Direct Skills Teaching

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Abstract

*A*s the field of community support and rehabilitation matures, and new program models and methods are developed, the need increases for knowledge about the various programs and methods. Recent literature suggests that interventions designed

to develop skills have a positive impact on outcomes. While descriptions of the principles of skills training have been published, little has been written about the techniques of direct skills teaching. In this article, the principles of direct skills teaching are presented, its elements are described, and issues related to application with groups are discussed. Direct skills teaching is contrasted to skills training.

Introduction

As the field of community support and rehabilitation matures, and new program models and methods are developed, the need increases for knowledge about the various programs and methods. While reviews of the research suggest that some approaches that have been implemented in the field have a positive impact on outcomes (see, e.g., Anthony & Blanch, 1988; Test, 1984), further research requires clear descriptions of the underlying philosophy and goals of the program model (Bachrach, 1988).

Rehabilitation interventions can be broadly categorized as development of skills and development of supports (Farkas & Anthony, 1989; Anthony & Liberman, 1986; Anthony, Cohen, & Cohen, 1984; Anthony & Nemec, 1984), a distinction that can also be applied to community support programs (Test, 1984).

Skill development interventions involve improving performance abilities in a defined context (Morrison & Bellack, 1984). Skills are purposeful behaviors that must be performed at a required level to succeed in a particular environment (Cohen, Danley, & Nemec, 1985). The concept of *skill* implies competency; that is, if a skill is performed it is, by definition, done correctly. Skill development, then, relates to increasing the frequency with which the skill is performed accurately in the correct circumstances.

Reviews of the research suggest that skill development is effective (see, e.g., Dion & Anthony, 1987), with its effective-

ness demonstrated through both single subject (Lewis, Roessler, Greenwood, & Evans, 1985; Bellack, Hersen, & Turner, 1976; Edelstein & Eisler, 1976; Hersen & Bellack, 1976; Hersen, Turner, Edelstein, & Pinkston, 1975; Williams, Turner, Watts, Bellack, & Hersen; 1977) and group designs (Bloomfield, 1973; Doty, 1975; Field & Test, 1975; Goldsmith & McFall, 1975; Monti, Curran, Corriveau, DeLancey, & Hagerman, 1980; Monti et al., 1979; Percell, Berwick, & Beigel, 1974). Some reviews suggest that skill development has the greatest potential for benefit when it is incorporated into a comprehensive approach to rehabilitation intervention (Anthony & Liberman, 1986; Liberman et al., 1986; Wallace & Liberman, 1985).

The methods of skill development vary. The two most comprehensive and best defined are skills training (Liberman et al., 1986; Morrison & Bellack, 1984; Goldsmith & McFall, 1975; Anthony & Margules, 1974) and "direct skills teaching" (Cohen, Danley, & Nemec, 1985). Table 1 highlights the points made in comparing these approaches.

Table 1: Comparison of Direct Skill Teaching with Skills Training

	Skills Training	**Direct Skills Teaching**
Purpose:	Skill development	Skill development
Foundation:	Learning theory, behavior therapy	Education, "teaching as treatment"
Components:	*Assessment*—determination of skill deficits in a targeted targeted area (e.g., social skills).	*Assessment*—determination of skill performance requirements of client's performance in relation to environmental requirements.
	Acquisition—person can perform target behaviors.	*Acquisition*—person can perform the skill as needed.

Generalization—person can perform target behaviors in the natural environment.

Generalization—person can perform the skill as needed in the his or her preferred environment.

Maintenance—person can continue to perform target behaviors over time.

Maintenance—person can continue to perform skill as needed over time.

Impact—the new skill plays a meaningful role in improving the person's life.

Impact—the new skill increases the person's success and satisfaction in his or her preferred environment.

Techniques: *Instructions*—specific directions or requests to elicit behavior.

Orient person to process Tell—comprehensive explanations and descriptions of skill performance.

Modeling—demonstrated performance of skill and component behaviors.

Show—demonstrations of performance of skill and component behaviors and skills.

Role play—practice of skill.

