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Matching Instructional Tasks with Learner Ability: The Inclusion Style of Teaching

In Mr. Weaver's third grade physical education class students begin their fitness routine immediately upon entering the gymnasium. All students do the same exercises, the same way, at the same time. For example, when students perform push-ups they are performed from a prone position, with hands under the shoulders and back straight. Following six-minutes of continuous moderate to vigorous physical activity Mr. Weaver gathers his students to review the major concepts and skills of the last class (throwing and catching). He then instructs his 24 girls and boys to throw a small foam ball to a partner who is standing 15 feet away. While his students practice this task Mr. Weaver observes their performance and provides each student a positive and corrective feedback statement specific to the critical skill elements of throwing and/or catching. After the students have overhand-thrown the ball to their partner 20 times Mr. Weaver stops the class to demonstrate the new skill of the day, striking with a bat. The critical skill elements of striking are first highlighted by Mr. Weaver and then demonstrated several times from an underhand pitched toss. The students are instructed to return to their partners, and with a bat and small foam ball to complete the task within their designated area as demonstrated (i.e., bat the ball that is pitched by your partner who is standing approximately 10 feet away). Again, Mr. Weaver observes his students perform the task and provides each student a positive and corrective feedback statement specific to the critical skill elements of batting. At the end of class Mr. Weaver reviews the critical elements of throwing, catching, and batting by posing questions to his students.

Across town in Mrs. Brody's third grade physical education class students also begin their fitness routine immediately upon entering the gymnasium. All of her students do the same exercises, at the same time, however, they choose the level of difficulty of each exercise. For example, her students can do wall push-ups (leaning against wall), push-ups from a prone position (as in Mr. Weaver's class), or bench push-ups (feet raised on a bench), keeping hands under the shoulders and back straight. Following six-minutes of continuous moderate to vigorous physical activity Mrs. Brody gathers her students to review the major concepts and skills of the previous lesson on throwing and catching. She then instructs her 24 girls and boys to throw a small or medium sized foam ball to a partner who is standing either 10, 15, or 20 feet away. Students select which ball to use and the distance from which to throw, and then proceed to assess their own skill performance with the help of a criteria sheet. While her students practice this task Mrs. Brody monitors their performance and decisions regarding distance and size of ball chosen. She questions each student about the critical skill elements to determine whether they are self-checking performance accurately. After the students have overhand-thrown the ball to their partner 20 times Mrs. Brody stops the class to demonstrate the new skill of the day, striking with a bat. The critical skill elements of striking are first highlighted by Mrs. Brody and then demonstrated under three different conditions: from a batting tee, from a ball underhand-tossed from the side by a partner, and from a ball underhand-tossed from in front by a partner. The demonstrations are also presented using three different sized foam balls (small, medium, and large). The students are instructed to return to their partners, and with a bat and foam ball (size determined by batter) to complete the task within their designated area employing one of the three conditions demonstrated (condition selected by batter). Mrs. Brody also reminds them about using their batting criteria sheet. Once the students are engaged in the activity Mrs. Brody monitors their performance, self-check behaviors, and decisions regarding batting conditions and ball size. At the end of class Mrs. Brody reviews the critical elements of throwing, catching, and batting by posing questions to her students.

How are Mr. Weaver's and Mrs. Brody's lessons similar? Both classes are comprised of 24 third graders, boys and girls. Moderate to vigorous physical activity is emphasized at the beginning of the lesson. The skills presented are the same and both teachers focus on skill development. Both teachers have the students organized as a single group during the fitness portion of the lesson, and in pairs for practice in all three of the skill tasks.

How are their lessons different? The answer to this question lies in the presentation of the skill tasks practiced by the students and the manner in which feedback is presented to the students. Mr. Weaver's students perform the fitness routine and practice throwing, catching, and batting under a condition that imposes a single standard. All of his students are expected to complete the same number of trials, under the same conditions. Mrs. Brody's students perform the fitness routine and practice throwing, catching, and batting under self-selected conditions. Her students are provided the opportunity to match the task to their ability level.

