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Abstract

Compelling behavioral and neuro-imaging data suggest that the retention and perfection of skills (procedural, "how to" knowledge) reflects long-lasting experience-driven changes in the brain’s organization (neural plasticity). Two corollaries require consideration in designing effective skill learning programs. i) Neuro-behavioral constraints, imposed on whether neuronal plasticity is triggered and allowed to proceed, must be satisfied; otherwise, the skill may fail to consolidate into long-term memory. These include the amount of task iterations afforded, task scheduling, behavioral relevancy and the degree of consistency of the to-be-learned experience over a required time-window. ii) The performance of a given task reflects qualitatively different task solution routines in different phases of experience. Practice, given time and sometimes time-in-sleep, can trigger processes whereby new procedural knowledge and qualitative changes in task solution, emerge and consolidate. These emerging changes in procedural knowledge result in differences in the ability to transfer gains, across stimulus, context and task parameters.

Our aim here is to present a very brief account of our current view of procedural learning and procedural memory consolidation as emerging from a number of studies addressing the characteristics of human skill learning. We present a number of points which we believe are of relevance to the understanding of the biological mechanisms and specifically, the neuro-behavioral constraints imposed by these mechanisms on skill learning and skill memory. These constraints require consideration if we are to improve and perhaps even optimize skill teaching protocols and skill learning programs. The references provided, mainly from our own work on perceptual learning and motor skill acquisition can be consulted for perusing the actual data and as pointers to many related studies and papers that inspired us.

A widely accepted view is that skills and habits - procedural, "how to" knowledge – are organized in memory in a manner which is quite distinct from that of declarative, "what" knowledge (knowledge of facts and singular events) and are retained in an outstandingly robust manner (Squire, 1986; Dudai, 2004). It is clear, nevertheless, that the two memory systems interact in healthy, typical adults (Albouy et al., 2008). A somewhat different perspective on the two long-term memory systems is that while the declarative memory system is geared to retain sparsely occurring and even singular experiences, the declarative memory system is triggered if and only when a given experience is repeated; preferably in a consistent manner. Thus, declarative memory can be viewed as a memory system evolved from the need to retain singular events (e.g., painful event that one would not want repeated) and arbitrary associations, while procedural memory reflects the evolving ‘deep’ knowledge of the structure of the relevant environment and context, as well as the statistics of repeated experiences. In the context of skill learning, a training experience will often result in some trace of declarative memory, but if training is continued, i.e., more iterative experience on the task is afforded and experience accumulates, the neural mechanisms (presumably Hebbian in character (Viana & Prisco, 1984) subserving the generation of long-term procedural memory can be triggered.

An important advancement in our understanding of the biology of procedural memory comes from animal and human studies that clearly indicated that the establishment of long-term procedural memory is subserved by functional and structural changes within the brain systems involved in the performance of the task, i.e., activated by the repeated experience (Karni, 1996; Merzenich, 1998). Moreover, there is evidence suggesting that the neural changes triggered by repeated experience affect two distinct levels of brain representation. Repeated experience can result: i. in neuronal changes at local processing levels that are

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Emerging from our and others’ work in recent years is the notion that experience-driven changes can occur because procedural knowledge is dynamic. Even at low-level corticale processing stages but within the processing stream involved in the execution of the to be learned task (For example, Karni et al, 1995, 1998; Schwartz et al, 2005; Blake et al, 2005; and see also M. Greenlee’s paper in the current proceedings). Based on a principle of parsimony, it has been proposed (Karni, 1996), that experience dependent changes would occur at the lowest possible level in which task parameters which are critical for task performance are differentially represented by a group of neurons or a local circuit (the Critical Level theory). The critical level for task representation reflects not only task parameters and the nature of the training experience, but also of the amount of experience gained, because representations change. Thus, the level to be affected by plasticity is determined, according to the Critical Level hypothesis, by multiple factors such as the nature and structure of the training experience, the ability to represent the relevant aspects that a re critical to the task solution implemented and the task demands but also relates to the learners experiential “history” (e.g., prior experience with the target and related – in a neural representational sense – tasks) and needs (relevance, priority) (Karni, 1996). It is important to note that in line with the Critical Level theory and contrary to a widely held view, the more one practices, the less amenable are the skills to be expressed in novel (untrained) conditions: the more one practices, the more lower-level brain representations become engaged (e.g., Korman et al, 2003; Sosnik et al, 2003; Hauptmann & Karni, 2002).

