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ABSTRACT

This paper presents a model for implementation of behavior therapies in adventure programs that use Group Adventure Initiative Tasks (GAITs) to promote personal development. Behavior therapies include various techniques and processes based in learning and pedagogical theory and used to promote changes in behavioral responses to environmental situations. In many cases, adventure programs aid the client's experiential and subjective process of self-exploration and development. Since many adventure activities grew out of the fields of outdoor pursuits and outdoor physical education, a conceptual framework for motor skill acquisition may be borrowed and applied to the learning of new behavioral skills. Fitts and Posner's model of stages of motor development illustrates a continuum of skill acquisition from beginner to expert. Characteristics of learner performance and appropriate learning strategies are described for the beginning "cognitive" phase, the intermediate "associative" phase, and the mastery "autonomous" phase. An example illustrates this model's traditional application with regard to motor skill development in kayaking. The model is then applied to development of behavioral skills during GAITs. During an initiative such as "spider's web," each participant in the group progresses toward an individual behavioral objective, supported by encouragement, feedback, and guidance from other group members. GAITs and "adventure growth groups" allow the learner to practice new behavioral skills in a safe and nurturing environment constructed to allow a sequential progression of challenge and mastery. (SV)

Learning New Behaviours through Group Adventure Initiative Tasks: A Theoretical Perspective

By Travis Kemp, M.A. & Leonie McCarron, Ph.D.

Abstract

In recent times, much attention has been directed towards the identification of personal changes and development within participants of adventure learning and therapeutic activity programs. Many of the behavioural outcomes and changes observed in participants have been anecdotally reported in the literature. These findings have included improvements in individuals' self-esteem and feelings of self worth, improved coping skills and general self-efficacy in client groups. These results have been reported in groups ranging from students in adventure education programs to executives in corporate training programs to adolescents "at risk" and clinical therapy programs. Unfortunately, there exists not only an absence of clear delineation between the diverse range of adventure based experiences, but apart from a generalised framework for facilitating personal growth and development, there has been little investigation into the application of established therapeutic intervention techniques to the adventure paradigm. The current paper presents a model for the application of behaviour modification therapy to adventure programs which utilise Group Adventure Initiative Tasks (GAIT)(Kemp and Piltz, 1995) as the medium of adventure for personal development.

Introduction

Outdoor and adventure based programs have a relatively brief history. Indeed, it is only in the last 25 years (Cason and Gillis, 1994) that these programs have grown and gained recognition in the fields of training, education and counselling. Adventure therapy enjoys an even briefer history, in fact, for many current therapists and counsellors in established clinical practice, the term adventure therapy is a foreign one. It was not until Michael Gass's (1993) book, *Adventure Therapy: Therapeutic Applications of Adventure Programming* that the field began an accelerated evolution towards its own unique identity. It was here that Gass identified the need for the continued exploration of links between current therapeutic styles and Adventure therapy. It is the purpose of the current

paper to explore the relationships between broadly behavioural approaches of therapeutic intervention and their applications to adventure programs utilising GAITS as the primary tools.

Learning New Behaviour

Behaviours can be seen as learned responses to the environmental situations, which are faced by individuals on a daily basis. The field of Behaviour Therapy refers to the application of a variety of techniques and processes which are essentially based in learning and pedagogical theory (Corey, 1981) to the acquisition of new behavioural responses to the environmental situations faced by an individual. Hence if we accept this preposition, it is feasible to suggest that new behaviours may be learned to replace pre-learned behaviours which are either inappropriate or no longer useful to a person. Put simply, we are able to more effectively communicate and interact with our environment, ultimately leading to our needs being met more completely. Skills such as clearly expressing one's needs, resolving conflict, active listening and assertiveness all contribute to the person's interaction with others and ultimately to the individual's ability to have their needs met by their environment. When these skills have not been learned or nurtured or they have been learned ineffectively or insufficiently, clients may be unable to meet their needs through their relationships with others and, consequently, their personal growth and development may be affected. In more extreme cases, adverse effects on one's self-esteem, self-efficacy and general feelings of self-concept and adequacy may suffer markedly as a result.

Adventure therapy programs, in many cases, appear to aid the client's experiential and subjective process of self-exploration and development. Some participants also report associated feelings of increased self worth as a result of this experience. However there appears to be little understanding of a procedural framework for facilitating these improvements, often leaving clients with improved attitudes of "self" but without the skills and ability to develop and maintain these self-attitudes in the future. Hence any positive changes experienced as a result of the adventure experience may dissipate over time and given the few longitudinal studies in the Adventure therapy field, long term change is difficult to ascertain.

