How you learn to drive and what it means to educators

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In most cases thorough learning of a skill requires a process of acquiring a series of smaller or contributing skills. The younger the child the more one can see a myriad of skills developing. It is breathtaking to observe all the skills a baby develops up to school age. At the other end of life, skills begin to diminish. One of the problems of old age is that acquiring new skills can be difficult. Brain deterioration means that some elderly people lose established skills.

The general process for learning a new skill follows a series of culminative steps. How did you learn to drive?

1. Being motivated – wanting to drive (like your peers) and seeing value, fun, and a challenge in the learning.
2. Gaining understanding – being taught, studying the car manual and driving rules, and qualifying for a learner's permit.
3. Learning each subskill – learning to start on a hill, use of the brake and accelerator, signalling and the dreaded reverse park, to name a few.
4. Practise, practise, practise – the only way to build those skills up to the accepted standard in a smoothly paced way. Eventually these will be spontaneous and even automatic.
5. Demonstrating your ability – an essential to proving to others that you can do it, including passing the driving test.
6. Applying and generalising the skill – driving safely and independently in the community. Generalising the skills to other conditions e.g. unfamiliar terrain, difficult weather, other types of vehicles.
7. Mastery of the skill – maybe completing a defensive driving course. Being acknowledged by others as a safe, very competent driver. Having a flawless legal driving record.
8. Keeping the skill current – driving regularly, updating on road rules and continuing to generalise.

As you have probably learned from experience some people take longer to acquire some of these steps, and certain skills can be challenging. Did you generalise well, or stick to safe options? Did you get tired of practicing and jump ahead into situations when you were not ready? Were you inconsistent from day to day? Worst of all were you nervous when going for your licence and fail to demonstrate that you really could do it?

In classrooms today there is a tendency to standardise teaching and learning. Large classes, outcomes based education and political pressures, contribute to this. Let's comment on the eight steps in learning the skill of driving as it might apply to learning skills in the classroom.

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1. Being motivated

Does a child really find fun or value in a repetitive learning of times tables? On the other hand, does a predictable and repetitive learning task every day have the effect of calming and reassuring unsettled children? How much choice is offered in learning options? There is a wide range of motivating factors at work from intrinsic motivation with a love of learning for its own sake, to extrinsic motivation and relevant rewards. The attitude of "what do I get out of it" is a growing one in the community. Fortunately to balance that, there is the altruism that is evident in community volunteers. Motivation is a complicated, personal and classroom dynamic.

2. Gaining understanding

A good teacher is what is needed for this outcome; giving clear instruction where possible, through demonstration which is strengthened through visual and auditory stimulation as well as cues. Teaching should be flexible enough to allow for different learning styles and for accommodating all children in an inclusive classroom.

3. Learning each subskill

Teachers need to order the learning into small steps and allow for different learning rates and abilities. If needed, slow down and even provide over-learning, so every child can achieve mastery of the subject matter.

4. Practise, practise, practise

Build more practice into daily opportunities set up for those learners who need it. Bright children may be taught once and know it, while others need more time and consolidation through software, co-operative games, buddy practice with a peer, or extra adult support.

5. Demonstrating the ability

Assessment can be so arbitrary. If you set the bar at the wrong level it can distort the learning results. Adapt to the learner and use precise curriculum based assessment. Sensitively delivered skills based assessment can even be made fun and interesting to children.

6. Applying and generalising the skill

Applying is not easy for some children. For example some have all the skills to work out a practical maths or science problem but can't choose which operations or the order in which to apply them. Slower learners can learn a skill in isolation but have trouble generalising it to a new situation. Further direct instruction and more practice can be planned to improve performance.

7. Mastery of the skill

Sometimes mastery is not vital and a working functional knowledge is adequate. Divide learning tasks into essential and useful. For example knowing state capitals is useful, while constructing a well punctuated sentence is essential (or will it be in the technology dominated future?). Children gain pride and confidence from mastery.

8. Keeping the skill current

Revision is a bit dated as a word but teachers should provide opportunities to revisit and celebrate the learning.

The purpose of this article is to alert teachers to the skill acquisition process, remind them of the variation in children's ability levels and learning rates and make a plea for children who may struggle in the classroom and learn differently. TEACH

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