

Group Project

Acquisition of close-up magic skills

INTRODUCTION

What are the main principles behind learning? This project will attempt to analyse and evaluate different methods of learning so that a justifiable conclusion can be drawn as to what actually effects and improves individual and group learning. The selected activity to be learnt by our group is close up magic. After brainstorming all the possibilities this was chosen as a couple of people had had limited experience, but were willing to progress, and the others despite being novices were interested but most importantly for learning, motivated.

The art of magic is obviously quite broad, so therefore offers scope for learning but should be straightforward to evaluate. If we are to define the process of learning as the absorption of information that is subsequently reflected by behaviour, by the end of this particular task the behaviour concerned will be an assortment of magic tricks that can be performed with skill, spontaneity and confidence. To assist with individual learning it is vital that external information sources exist, as this is again why learning magic should be relatively successful. From our own knowledge we can rely on material from books, the Internet and possibly videos. This is in addition to our previous experiences and knowledge that can be demonstrated and learnt on a group level. The overriding importance of this project is not necessarily to be able to perform the skill with complete success but instead identify different learning (and also teaching) processes and evaluate their effectiveness. These may be for example group work, individual research, lecturing from one individual to the group or through the use of visual aids such as a video or handout. All of which are current methods of learning but undoubtedly they'll all have varying degrees of practicality within this context.

Initial thoughts on this project lead towards the fact that it will be a challenge and that roles and identities within the group have already been constructed. This is perhaps a result of a more streamlined teaching method by which someone with a skill demonstrates and the group attempts to emulate this. I believe this will only be an initial style, and as people's knowledge broadens and group dynamics change, other learning methods will have to be adopted. The importance of the teacher within this particular context is perhaps paramount as Underwood writes in respect to the idea of a self-fulfilling prophecy, 'assume that the aspirations of the pupil, their work rate and their attempts to achieve skill will be linked to the expectations of the teacher'. We also believe that the acquisition of this particular skill is not going to be as straightforward as 'input, process, output' something theorized within pedagogy. For magic a certain base level of ability is required and although one may be aware of the skill; it requires much practice to co-ordinate this with a sufficient amount of ability, especially when the difference between success and failure is so minimal.

To summarise, we believe this project should be productive in the sense that the skill we have chosen will not only give itself to the use of various learning methods but also highlight how individual perception varies and how these are either successful or have to be overcome. Operating in a small group there will also be varying degrees of coherence in terms of using new and untested learning strategies. As Huber writes, 'if students are able to tolerate an uncertain instructional situation, in which they are confronted with a variety of sometimes even controversial perspectives, they will be more motivated to achieve in this situation'. If a person within the group believes that they are unable to perform or learn the skill through a certain method it requires a strategy of teaching and learning in order to resolve the problem, something that we will hope to achieve. The final emphasis must be upon the learner, their conceptual understanding, perception, decision-making and technique execution. All aspects that are required if the acquisition of a skill is to be successful.

METHOD

Planning and strategy can be deemed as the key to learning. Therefore the method by which we conducted this project was vital to obtaining any degree of success. The first time we met we identified that only two group members had previously performed magic tricks. Initially we decided to progress in a strategic fashion. Following the group brainstorming to establish a suitable focus for the project we felt the next step should offer the opportunity for individual exploration, an introductory opportunity, often suitable when entering a new field so that people can naturally identify their own capabilities. Subsequently we decided that each member of the group would learn a trick in their own time in between meetings. The idea was followed that we would meet together twice a week and teach the learnt trick to each other. Planning would ensure this is done using different teaching styles to maximise a pedagogic awareness. Some members of the group possessed limited experience and this may aid the practically in the learning of new skills by offering a degree of freedom within a learner centred context.

We decided to plan in advance of each group session that we would try and implement a different teaching style to identify which methods were most effective for performer learning. People are idiosyncratic to the way in which they learn most effectively. One person may learn better when practising alone. Another may prefer to learn with others in a group with additional, external stimulus. We knew this prior to the project so it was always vital to use different teaching styles to discover and evaluate subsequent individual responses.

There are 3 different learning styles we could use. People may use a visual learning style, one that offers most suitability if a major component of the material or lesson is something they can see or watch. This learner works best with written material and instructions, diagrams, posters, and demonstrations. This could be used in the tricks demonstrations where the learner will just watch a demonstration and store an image of the process involved in their brain. People may also use an auditory

learning style, these learners learn best if there is an oral component to the material being learned. This would include verbal instructions and face-to-face instruction work. Finally people could have a kinaesthetic or tactile learning style, they learn best when they can touch or feel what they are learning about. A more hands on approach such as this, in theory, is likely to work most effectively when learning magic tricks.