Do—practice of component behaviors and performance.

Feedback—strengths, weaknesses of performance presented with encouragement and reinforcement.

Critique—interactive discussion about strengths/weaknesses of skill performance, with encouragement and reinforcement.

Homework—assigned practice with feedback and reinforcement.

Skills programming—identification of barriers to the successful performance of skill, of action steps and of self-rewards to use to eliminate barriers to skill performance.

Principles of Direct Skills Teaching

While skills training and direct skills teaching differ in practice, they are both based on fundamental principles of skill development. Skills training is based on behavioral techniques and incorporates some principles from education. Direct skills teaching is based on education, a "teaching as treatment" model (Carkhuff & Berenson, 1976), and incorporates some principles from behavioral and social learning theories.

The principles of skills training are outlined elsewhere (e.g., Morrison & Bellack, 1984) and include an emphasis on modeling and generalization. In addition to these, the principles of direct skills teaching include learner choice and involvement, individualization, structure and preparation, instructor expertise, practicality and manageability, and independence of skill performance (freedom from prerequisites).

Modeling is a process of demonstrating skill performance. The instructor shows the person what to do. In some instances, practitioners equate modeling followed by reinforcement with skills training (McCarthy-Funaro & Hargreaves, 1988; Farkas, Cohen, & Nemec, 1988). Direct skills teaching requires that modeling be accompanied by explanations and practices. The use of descriptions of the critical aspects of performance also is recommended in skills training (Morrison & Bellack, 1984).

No matter what approach is used for skill development, evaluation of its effectiveness must focus on the issues of generalization and maintenance (Morrison & Bellack, 1984). Skill development is goal oriented, focusing on successful performance of the skill by the learner in identified circumstances. The skill must be generalizable from the classroom to the real life circumstance where it is required. Performance must be maintained at the needed level to ensure success. Direct skills teaching incorporates an evaluation of the learner's use of the skill in the needed circumstances. Following formal skill

teaching, skill performance is re-evaluated, and any barriers to performing the skill at the required frequency or in the needed circumstances are identified. An individualized behavioral program is developed to overcome the identified barriers, ensuring generalization.

Learner choice and involvement is at the heart of the direct skills teaching process. In order to avoid the problems that arise from low motivation, the skills taught through the direct skills teaching process are based on those skills the person needs and wants to learn. Motivation is inherent in a process where individuals identify skills as necessary for their success and satisfaction in a particular environment they have chosen. Skills that make the lives of service providers easier but have no relevance to consumers' desires will be seen by consumers as irrelevant or, at worst, "force-feeding." Beyond the obvious ethical considerations, assisting people in pursuing their own goals makes practical sense (Shepherd, 1990).

Direct skills teaching is individualized to the person who needs and wants to learn the skill. Skills are selected for teaching based on an assessment of the person's functioning. This assessment evaluates current skill performance in areas critical to success and satisfaction in the person's chosen goal environment. Careful consideration is given to the level of functioning of the learner, not just generally, but in the specific environment where the skill will be used. The teaching is targeted to what the person needs to learn (Shepherd, 1990). Teaching materials are developed for the particular person, taking into account his or her individual learning style. Skills training more often makes use of a prepared curriculum (e.g., Corrigan, Davies-Farmer, & Lome, 1988; Wong et al., 1988; Lewis & Roessler, 1984; Beidel, Bellack, Turner, Hersen, & Luber, 1981). Additionally, the skill instructor selects for teaching specific component behaviors of the skill that the person cannot perform. Teaching focuses on new learning, and avoids reteaching the parts of the skill in which the learner is already proficient.

Direct skills teaching is a structured process. One segment follows another in a logical fashion. The prepared lesson plan leads the learner from hearing about the skill, to seeing the skill performed, to practicing the skill in the learning setting. Preparing the lesson requires that the instructor think through the elements of the skill: its definition, the benefit of performing the skill, the conditions under which the skill is performed, and its component behaviors. This preparation requires the instructor to have a thorough understanding of the skill and results in a clear focus for teaching.