Mr. Weaver directly informs his students about their task performance. He provides them positive and corrective feedback specific to the critical skill cues demonstrated. Mrs. Brody expects her students to check their own skill performance. She asks the students questions about the critical skill cues as she observes them perform the task, and when the students are unable to answer her questions she reminds them to use their criteria sheet.

Two variables critical to learning are time spent in good practice and matching tasks to learner ability (Gusthart, Kelly, & Rink, 1997; Rink, 1996). The two scenarios suggest that the students in both Mr. Weaver's and Mrs. Brody's lessons were performing under "good practice" conditions. The teachers planned and delivered their lessons with the purpose of improving student fitness and skill levels. The tasks presented matched this purpose. Previously learned subject matter was reviewed and new subject matter was presented in detail. The two teachers' lessons seemed to flow smoothly. Time devoted to class management was minimal, whereas time devoted to student activity was maximal. Students were grouped to maximize their opportunity to perform trials. Feedback, both positive and corrective, was provided to each student in each activity. Closure at the end of class provided time for review and a check for student understanding. These actions all suggest that time spent in "good practice" was high in both teachers' lessons.

Rink (1996) and Gusthart et al. (1997) identify matching tasks to learner ability level as a second factor critical to learning. Mr. Weaver's students performed tasks to one standard, which was chosen by him. Likely this level of task difficulty met some, but not all, of the students' ability levels. In Mrs. Brody's class students were able to select the level of difficulty for each task. Assuming that Mrs. Brody had designed levels of task difficulty based on the different ability levels of her students, it is likely that more of her students practiced at a skill level that matched their ability level.

Lee (1997) suggests that a learner's initial skill and thoughts about a given task combine to influence his/her class involvement, and that a student's involvement, in turn, can be influenced by the teacher's actions in the class. The physical educator can shape the learning environment through the selection of activity, instructional and assessment strategies, and the level of student involvement in class decision making. Research studies conducted by Byra and Jenkins (1998), Carlson (1995), Hopple and Graham (1995), and Sanders and Graham (1995) support Lee's (1997) contention that task value affects the perceptions and involvement of school aged learners in physical education classes.

So how did Mrs. Brody get her students involved in the subject matter at an appropriate level? She provided the learner options for skill practice, options based on factors that made the practice of the skills more or less difficult. She incorporated instructional strategies that fall within the framework of Mosston and Ashworth's (1994) Inclusion style of teaching, Style E. The purpose of the Inclusion style is to include all learners at their appropriate level of participation and skill (Mosston & Ashworth, 1994). The Inclusion style allows for individual (skill) differences amongst the learners. It provides all learners an opportunity to enter an activity at an appropriate level, to step backward to a lower level in order to succeed in the activity, or step forward to a higher level to meet a new challenge.

Decisions that impact the teaching environment in Inclusion style are shared by the teacher and learners (Mosston & Ashworth, 1994). Those decisions that relate to the planning of a lesson (or episode), those that define the intent, are made by the teacher. Mosston and Ashworth call these the pre-impact decisions. Decisions made during the lesson, those that define the action, are shared by the teacher and learner. These decisions are called the impact decisions. Learners make the those impact decisions related to who they work with, where they locate themselves, the pace at which they work, and the determination of level of task difficulty. These impact decisions are made by the students within the parameters the teacher establishes. Decisions concerning evaluation of the learning-teaching transaction are also shared by the teacher and learner. Mosston and Ashworth identify these as post impact decisions. The learner assesses his/her skill performance with the help of a criteria sheet (the guide), while the teacher responds to the learner's role in decision making (i.e., communicates with the learner about his/her accuracy of self-checking skill performance and his/her appropriate selection of level of task difficulty).

The criteria sheet is a critical component of the Inclusion style of teaching. It represents the guideline for learner practice. The criteria sheet provides the learner with information about what to do and how to do it, and the teacher with a record of learner progress (Mosston & Ashworth, 1994). Criteria sheets provide the learner legitimate options for skill practice, options which are based on factors that make the practice of the given skill more or less difficult. Learners must first decide at which level to enter the presented task on the criteria sheet, and then, for additional sets of trials, decide whether to perform the task under the same conditions, make it more difficult, or make it less difficult. Following are two examples of criteria sheets to demonstrate the expectations of the learner in the Inclusion style of teaching. One is designed for primary aged learners, first or second graders (see Figure 1), and one for elementary aged learners, fourth or fifth graders (see Figure 2). Both criteria sheets are designed to be used on multiple occasions.