We will also be evaluating the actual teaching styles used throughout and after each session. We will be implementing and determining the effectiveness of autocratic styles, paternalistic styles and democratic styles. An autocratic style was where efficiency was paramount, revolving around direct instruction from the teacher to a passive learner. This could work well with a simplistic skill, one in which a simple explanation is sufficient for the individual to be able to proceed and practice alone. The democratic style is where the teacher is still in charge but they react positively to the learner's ideas, desires and needs. When exploring the complexity of magic skills, this perhaps may be most appropriate, allowing people to express any problems or limitations they may have. A paternalistic style is where the teacher is still in charge and the learners give their ideas to the teacher, but essentially the teacher makes the final decision, it is a medium between democratic and autocratic. Each style will be used and possibly developed. One session may involve a combination of styles in order to achieve the most positive result. We may also consider using reciprocal and task methods of learning to offer a degree of flexibility to the learning phase by shifting the session towards a more learner based context. Furthermore if the circumstance errant it, guided discovery may be a way of encouraging individual initiative, an issue that may be appropriate considering the maturity of the group.

In order to learn the skills effectively it is useful to be aware of a target, for example an ability level to be obtained within the time allocation. The Fitts and Posner theory (1967) proposed the phases of learning model. They suggested that there are three main stages of learning; The Cognitive phase the Associative phase and the Autonomous phase. When we learn a trick or any other skill we will inevitably pass through these stages. A cognitive learner will demonstrate the trick with limited confidence and subsequently the quality of the final product will be low. In the associative stage the magician will use environmental cues with the task requirements. As a target all should achieve the associate phase. It means that all members, as regards the basics of magic can offer a good understanding and certain (possibly less complex) skills and tricks can be demonstrated with confidence. Any good magician will be in the autonomous phase as they can execute the trick easily and effectively. With magic tricks the performer has to be in one of the later stages as the tricks are often complicated and often with the audience in such close proximity the difference between success and failure is very slim. So the performer has to be confident, proficient, and precise in order to obtain success. Furthermore learning in this environment is not merely skill based, and we consider each session as being multi-dimensional. One person will learn about other members' abilities, their personalities, efficient teaching and learning methods and aspects regarding context, a concept known as reflexivity.

A benefit of learning magic tricks is that there is not much equipment required and there is also no shortage of information available. Most of our tricks will be playing card based. We will gather information from several resources. This could be from

books, the Internet, videos, and also previous knowledge of group members or people outside the group who are competent with certain magic skills.

It is inevitable that each session will facilitate variable difficulties, an issue that is common within all learning situations and something that will offer a challenge to the teacher or the group as a whole. One of these problems is varying ability of each group member; some of the group may be more confident which brings with it the adoption of unintentional social roles such as that of 'leader'. The formation of personas shouldn't always be viewed as detrimental and can often offer a format by which the group operates much more dynamically. The aim is to teach three to four tricks each session. It should not be assumed that practically each of these will be learnt by every member every time but what should be seen as vital is that the theory is communicated clearly so that the basics to each skill can be taken away.

Another potential problem is the time allocation. Magic tricks are often technical, such as sleight of hand, and therefore difficult to perform, thus requiring adequate learning time in order for the performer to make the trick appear impressive. The precise nature of this skill means that a small gap exists between success and failure with the performer usually having just one opportunity to amaze their audience. It is doubtful whether sufficient time exists to develop a wide range of magic skills. As Carroll (1963) writes, 'the learner will succeed in a learning task if s/he is given opportunity and allowed sufficient time to engage actively'. This will have to be one issue that is taken into account by the teaching strategies. The key to succeeding within this task of learning is that of perception, ensuring that this is positive will lead to higher levels of motivation, interest and co-operation.

RESULTS

During this extensive learning period, looking into the acquisition of magic skills, the group has attempted to experiment with numerous learning and teaching approaches. In an attempt to gain an associative or possibly autonomous approach to magic each session has attempted to explore a different side to learning. Inevitably the degrees of success were variable and it was often the case that flexibility was required in order to adopt the learning method to suit the context. Being an individual skill kinaesthetic information was important accompanied by visual observations, this type of feedback often determined the course of each session.

Undoubtedly each member of the group learnt differently and acquired different levels of skill with each magic trick attempted. Often learning was multi-dimensional and other aspects such as other member's skills and abilities were also learnt in addition to the magic itself. A summary of each individuals learning progress can be offered:

- Mark – Learnt most efficiently through practical demonstrations, something deemed successful for learning cognitive skills. It was felt that confidence

increased through both adopting and attempting different learning methods and with the magic itself.

