

Perceptual Control Theory Unwittingly Applied

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PERCEPTUAL CONTROL THEORY UNWITTINGLY APPLIED

One of the best examples I can provide to illustrate the ability of people to control their own performance comes from the early 1970s when I was head of the Programmed Instruction Writer's Course at the Navy's Instructor Training School in San Diego.

I had just taken over as head of the course in 1971 when I decided to significantly alter the approach taken to preparing people to develop programmed instructional materials.

I had been reading Bloom's *Taxonomy of Educational Objectives* and I was particularly taken by its assertion that higher levels subsume lower levels.¹ In the cognitive domain, the highest level was *Evaluation*. I reasoned that if people could evaluate their own performance they could adjust their behavior as necessary to produce the desired results.

We still had to present much of the same information but we did so in the context of *evaluating* programmed instructional materials instead of how to write them.

William T. Powers' seminal book about perceptual control theory, *Behavior: The Control of Perception*, had not yet been published. Frankly, it would have offered a much sounder theoretical basis for the design decision I made back then.

In any case, I redesigned the course and instead of teaching the participants *how to write* programmed instructional materials they were taught *how to evaluate* such materials. We developed in them the ability to judge the quality of such materials. We did so using abundant examples of "good frames and bad" (thanks to Susan Meyer Markle).

What we did have to teach them how to do was to conduct the kinds of job/task and behavioral analyses that would provide a solid basis for their programs. But we left it to them to do the writing. As we hoped, the participants produced better materials faster than was the case with the preceding course design.

¹ Regarding the assertion in Bloom's taxonomy that higher levels subsume lower levels, it seemed to me that if you trained someone at the level of evaluation – and you succeeded – whatever you covered and however you covered it had to adequately deal with the lower levels, otherwise you couldn't have succeeded because the required foundation wouldn't have been laid.

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The basic principles of (a) equipping people to be the judge of their own performance and (b) ensuring they have the information to do so have been underlying factors in my performance improvement practice ever since.

REFERENCES

1. *Behavior: The Control of Perception* (1973). William T. Powers. Aldine De Gruyter: New York.
2. *Good Frames and Bad: A Grammar of Frame Writing* 2nd Edition (1969). Susan Meyer Markle. John Wiley & Sons: New York.
3. *Taxonomy of Educational Objectives. Handbook I: Cognitive Domain* (1956). Benjamin S. Bloom, Editor. David McKay Company, Inc: New York.

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Click [here](#) to contact Fred Nickols via email. Other articles pertaining to control theory and the GAP-ACT/Target Model of human behavior and performance can be found in that [section](#) of his web site.


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