Smarter with Games in Physical Education
There are many teaching models available for physical educators to choose from when it comes to games and the ways we use them to achieve our educational aims. Some of the most well known include fundamental motor skills (FMS), teaching games for understanding (TGFU) or game-sense, and sport education (SEPEP). Another model that some teachers may have discovered is that of Teaching for Personal and Social Responsibility in PE (TPSR). Another used intermittently by many teachers is that of involving students in creating and developing games (CDG). Each of these models or ways of teaching has a different emphasis, and each emphasis has value. But these models are often presented to teachers as resources sitting on a library shelf, leaving the PE teacher thinking that they must choose between them. Should I use FMS or TGFU or both? Should I base my program on SEPEP or one of the others? What is TPSR and how do I use that? If I have my students involved in CDG, wouldn’t this just be a fun diversion?

This article will present to readers a way of using these gaming models so that the strengths of each model contribute to a larger unit. Such a unit would be a project structured in four interconnected parts: Team, Game, Season, Practice.

Gaining a sense of the big picture is the best way to begin. Students should be organized carefully into four teams that will be involved in the process of making games, eventually contributing to the development of a class game. This class game will then be played in a season of games, with the emphasis during the season being on improving team performance via practice; Team; game; season; practice; underpinned by FMS, TGFU, SEPEP, TPSR and CDG.

It is important that the teams are constructed carefully. Usually four teams work well and provide a good number for a season of games. It is crucial that the students in each team can work well together, and that an even competition during the season is possible. Many professional sporting competitions, such as the AFL, have developed strategies like player drafts and salary caps, aimed at maintaining evenness across the competition. This is especially important in a competition involving students where the teams will remain together for a significant length of time.

As in any team sport, being a good team member is a very important aspect of engagement and participation. This can be facilitated using the TPSR model: a series of levels that the students become familiar with, and self-assess against in relation to their teamwork at the end of every lesson. The lower levels represent problematic students: poor team members. The higher levels represent those students participating and contributing. The more team members there are in the higher levels, the better that team will be able to function in all aspects of the project – not least in playing the game.

With teams organized, games can now be created and developed. The teacher plays a crucial role here in setting the criteria which the students must adhere to in making their games. The teacher can determine the specific skills, possibly from the FMS framework, that must be included in the game. The teacher then provides a set of equipment for each team that will broadly enable this skill to be displayed. This equipment is identical for each team and may include basic items such as cones, balls, hoops (often used for goals), beanbags, and so on. Depending on class size and the age of students, often a basketball court is all that is needed as a class space. The court is divided into four areas for game planning, one quarter for each team. When games are to be played between two teams, half the court will be used, enabling two games to be played at once on the court.

The timing of the game can be worked out roughly at this stage, becoming clearer as things progress, but should ideally involve two halves, allowing teams to regroup and discuss strategies between halves.

Other criteria reflect the students’ own playing of games at recess and lunchtimes, as well as at home. Keeping these contexts in mind, the game must involve all participants playing the game all the time (no one sitting out); and of course, the game must be safe. Of prime importance, the game must be able to be played without an umpire and should be easy to score. Unlike the aspect of SEPEP that has students taking on different roles as individuals, this game has everyone umpiring, scoring, coaching and captaining, just like during recess. This removes the teacher from the typical role of umpire.

Taking the teacher off center stage is a central aspect of the project, as it enables the teacher to accomplish more important things to do with teaching and learning, such as attending to particular questions, offering suggestions, and so on. To achieve this situation a well behaved class is required. This is where TPSR comes into its own, emphasizing being a great team member.

Students often find it difficult to begin when creating a game as there are so many possibilities. The key is to get them trying out an idea as soon as possible. Once they are trying something out, the team has something to critique and to improve. When each team has decided upon a rough game, they can test their game to an opposing team and try to play it. Once players in the team learning the game have a basic understanding of the game, the teams switch learning and teaching roles, trying out the other team’s game. In this way all four teams are occupied, with two games in play at once, using half the court for each game.

Each team has now learnt one game and should perform a pen and paper review of this game, structured around the criteria used to make the games: incorporation of skill, full participation, safety, easy rules to manage and score, and the essential element of fun. This feedback could be incorporated into a team’s efforts to improve their game in the next lesson. The teams can go repeat the process of teaching the game (this time improved) to one of the other teams, and get further feedback via review. This process should continue over successive lessons until teams have taught versions of their game to all of the other teams, and experienced versions of the other team’s games. After each lesson.

By John Quay
students are self-assessing regarding their contributions to the team via TPSR levels.

Next is one of the more difficult aspects of the project: moving from four team games to one class game, allowing a ‘season’ to be organized. Again the teacher is of crucial importance, as elements of these four games must be brought together in one complete game, acknowledging the work of each team. There is little point in voting on the game of choice, as voting always leaves students behind, detracting markedly from student engagement in the upcoming season. It is also unusual that all teams would unanimously select one of the games. The teacher should know each game and take some time to think about various options, always keeping in mind the educational objectives, such as practice of a particular skill and participation. It is also important that the game can be played fairly when teams are slightly uneven, such as when a student is absent. As team membership is such a meaningful aspect of the project, selecting one student from each team to make up numbers is another is not an option. It would be like asking Ricky Ponting to join the English cricket side because one of their players was injured!

While it might appear that there is pressure on the teacher to select a good game, really, this responsibility is shared as there should be a few lessons spent trialling this game and reviewing and improving it. This process will also assist the teams in fully learning the game and allow the students to take ownership of it as a class game. When the rules of the game are more settled, a season can be contemplated, always remembering that rules can still be tweaked throughout a season – as they are in most sports, even sports that are more than a hundred years old!

The easiest way to structure a season is as a round robin, although it is interesting to contemplate other fixture structures, such as used in tennis, or boxing. A ladder should also be kept. Points accrued could be as follows: 10 for a win, eight for a draw and six for a loss.

The longer the season goes, the more meaningful it is and the more opportunities exist for practice and improvement, the main aim of the project. Introducing a two or three game season would not be worthwhile, so it should be kept in mind that more games means less pressure to win a particular game, as there will be the next game to work towards. This mitigates the negative effects of competition and instead harnesses the positive influence competition can have.

While students will be focused on the games, the benefit for teaching is that students are keen to be involved in practice. Professional sporting teams spend more hours practicing than playing in competition.

A similar structure can be used with strategies. Teams can identify strategies as simple as calling out for the ball, or creating space, or even set plays, that can be developed using role plays and practice games. Fitness is another obvious contributor to team success. Teams can determine activities which can help them monitor and improve their individual fitness levels. And teamwork is never far from the minds of the students as they continue to self-assess using TPSR at the end of each lesson. All of these skill, strategy, fitness and teamwork ideas can be documented and shared, all contributing in both formative and summative ways to assessment.

As the season progresses and more practice is engaged in, improvement should remain the main goal. A finals series can be a culmination to the season, although the emphasis should not only be placed on the winners, but primarily on improvement.

Remember: Team, Game, Season, Practice.

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