Consumption Skill Acquisition in Ski Schools: Towards a Theory of Embodied Learning

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Remedying the absence of a cultural theory of consumption skill acquisition, we use video data to explore how consumers learn in ski schools. We identify six modes of skill acquisition and theorize the interplay between the sensori-motor system, the conscious state of skillful coping, and the socially assembled learning situation.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Consumption skills are vital prerequisites for realizing identity projects, community membership, and value co-creation. Consumer researchers have repeatedly acknowledged the benefits of skills—the bodily capacity to do something well—and the importance of skill acquisition to consumers with regard to experiences, identity construction, or status (e.g., Arnould and Price 1993; Golding, Shankar, and Canniford 2012; Tumbat and Belk 2011).

However, while many studies in consumer research find that consumption skill level is variable and can be acquired over time, no systematic study has focused on how consumers acquire skills in dedicated learning settings. Most studies assume that skills ‘automatically’ increase with experience, or that consumers acquire skills through trial-and-error. Hence a broad range of market offerings remains understudied that seek to teach consumers new skills through dedicated exercises and various forms of instruction.

In this paper, we review how existing studies conceptualize skill acquisition and find a number of quite different acquisition modes described in the consumer research literature. We complement existing research with an exploration of how consumption schools enable and facilitate consumption skill acquisition through different schooling practices. Focusing on the context of ski schooling, we find that none of the different skill acquisition modes described in the literature dominates, but rather that instructors alternate between schooling practices that entail a variety of different acquisition modes. We systematize these modes and compare them to prior literature in order to lay the foundation for a more systematic theory of embodied learning.

Bodily skills form the bedrock on any human activity (Merleau-Ponty 1962) and thus appear in many different contexts and range from basic and ubiquitous to highly specialized and difficult. We discuss skill acquisition using a tri-part scheme that acknowledges the interconnected domains of 1) bodily or muscle movements, 2) the conscious state of skillful coping, and 3) the socially assembled (learning) situation. Being skilled means to experience one’s bodily doing as suitable to deal with the practical demands of the situation at hand, and hence restricting the analysis to either domain would lead to an impoverished understanding of the phenomenon.

1. Bodily or muscle movements: Developmental psychologists (Burton, Brown, and Fisher 1984), sport scientists (Duesund and Jespersen 2004), and consumer researchers presenting both experimental (Murray and Häubl 2007) and cultural studies (Joy and Sherry 2003) agree that at the core of skill acquisition or bodily learning we find a basic mechanism of repetitive sequential learning. The more a body or its muscles repeat a certain movement, the better they ‘remember it’ and the movement then becomes refined.

2. The conscious state of skillful coping: Following the lead of Joy and Sherry (2003), we draw on the phenomenology of embodiment (Merleau-Ponty 1962) to conceptualize skill and skill acquisition. In doing so, we seek to understand possessing skill as being tied to an experience of being skilled at something. We neither look at the body as a kinetic machine that is functionally or ontologically independent from conscious experience or merely executing commands; nor do we conceive of the conscious mind as independent from, or prior to, the moving body.

3. The socially assembled (learning) situation: Skillful conduct requires a socio-material assemblage organized towards affording the activity (e.g., Canniford and Shankar 2013; Hill, Canniford and Mol 2014). The assemblage enwrapping the situated body must allow details of body movement to recede into the background of experience to give the practitioner a sense of skill and control. The learning situation is arranged so that focus is directed towards details that require control and change—such as the shoulder rotation in skiing—and away from other that can block progress—such as the fear of falling.

To explore modes of skill acquisition in an empirical and systematic manner we conducted a video-based ethnographic study in several ski schools. Our data base encompasses 18 hours of video from observations of different classes in two ski schools, 16 interviews with instructors and experts in the ski industry, and 16 informal interviews with skiers. In several rounds of moving between explanations of bodily movement by skill instructors, to consumers’ descriptions of critical learning moments, to situational examples from our video material, a recurrent set of modes of skill acquisition emerged.

We find that skill acquisition in ski schools happens primarily in carefully assembled learning situations which combine a number of socio-material resources such as space, ski equipment, social roles and norms, verbal instructions, gestures, and interaction orders. We identify six types of skill acquisition modes that represent different constellations of bodily movements, conscious focus, and the social structure of the learning situation, in particular the relation between the instructor’s and learners’ doings. We organize these practices into two groups:

I. Learning by Doing in which skill acquisition and refinement happens (consciously or pre-consciously) over the course of performing the aspired practice: Repetition, Reflection and Emulation.

II. Forms of Training, understood by us as learning practices in which learners do something else than performing the activity they eventually seek to learn: Demonstration, Instruction, and Exercise.

Three key implications stand out. First, the sensory-motor system, conscious experience and social assemblage are structurally coupled but separate in that none has full control over the other. Since skillful coping requires the three to be in a state of smooth alignment (Woermann and Rokka 2015), teaching a skill requires well-placed interventions into the learner’s performance. Second, consciousness functions as a pivot between the situational assemblage (including the task at hand, the spatial, and material setting, and the interaction with the teacher) and the learner’s motor system. The ski instructor cannot teach consumers’ bodies directly, but must work via their conscious experience. Third, this means that an adequate understanding of consumption skill acquisition must pay special attention to consumer experience and particularly emotional states such as fear, failure, and frustration. Overall, we encourage consumer researchers to pay particular attention to the powerful interactive forms of skill acquisition which seem to be instrumental for acquiring skills, and, ultimately, for gaining access to abundant rewarding consumption experiences.
REFERENCES