



# Understanding tennis learning: Reflective considerations on tennis learning theoretical underpinnings.

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## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to reflect on some issues that lie under the surface of tennis learning. Such reflective actions are suggested to deepen our understandings towards our practice and lead to effective tennis coaching.

**Key words:** Coaching, Skill-based approach, Game-based approach, Learning metaphors, Reflection.

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## INTRODUCTION

Coaching as a profession combines knowledge from several disciplines such as physiology, biomechanics, psychology, sociology and others and it has been characterised as 'evolutionary in status' (Abraham & Collins, 2011). Given the broad scientific base of the profession, different perspectives are possible, however, certain commonalities between the teaching and coaching profession have been explicitly underlined (Armour, 2011). This means that the young learner's needs are placed at the centre and the coach is to serve those needs. The tennis coaching profession does not constitute an exception, similarly to teaching in general, it situates the young learner at the core within the tennis learning context. As it has been claimed, 'the primary job of a tennis coach is not solely to teach tennis, but to help their students to learn it' (Roetert & Crespo, 2002). Following this stance, there is a focus on the coaching profession as a profession which encounters a teaching and pedagogical orientation. As such, understanding what learning means to children and young athletes is crucial for the profession. Below are some theoretical basis of current research on learning is presented and the reader is invited to reflect on how this theory implicates on her or his own practice.

## PERSPECTIVES ON LEARNING AND LINKS TO TENNIS

In recent years in tennis teaching and coaching, tennis experts have advocated a shift from skill-based approaches which focus on specific aspects of the sport, to a more game-based approach which are closely related to the sport as a playing situation. As Pankhurst (2013) suggests, a tennis coach should emphasise, instead of 'what' skills to teach, on 'how' children

learn skills. The former question is related to specific elements of the sport, which the athlete has to acquire and then transfer into playing situations. The latter one lays upon the idea that learning is a complex process for the whole person and teaching and coaching focus on creating a learning context in which the athlete is situated and develops her or his sporting ability. There are obvious links between skill-based approaches to the 'what' question and respectively game-based approaches to the 'how' question. Furthermore, since 'how' to teach is addressed as more important compared to 'what' to teach (Pankhurst, 2013), it comes as no surprise the suggested shift from skill-based to game-based approaches.

It might be helpful to make some reflective comments on how learning is viewed by these two approaches. The idea behind this reflection is to deepen the theoretical understanding of learning processes, something that will have a substantial influence on practice (Abraham & Collins, 2011; Timperley, 2008).

The research field of learning draws upon a debate of two metaphors of learning, 'the acquisition metaphor' and 'the participation metaphor' (Sfard, 1998). Viewing learning as acquisition implies that the learning object is to be transferred to the learner through a cognitive process. This is a traditional view that learning and a skill-based approach are theoretically underpinned by this view. On the other hand, the participation metaphor, which has been more recently evolved, considers learning as a social process and thus focuses on the learning context. Recent studies into tennis coaching support that a game-based approach underlines the necessity of implicit learning (Barrell, 2013; Buszard, Reid, Farrow, & Masters, 2013;

Iserbyt, Madou, Vergauwen, & Behets, 2011; Pankhurst, 2013; Zmajic, 2013). Through reflecting on this implicit learning function while teaching tennis, it could be claimed that the tennis coach is expected to limit direct instructions and create a learning environment in which children can experiment in playing tennis (Barrell, 2013). Given this idea, the game-based approach theoretically flows along with the participation metaphor of learning. Moreover, such approaches seem to agree with the pedagogical orientation of the coaching profession as it was set out in the first paragraph of this paper.



The explanations presented above are considered as stimuli and to initiate self-reflection for tennis coaches. Such a thoughtful approach towards the profession as practitioners who coach children, deepens our pedagogical understanding, supports our theoretical background and integrates it with practice. These practices should be a priority within the coaching and teaching professions (Abraham & Collins, 2011; Timperley, 2008).



## CONCLUSION

The issue between a skill-based or a game-based approach gains a deeper perspective. It is claimed that this deepening in teaching professions, coaching being one of these, is the 'basis for making on-going, principled decisions about practice' (Timperley, 2008). The two metaphors of learning respond to a broad theoretical debate. Deepening understanding towards these underpinnings and what lies behind the methods being used, empowers coaches in their task

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