- Will – Learning was achieved by both a guided and task approach. A clear associative level had been achieved in many of the magic tricks, through mainly being directed by the teacher and then enhancing on this knowledge with practical experimentation.
- Jo – Another context where confidence was increased dramatically as the acquisition of certain skills became more competent. Here a command style was possibly felt to be most effective. This may have been due to limited previous experience in terms of magic but with step-by-step guidance offered ability was greatly improved. Reflexively learning was evident within this environment with the learner, in addition to the skill, realising their own ability and which skills they can effectively adopt.
- Alex – Again a guided discovery method was thought to be most effective. Previous knowledge and experience was already present and it was a case of extending this through individual research. In order to extend the level of ability to an autonomous phase it was important that the skill could be performed and adopted to various environments, this is something that continues to be worked upon.

The approaches that worked best and were most effective when encouraging learning all included clear interpersonal communication. It was also important that any individual learning and experimentation was followed by group consultation. This meant that success was shared and the group learned further. It is possible to justify that reciprocal and guided styles perhaps were most advantageous, possibly because this is very much as individual skill that requires much practise. The group composition must also be taken into account and as the style of learning must relatively reflect the levels of maturity, this stimulates interest. Kinaesthetics feedback continued to be vital as regards individual practise but as the skill usually involves an audience visual feedback determined by other members was just as important. From a teacher's perspective, 'understanding formative assessment and feedback can be used to promote learning' and similarly it has been foreseen that one 'needs to address ways in which teachers can adopt reliable and rigorous ways of evaluating their day to day teaching' (Mortimore, 1999). It is important to judge the complexity of any skill related to the base level ability of the group to avoid the formation of any negative perceptions.

One difficulty was the initial lack of confidence due to the complexity of several of the skills. It was also found that when using learning sheets further interpersonal communication was required by the group leader in order to refine the techniques. Certain roles within the group can also be destructive. It is important in contexts to maintain a liberal, democratic situation rather than individuals adopting 'leader' personas. It should also be noted that if a skill is perceived as being too simplistic the group could become de-motivated.

In conclusion effective methods of teaching and learning were identified for this specific context. Negative issues arose and were subsequently avoided as much as humanly possible. All learners should always be considered on an individual basis and the teaching process should be flexible in order to adapt to this.

DISCUSSION

The group task of learning a variety of basic magic tricks has made us realise and think in more detail about learning processes and strategies and how individuals are affected by the way in which they learn, or the way in which the medium is taught. There is no right or wrong way of learning a skill or teaching. However, for particular tasks, there are methods and styles that are more effective than others. We especially noticed this with the magic tricks, as they required a certain level of complexity, which was often proportionate to the specificity of how the skill needed to be taught.

A very important task in this project was to show how the learning objective, for us magic tricks, could demonstrate how practical the many learning and teaching theories can prove. These are the theories learnt about in lectures and from readings. We have also carried out additional reading and research in order to find and link some theories to this specific project to try and justify many of the results we experienced.

There are various methods of learning and teaching, many of which we experienced in learning the magic tricks. One theory, which we thought had a significant effect on how well we learnt, was Mosston's Spectrum. This involves a variety of styles of teaching. Undoubtedly, all styles are suitable subject to the context in which they are being used, so although we found several teaching methods to be unpractical, this would not always be the case. However, we had to find the style that was most useful for us as a group. At the top of the spectrum we have the Command style. This involves a teacher and a group (usually large) of learners. It involves the teacher giving commands and the learners following them. There is very little interaction between teacher and group and no feedback on performance but useful if discipline or high levels of accuracy are required. We experimented with this style during one of the sessions. Alex acted as the leader, giving instructions on how to perform a trick and the group trying to replicate the demonstration. Unfortunately this proved very unproductive. Not every member of the group was at the same level of learning as Alex and so his instructions were very difficult for some members to understand and follow. The group decided that for our task it would be much more useful to use a style where there is feedback and discussion about the learning, an approach that was much more learner centred.

There are four other styles within Mosston's Spectrum. Of them all, there were two which we felt were very useful for learning magic tricks. They were the Practice and Reciprocal styles. Both involve a demonstration, followed by evaluation and feedback. The difference is that the Practice style is taught in a group and Reciprocal style involves learners in pairs. Feedback is very important in order to make magic tricks effective, especially when considering the final result could possibly be performed in front a critical audience. The style at the opposite level of the spectrum was one that we did not implement but we felt it may offer benefits further on in the learning process. It is Inclusion and provides various difficulty levels for different learners. This could have been useful because some of us were

capable of more complex tricks than others, however we all attempted to learn the same tricks due to the time allocation.

