

Writing Program Objectives

Part 2c

Reinforcement¹

Reinforcement is the underpinning of the instructional interaction between a teacher and a learner.

¹ Sternberg et al. (1994). Individuals with Profound Disabilities: Instructional and Assistive Strategies. (3rd ed. pp. 321-327). Austin, TX: PRO-ED.

Reinforcement serves two major purposes in the instructional process.

- First, it provides a motivator for learner performance. The learner is motivated to comply with the instructional cue to obtain the reinforcing item or event being offered.

If the item or event is truly a reinforcer, it will increase the future rate and/or probability of the learner's producing the behavior.

If the item or event does not have this effect, it may be only a one-time satisfying occurrence (reward), but one that is not a useful instructional tool over time.

- The second purpose of reinforcement, and one that is especially relevant for individuals with disabilities, is to train the understanding of cause and effect.

The learner learns that the response he or she makes (cause) results in the reinforcer (effect).

For the learner to make this connection, the delivery of the reinforcer must immediately follow the requested behavior (or, at times, occur during the behavior), and its delivery must be contingent upon performance of the behavior.

This understanding is the underpinning of the instructional interaction between a teacher and a learner.

The learner is, in effect, learning the process of learning.

Our purpose in this presentation is not to provide a full review of reinforcement theory; however, several critical points need to be remembered.

The greater the level of an individual's disability, the more difficult reinforcer identification becomes.

With many individuals with profound disabilities, identifying reinforcers will likely challenge a teacher's creativity and problem-solving skills.

It is important to remember, however, that every individual is reinforced by something.

Also, there is no one item or event that will reinforce every learner.

Individuals with disabilities may make choices (e.g., playing with certain toys), show preferences (e.g., food items), or actively seek out opportunities to obtain certain events (e.g., pressing a switch to turn on a tape recorder).

These consequences, however, may not necessarily act as reinforcers for performance of other behaviors.

In the event that a reinforcer is determined to increase the occurrence or rate of a behavior, the teacher must be aware that, once the learner has become satiated on that specific reinforcer, responding and its accuracy will decrease.

This is not a function of an inability to learn, but a function of the learner's satiation on the reinforcer.

If possible, it is important to identify a number of potential reinforcers for the learner; this will allow the teacher some flexibility and, at the same time, decrease the probability of satiation.

A Reinforcement Assessment can assist in identifying a number of potential reinforcers for the learner.

If primary reinforcers (e.g., edibles) are initially selected for use, it is appropriate to plan for a transition to the use of secondary reinforcers (e.g., preferred activities).

Typically, this is accomplished through a pairing of primary and secondary reinforcers.

It must be remembered that, in teaching individuals with disabilities, the ultimate goal is for the learner to be motivated by reinforcement that naturally occurs due to performing a behavior.

Therefore, activities that have naturally occurring reinforcing consequences should be included in instruction.

For example, when teaching the learner to ask for a glass (e.g., by pointing to the object), there should be something reinforcing (i.e., juice) in the glass so the learner may experience the reinforcing result of using the glass appropriately.

Finally, it is important to attempt to reduce the number of reinforcers that are systematically being provided to a learner.

Such thinning of the schedules of reinforcement delivery will hopefully assist a learner to accept delayed gratification for increasing amounts of performance. It will also establish a more normalized type of reinforcing environment.

Correction During a Trial

When the learner's attempt at behavior performance is not correct, it should not be reinforced.

Rather, it should be corrected by the teacher in such a manner that the learner experiences the correct performance and its resulting reinforcement.

For many individuals with profound disabilities, this correction often requires that the teacher put the learner through the requested behavior in a hand-over-hand manner.

There are several variations of correction procedures. Following are two examples.

The first procedure is recommended when the learner is being trained on a single step of a task analysis:

1. Immediately interrupt the learner's incorrect response.
2. Repeat the instructional cue paired with the activity cue that preceded the incorrect response.
3. Give whatever additional assistance is necessary to ensure a correct response by the learner.

4. Immediately reinforce the correct response.

5. Repeat the procedure, this time fading the additional assistance, to provide additional practice on the missed step.

6. If the learner meets the performance criterion for the step, continue on to the next step.

The following procedure is recommended when the individual is being trained concurrently on a number of steps of a task analysis (e.g., in vocational training procedures):

1. Immediately interrupt the learner's incorrect response.
2. Go back two steps in the task analysis and give the appropriate instructional cue for that step.
3. Have the learner repeat the two steps and the missed step, providing enough assistance to ensure correct responses on all three steps.

4. Reinforce each correct (assisted and unassisted) response.

5. Repeat the procedure to provide additional practice on the missed step.

6. Proceed to the next step in the task analysis.

References

¹ Sternberg et al. (1994). Individuals with Profound Disabilities: Instructional and Assistive Strategies. (3rd ed. pp. 321-327). Austin, TX: PRO-ED.

² *State Operations Manual Appendix J - Guidance to Surveyors: Intermediate Care Facilities for Persons With Mental Retardation.* Retrieved from http://www.cms.gov/Regulations-and-Guidance/Guidance/Manuals/Downloads/som107ap_j_intermcare.pdf

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