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The ultimate goal of instruction in Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA) and Positive Behavior Support (PBS) is to ensure that learners respond appropriately to naturally occurring antecedents, under the influence of contextually appropriate motivating operations, and are sustained by naturally occurring reinforcement schedules. The success of instruction is not measured solely by performing a behavior on demand in a contrived setting, but by the learner engaging in meaningful, socially significant behaviors that enhance their quality of life across natural environments.

For example:

- If we teach someone to manage money, success means they use money appropriately in stores when paying for items, not just in a classroom roleplay.
- If we teach toileting, success is the person using the toilet when they feel the physiological urge, in the settings where they live, work, and socialize.
- If we teach coping strategies, success means the person uses them spontaneously when encountering stress in daily life.

Instruction is a temporary scaffold. Behavior analysts design prosthetic environments - supports that compensate for what the learner cannot yet do - with the ultimate aim of dismantling or reducing these supports as competence develops. This scaffolding might include prompts, elevated reinforcement schedules, or modified materials.

However, not all prosthetic supports need to be removed if they are practical, socially valid, and/or self-managed. For instance, using a visual schedule app to plan the day is a prosthetic environmental support, but one that promotes independence rather than dependency.

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The Concept of Transferring Stimulus Control

Stimulus control occurs when a specific antecedent reliably evokes a particular behavior because that behavior has been reinforced in its presence in the past.

Importantly, in ABA, the term “control” refers to a predictable and reliable relationship between stimuli and behavior - not domination or coercion. It reflects influence, not the removal of autonomy. The goal is to help learners gain more control over their own lives by ensuring their behavior comes under the influence of natural cues and motivations in their environment.

When we teach new behaviors, learners often respond to supplementary or artificial antecedents - prompts or modified stimuli, rather than the natural antecedent that will evoke the behavior in real life. Thus, a critical part of instruction is the transfer of stimulus control from these artificial cues to the natural cues present in the learner’s daily environment.

This process ensures that behaviors are not bound to contrived teaching settings but generalize and maintain under the conditions where they are genuinely needed.

How Stimulus Control Transfer Occurs

Transfer of stimulus control is typically achieved through systematic strategies that reduce dependency on artificial stimuli while strengthening the natural SD’s control over the behavior.

Common strategies include:

Prompt Fading: Gradually reducing the intensity, frequency, or intrusiveness of prompts.

Stimulus Fading: Slowly altering the characteristics of a stimulus until the natural cue is fully controlling the behavior.

Time Delay: Introducing a delay between the presentation of the SD and the prompt, giving the learner a chance to respond independently.

Vignettes of Stimulus Control Transfer in Practice

1. Professional Presentation Skills: Amira is learning to give presentations at work. Initially, she uses detailed notes and slides densely packed with text. Over time, her coach encourages her to rely on slides with only key points, prompting her to internalize the material. Eventually, Amira presents fluently using slides as minimal prompts, with the natural antecedent, the audience's attention and the scheduled meeting, evoking her confident, structured delivery.

2. Managing Stress with Mindfulness: Jordan is practicing mindfulness to manage stress at work. In therapy, he initially uses a guided meditation app whenever he feels anxious. Over time, the therapist encourages Jordan to first notice his stress cues (e.g., shallow breathing, tension) and initiate deep breathing exercises before using the app. Eventually, the physical sensation of stress itself becomes the antecedent that cues Jordan to engage in mindfulness independently.

3. Cooking with a Recipe: Elena is learning to cook a complex recipe. At first, she follows the recipe step by step with detailed instructions and visual aids. As she practices, she no longer needs to check the recipe for each step, relying instead on the natural cues within the cooking process, like the smell of spices or the appearance of simmering sauce, to guide her next actions.

4. Public Transport Navigation: James is moving to a new city and learns to navigate the subway system using a transit app and written directions from friends. As he repeats the journey, he starts recognizing station names, signage, and the sequence of stops. Eventually, the natural environmental cues, such as station announcements and landmarks, guide him without needing the app or instructions.

Practical Tips for RBTs

- **Clarify the Purpose of Instruction:** Ensure you understand how the behavior benefits the learner, not just how it meets external expectations.
- **Understand the Natural SD:** Always clarify with your supervisor what the ultimate SD is for any behavior you are teaching.
- **Ensure the Right Motivating Operations:** Be aware of what motivates the learner in different contexts. Teaching is more effective when the learner is motivated to engage with the skill being taught. In addition to recognizing existing motivators, effective teaching often involves helping learners acquire new motivating operations that are socially and personally significant.

  For example, we might initially teach someone to brush their teeth using praise or tangible rewards, but our long-term aim is for them to value the health of their teeth itself. Similarly, while we might encourage studying with tangible reinforcers, we ultimately want learners to engage with studying because they are motivated by the desire to master a subject, achieve academic goals, or satisfy personal curiosity.
- **Consider the Schedule of Reinforcement:** Reinforcement should be delivered in a way that reflects natural reinforcement schedules. Over time, aim to thin reinforcement so that behavior persists without prosthetic reinforcers.

- **Ask About the Transfer Plan:** Know how the plan aims to fade prompts and transfer control to natural cues and reinforcement schedules.
- **Monitor for Prompt Dependency:** Watch for signs that the learner is only responding when prompted, indicating that further fading is needed.
- **Support Generalization:** Practice skills across settings, people, and times to ensure the behavior is under broad stimulus control.

Ethical and Practical Considerations

It is also important to emphasize that the goal of transferring stimulus control is not to promote compliance or conformity for its own sake. Instruction should not be about teaching someone to respond simply because that is what others expect.

Instead, the aim is to help learners respond in ways that are meaningful and useful to them, based on their own goals, preferences, cultural context, and identity. A behavior is only contextually appropriate if it aligns with what the individual values and finds beneficial in their environment.

It is crucial to recognize that the goal of instruction is not conformity or compliance for its own sake. The purpose of transferring stimulus control is to help learners engage in behaviors that are contextually appropriate given the situation, their cultural background, personal goals, preferences, and identity. It is not about enforcing social norms that may not align with the individual's values.

While the goal is often to remove prosthetic supports, this is not universally necessary. If a prosthetic support (like a reminder app, hearing aid, communication app or visual checklist) is manageable and enhances independence, there may be no ethical or practical need to eliminate it.

Conclusion

Instruction in ABA is not about perfect performance in controlled settings but about helping learners to respond effectively to the natural world around them. Transferring stimulus control is central to this goal. As skills transfer from prompts and prosthetic environments to natural antecedents and reinforcement schedules, the learner moves closer to genuine autonomy and a more fulfilling, more self-directed life.