Accurate identification of which critical behavioral components to teach requires that the instructor know the learner well. This enables the instructor to differentiate the parts of the skill with which the learner needs help from the parts that she or he can perform with ease. In addition to an expert understanding of the learner, the instructor must have expertise in the skill area. Accurate assessment of the learner's skill performance and the preparation of a detailed lesson requires that the instructor have both knowledge and experience in the skill area. Effective teaching requires mastery of the subject matter.

In direct skills teaching, the skills taught are practical, that is, they are manageable both to teach and to learn. What is of manageable "size" varies, depending on the level of functioning of the learner. For example, instruction may be needed in money management, weekly budgeting, identifying fixed expense categories, or simply writing a check. The determination of the relevant "size" of the skill is based on information about the person as well as the environment in which the skill is to be used. Level of functioning may vary from environment to environment. A person may function with a high degree of skill in a vocational environment, yet function less well in the same skill area within the living environment. This is taken into account when the instructor is planning both the scope and the pacing of the lesson.

Performance of complex skills may presume competency of prerequisite skills. Budgeting, for example, presumes competency in basic arithmetic skills. If someone cannot perform these, teaching budgeting may be premature. The instructor may need to emphasize first learning the mathematical operations involved in the process of budgeting, or obtaining supports (a calculator or an accountant) that will replace the need for the prerequisite skill.

Elements of Direct Skills Teaching

The elements of direct skills teaching incorporate the five elements of skills training: instructions, modeling, role play, feedback and positive reinforcement, and homework (Morrison & Bellack, 1984). Instructions are specific directions or requests to elicit behavior, and may include reasons for the importance of performing the behavior. Modeling demonstrates the desired behavior to the learner. Role play is a practice opportunity where the learner performs the desired behavior. Giving feedback involves providing the learner with concrete examples of what was done well and what needs improvement. Feedback is coupled with positive reinforcement for improvements and encouragement for continued improvement. Homework assignments are practice of the skill or desired behavior outside of the instructional setting. Performance of homework assignments is followed by feedback and reinforcement as was done in the role play practice.

Direct skills teaching includes some of the elements of skills training. Instructions are given, practice opportunities are provided, and feedback is given. The process of direct skills teaching involves preparing a lesson plan based on an outline of the components or "content" of the desired skill. Outlining the content incorporates the most important elements of the skill, including a definition of the skill name, a likely benefit or positive outcome of using the skill, a list of three or four critical behaviors that are component parts of the skill, and a general condition indicating the cue for skill per-

formance. Later, a lesson plan is built around these important elements of the content outline.

The lesson plan uses a five part "ROPES" format of a Review, an Overview, a Presentation, an Exercise, and a Summary (Carkhuff & Berenson, 1976; Cohen, Danley, & Nemec, 1985). The review provides an opportunity to explore the client's understanding of the skill. During the overview, the skill teacher provides information about what the skill is and why it is important, an image of how the skill is performed, and a description of the circumstances in which the skill is to be performed. This is similar to the skill training concept of instructions including reasons for performance, but differs in that it is a comprehensive look at the skill content rather than information about the component behaviors of the skill. The presentation gives explanations, demonstrations, and practice opportunities for the skill's component behaviors, while the exercise is a chance for the client to practice the skill in its entirety. The summary explores the learner's understanding of the skill following the teaching. Homework may be assigned if it seems necessary.

Once the structure of the lesson plan has been organized in the "ROPES" fashion, the tasks in planning a skill lesson are developing the elaboration points about the skill and the skill behaviors, preparing examples of the skill, and designing practice opportunities. These points are the important pieces of information that the skill teacher tells the learner while teaching the skill. A fully prepared lesson spells out the elaborations in a word-for-word script. This permits the instructor to attend to the learner during the skill teaching session rather than focusing on how to explain skill performance. While a fully developed lesson plan includes questions, orientations and directions for the learner, the bulk of the lesson plan is the "tell-show-do" sections: the elaboration points (the "tells"), the examples (the "shows"), and the practices (the "do's").