Place Figures 1 and 2 About Here

The Inclusion style of teaching is presented here as described by Mosston and Ashworth (1994). Teachers can modify an Inclusion style episode to meet their needs as well as their students' needs while maintaining the integrity of the teaching style, that being to provide students opportunity to engage in activity at an appropriate skill level. Following are several examples of modifications that a teacher may want to incorporate when providing instruction within the framework of the Inclusion style of teaching. Students who are not ready or lack the knowledge to assess their own skill performance can have the teacher assess skill performance. During the post impact phase of the episode the teacher may provide skill-related feedback to the learner as well as feedback related to decision making concerning level of task difficulty.

Another modification relates to the criteria sheet. Teachers could substitute a wall chart for individual criteria sheets. A wall chart can include the same information as an individual criteria sheet, including a place to record student progress. The significance of a wall chart is that it can be used over and over.

One of the decisions to be left to students in the Inclusion style is the decision about the entry point into a skill task. If the skill task is new to the students, this decision is difficult to make. When students are unsure about their ability level with a particular skill, the teacher may suggest that they initially select the least difficult skill option. After completing a set of trials, allow them to make the decision about a new level of task difficulty. This will likely save time and increase the level of student success. All three of the modifications presented here maintain the essence of the Inclusion style.

The primary goal of the Inclusion style is to provide students opportunity to engage in activity at an appropriate skill level (Mosston & Ashworth, 1994). Given this goal, students who receive instruction within the Inclusion style framework are likely to perceive success more readily, find the task to be more meaningful, interesting, and challenging, and, as a result learn to perform the task at a higher level. The results from one study support these contentions. Byra and Jenkins (1998) found that fifth graders who received instruction within the framework of the Inclusion style of teaching selected from alternative levels of difficulty when batting a ball. Given the options of batting different sized balls from a tee, a side toss, a toss from in front, or a self-toss, fifth graders reported that they made their task decisions according to whether they were successful and challenged. Learners who were unsure about their ability to bat a ball chose to make the task easy for themselves at the beginning of each lesson because they wanted to experience success. Those who knew they could bat a ball chose to make the task more difficult for themselves and in doing so challenged their perceived ability level. As the learners proceeded to complete additional sets of trials in the lessons, "success" and "challenge" continued to be reflected in their reasoning for making the task condition selections they did.

The findings from Byra and Jenkins (1998) are interesting when compared to those associated with a study in which all learners performed tasks to a single standard (Portman, 1995). One of the themes that emerged from Portman's research of low-skilled students in physical education was, "I like PE when I am successful." The learners in Portman's study reported few successes in physical education; most could recall only one instance of success during the entire school year. The activities or tasks that students were asked to perform in Portman's study were designed with one standard decided on by the teacher. Given this situation, the learner's task was to perform at the teacher determined level. Mosston and Ashworth (1994) purport that single standard tasks induce the process of exclusion. The responses from the learners in Portman's study seem to confirm this contention.

Let's return to Mr. Weaver's and Mrs. Brody's lessons. One can deduce that a main object of each teacher's lesson was fitness and skill improvement. Teaching to one standard, as was the case in Mr. Weaver's lesson, and teaching to multiple standards, as was the case in Mrs. Brody's lesson, can facilitate student skill and fitness improvement. Ample research specific to the Practice (instruction as presented by Mr. Weaver) and Inclusion styles of teaching (Mosston & Ashworth, 1994) has been conducted to support this statement (Beckett, 1990; Goldberger & Gerney, 1986; Goldberger, Gerney, & Chamberlain, 1982; Jenkins & Byra, 1997). However, only in Mrs. Brody's lesson is there an attempt made to meet the different ability levels of the students. In a well formulated Inclusion style episode tasks are matched to student ability level. The low, medium, and high ability students will all have the same opportunity to succeed in the Inclusion style of teaching.

