

Feminist directions for Teaching Games for Understanding (TGfU) Movement

In 1949, Simone de Beauvoir famously said that *if the body is not a thing, it is a situation*, as she framed the human body as a complex structure (composed of muscle, bone, brain, memory and affect) situated in other structures (gender, class, race, history, and power). As de Beauvoir went on to note, the body is *our grasp on the world and the outline for our projects*. It is through the body that we think, feel, and perceive.

It is an odd and (as I will argue) unfortunate circumstance that Physical Education has clung so tightly to the old binary set by Descartes between the body and the mind. We have focused too exclusively on the *education of the body* (as if it were a thing) and thus failed to pay sufficient attention to *education through the body* (as if it were a situation). As Kirk (1996) and his colleagues and Kudlacek (2009) have suggested, this insistence on dualism has “diminished the educational status of PE” and hindered our collaborations with other subject areas. I suggest that it has also blinded us to the cultural impact of sociopolitical context on our students, and particularly our girls. I illustrate this here with a simple example – the business of throwing.

The motor development literature shows a 49% difference in throwing performance between genders (Nelson et al., 1991), even in pre-pubescent children when there is no anatomical difference.

Over fifty years ago, Strauss (1966) explained this ‘remarkable’ throwing difference as the result of women and girls’ general weakness and ineffectuality. He saw the female body as a *thing*, and a lesser thing at that.

It took another feminist writing from the field of phenomenology to counteract this mechanistic perspective. In 1990, Iris Young offered an alternative explanation in her article *Throwing Like a Girl*. She pointed out that the throwing effectiveness of women and girls has been impacted by cultural norms, as females are socialized not to take up too much space, a message that is so deeply entrenched that it has become almost invisible until one takes an objective look around a subway car.

Though Young’s conclusion seems inescapable, it has not been taken up in the literature from our field, with only a few notable exceptions. Frederickson and Harrison (2005), for instance, found that the higher girls’ score in self-objectification, the lower they score in terms of motor skills. In other words, when girls see their bodies from a third-person perspective, they treat themselves as things to be judged by others. Put simply, they ask “How do I look?” instead of “What am I capable of?” or “How do I feel?”

Yet these last questions, which speak to agency and engagement, are the very questions considered by the founders of TGfU back in the 1960s. Bunker, Thorpe and Almond worked closely with practitioners, and their research was firmly based upon their observation of student’s lived experiences. The movement was thus constructed to better promote such things as equal access, engagement, connection, and agency, as witnessed by this extract from *Rethinking Games Teaching*, first published in 1986:

“We were teaching PE in schools where the skill-based approach was much in evidence. And we were unhappy with the results of our work; so many youngsters seemed to be getting nowhere – very little ‘progress’ was being made and not surprisingly, interest soon waned. Surely there was something better for the majority of our classes?” p.5

As we thus revisit this aim – to provide something better for the majority of students – I conclude by reminding readers that girls, who make up half of our student population, tend to drop out of organized games earlier, and yet have been subsumed and conflated in our research. Harvey and Jarrett (2013) in their summary of games centered approaches (GCA) research found only six studies on gender from 2006-2013.

I would like to suggest that we forefront both gender as crucial cultural issues. If we believe, as the founders did that TGfU is not just a means of helping our students become effective games players, but also a way to help them become active, engaged citizens in a sustainable global community, then it's time to think more carefully about issues of social justice, including gender and race.

As our Canadian Prime Minister, Justin Trudeau, said when asked about his gender-balanced cabinet, "It's time, because it's 2015." If our world is to become sustainable, we need to empower women and girls across the globe. "Start with women, and everyone rises," says Sophie Noonan, Country Director of The Hunger Project UK. "Empowering women and girls is key to our global efforts to end hunger."

We are ideally placed to do our part by making games available and attractive to all our students, including our girls.

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