Bandura's Model of Learning is another important model that shows the way in which learning takes place. The first stage is the Demonstration, something that was part of all of our learning sessions. This has to be correct to be effective. The next stage is Attention. This is where the learner remembers the important details of the Demonstration in preparation for reproducing the skill or task and highlights the importance of active listening. When demonstrating, the group member would emphasise the most important aspects of the task in order that the rest of the group would remember them. If this is effective then the learner will retain the instructions and then effectively perform the skill or task through a process of motor reproduction. Then, if there are errors they can be corrected with feedback from the teacher. In theory this is perhaps how the group learnt the magic tricks, emphasising the importance of the initial demonstration.

Although learning theories are very important and we found many links between our learning and the theories discussed in lectures and readings, we felt that there are other factors that are also vital to successful learning. One of these was motivation. If the learner is not motivated then success is limited before learning even begins. For our group this was a factor in choosing magic tricks as our task. As a correct choice this was confirmed throughout the project. By progressing gradually in difficulty with each skill, interest was maintained. Operating in a group there was also a feeling of responsibility and almost pressure that as individuals we needed to achieve success rather than avoid failure. Although at times frustration was experienced as some tricks proved too difficult. If one individual began to struggle and fall behind the rest of the group it was vital that any difficulties were addressed immediately, especially within this context, when confidence is such an issue.

In addition to learning and methods of learning skills, effective teaching is also highly significant. An aspect of teaching, which is vital to learning success, is effective and useful communication. The learners do not know how to perform the skill successfully, however the teacher does or should do. Therefore their instructions have to be clear and accurate to ensure the desired perception amongst the students is achieved, an issue that has already been deemed as instrumental to success within any field of learning. Teaching was a smaller part of our group learning because we were all learners, none of us having significant experience in magic tricks, nevertheless prior to each session planning and strategies were required to make sure the time together was optimised. However, Alex and Mark did have some experience and knowledge and so there were sessions where they adopted more of a leadership role. The way in which they communicated instructions was important, emphasis being upon aspects such as non-verbal communication, paralanguage and proximity. The way in which the leader/teacher approaches the teaching is important for motivation. If it is ambiguous or if the teacher themselves have a lack of motivation then learners will become bored and lose motivation, resulting in them being less likely to achieve success. Within our task we felt that one teacher was not required. Each of us took our turn in demonstrating and giving feedback on others' performance. This we felt provided motivation because each member felt they were active in the teaching as well as the learning process and that their role in the group was valued. By offering opportunities between sessions for individual research we each recognised that other

members of the group, despite ability levels, could still offer another dimension to group learning and bring with them valued and new knowledge.

Learning and teaching has progressed through time, an early form of learning focused on learning through technique. This approach has limitations as it does not include cognitive processes of learning, it does not explain how people learn to apply physical skills creatively or how to perform in novel situations. (cited on Traditional approach to skill acquisition). It is clear through our learning that we bring cognitive skills from many areas within of our lives. These cognitive skills establish our base levels within many activities. An example is our neuromuscular system, we develop this through many activities within life, and as we go through childhood into adulthood it becomes more advanced, demonstrating how cognitive skills form bases to life long learning.

When evaluating learning and teaching theories, it is important that we understand that there is not one specific method that is perfect for every task and skill. A variety can be used in tangent with each other. With magic tricks our group found that more interactive styles were useful, those that involved plenty of feedback and evaluation as well as those that allowed practice in order to enhance accuracy. The more command like styles were less effective within this context due to a lack of coherence, especially if the technique or skill required further demonstrations than just those given.

As a starting block for future investigations into pedagogy it should be remembered that learning can be achieved in many different ways, through many overlapping strategies. Planning is always paramount, as the teaching approach should always have a close correlation to the complexity of the skill and the ability of the student. Any session in the mind of the teacher should have clear guidelines but at the same time possess a degree of flexibility, as the learning environment will be forever changing.

REFERENCING AND RESEARCH METHODS

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Rink, J. 1993, Teaching Physical Education for Learning
Mosby-Year Book inc.

Underwood, G, L. 1988, Teaching and learning in physical education. A social psychological perspective. Redwood Burn Limited, Trowbridge, Wiltshire; pp.31

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RESEARCH AND MATERIAL USED AS LEARNING SOURCERS

INTERNET

- <http://allmagic.com/magicshow/movies/>
Accessed 30/11/03
Visual magic trick demonstration – online video
- <http://gcgordy.crosswinds.net/master-system.html>
Accessed 2/11/03
Magic trick descriptions and methods
- <http://www.geocities.com/jhnsnoot/card-flipper-trick.html>
Accessed 25/10/03
Several basic magic tricks – used as instruction cards

LITERATURE

- Fields, K. Holland, C. 1989. Magic For All. David and Charles, Newton Abbot, London
Information and methods regarding a wide variety of close up magic skills
- Hugard, J. 165 Card Tricks and Stunts. Mackays of Chatham PLC, Kent
Close-up, sleight of hand magic skills

IN ADDITION

- Skill's obtained from individual research and previous knowledge.