The second question called to mind is when do these changes occur? The studies addressing this question lead to the discovery of a latent memory consolidation phase in procedural learning (e.g., Karni & Sagi, 1993; Karni, 1996, 1998; Korman et al., 2003, 2007; Adi-Japha et al., 2009; Shadmehr R & Brashers-Krug, 1997). During a few hours after the termination of the training experience memory processes, which were triggered in training, result in measurable changes in the brain as well as in task performance. The successful completion of procedural memory consolidation was shown, by us and others, to be in many cases sleep dependent (Stickgold et al, 2000; Walker et al., 2002; Korman et al., 2007). Nevertheless, sleep may be necessary only for memory consolidation in the motor domain (Korman et al, 2003, 2007; Walker, 2003). Several of our studies showed that the triggering and expression of consolidation phase gains depend on specific parameters of the training experience in the context of subsequent experiences occurring before time and sleep is afforded (e.g., amount of task iterations (Hauptmann & Karni, 2002; Korman et al, 2003; Censor et al., 2007), sleep or time interval (Korman et al., 2003, 2007; Doyon, Korman et al., 2009), interference and scheduling (Korman et al., 2007,
The notion that procedural skill learning is a multi-staged, dynamic, process is based on extensive behavioral, functional imaging, electrophysiological, and cellular/molecular evidence (for some reviews see Willingham, 1998; Karni et al., 1998, Shadmehr & Brashers-Krug, 1997; Hikosaka et al., 1999). Much of our work in recent years has been concerned with the characterization of a critical, time and time-in-sleep dependent, phase in the establishment of skill – the procedural memory consolidation phase (e.g., Karni & Sagi, 1993, Karni et al, 1994, Korman 1998, 2007; Doyon et al, 2009). Nevertheless, we think, that the dynamic aspect of the process have not been taken into account in the cognitive skill learning literature. Specifically, the impact of the notion that the switch from one phase to the subsequent one is not linear or a simple function of the number of iterations as the “Power Law” model of skill learning suggests, is still to be felt. For example, it is clear that multi-session training does not constitute the sum of incremental gains of a number of single sessions of training on a task. Multi-session training can result in (numerous) qualitative shifts in the knowledge gained from the experience (Korman et al, 2003; Hikosaka et al., 1999).

A further important notion to have emerged in recent research is that skill learning, specifically, the generation of long-term procedural memory is under multiple control mechanisms (i.e., whether learning will occur is “gated”) which are in effect, in varying modes, throughout the individuals’ life time. It has been proposed (Karni, 1996; Keuroghlian, & Knudson, 2007) that some constraints on skill acquisition are required, in an ontogenetic sense, because skill and other types of habit learning represent a set of processes in which behaviorally important representations of experience, sometimes including low-level sensory and motor processing, are modified. Although most theories of skill acquisition assume that all skills are more alike than different to each other in terms of the characteristics of the skill acquisition process and the cognitive and brain processes subserving them, the evidence in support of this notion has been slow in developing.

We argue that it is important, to try and understand the behavioral and neural constraints on the acquisition of procedural knowledge and specifically the constraints on the triggering and the establishment of long-term procedural memory (i.e., procedural memory consolidation). The main motivation is the idea that brain plasticity can be better harnessed for improving skill acquisition across our life spans as well as for the rehabilitation of skills in individuals with developmental or acquired neurological deficits.

1. References


