



# Dr. Geoff Potter's Clinical Corner

OVERVIEW OF VARIOUS  
BEHAVIOURAL TOPICS &  
INDUSTRY UPDATES

# SKILL ACQUISITION

Skill acquisition is a critical element of our work. Over time we may develop general skills (dressing, bathing, cooking etc), functionally related or equivalent skills (functional communication skills etc) and/or coping and tolerance skills (relaxation, covert imagery training etc).

It is helpful to think about there being three stages to learning a task or skill:

- **Task Acquisition:** learning the steps involved
- **Productivity:** speed acquisition
- **Skill Maintenance:** being consistent in performing tasks over time

The strategies for teaching and monitoring depend on what stage the learner is in. You will find the stages are outlined below.

## ***Stage I: Task Acquisition:***

The best method for teaching a task begins with a task analysis. A task analysis is a breakdown of each of the steps of the task into small teachable pieces. Task analyses can be used for work, community, domestic, or recreational skills. Ideally, a task should be analysed prior to beginning training.

A task analysis varies somewhat, depending on the learner. Typically, the more severe the intellectual and performance deficits, the more detail is necessary in the task analysis. For example, in setting a table each individual step, such as "walk to table," "select fork," and "place fork to left of plate," might be listed separately. For a faster learner, this level of detail might not be necessary. One step, such as "places fork to left of plate," might suffice.

A task analysis is a guide for how the task is to be performed. For many tasks, there is not necessarily a single correct order of steps. Order may vary depending on the person or the day or time. It is fine if a learner changes the order of the steps if this does not otherwise interfere with the task being completed correctly.

## ***Stage II: Increasing Productivity***

After a learner has completed the task acquisition phase, i.e., is independent on every step of a task, instructional strategies can focus on productivity. For many learners, how fast they complete a task may not be an issue. With practice, their speed may be acceptable for the task. However, if it is not, then instructional strategies should focus on helping them to perform the task more quickly, while maintaining their level of independent task performance established during the task acquisition phase.

# SKILL ACQUISITION - CONTINUED

As with any behaviour change strategy, the first step is to baseline how long it takes to complete the task. The second step is to set a goal for desired speed of completion. For some individuals, getting to a normal speed would not be a realistic goal, in which case the goal would take into account individual capabilities as well.

## ***Stage III: Skill Maintenance Check***

After the learner masters the Task Acquisition and Productivity phases, continued monitoring is necessary to maintain skill levels. It often happens that after a learner learns tasks with acceptable accuracy and speed, her performance backslides for a variety of reasons. This could result in loss of a job, loss of an advancement opportunity or poor self-esteem.

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**Thanks for reading!** We look forward to developing and sharing our fortnightly internal ***Clinical Corners*** which highlight various behavioural and industry update, and plan on continuing to share these externally from time to time. If you have any topics or areas you would like to hear more about, please don't hesitate to let us know!