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Abstract	By ensuring the teaching environment provides authentic learning experiences, there is a greater likelihood of broadening student's view of actual 'life situations' and the skills required. The inclusion therefore of active play in developing effective children's sport coaches was achieved through experiential learning. This exploration recalls the impact of 'revisiting' of play, the games used and the associated emotions which emerged from adopting a learning through play philosophy.	
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# 4

## Exploration: 'I Learned to Play Again' The Integration of Active Play as a Learning Experience for Sports Coaching Undergraduates

Richard Cheetham

Nine thirty am, tea and coffee alongside informal introductions and then it began. A ninety-minute play workshop for sports coaches with my main goal to change the 'temperature' in the room from a reserved cold blue to an expressive, freethinking red hot where adults gradually took their 'protective self-conscious armour' off and returned to that energising play-ground of activity, imagination, spontaneity and laughter. The session was designed to highlight the essence and value of play integrated into coaching delivery by reinforcing the transfer of learning, development of skills and the heightened levels of engagement that can be achieved. More structured instruction, an emphasis on the technical and tactical aspects as players' progress from the early stages of skill acquisition in sport comes at the expense of play. I do not believe it should be an 'either or' scenario. The 'play sales pitch' was about to begin! So after initially being met with caution and scepticism, I remember distinctly reflecting with the group afterwards that I had just seen that same group of adults playing a game

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(with great intensity and engagement) which they created called butterflies or flowers! Playfulness 1, Fear 0, what a result!

A playful approach to teaching was always something I wanted to adopt more, break a few rules and move away from a more 'traditional and linear' style of delivery. My belief in its importance in teaching and coaching had become further shaped after a series of conference presentations on the subject to National Governing Bodies of Sport (NGBs). The concept of play may have been relegated to the childhood years of the delegates and now regarded as an unaffordable luxury in an increasingly formalised approach to education. Yet through their work, the NGBs were influencing the sport and physical education experiences of children with curriculum and programme development as well as delivery. This is where play content (integral to a child's physical and emotional development) is essential. I felt there was a need therefore to create an authentic recreation of play and playfulness in these sessions so they could revisit the associated emotions and then be more able to connect with its importance, value and impact. It is entirely possible to 'flick this switch' by asking a group of adults to imagine something, anything and then draw it on a piece of A4 paper. Oh and one rule—that the paper is placed on their head while they draw! Then to set them the task of guessing what one another has drawn. Trust me, it is one of the simplest ideas but the wheels of playfulness have been put into motion.

Runco (2014: 62) highlighted that 'the loss of unstructured experiences is the direct result of increases in structured experiences in formalized and organised sport'. Robinson (2006: 94) endorses this view from an educational perspective where he believes 'the exile of play is one of the great tragedies of standardised education'. It is through my role at the University that I feel able to influence redressing this balance in coach education. For participants, play is a critical learning tool and not an 'end of session reward'. I want there to be more 'play advocates' as a result of the undergraduate degree programme.

I first integrated an experiential learning approach to the Coaching Children through Play element of a final year practical module for University of Winchester Sports Coaching undergraduates. Each Friday I would take the students out of the lecture room to the nearby playground where they experimented by bringing a series of children's stories to life



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through movement. Frogs jumping off lily pads, pirates balancing on stormy seas and witches taking off on their broomsticks became the playful way to teach fundamental movement skills. The sessions began analysing the narrative, the characters and their characteristics in order to integrate them into a moving story. It was their playful imagination and creativity which directed the teaching and learning and I felt very strongly about its inclusion. The degree course seeks to prepare students for a predominantly vocational career and 'authenticity' in the study experience is at the heart of my teaching philosophy. Rod Judkins stated 'The future belongs to those who can reconnect with play. It is the child in you that is creative not the adult' (2016: 92). I did not want those who can influence a child's early learning experience in sport and physical activity to be without some opportunity to develop their play expertise on the degree programme. I sought to unearth the dormant feelings of childlike behaviour.

From an educational perspective, the value of recreating a playful learning environment for students was an opportunity to break free from a more 'normalised' approach to studies. As many of those involved in this programme will pursue a career in teaching and coaching sport to children of all ages therefore I felt it would be invaluable to revisit play and not only try and see it through their eyes but 'experience it'.

Pritchard (2009: 115) focusses thoughts on the restructured educational setting away from 'conventional' to one where 'knowledge creation comes from personal experiences, collaborative work, active learning and movement'. It is this break from convention where the coaching module structure proved to be so worthwhile because the students generated ideas together. They compared dragons with gorillas, showed how crocodiles moved, how flamingos ate their dinner and shipwreck survivors collected treasure from the other side of a hot lava stream.

