

CAN'T TOUCH THIS?

No cow is too sacred to be considered for burgers, suggests Phil Beadle...

According to Professor John Hattie's meta-study, self-instruction has an effect size of 0.62. This means it's a real biggie in terms of its effectiveness as a technique and, if we are to be properly evidence based, we should all be using self-instruction as part of our toolkit. But what is it? The nomenclature seems to suggest that it is students teaching themselves, which seems to fit with prevailing pedagogic orthodoxies, and also seems a nice activity in terms of the amount of planning it doesn't take.

"What are we doing today, sir?"
"Self-instruction. You're teaching yourselves. I couldn't be bothered to plan anything. It's evidence based, y'know!"

Only that's not what self-instruction is. If we reach for our copy of 'Visible Learning' we see that it is, "self-verbalising the steps to complete a given task." What is this? It appears, on first sight, to be something suitable only for use with teaching basic life skills to students with multiple and complex learning difficulties. And sure enough you do a little research and that is exactly what it is. Basically, self-instruction has three steps: the teacher models a task while saying what he is doing out loud; the student performs the task while the teacher says the steps out loud; the

student performs the task while saying the steps out loud.

You can see how this would work with teaching someone to wipe his bottom, for instance:

"First, I take the paper, then I reach behind me, then I wipe. Finally, I put the paper into the toilet and I flush. Now you do it. First, you take the paper, then you reach behind yourself, then you wipe. Finally, you put the paper into the toilet and you flush. Now do it without me guiding you through the steps; you must say the steps out loud."

"I can't. I've already wiped. I need to wait for another opportunity."
"Yeah, but imagine you hadn't already wiped."
"I can't."

There is a further, even more dribble-specked variant to self-instruction: did – next – now. You state, again, out loud the step you've completed (did), then state out loud the step you've got to do next (next). Finally, you state, yet again, out loud, what you are going to do now (now). At the end of each stage it is genuinely recommended that the poor person performing the task, states out loud, "I did what I said I'd do." Clearly, this is the kind of strategy you might employ to teach a buck toothed waffle waitress who is kissing cousins with a spectacularly unintelligent monkey how to lay a table, but this does not stop it being the subject of serious academic study or being regarded by those serious academics as having a large effect size.

And it is here where we start the questioning of the sacred. It takes too large a leap of faith to conclude that self-instruction could be thought a viable

technique to teach anything more complicated than a set of very basic instructions, and yet we are hold the contents of 'Visible Learning' and particularly those techniques with a large effect size, to be a version of the gospel. But with self-instruction you can see why the effect size is so large: it is only suitable for teaching things that are very, very easy to learn.

As with any sacred text, sometimes it is worth sticking your fingers into the edifices of the holy, as what you get on them after a little poke around is not always what you might expect. I still think it is great that someone has done so much work to find out what teaching techniques work, and spend much of my life devoted to finding ways of translating Hattie's work to the classroom, but I wonder – just wonder – whether the stuff that comes down to us from academia that we are told we must use is always as well evidenced as we are lead to believe.

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