Task versus Skill Training:

A Matter of Practice

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This brief post draws an important distinction between task and skill training and suggests that dealing with the difference is essentially a matter of practice.

I've been thinking about the difference between training meant to equip someone to perform a specific task (e.g., assembling a widget or processing a certain kind of claim) and training intended to develop a skill (e.g., problem solving or technical troubleshooting). Let's begin by examining these two terms: task and skill.

A task is a time-bound work activity; it has a beginning and an end. Further, it is a *prefigured* work activity, that is, someone has specified in advance the what and how of the task. Typically, this "someone" is someone other than the performer, perhaps an industrial engineer or work design specialist. Moreover, a task is usually performed under standardized conditions using standardized tools. Little has been left to chance or the discretion of the performer. Although the factory assembly line is the archetype of prefigured work, it exists elsewhere as well (e.g., the work of insurance claims examiners).

A skill is an inferred capability. We observe someone cope successfully with a wide range of difficult situations and we say of that person that she is a first-rate or highly skilled problem solver. The more difficult the problem and the broader the range of situations handled, the more we are likely to say her skills are highly developed. Skills, then, transcend time and circumstances. Skills enable us to perform a very different kind of work – *configured* work, that is, work in which the performer must figure out what to do and how to do it, including, perhaps, specifying the result to be achieved.

Training someone to perform a specific task is a very straightforward matter, often handled quite successfully through an instructional method known as "demonstration-performance" (i.e., the task is demonstrated via a live instructor or a video, the steps are explained as the demonstration proceeds, and the trainees are then provided with opportunities to practice the task themselves, typically with feedback). Depending on the task, this can be quite a bit more complicated than I've made it sound but its basic elements do not change. The main point here is that the trainees should be provided with practice that approximates as closely as possible the conditions found on the job.

You do not train someone to perform a skill. Instead, you provide practice that is meant to promote the development of that skill. In other words, skills aren't taught as much as they're learned. Here, too, the practice situations should resemble those encountered on the job but – and this is an important but – they are not and can never be exactly the same as what the learner will subsequently encounter. Indeed, the point of skill development is to equip the learner to cope successfully with a range of situations, not simply handle one particular situation.

A major difference between task training and skill training lies in the subject matter presented prior to, during, between or after the practice session(s). For task training, the subject matter is easily confined to the steps of the task, such nomenclature as might be necessary to follow instructions or use a job aid and a demonstration of some kind. The task determines the subject matter. For skill development, we are in a very different situation. We are confronted by the fact that we really don't know what underlies a skill. We have some notions, some theories, some hypotheses, but we really don't know. And so we present subject matter consisting of concepts, models, methods, approaches and techniques to name a few. The practice we provide is practice in applying these artifacts to the situations we set up in the training.

For some skills, we have great confidence in our models, methods and so on and reasonably good skills are in fact readily developed. Technical troubleshooting is a good example. For other skills (e.g., leadership), we know much less and our models and methods do not yield the same level of confidence in the outcome.

Where does all this leave us? Well, for one thing, it suggests that task training is easily handled. For another, it suggests that skill development is an altogether different matter. Both cases boil down to ensuring that the learners receive appropriate instruction and practice. Therein lies the main point of this brief paper: the design of training is sometimes a task (as in the case of task training) and it sometimes calls for the application of skill (as in the case of designing training to develop a skill). In both cases it calls for appropriate practice – with feedback.