Motor skill acquisition theory has been presented widely in the past and Shumway-Cook and Woollacott (1995) provide a succinct overview of the prevailing perspectives within this domain. Because many adventure based activities currently utilised in adventure therapy programs grew from the fields of outdoor pursuits and outdoor/physical education, it seems appropriate that we borrow a conceptual framework for motor skill acquisition and apply it to the learning of new behavioural skills. Fitts and Posner's (1967) "Stages of Motor Development" model provides an excellent framework for conceptualisation of the process of behavioural learning through "GAITS". The model's structural simplicity can be directly applied and utilised by the adventure therapist to bring about behavioural learning or modification in the first instance, and further provide a framework for clients which will enable continued self understanding and development in the future.

Fitts and Posner's Model and Behavioural Links

Fitts and Posner's model of learning presented in figure 1 illustrates the progressive continuum of skill acquisition from the level of absolute beginner to that of expert practitioner as presented by Magill (1985). Magill provides a valuable synthesis of the characteristics of performance by the learner in each of these phases, which provides a useful foundation on which to describe an example of behavioural skill acquisition.

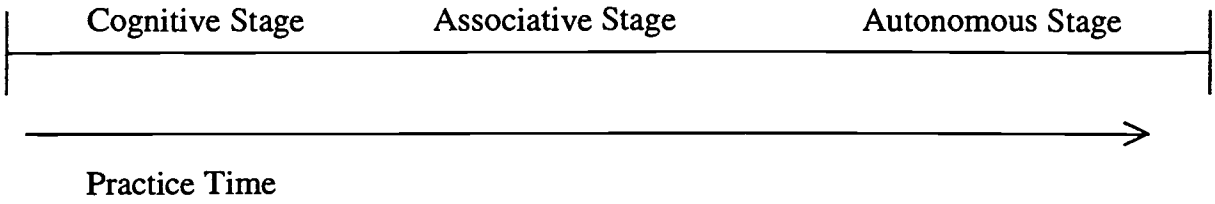

Figure 1. Fitts and Posner's stages of learning and time continuum (Magill, 1985)

Characteristics of the cognitive stage.

The characteristics of skill performance in this stage are often easiest to identify by the observer. The learner makes a large number of errors when performing the skill, and often these errors are very large or "gross" and obvious. The learner's performance is highly variable between each performance of the skill. The learner may complete the skill with a great deal of success on one occasion, but then on the next attempt, fail to replicate that level of mastery. The learner is often aware of a problem existing with their performance, but remains unaware of the appropriate course of action required to correct it. The low level of mastery of the skill, which the learner currently has, makes its adaptability extremely limited. Any environmental demands placed on the learner causes her/his skill to break down quickly and often completely as much directed attention are needed to focus on correct completion of the skill.

During this phase, the learner requires specific information feedback. Appropriate cues given by the teacher or facilitator direct the learner's attention toward the important elements of the skill requiring attention. The learning environment needs to be co-operative, controlled and "learner friendly". General feedback, which is positive and highly supportive, is required during this often clumsy and frustrating phase of skill development.

Characteristics of the associative phase.

As the learner progresses towards the associative phase, her performance begins to improve. By this stage the concrete fundamentals of the skill have been learned and the number of errors and size of errors is decreasing at a steady pace. The learner is beginning to refine the skill while learning a self-correcting mechanism through her ability to identify some errors in her performance and modify them through internalised feedback. Associated with these developments is a decrease in the variability of performance and generally improved performance. The learner requires continued feedback throughout this phase but is now able to process much more specific cues relating to her performance. This development enables further refinement of her

performance. A more demanding and realistic environment can now be provided for the learner as they begin to attend to the demands of a dynamic situation.

Characteristics of the autonomous phase.

By the autonomous stage, performance of the skill becomes automatic. The learner can now perform the isolated skill without thinking or cognitive attendance. Self-regulation of performance increases and the learner has now developed the "closed loop" feedback system of the expert. The learner is also now able to adapt the skill to a variety of environments and situations without loss of technical competence thus allowing them to operate effectively in a variety of varying conditions. Generalised positive feedback and encouragement is required and the establishment of more demanding and achievable goals for further refinement of the skill is required. Subtle adjustment is made with the aid of highly specialised feedback from an expert outsider. The learner has now developed to an elementary stage of mastery, with improvements now coming less frequently than during the initial phases of skill development.

Putting the process in context: Forward paddling in kayaking.

