

Mechanical Vs. Flexible

The following experiment reveals a lot about practice;

All students were given the same task - they had to throw a rolled up ball of paper into a bin from three yards. They all knew they had to practise and that they would be tested on the number of successful throws they achieved at the end of the practice period. Here's the interesting bit; group 1 were told to repeat the three yard throws over and over again, and group 2 were made to alternate between two yard and four yard throws over and over again.

When the two groups were brought back together to do a three yard bin throw, it's worth pointing out that group 1 had done hundreds of three yard bin throws. Group 2 had not practised any three yard bin throws at all.

Which was more successful? Group 2. Why? There is a difference between mechanical practice and flexible practice. Mechanical practice doesn't change - it repeats the same thing over and over again. Flexible practice builds in different levels of challenge; the two yard throw is easier and the four yard throw is significantly harder.

What does this mean for A Level study?

Those students who practice mechanically (group 1 students) can have nightmare exam experiences. They will often say, 'The question was slightly different! It totally messed with my concentration! I didn't know what to do!'

Students who practise flexibly (group 2 students) start to think flexibly. They will say, 'The questions were a bit weird. Eventually I worked out what I needed to do though.'

Make sure you mix it up in practice. Challenge yourself to:

- Seek out the weirdest questions that have ever come up and try them.
- Create strange questions.
- Visit the website of a different exam board and try their questions instead.