It was also important the students did not feel this was a *one-man crusade* to change the way they were taught but one that has had clear underpinning rationale. Forencich (2006: 199) referred to the inclusion of play as 'authentic engagement with the real world'. Kaufman and Gregoire (2016: 10) believe that as 'adults, cultivating a childlike sense of play can revolutionise the way we work' in an increasingly play deficient society. And Brown (2015: 207) discusses the benefits of recalling our 'play history' encouraging spending some time revisiting moments

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from childhood ‘things that got you really excited’. Play can be an individual or shared multisensory, memorable experience and I sought to foster an environment where recollections could elicit smiles and laughter as individuals felt transported back in time. I found these play recollections were experiences full of stories, activities, the games they (the students) invented and the friends they played with. The importance of a reflection on the sessions was to highlight (by recalling these experiences) the freedom, the imagination, the lack of boundaries and adventure. This could then shape and influence their approach to coaching as an appreciation of the transfer of learning that becomes evident in purposeful developmental experiences. I believe this was one of the key outcomes—the relationship between the relevance of the play experience to the sport skills required created a realisation of its worth and its potential as a coaching approach.

The following examples are three play interventions which were developed. Included with their content, rationale is some feedback from the groups.

### Musical Chairs .... Without Music and Without Chairs

The safe ‘building of a scrum’ in Rugby Union can be a challenge to coach and for the participant to learn the skill effectively. Posture, balance and accuracy of technique are the real building blocks required and ones that need to be reinforced. This was taught through an imagined musical chairs game. One without music, without (real) chairs and without anyone being excluded. As the coach calls out ‘stop’ to the group, they sit on an ‘imagined’ chair (the basis for a squat position often referred to as the ‘tower of power’). Select people each time to have ‘lost’ their chair so they have to combine (bind) with another to form an ‘imagined’ two seater sofa. As more chairs are taken away groups of three (a three seater sofa) are established. The one in the middle binds on to those either side (now we have a hooker—the position of the player in the middle in the front row of the scrum). They then ‘sit’ as they did individually at the beginning. The squat position, the stability and the posture are gradually being learnt (Fig. 4.1).



Fig. 4.1 Musical chairs without chairs



## Balloon Waterfalls

As my 6-year-old daughter Kitty spotted a leftover birthday party balloon in the corner of her room, she embarked upon ‘avoid going to bed syndrome’ and clearly exploited her dad’s softer side. *See how many times you can keep the balloon up before it hits the floor Daddy!* Thirty minutes of fun and laughter in this activity and other balloon game adaptations sowed the seeds for ideas as I observed some of those wonderful play characteristics—simplicity, creativity, skill acquisition and the chance to strengthen the parent–child bond. The bonding between coach and participant can also be enhanced by providing activities with similar characteristics. The adoption of these simple ideas has led to a series of remarkable ‘eye-openers’ in the world of play within teaching at the university. The first session with third-year undergraduates was akin to a noisy child’s birthday party. I watched the students play with the balloons in an improvised game they called ‘balloon waterfalls’—a challenging game with movement, collaboration and decision making. ‘*Don’t let any of these raindrops (balloons) hit the floor*’ one exclaimed as more and more were inflated and added to the melee in the sports hall. Each person could only inflate a second balloon if they kept the first in the air at all times (no holding onto it allowed). A real aerobic warm-up alongside developing fine and gross motor skills (Fig. 4.2).

My observation focussed on recognising the intensity and style of play elements—the level of enjoyment (seeing their faces, hearing their voices); the interaction and connection between one another in the group; the persistence with the game and their eagerness to play and finally the creative ways with which they approached their challenge.

Critically the teaching session allowed time for a period of reflection afterwards through a group discussion. What did we all observe, how did we all feel, what was that playful world like and *why* were they asked to play?

Freedom, you just allowed us to play, to get on with it.....we made up the rules

I remember how simple it all is (*play*), you just gave us a pack of balloons and we were off, I was surprised how quickly everyone felt so comfortable with the games



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Fig. 4.2 Balloon waterfalls





My kids (*coaching group*) will see another side of me next week.....they think I will be like one of them....hopefully! I understand this more now, at first I thought you were just sharing an idea but now you have shared a philosophy!

