EFFECTIVE TEACHING?
FOR BASIC SKILLS, IT'S THE PRACTICE STYLE

Billy E. Gober and Michael Goldberger

What is the most effective way to teach? This simple question has intrigued teachers, parents, administrators and scholars for years. From "open education" to "individualized programs" to "direct instruction" to who knows what's next. Over the years the educational system has been rocked from one "cure all" teaching approach to another.

We now realize that this is not such a simple question. Through successful practice and research we now see that different teaching approaches are in a sense, different tools, each of which is more or less appropriate in facilitating particular learning outcomes. The effective teacher is now seen as one who can select and implement the teaching approach which best fosters the desired learning outcome at hand. What then are the approaches available to the teacher?

The Spectrum of Teaching Styles

Mosston's Spectrum of Teaching Styles provides a series of alternative teaching approaches - "From Command to Discovery." The Spectrum is based on decision making and specific styles of teaching emerge as decisions systematically shift between the teacher and learner. "Identifying primary decisions and understanding the possible combinations of decisions opens up a wide vista for looking at teacher-learner relationships", (Mosston & Ashworth, 1990). For example, the Command Style (Style A) is a relationship in which the teacher makes all decisions and the learner's role is to respond immediately to the teacher's directions. In terms of learner outcomes, the strength of this style is immediate and precise learner performance. This style does not foster individuality, problem-solving, or creativity, but it does achieve conformity to a given standard. In contrast, in the Self-Teaching Style, all the decisions are made by the learner. This style exists when an individual is systematically teaching himself/herself something new.

Each style along the Spectrum has its own structure of decision making and thus each creates a different act of conditions which can be judged as being more or less appropriate for fostering particular learning outcomes. In Mosston's words, each style has its own T-L-O, "the bond among teaching behavior (T), learning behavior (L), and objectives (O)" (Mosston & Ashworth, 1990).

Learning Outcome Focus - The Acquisition of Basic Skills

As the title of this article suggests, we are limiting our discussion here to the achievement of basic motor skills as the learning outcome. Basic motor skills, popular forms of sport, dance and exercise, still comprise the bulk of the contemporary physical education curriculum (Lawson & Placek, 1981). What do we know about the most effective way to teach basic motor skills?

Probably the most important conditions for skill teaching are the opportunity to learn (i.e. practice) and feedback (Singer, 1980). In terms of practice, a number of teaching studies examined how time was spent in the classroom. Scholars first made the distinction between allocated time (time available) and engaged time (time actually spent practicing the material to be mastered). They concluded that, although there must be adequate allocated time, engaged time was the more critical variable. Relationships were consistently found between engaged time and learner outcomes. Other scholars refined engaged time to include the notion that for practice to be beneficial, the learner should be experiencing a high level of success while practicing. This refined notion of engaged time, referred to as Academic Learning Time (ALT), was found to consistently relate to learner outcomes in both classroom and physical education settings (e.g., Fisher, et al., 1980; Metzler, 1989).

While each style of teaching along the Spectrum provides for practice and feedback, the teaching style which provides the maximum opportunity to practice with teacher feedback is the Practice Style.

The Practice Style

Using the Command Style (Style A) as a point of reference, in the Practice Style (Style B) a set of nine decisions is shifted from teacher to learner. The set of decisions shifted to the learner has to do with time and position decisions as the learner practices a teacher designed task. In the Practice Style each learner decides on his or her starting time, stopping time and pace of practice, and the order and timing of task completion, and the location and posture during practice. It should be noted that although learners do make this set of decisions in the Practice Style, this style is conceptually close to the Command Style so this approach is still relatively didactic (i.e. teacher-controlled).

In a number of studies the Practice Style was found consistently to enhance motor skill acquisition (e.g., Beckett, 1990; Goldberger & Gerney, 1990). While there is some evidence to suggest that this style was not the best for a small minority of learners, for most the Practice Style proved effective.

Designing Practice Style Tasks

In the Practice Style, the learner's role is to engage in teacher designed tasks, Practice Style tasks have the following characteristics: (1) They specify the learner's behavior. (2) They clarify any conditions under which the behavior is to be performed. (3) They prescribe the quantity and quality of performance.

