate students net/wall games and was captivated by his approach. This led to discussions and workshops with David Bunker and a number of colleagues who had been developing their own approaches with students, teachers and practitioners. The team debated and refined their ideas using theoretical concepts from the works of Bruner, Dewey and Vygotsky, for example, to create the key principles of what would eventually become TGfU.

In 1982, the publication of the TGfU model was considered as a historical moment in games education, specifically, games-based approaches (GBAs). The model challenged the existing method of teaching physical education by placing the learner in modified games suitable for their level and experience from the very beginning of the lesson and unit.

Thorpe and Bunker (1989) added four pedagogical principles to the TGfU model.

- Game sampling – exposing students to a wide range of games to explore the similarities and differences.
- Exaggeration – changing the secondary rules of the modified game to create a specific tactical problem.
- Representation – developing modified games that have the same tactical structure of the full version sport. Representation can be further achieved by creating a selection of games with similar tactical problems rather than focusing on a specific sport for a unit, as discussed in the Games Classification System (Thorpe, Bunker and Almond, 1984).
- Tactical complexity – ensuring the modified game is developmentally appropriate for the pupil. As pupils develop their understanding of the tactical problems, the complexity of the game can increase.

Developments

Throughout the 1980s to 2000s, there was a rapid theoretical expansion and global popularisation of TGfU. Researchers have sought to understand the approach and its applicability to numerous theories, for example situated learning, constructivism, schema theory and complexity theory.

The initial TGfU guiding principles have spurred different interpretations and variations across a number of countries with the two most notable being Game Sense (Australia) and the Tactical Games Approach (USA). Others include Play Practice, Tactical Decision Learning Model, Ball School, Invasion Games Competency Model, Game Insight and the Inventing Games Model. Additionally, UK national governing bodies, such as the Football Association and England Hockey, have adopted GBAs.

GBAs have also been integrated with a variety of pedagogical models such as Sport Education (Siedentop, 1994). This hybrid method has encouraged pupils to play modified team games focusing on understanding tactical problems. The pupils then take active roles as seen in realistic sports settings such as officials, coaches, publicists etc.

More recent emerging topics in this field have included the following developments.

- Using the inventing games process to teach pupils about social justice and democracy in action. Teachers can actively provide opportunities to promote citizenship and ethical awareness through games (Butler, 2016).
- GBAs offer a venue for physical educators to foster justice, diversity, equity and inclusion by humanising and creating a *Thirdspace* where all pupils are respected and feel a sense of belonging. Pupils and players create a space where they discuss, solve problems and support each other while teachers and coaches deliberately facilitate the safe learning space (Culp, 2020).
- The Digital Video Games Approach creatively uses key components inherent in video games and applies them within practical modified games (Price and Pill, 2016).
- GBAs and the Spectrum of Teaching Styles: teachers can apply a range of teaching styles to promote holistic learning within games (SueSee, Hewitt and Pill, 2020).

TGfU Special Interest Group

A key development has been the formation of the TGfU Special Interest Group (TGfU SIG). Many researchers and teachers believed there was a need to extend the model theoretically and provide better support for practitioners using GBAs. In 2001, the first TGfU conference was convened at Waterville Valley, New Hampshire, USA with 150 attendees from 17 countries. Through this conference, there was resounding endorsement for the creation of a task force to network and coordinate the development of TGfU.

To promote and sustain international interest in this field, the TGfU Task Force partnered with the Association Internationale des Ecoles Superieures d'Education Physique (AIESEP). With the TGfU movement gaining traction and becoming larger, the TGfU Task Force transitioned into AIESEP's first special interest group and became ratified at the TGfU conference in 2008.



The TGfU SIG is an active international community committed to the promotion and dissemination of knowledge, learning and teaching through GBAs. The SIG holds regular conferences and one-day seminars, contributes to the growing scholarly debates and works closely with the International Advisory Board, comprising 23 countries and a wider global network.

The future

Over the past 40 years, there has been a significant interest and growth for GBAs that has contributed to a variety of pathways and innovations. As the present TGfU Executive Board, we hope that the TGfU community will continue to be a catalyst for change in physical education teaching and learning through sharing as a community of practice, publications and in the dissemination of research and practice.

There are numerous avenues for future progression within GBAs, for example the integration with other scientific disciplines and frameworks, teacher/coach professional development, using games to address equity and social justice, and many more. We are always welcoming and encouraging of practitioners to engage with these key debates to help to meet the demands of the changing physical education landscape.

Throughout 2022, the TGfU SIG community will be celebrating with a variety of events,

including our professional development webinar series, 40th anniversary video project and our forthcoming 40th anniversary edited book. We would like to encourage teachers, coaches and pupils to participate in these events and support our ongoing GBAs movement.

If you would like further information, please contact us on tgfu.info@gmail.com, check out our website www.tgfu.info and follow us on Twitter [@TGfUInfo](https://twitter.com/TGfUInfo) ■



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