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Describe the Fitt's and Posner's phases of learning and explain how you would structure practices to enhance a performance.

In 1967 Paul Fitts (Fitts) and Michael Posner (Posner) developed the Classic Stages of learning model. They detailed the kinds of changes and phases that learners go through when acquiring skill.

The three stages of learning of the Fitts and Posner model are best understood as reflecting a continuum of practice time. The cognitive stage represents the first portion of the continuum. This is followed by the associative stage and then the autonomous stage. The transition from one stage to the next is not abrupt; on the contrary, it is gradual and the transition is difficult to detect as the learner may at any point in time be at a particular stage or in transition between stages.

However, the beginner and the skilled performer have distinct characteristics that need to be understood. The concept of deliberate practice helps to explain how this transformation comes about.

Cognitive stage

This is the first stage of the learning process where the beginner tries to get to grip with the nature of the activity and to figure out what to do. Verbal explanations and demonstrations are important. Improvements are rapid but movements are jerky and uncoordinated. High levels of concentration and attention are needed during this stage.

Example – a beginner learning to pass in hockey will be shown how to pass by the teacher. The beginner watches the demonstration and understands what needs to be done.

The concept of the cognitive stage is also to understand how the activity is to be used in a game situation. Their first concern is to understand the task and this often means attaching verbal labels to movement responses. The beginner is primarily concerned with what to do and how to do it. It is difficult for the beginner to perform the skill successfully in a game situation but they can spend time watching other players use the skill in the appropriate circumstance. For example if the activity was a hockey push pass, the person could watch teams play on television, watch club matches and see the skill performed at elite level. This way the skill is able to be put in to context and the purpose explained. The beginner can start to appreciate the routine and movements of the skill.

Verbalising the skill is important for the beginner. A good example of verbalising required actions is in dance. For example 'side, together, side, hop, side, split'. In sport this may be more focused on limbs involved as the beginner pays all their attention to the details of the action rather than watching what is happening around them. Therefore it is extremely important that practices set at this stage are very simple. The beginner must receive lots of time and space to perform the skill so that they have a chance to concentrate on achieving it. If we take a hockey 'push' pass as an example, and simple passing between two will allow the beginner to concentrate on the technique of actually passing the ball. The players know where each other are, they have no time pressure, lots of space and no opposition. As the performer becomes a little more comfortable, very limited opposition could be introduced. It is vital that the beginner receives as much attention as they require and their techniques regarded carefully by the coach or trainer so any bad habits they may surface can be rectified immediately before the player becomes accustomed to it.

As I mentioned earlier, the kind of errors made are usually gross e.g. a hockey player miss the ball when attempting to pass. At this stage they may not understand how to correct what they

are doing wrong. This is where feedback from coaches is vital and should involve visual demonstration, verbal instructions and/or manual physical guidance.

Associative stage

The performer now understands the activity. Specific motor programmes and subroutines are developed and consistency and coordination improve. The aim of the learner is to begin to associate the 'feel' of the movements with the end result. Gross error detection and correction is practised and detailed feedback is utilised.

Example – the novice hockey player will now practise the pass, perhaps by practising the sub-routines. The teacher will give feedback.

At this stage the player now has accomplished the basic technique as is able to functionally complete the skill. This stage is mainly concerned with practicing the new skill. However, although technically they may be sound, they may now need to practice the skill in more pressurised situation to help work towards the fluidity, consistency and accuracy that is achieved later on. Performance is normally characterised by fewer errors, and those that there are, are normally caused by difficulties in controlling speed or force. An ideal structure of a practice to enhance this performance is to adopt a 'whole – part – whole' routine that allows the player to focus on a particular part of the skill which is then incorporated into the whole skill, theoretically improving the overall outcome. Progressively the parts are practiced, e.g. a hockey 'push' pass is broken down into its fundamental parts and each part is focused on individually, practiced separately then brought together again as a whole.

Learners become more able to identify their own errors but may still need help to correct them. They require a change in feedback from visual and verbal to more reliance and kinaesthetic's. This period can last a long time and requires consistent, regular practice. At this stage players begin to feel when the skill is not being performed successfully and can start to correct their errors themselves.

The player must be put under an increased pressure so that the technique has to be refined with limits of time, space and opposition. Small practices of 3 to 4 players can be designed to enhance the skill. For example, 2 players must link 10 push passes together consecutively within a limited space with the third player acting as a defender. This player could begin passively but become more challenging and the other players become more confident. Players must now aim to achieve consistency, fluidity and accuracy before they can achieve the final stage.

Autonomous stage

Movement patterns have now become automatic and the skill is performed easily and without stress. The learner is now able to attend to other cues such as tactics and strategies. This stage is only reached by the very skilful. The lack of conscious control to movement production enables the performers to free their attention mechanisms to deal more effectively with the conditions surrounding them e.g. other players, obstacles, tactics and strategies.

Example – the hockey pass has been learnt and the player can now pass with little conscious effort.

Performers are now capable of identifying their own errors and are able to correct them themselves. Performers should be encouraged to contribute to their own improvement through self analysis.

Now little conscious attention should be required for the actual technique therefore the player can begin to think about other things such as tactics, strategy and disguise because the player does not have to think about each component of the technique. This is something that most players, when they reach this level will attain themselves however it can be encouraged by pressure practices and game like situations which will enhance the skill. Accuracy, consistency and fluidity can be improved on in similar situation which result in the player being able to perform the skill comfortably and to its maximum effect enhancing the overall performance of the player. Coaches feedback is still important during the autonomous stage.

Bibliography

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