The following are examples of the Practice Style tasks in physical activity; one each in balance, locomotion, ball handling, stretching and basketball.

1. Balance on one foot, close eyes, place hands on hips and the opposite foot on the knee of the balancing leg for 5 counts. (Gober, 1991, p. 15)

2. Place a rope in a figure eight design and stand with one foot in each circle. Jump and do a half turn landing with feet in opposite circle. Do this 5 times without missing. (Gober, 1991, p. 15)

3. Hold the ball with both hands behind the knees, toss the ball between the knees and catch it in front of the knees. Repeat by tossing the ball from the front and catching it in back of the knees. Complete 5 successful catches. (Gober, 1991, p. 15)

4. Lie on your back, knees bent, feet on the floor and arms resting at side. Press the back so that the entire spine is in contact with the floor. Hold for a count of 12. Relax and repeat for a set of 3. (Gober, 1991, p. 15)

5. Partner with a basketball runs and dribbles the ball as partner follows calling out which hand must dribble the ball. Dribble 100 feet, change roles. Do 3 sets. (Gober, 1991, p. 17)

Task Delivery

To facilitate task delivery, after describing and demonstrating the tasks(s), the teacher typically employs task cards. Task cards can be individual cards or sheets of paper. They can also be placards posted on the wall or on equipment (such as standards or traffic cones). Or they can be on transparencies or computer generated images for use with an overhead projector. You will note that the tasks listed above are quite prescriptive. Once the teacher describes and demonstrates the task, most learners can, on their own, engage in practice using the task card as a reference.

The teacher can assign one task or multiple tasks at a time. If the learner must go to different areas to engage in different tasks, this is often referred to as station work or learning centers.

Prepared Practice Style Tasks

Most activity textbooks include drills which are often appropriate for the Practice Style. Also, many elementary physical education texts (e.g. Dauer and Pangrazi, 1989; Graham, et al., 1987) provide Practice Style tasks in a wide variety of activities. Zakrajsek and Carnes' text Individualizing Physical Education provides a plethora of Practice Style tasks in over a dozen activity areas.

Recently Sportime, the innovative physical education equipment supply firm, has begun producing Practice Style tasks as part of their Learning Obstacles series. The company provides large, easy to read placards which fit into pre-cut traffic cones. Their tasks have been carefully prepared and field tested and have proven very useful to many physical educators. Blank cards are available for those teachers who want to develop their own task cards.

In Conclusion

This article began by asking the question - What is the most effective way to teach? We limited discussion of this question to the acquisition of basic motor skills. While the acquisition of basic motor skills is not the only objective of physical education, it is certainly one of the central objectives. The Practice Style, one teaching approach from the Spectrum of Teaching Styles, has been consistently found to be effective in fostering motor skill development. The Practice Style, and its various formats, provide the teacher with several options for task presentation. Practice Style tasks are easily prepared, but they are also available in textbooks and in other commercially prepared materials. In conclusion, what is the most effective way to teach? For teaching basic skills, its the Practice Style.

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BASKETBALL-TIME
TASK SHEET

BY
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1. Basketball Duel - Score the number of passes completed
                      without a miss. _____

2. Double Pass - Score the number of completed passes
                  without a miss. _____

3. Keep Away - Record the number of times you stole
                the ball. _____

4. Side Stride - Did you complete 20 passes?
                  (Circle) Yes or No

5. Follow Leader - Can you dribble 25 times and follow your
                    leader successfully ? (Circle) Yes or

No

6. Rebound - Record the number of times you rebounded the
              ball. _____

7. Free Shot - How many free shots did you make out of 10
                attempts? _____

8. Dribble Drill - Were you successful with: (Circle)
                    either hand - right only - left only

9. Creative Pass - Record the total number of different
                    passes. _____

10. Jump Shot - Record the number of successful jump shots
                 out of 12 attempts. _____

11. Pivot - Record the number of successful pivot passes out
             of 10 attempts. _____

12. Fast Break - Record your best time. _____

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