Examples of the skill and its component behaviors are creat-
ed and prepared ahead of time to enable the learner to get
an accurate image of a competent performance of the skill, or
at least a clear picture of the end product of skill perfor-
mance. The demonstration of the examples is written into the
lesson plan, following elaborations where information is
explained. The need for modeling skill performance is
stressed repeatedly in the literature on skill development. It is
important to show the example as soon as possible after
introducing a new skill or behavior so that the learner can
get a visual image of what is being discussed.

Exercises are designed that provide opportunities for the
learner to practice the entire skill and each of the skill's com-
ponent behaviors. These practice exercises give the learner a
chance to try out what has been taught in the instructional
setting with feedback on performance. Most often, the prac-
tices take on the structure of a role play—a simulated situa-
tion. At some point, however, the practices must include per-
formance in the actual circumstances where the skill is
needed. Often, practice in "real" circumstances is designed as
"homework" or instructor-supported practice sessions follow-
ing the classroom teaching.

The development of lesson plans for direct skills teaching
may take on a variety of "sizes" or "levels" depending on the
teaching required. Lesson plans may be written for a single
skill for a single lesson (e.g., applying makeup). Single
lessons may be incorporated in a module for a set of skills
falling under one major skill activity (e.g., grooming). Mod-
ules may be prepared as part of a course that includes a vari-
ety of activities (e.g., personal hygiene). Finally, courses may
be prepared as a part of an entire curriculum (e.g., daily liv-
ing activities).

Following the development of a detailed lesson plan, the skill
instructor teaches the skill. Effective teaching actively
involves the learners and results in measurable progress in

skill development. Progress means improvement in under-standing the knowledge about the skill and in performing the skill itself (Cohen, Danley, & Nemec, 1985). Instructor exper-tise is needed to evaluate skill performance accurately. Good interpersonal skills are needed to make the teaching session interesting and meaningful for the learners. Research sup-ports the positive impact of interpersonal skills on learning outcome (Cohen, Danley, & Nemec, 1985).

Effective interpersonal skills include giving direction through orientations and instructions, encouraging participation by asking facilitative questions and responding to the learner's thoughts and feelings, modifying the content and lesson plan as needed, and critiquing progress, which involves presenting the instructor's perspective on the learner's skill performance. Critiquing is an essential teaching skill as it provides feed-back, giving specific examples of what to do again, as well as what to correct. Effective critiquing occurs as an interactive process that identifies the learner's assessment of his or her own performance. A person's ability to self-critique will have an impact on his or her future ability to self-correct faulty performance.

After the teaching occurs, evaluation of the learner's skill per-formance is needed. If the follow-up assessment indicates further skill development is necessary following the teaching sessions, the skill teacher assists the learner in applying the skill in the required circumstances through a process called skills programming or programming for skill use. Program-ming is a step-by-step procedure developed with the learner and designed to overcome particular barriers to using the skill as needed. Specific timelines, rewards, and a monitoring system are used to support the person's use of the program to improve performance of the skill.

The skills that are to be developed through direct skills teach-ing are those the person cannot perform in any environment under any circumstances, and about which the person knows

little or nothing. Direct skills teaching is reserved for skills that need to be taught "from scratch." Skills programming alone is the preferred skill development intervention when the person already can perform the skill at some level. Skills that are taught using the direct skills teaching method are previously identified and evaluated, and they are crucial to success and satisfaction in the environment in which the skill is to be performed.

Direct Skills Teaching in Groups

Direct skills teaching may be done individually or in groups. Many practitioners fear that direct skills teaching is too time consuming to be practical, due to the emphasis on prepared lesson plans and individual instruction. One solution to this problem is to teach a skill to a small group. There are several factors related to teaching skills in groups that are derived from the principles and elements of direct skills teaching: individual needs, group composition, lesson plan development, group process, follow-up, and further skill development.

In preparing for direct skills teaching in groups, an instructor must identify the purpose or need for teaching the skill to a group. Because the skills taught are identified as needed and wanted by the learner, group teaching requires that several people need and want teaching for the same skill because they cannot perform the skill at all. While their goal environments may differ, the critical skill must be generic enough for each of them to benefit. Effective skill teaching groups are formed based on participant needs rather than instructor convenience or interest.