The more meaningful, interesting, and challenging students find physical education to be, the more successes they will report. A goal of most physical educators is to have their students establish behaviors of regular participation in meaningful physical education. The intent of one of the National Standards for Physical Education (NASPE, 1995) directly reflects this goal. This standard reads, "A physically educated person exhibits a physically active lifestyle" (p. 2). The Inclusion style of teaching, is designed for the inclusion of learners and their continued participation in physical activity.

Here is a mini-study or action research that physical educators may want to attempt. The purpose of this action research is to examine students' perceptions about success and non-success in physical education. Select one or two classes for this study. If you select two classes, choose one class in which student ability level is highly variable, and one in which student ability level is more similar than different. This will allow you to compare and contrast the perceptions of different groups of learners. For two consecutive lessons have all learners perform lesson tasks to a single standard, a standard decided upon by you (a standard that meets the needs of those who have average ability level). After two lessons, have the students write in their journals about their successes and/or non-successes as they relate to skill performance. Ask them why they were successful or why they lacked success. For the next two lessons have all learners perform lesson tasks within the framework of Style E, where task design provides for multiple levels of performance. Again, have the students report in their journals about their successes and non-successes as they related to skill performance. Ask them why they were successful or why they lacked success, and have the students compare and contrast their successes and non-successes across the two different instructional formats. See what your students have to say and what you can learn from them!!

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Figure Captions

Figure 1. Throwing criteria sheet for primary aged learners.

Figure 2. Striking criteria sheet for elementary aged learners.

Throwing Criteria Sheet for Primary Aged Learners

Name _____ Class _____

FACTOR 1

<u>Level</u>	<u>Distance</u>
1	Close (10 ft)
2	In Between (15 ft)
3	Far (20 ft)

FACTOR 2

<u>Level</u>	<u>Size</u>
1	Red (small)
2	Blue (medium)
3	Yellow (large)

DIRECTIONS TO THE STUDENT

Set 1

1. Select a distance. Place the number in the box.
2. Select a target. Place the number in the box.
3. Record the number of successes out of 10 trials.

Set 2

1. Select a distance. Place the number in the box.
2. Select a target. Place the number in the box.
3. Record the number of successes out of 10 trials.

Set 3

1. Select a distance. Place the number in the box.
2. Select a target. Place the number in the box.
3. Record the number of successes out of 10 trials.

			Date	Date	Date	Date	Date
Set	Task	Ball	Score 1	Score 2	Score 3	Score 4	Score 5
1			/10	/10	/10	/10	/10
2			/10	/10	/10	/10	/10
3			/10	/10	/10	/10	/10

PERFORMANCE CRITERIA

1. Eyes on target?
2. Side to target?
3. Arm way back?
4. Step with opposite foot?
5. Follow through?

Striking Criteria Sheet for Elementary Aged Learners

Name _____ Date _____ Class _____

TASK

<u>Level</u>	<u>Task Description</u>
1	Bat a ball from a tee
2	Bat a ball tossed from the side
3	Bat a ball from an underhand toss
4	Bat a self-tossed ball (fungo style)

SIZE OF BALL

<u>Level</u>	<u>Size</u>
1	Large
2	Medium
3	Small

DIRECTIONS TO THE STUDENT

1. Select a task and ball size for your first set of 10 trials.
2. Write the level of the task and ball size chosen in the appropriate box below.
3. Write the number of successful hits you think you will make out of 10 trials (prediction).
4. Now do the 10 trials and record the number of successful attempts out of 10 (actual).
5. After completing the first set of 10 trials, decide the task and ball size you wish to use to complete a second set of 10 trials. Follow DIRECTIONS 2, 3, and 4.
6. After completing the second set of 10 trials, decide the task and ball size you wish to use to complete a third set of 10 trials. Follow DIRECTIONS 2, 3, and 4.

Set	Task	Ball	Prediction	Actual	Prediction	Actual
1			/10	/10	/10	/10
2			/10	/10	/10	/10
3			/10	/10	/10	/10

PERFORMANCE CRITERIA

1. Hands touching with dominant hand on top?
2. Bat swing is in a horizontal plane?
3. Taking a step forward?
4. Rotating your hips, trunk, and shoulders?
5. Uncocking your wrists on contact?