Success in Salsa: Students' Evaluation of the Use of Self-reflection when Learning to Dance

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Background and Purpose of the Project

Achievement goal theory stipulates that achievement goals guide our beliefs and behaviour (Roberts, 2001). The two main achievement goals orientations identified in the sport and physical activity literature are task and ego orientations (Nicholls, 1984). A person with a strong task orientation defines success in self-referenced terms, as improving one's own performance or mastering new skills. Someone with a strong ego orientation defines success normatively, as being better than others (Duda & Hall, 2001). The majority of existing research suggests that having a strong task orientation is a good thing, whether in regards to motivationally adaptive responses (Standage & Treasure, 2002), self-referenced sources of enjoyment (Yoo & Kim, 2002), adaptive sources of confidence (Magyar & Feltz, 2003), or students' satisfaction with learning (Zandvliet & Straker, 2001).

Similar to many studies with athletes, Nieminen, Varstala and Manninen (2001) found that dance students tended to have stronger task than ego orientations. Even so, any method that

encourages dance students to focus on the process of what they are doing rather than what others are doing (i.e., comparing themselves to others) would be beneficial in helping students attend to relevant cues and improve their skills.

Both teachers and students can become frustrated when either the desired level of improvement in student skills is not being achieved or when teachers are repeatedly saying the same thing with no apparent result. While teachers may need to provide more accurate, detailed or individual feedback, or improve the motivational climate of the class, sometimes the situation is that the students need to engage more directly in the learning process.

One possible intervention is the use of structured self-reflection. Using self-reflection sheets that cause respondents to focus on specific elements of technique or skills, and rate one's own performance, should theoretically promote a task focus. Hanrahan (1999) suggested that engaging in self-reflection may enhance intrinsic motivation as well as performance. Self-analysis and self-monitoring have been found to positively influence the acquisition of physical skills (Lounsbery & Sharpe, 1996; Zimmerman & Kitsantas, 1996).

The purpose of this study was to have dance students engage in structured self-reflection for a number of weeks and then evaluate the self-reflection process.

Method

Participants

The study was conducted over an eleven-week period at Rio Rhythmics, a Brisbane-based Latin dance academy that has approximately 900 students. Almost all of the Rio Rhythmics students are adults who take classes for recreational purposes. Students learn in a group

environment with an average class size of 25. Multiple instructors teach on a rotational basis so that students experience a number of teaching styles. The curriculum covers 11 Central and South American dance styles. For this study all students enrolled in the Salsa/ Lambada courses titled 'Intermediate Two', 'Upper Intermediate' and 'Advanced' during this period were invited to join the project (31 males and 46 females). Of these students, 72 (93.5 %) agreed to participate. The mean age of the students was 34.93 years. Roughly two thirds of the students had tertiary education (undergraduate and/or postgraduate degree).

Measures/Questionnaires

Demographic Questionnaire:

Completed anonymously, the demographic questionnaire was used to collect background information about the participants.

Salsa Self-Reflection Form (SSRF):

The Salsa Self-Reflection Form (SSRF) was completed one time per week for nine weeks. The SSRF consists of a description of poor and good performance on 18 different skills/techniques related to salsa (See Appendix). The participants rated their current performance on each of the skills/techniques on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (*poor performance*) to 5 (*good performance*). Items measured posture, timing, weight distribution, upper body movement, distance from partner, stepping, eye focus, arms, floor craft, turns/spins, enthusiasm, enjoyment, interaction with partner, courtesy, musical interpretation, creativity, following, and leading. The form also asks the student to name one thing done well in that particular class and to state (in a positive fashion) anything that should be addressed in the next class.

Self-Reflection Evaluation Questionnaire (SREQ):

In this questionnaire, participants identified the pros and cons associated with using the SSRF and stated whether they were interested in having self-reflection forms for other styles of dance. Other questions asked the participants to give suggestions for improving the form and to evaluate the impact (if any) of the self-reflection process on their approach to dancing.

Procedure

The project began with all participants completing the demographic questionnaire during the first or second week of an 11-week block of classes. In the third week of classes the participants were given a booklet of 10 blank SSRF forms (i.e., one for each weekly class, and one spare). Each week the form was completed either during the class or immediately after it to allow the students to track their progress as the term unfolded. In between classes the booklets were kept at the dance academy rather than taken home by the students; this was done to ensure that they were available at every class. Students created their own code name for use on the SSRF and all other questionnaires. Code names were used to ensure student anonymity, a strategy designed to encourage honest responses about their dancing as well as in their evaluations of the SSRF forms.

The last week of the project involved the students completing the Self-Reflection Evaluation Questionnaire (SREQ).

Results

Changes in Approach to Dancing

When asked if their approach to dancing had changed as a result of the self-reflection process, exactly 50% of the project participants felt that their dancing had changed in a positive way.

The other half experienced no change (26.4%) or did not respond to the question (23.6%). No students reported that their approach to dancing had changed in a negative way.

A number of dimensions emerged from the students' qualitative responses about why they thought their approach had changed. Some felt that they had become more cognisant about their dancing, as distinct from just doing it. Self-awareness was improved, as was their understanding of salsa.

Additional changes were that learning became more focussed, and the students became more motivated to self-reflect. They became less negative in their self-criticism and were less inclined to compare themselves with others.

Finally, the students also reported experiencing increased enjoyment, fun and relaxation in their dancing, and, significantly, improved dance skills.