The instructor must select carefully the people who will form the group. Although several people may need to learn the same critical skill, their functioning levels and learning styles may be very different. The skill instructor must choose either homogeneous groups with similar styles and levels, or heterogeneous groups with a built-in tutoring system in which

group members help each other and higher functioning learners model the skill.

A lesson plan must be developed that will accommodate a group of learners. The instructor will need to have additional information and materials ahead of time. Definitions or benefits of the skill may need to be written differently for the various learners; extra examples and practices may need developing to suit different styles; and extra time must be built in for practices, feedback and discussions. The principle of individualization must not be lost in group teaching. The skill lesson and instruction still need to be individualized for each of the people in the group.

Delivery of the direct skills teaching lesson to a group has several advantages and disadvantages. First, teaching one skill to a group is, in some ways, time efficient. The instructor can teach the main concepts of a skill to several people at once. The corresponding disadvantage is that more time and effort is needed to individualize the learning for everyone. More time and personal attention is required during the initial review of skill knowledge and experiences, during practices and feedback sessions, and during summary discussions so that each person's perspective is heard.

The group process must be managed to maximize involvement. Involving a group in a lesson together can provide peer support, camaraderie, healthy competition, role models, tutors, empowerment, and inclusiveness. Motivation may sometimes increase when other people are learning the same skill. During discussions, group members will have a variety of perspectives to share that may be beneficial to each others' learning. Extra experiences with the skill are also built in by the fact that while one person may be performing the skill in a practice, the others may be involved in discriminating the correct and incorrect aspects of performance. However, optimal involvement requires that the group members have (or learn) additional participation skills, such as giving and

receiving feedback, prior to entering the skill development group.

Involving people in a group setting may create challenges independent of the teaching factors. Some people with psychiatric disabilities have difficulty tolerating a group experience. Sometimes poor interpersonal functioning or personality conflicts mean that certain people do not work well together as a group. Competition among group members can damage group cohesiveness. In general, the more skilled a instructor is in the concepts of group management, the greater the chances that the skill teaching group will succeed.

After conducting the direct skills teaching group, a follow-up of each learner's progress with the skill needs to occur. Skill performance evaluation occurs by self-monitoring, where the individual measures his or her own performance; by observation of each person by the other members of the group; and/or by formal evaluation by the skills teacher, other staff members, or significant others in the goal environment.

The need for further skill development beyond the group instruction depends on each individual's progress and his or her originally assessed skill performance need. Usually, adequate skill performance requires development of a skill program based on an individual's unique barriers to using the skill. As described above, once these skill performance barriers are fully explored, action steps are written that serve as solutions to overcome the barriers. Additional supports, such as timelines, reinforcements and monitoring are built into the program. Because of its highly individualized nature, skill programming presents a challenge for a skill instructor in a group setting. Extra time must be allocated, and a process must be developed that attends to both group and individual needs. One creative alternative is teaching the process of skills programming to the group, enabling them to create their own skill development programs.

Summary

Skill development increases the frequency with which a person accurately performs a skill in the correct circumstances. Direct skills teaching is a highly individualized process by which skills are taught using a prepared lesson plan. The lesson plan is developed for an individual based on his or her unique learning needs, and on the specific knowledge and behaviors that are needed to competently perform the identified skill. The skill to be taught is one that the person cannot perform, but needs to, in order to be successful and satisfied in his or her chosen goal environment.

The two best defined skills development approaches can be used to enhance one another, and a study of both approaches can benefit practitioners. While direct skills teaching can be distinguished from skills training by its emphasis on individualization, it can still be used effectively in a group approach to skills training. Pre-packaged skills training curricula in the area of social skills, for example, can be modified using the principles and techniques of direct skills teaching and applied in an individualized teaching session. The behavioral techniques of modeling, homework, and reinforcement are incorporated in the direct skills teaching approach, yet a separate study of these techniques can increase a practitioner's understanding and, ultimately, effectiveness.

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