Application of this theoretical development as it has been traditionally applied to motor skill acquisition can be best illustrated with the use of an example. Kayaking is a technically demanding and, as the learner develops, an environmentally demanding motor skill. The level of skill development required to paddle in extreme white water is universally obvious, but the expert paddler progressed through identical stages as any other learner.

As the novice paddler begins her lesson, there is fear, anxiety and excitement. She requires reassurance understanding and support. As she climbs into her boat, she is attending to the many instructions and cues given to her by her instructor. She wobbles and her movements are jerky. She may capsize easily and lose motivation to continue. As she begins to learn the basics of forward paddling, she will be unaware of the environment around her, instead focussing on the technique required to keep the boat straight. Much time will be spent correcting and turning around in circles but with guidance and support from the instructor, her skill development improves. The learner now begins to master the forward paddle and through small adjustments in her paddle stroke, begins to paddle a straight line. Other elements such as balance begin to fade away from consciousness as she begins to attend more to the environment around her. At the same time, other parallel skills such as sweep and draw strokes are practised and incorporated into the learner's paddling repertoire. Continued practice and refinement occurs over time until her skills are now automatic. She can paddle forward, backwards and turn free of cognitive effort. The environment is now manipulated as she begins her practice on moving water. No longer requiring focussed cognitive attention, her skills can be used and applied to progressively more demanding situations and conditions while her internalised feedback system, coupled with highly refined and specific feedback from her instructor, continues to perfect her performance. Few mistakes are now made and a level of mastery has been achieved. This process of development is similar in all learning situations. Although the length of time spent in each phase varies markedly between individuals, the learner nevertheless masters each phase sequentially.

Applying the model to learning new behaviours in the interpersonal domain.

The "GAIT" environment, in much the same way as a still clear creek, provides an ideal environment for the behavioural learner. When learning a new skill, for example, assertiveness, the learner will progress through the identical process to that experienced by the motor skill learner. They will require the same needs and demonstrate the same characteristics.

Reflect for a moment on the "Spider's Web" initiative (Rohnke, 1984). A group of individuals have come together for a "growth group" experience. Each of the participants has their own behavioural objectives, which they want to achieve. Assertiveness is one such behavioural skill, which is desired by all members of the group. The group begins by making agreements to support and encourage each other in a cooperative and empathic style. Various other "norms" are established to maintain a safe learning environment preventing any injury (imagine placing the novice kayaker on an extreme white-water river). The environment is therefore controlled and conducive to the cognitive level of the beginner. The task begins and through the group's interaction, one member feels that their needs are not being met. In the past, similar situations have resulted in feelings of frustration and disappointment because of a lack of ability to "speak up". The learner expresses their identification of a problem and the group stops. The group offers support to the learner and encourages her to express her needs. She stumbles and stutters her way through her expression of needs, fearful of the response from the group. In keeping with the agreements, other group members reinforce her bravery and congratulate her on her efforts while providing feedback regarding her performance. The facilitator coordinates these interactions to clarify any confusion. The group members work towards meeting the learner's needs and the game continues until completed.

This process may continue throughout the program and in different situations and tasks. When a similar situation arises again, her fears this time are lessened and, armed with the feedback from her last performance of assertiveness, she refines her expressions to the group and clarity emerges. Once again, support and feedback from the group and facilitator allows the learner to progress through the cognitive stage and into the associative phase of development. As the learner's skills of expression become autonomous, the group is allowed to stretch the boundaries of support, as the group becomes self functioning. Conflict may arise where the learner, now proficient in assertiveness, may adapt and apply her skills in a more environmentally demanding situation. Further refinement occurs and improved feelings of self emerge as personal needs are met and self-esteem develops. When the group terminates, the learner has developed her assertiveness skills to the autonomous level and now further refines her skill in the environmentally demanding "real world" situation outside the adventure group.

This process can occur simultaneously for all members of the group through the support, feedback and guidance from mutually co-operative group members and a skilled Adventure Therapist. It is this application and awareness of the characteristics and needs of the learner as she progresses through the learning process which allows for the creation of a conducive and effective experiential learning environment. Awareness of the current level of ability of the learner and their needs facilitates the effective implementation of behavioural learning through GAITS. GAITS and "adventure growth groups" allow the ...rner to practise previously unlearned skills in a safe and nurturing environment ...structed to allow a sequential progression of challenge and mastery, free from the

highly demanding "real world" environment. It is this process of sequential progression, which is difficult to achieve without the controlled environment of the adventure growth group. In much the same way as expert kayak paddlers are trained and nurtured by their teachers and coaches to achieve high levels of skill and mastery, so too can we provide this idyllic environment for behavioural skill acquisition, enabling our clients to master an array of "life skill" behaviours.

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