Pros of Using Self-Reflection

A majority of project participants (i.e., 59.7%) identified pros, while only 2.7% replied that there were no pros to self-reflection. The rest of the participants did not answer this question.

In terms of the positives identified, the most obvious was that using a self-reflection form enables one to monitor and analyse personal progress. The rest of the comments were similar to, and therefore confirmed, the results of the previous question.

Cons of Self-Reflection

Half of the project participants (i.e., 50%) identified negative aspects of the self-reflection process. An additional 8.3% of the participants replied that there were no cons to engaging in the process. The rest of the participants did not respond to the question.

Overwhelmingly, the major concern was with the forms being too time-consuming. Many students wanted to spend every minute of limited class time actually dancing. Other challenges pertained to reduced enjoyment/ increased stress, the fact that the form makes some people more aware of their shortcomings and how much there is left to learn, and that the form fuels negativity.

Comments also related to completing the forms as being a repetitive, arduous, and overly analytical process. Difficulty with self-evaluation was expressed, warranting more in-class feedback from the teacher relating to the variables, or from the dance partner. Three people identified challenges in the design of the form.

Interest in Self-Reflection Forms for Other Styles of Dance

More than half of the project participants (i.e., 56.9%) expressed their interest in the development of forms for additional dance styles taught at the dance academy. Of the additional participants, 23.6% did not respond to this question and 19.4% of them responded with “no”.

Suggested Improvements for the Self-Reflection Form

The majority of the project participants (i.e., 68.1%) did not respond to the question about suggested improvements, while 5.6% responded with "none" or "nil". The rest of the participants (26.4%) contributed the following ideas.

One idea that emerged is that the form needs to be used in conjunction with more feedback from the teachers. Students suggested this should take the form of in-class feedback more frequently corresponding to the skills/techniques identified on the SSRF, or the teachers assisting students to set long term goals.

Students also felt that various alterations are required regarding time issues. They wanted the option to look at the booklet of self-reflection forms prior to their class, and to fill it out at home, rather than being given the booklet for a brief period mid-class or immediately after the class.

There was one complaint that the form is too specific, however most people suggested additions to the form.

Implications

Overall, the self-reflection forms were perceived to be useful. Focussing learning, increasing motivation, being more positive, having more fun, enhancing self-awareness, having a better understanding of salsa and improved dance skills are all positive results of engaging in structured, written, self-reflection. These results support the previous sport-related findings of Lounsbery and Sharpe (1996) and Zimmerman and Kitsantas (1996).

The results, however, also provided constructive criticism that can be used to improve the process with future students. Possible improvements include:

- Allowing students to keep their own booklets to be completed when desired and easily accessible for technique/style reminders.
- Reminding teachers to use the terminology in the self-reflection form when providing in-class feedback.
- Fostering opportunities for students to give each other feedback during class.
- Helping students to set long-term goals, and completing the first form with the student.
- Considering alterations/additions to the form, these being:
    - A 7-point instead of 5-point scale
    - More skills/techniques in the list
    - A space provided for information relating to external factors (e.g. illness) that may explain poor results.

Whether any or all of the above suggestions are implemented, the results of this study all point in the direction of creating and using self-reflection forms for multiple dance styles to increase the involvement, motivation and learning of students.

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Appendix

Salsa Self-Reflection

Name:_____ Date:_____

Skill/Technique	Poor Performance (1)	Good Performance (5)	Rating
Posture	Slouched (rounded shoulders, chin forward, weak core strength)	Proud (chest lifted, shoulders open and down, chin in, strong core)	12345
Timing	Broke on different counts within the same song; Danced too fast/slowly for the music	Broke on the same count throughout the song; Knew where I was in the music	12345
Musical interpretation	Danced the same regardless of the music	Step selection & style matched dynamics and mood of music	12345
Leading	Shoved partner; Too late/early; Lead verbally not physically; Tentative or didn't lead	Achieved clear signals physically with appropriate strength and timing; Smooth and confident	12345
Following	Anticipated, resisted, or delayed response	Responded to information immediately	12345
Upper body movement	Stiff, restrained, jerky, or exaggerated	Fluid and appropriate to the style of the music	12345
Weight distribution	Threw weight forward/ backward/sideways	Stayed on target	12345
Stepping	Leg stayed bent	Leg straightened	12345
Distance from partner	Accordion effect (looked more like rock 'n' roll)	Maintained consistent spacing	12345
Arms	Spaghetti arms (no tension) or overly tense; Elbows stuck out	Firm but relaxed; Elbows down	12345
Eye focus	Engrossed in the floor or footwork	Looked up/at partner	12345
Creativity	Always did the same thing in the same order	Tried something new; Was willing to make mistakes	12345
Floor craft	Bumped into others or stayed in the same spot	Good spatial awareness; Danced in more than one spot on the floor (travelled)	12345
Turns/spins	Got dizzy/ lacked control; Stayed in same place when partner turned	Spotted/controlled; Moved around partner when partner turned	12345
Enthusiasm	Looked bored and was negative about shortcomings	Smiled and was positive about the learning experience	12345
Interaction with partner	Ignored partner; Showed off with no focus on what the partner was doing	Had give and take with partner; Respected my partner's abilities	12345

Enjoyment	Self-conscious; Worried what others were thinking	Went for it; Had fun	12345
Courtesy	Rude	Thanked partner(s)	12345

One thing I did really well in salsa today was:

_____

Remember for next time (Keep it positive!):

_____