## The Bangkok Traffic Jam

Let me share a third example of how play was introduced with the new intake of first-year coaching undergraduates who were learning the importance of enhancing physical literacy. The session required a change of behaviour and 'status' from adult to child in an environment where a scenario was set in a Bangkok traffic jam. A chaotic movement of cars seemingly driving without any adherence to rules or traffic control! A limited space was set up (10 m square), students pretended to be cars moving from a walk to a run, changing direction (agility), stopping at imagined lights (the ability to stop quickly as well as accelerate in invasion games such as rugby is an essential skill and rarely taught) and then drove under 'low bridges' (a skipping rope attached to two badminton posts) to challenge their mobility skills. Every so often an animal would escape from the zoo into the traffic, with the group copying their movement patterns. A silverback gorilla impression was used to teach the foundation of good posture, a kangaroo to jump and land softly and a flamingo on one leg a perfect example of balance. The group chose more to add to the story from frogs to crocodiles and eagles to lions. Play really did foster and fuel creative thinking. Someone called out '*a sloth has escaped*' but I think it was when they grew tired! And so they played on, learning movement skills disguised in play. The significant and interesting aspect that emerged from the students feedback was that they were willing play participants: 'Can we do this every week?' **AQ8**

The students and I were richer for what was learnt and what can be achieved through and understanding 'powerful play'. Children have the 'expertise' of play as they are more often immersed in it, unaffected by the constraints that accompany the 'growing up process' and are able to fully experience its freedom and joy. The distancing from play that is a consequence of moving from a child to an adult was highlighted



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by Brooks (2011). In his book *The Social Animal*, he describes an enthusiastic father wishing to join in with his young son's games. His inadequacy at playing was such that it was compared to an amateur basketball player trying to scrimmage with the best team in the NBA (National Basketball Association). He was no match in the play domain, needing to be instead liberated from formality and routine in order to embrace what was required.

So with this in mind, what would be the consequences of not paying attention to the role of play and its benefits through a formal educational setting learning? For those about to enter an environment where expertise in play is essential the preparation needs to be our responsibility. It requires all of us involved to develop a greater empathy to a child's view of the world and one which 'begins by recognising in ourselves the emotions that others are feeling and how we would feel in the same circumstances' (Robinson 2015: 78).

The observations from all the activities encouraged students to think about using 'play' more in their coaching. These play sessions enhanced their motivation to learn and develop creativity as the learning environment removed any perceived fear of failure and encouraged trial and error. For example, the Bangkok traffic jam had speed bumps, road works and one way street by the end of the practical coaching session! The enhancement of motor skills can be and were developed through play—balloons can be unpredictable by developing spontaneous, challenging and reactive movement patterns. Play proved to be an excellent way for the coach to connect with the group. Children are more likely to engage with a coach who provides enjoyable, fun and engaging sessions.

These findings from a pedagogical perspective with this approach to learning can be 'justified' when in the right context and vindicated when designing learning opportunities in Higher Education for undergraduates. Butcher et al. (2006) consider that the educational intent of those leading and teaching on programmes should be to develop transferable skills which are authentic, realistic and appropriate. Effective teaching can include providing 'new material as a quality learning experience' and 'changing the classroom dynamic' (2006: 87). These observations can support the opportunity for embedding 'play' into



this environment which encourages students to see something in a completely different way.

The contribution of experiential learning through the inclusion of play activities offers an opportunity where a 'base for learning is broadened' (Toohey 2002: 102) as the foundations and fundamentals of sport skills begin to be developed. Knowles (1984) reflects on the '...importance of organising learning experiences around life situations rather than according to subject matter units' (cited in Toohey 2002: 59). What will the students need to be prepared best for and how can lectures provide these conditions as near as possible in their teaching.

Reflections on the integration and promotion of activities, formal or informal, which promote and develop playfulness of coaches, teachers and other educational leaders, could have a positive and profound effect on professional practice in Higher Education. Our coaching styles and approach can be a projection of how we learnt, how we were coached and what we believe is expected of us. Perhaps our experiences lacked the opportunity and outlet to play but it is not a reason why this should not be part of a more creative and broader thinking coaching philosophy. Should there ever be doubt about considering the use of play then these activities describe can provide some of the evidence to support it's worth and inclusion. Bassok et al. (2016: 1) highlight 'a focus on an academic content might crowd out other important types of learning experiences' but this is in reference to a shift in the balance primary education. If play is crowded out in these early years then there could be even more need to find a place for it in higher education teaching. So be a silverback gorilla and fill your balloons as it's not just child's play! After all, it was once said that growing up is inevitable, growing up is optional.

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