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Creative Paradoxical Thinking and Its Implications for Teaching and Learning Motor Skills

DAVID CHEN

Understanding paradoxes such as "less is more" can improve teaching effectiveness.

In my 20 years of teaching and research in the area of motor skill acquisition and performance, I have encountered many phenomena (either research findings or anecdotes) that first puzzled and then fascinated me. I would like to introduce these findings to illustrate my point.

- Mary, a novice teacher, coaches tennis at a high school. She is frustrated with one of the students who is trying to hit by correcting a flaw in his backhand stroke. The more she talks, the less the student progresses. The young teacher does not realize that when presenting feedback to a student, less is more. Feedback is more effective when it is brief and focuses on a key point, than when it is excessive.

- In another case of coaching tennis, Mary finds that her student retains more of what she teaches if she introduces multiple hitting, e.g., service, forehand, backhand, and volley in a random order, even though they may not progress fast initially.

- She also observes that during an important game, one of her best players chokes up due to an obsession with avoiding the mistake she fears most. Ironically, she does teach what she was trying to avoid.

Each of these occurrences seems counterintuitive and irrational because they have some contradictory elements. My understanding of these phenomena was greatly enhanced when I started to explore the concept of paradox and paradoxical thinking. Paradoxical thinking allows one to combine the rational, linear, left-brain approach with the creative, nonlinear, right-brain approach in understanding many previously confusing phenomena. I have also discovered that most of the effective learning and teaching strategies involve paradoxes. In this article, I will attempt to (1) define the concept of paradox, (2) propose the concept of creative paradoxical thinking and its benefits for theorists and practitioners, (3) identify six paradoxes by going through research findings of motor learning and performance, and (4) offer suggestions for applying the paradoxical thinking process in solving problems encountered in learning and teaching motor skills.

What Is Creative Paradoxical Thinking?

A paradox is defined as a statement or situation that contains two or more logically opposing elements, but that may actually be true (Fletcher & Chrysler, 1992; Quisenberry, 1988). In other words, in a paradox, contradictory and mutually exclusive elements are present and operate at the same time. In one of the above examples (less is more), "less" and "more" are juxtaposed to create an illogical statement, but a closer examination of the facts reveals its wisdom: less information

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