

Discuss the differences between skill, ability and technique and explain how you would structure practices to enhance these components of a performance.

In order to be a success at a particular sport, whether it's playing football for your school team or opening the batting in cricket for your country you must have skill, ability and technique.

Skill is being able to choose and perform the right techniques at the correct time, regularly and with the minimum of effort in a specific movement in a sport. Sportsmen use their skills to achieve particular objectives in their sport e.g. a skilled batsman would aim to score a century in cricket.

Ability is the physical and mental capacities or make up of a sportsman. A number of different aspects of your make up can be taken into consideration whilst talking about ability e.g. height, strength and co-ordination. To a certain extent, we inherit our ability from our parents, for example, if your father was tall, then the genes that make him tall are passed on to you. This ability for instance in height could be used to become a good basketball player. In this case, height would enhance goal scoring potential as the player is nearer the basket, so he is more likely to score.

Lastly, techniques are the basic movements that we need to play a sport e.g. in rugby, Johnny Wilkinson mastered the technique of doing a drop kick to score points. The technique is to learn the basic movement, the skill is to practice it so he can do it really well. We can combine a number of different techniques to create a pattern of movement, e.g. the triple jump, which combines running and jumping techniques.

Skill, ability and technique are always closely linked. The textbook 'Advanced PE' quotes the equation:

"Skill = Ability + Technique ... in order to perform a particular skill in sport, we must learn the required technique. In order to learn the technique fully, we must have the necessary abilities"

This quote agrees with the idea that all three areas are needed to be a success at sporting activities. However, to make clear the differences between the three, we must look more closely at each area.

Skill has been defined as:

"An organised co-ordinated activity in relation to an object or situation, which involves a whole chain of sensory, central and motor mechanisms" (Welford)

What Welford is saying is that the sports person can learn to focus his/her body on achieving the action which is required. This is usually learnt through repetitive practice. Skill can be broken down into a number of different types. These are: Cognitive skills, Perceptual skills, Motor skills and Perceptual motor skills.

Cognitive skills are also often known as intellectual skills and involve thought processes. An example would be the adding up of judges' scores in ice skating, the measures of a length of a long jump, or the calculation of batting averages at the end of a cricket season.

Perceptual skills involve interpretation of stimuli. We may see the same information as someone else, but our brain may interpret it differently from them. Examples of this can be seen in optical illusions.

Motor skills involve the muscular system and concern movement and muscular control. For example, walking or running are motor skills as they involve movement and muscular control.

Performance in sport is an extremely complex process. It does not involve just one type of skill, but several. Most skills are referred to as perceptual motor skills as they involve thought, interpretation and movement: cognitive skills, perceptual skills and motor skills.

In order to perform any skill in sports, you must have the ability to do so. "Excellence of performance-the successful integration of a hierarchy of abilities (all the abilities we have) appropriate to a given task under given conditions. (Professor GP Meredith)

Your ability is something that you are born with, so to improve it you need to train. This is the difference between skill and ability. Skill is something learnt and improved through practice. Ability we inherit and can be improved on through specific exercises which enhance physical or mental performance. It's part of our genetic make-up. Here are two definitions of ability to illustrate this point:

"Motor abilities are relatively enduring traits which are generally stable qualities or factors that help a person carry out a particular act" (E. Fleishman)

"Motor abilities are innate inherited traits that determine an individuals co-ordination, balance, ability and speed of reactions" (R. Arnot and C. Gaines)

Technique is often confused with skill. To perform a particular skill in any sport you will have to acquire the technique needed. There are a number of 'classification continuums' that may be used in conjunction with each other to build up a profile of a particular skill. There is 'Knapp's open-closed continuum', which involves skills being categorised into open or closed skills. An example of an open skill is a tackle in hockey. It is very difficult to improve an open skill in any sport because the situation in which it occurs is always different but the skill will be improved over time through experience and practice. An example of a closed skill is the shot putt. Closed skills can be improved easily due to the fact that there are no outside physical influences on the athlete, which means he or she can train easily for a closed skill. The difference between open and closed skills and technique is that technique is simply a basic movement needed to play a sport, where as open and closed skills are definitions for the type of technique needed. An open skill requires, e.g. a different type of technique for a tackle each time (hard or soft), where as a closed skill requires the same technique each time to perform well. This refers back to the fact that technique and skill appear similar but are still different, as I've explained.

I will now go onto explain about enhancing performance in these three areas. For example, to structure practices to enhance your performance for agility is very difficult as you are born with your abilities. However, an Australian sports psychologist has found ways of improving hand/eye co-ordination by doing special eye exercises. These exercises are starting to be used more frequently in sports such as cricket to improve hand/eye co-ordination but they are not, as yet, proven to work. Technique, according to most relevant sources can be easily enhanced and improved. Your technique can be enhanced and improved by feedback from coaches telling you to change certain parts of your technique e.g. keeping your head over the ball when kicking a football to get the correct height on the kick. This feedback can then be used to improve your technique and then you can go away and work on it in the next training sessions. This will enhance performance in the game.

The other abilities which, through structured exercises could be improved are speed and flexibility. Speed can be enhanced by working on muscular strength in your legs so you can move faster; flexibility could be

improved through regular warm up exercises like stretching leg muscles before play so that you can get the full use of the muscle.

The idea that technique has to be a good style to become skilled at it I also think is wrong due to some sportsmen and women having irregular techniques but still excelling in their sport, such as Muttiah Muralitharan, who is one of the greatest spin bowlers in cricket in the world at the current time but has a very unusual technique in the way that he spins the ball.

A structured practice to enhance skill could be a simple training exercise in football, such as dribbling a football around objects to improve dribbling skills. The idea that skill equals ability plus technique is the perfect way to describe how to be able to achieve a particular skill. there are a number of different aspects which come into consideration when performing a skill and being successful at that skill. Overall skill is developed by having good ability and having a technique that suits your body type.

The definitions of the three practices in these components of performances are all clear definitions that show the true differences between the terms skill, ability and technique.