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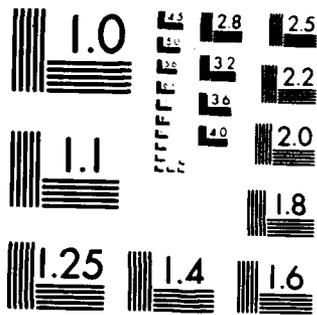
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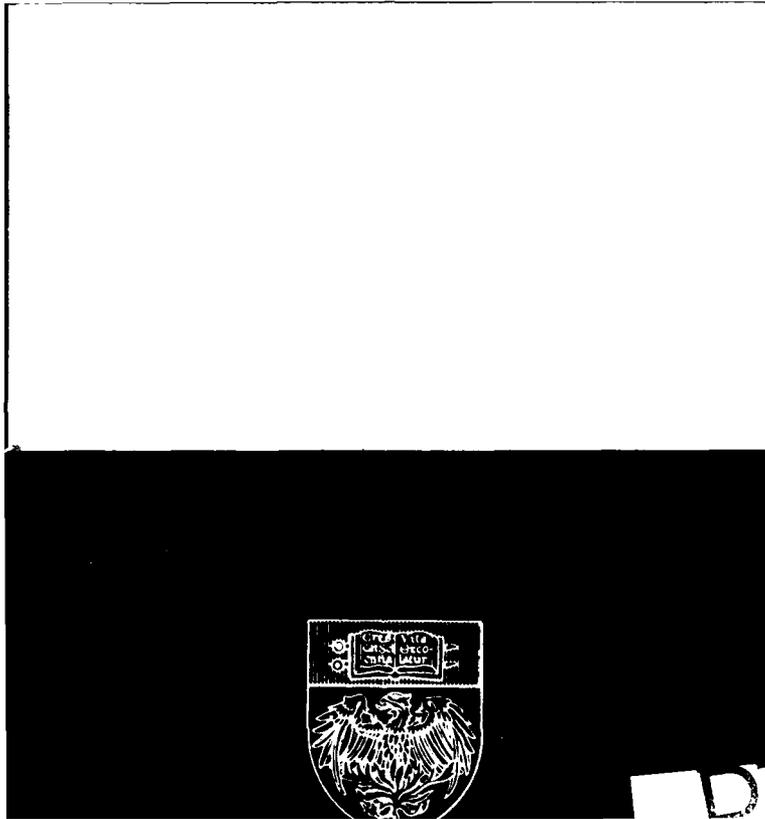
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**Learning in a Probabilistic Environment:  
A New Approach, and Some  
Preliminary Findings\***

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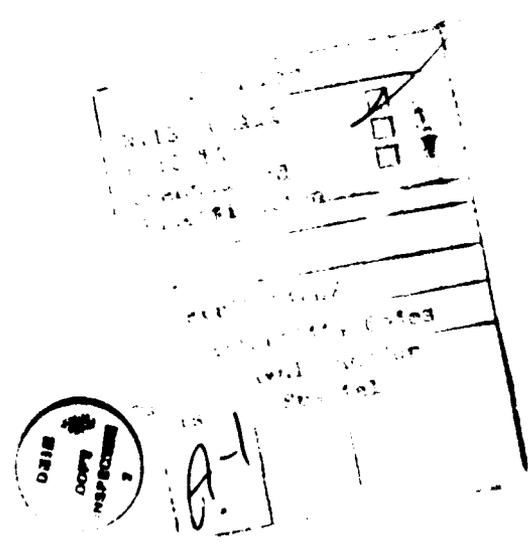
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represents natural learning situations by including: (a) instructions and rewards that emphasize gradual development of understanding, rather than discovery of "the right rule;" and (b) a large number of cues, which must be discovered, rather than a few cues explicitly given. Results with 12 college-student subjects indicate significant learning in a computer-displayed task, over approximately 10 hours of experience. Learning was incremental, and was accompanied by the addition of valid factors to existing rules. These results contrast with findings that people fail to utilize information effectively in probabilistic situations. Earlier studies do not, however, model situations in which learning requires the discovery and validation of predictive cues, processes critical for the development of real-world expertise.



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Learning in a Probabilistic Environment: A New  
Approach, and Some Preliminary Findings

Planning next year's budget, deciding when to plant your corn, selecting a class of graduate students, . . . What these activities have in common is that they all require us to predict the behavior of complex, multifactor, probabilistic environments. Indeed, we face this task whenever we must deal with the economy, the weather, or almost any aspect of human behavior. Even the behavior of purely mechanical systems is effectively probabilistic to those of us with imperfect knowledge (consider the vagaries of the family car).

The research discussed here is concerned with the question of how people come to understand such systems. Specifically, how do people learn the relationships between factors in the environment when those relationships are "imperfect," that is, correlational rather than strictly lawful? Given that we must operate in a probabilistic world, this learning process is essential for the development of real-world expertise.

There is, of course, already a long history of research on this general topic, under the rubric of "probability learning" (see reviews by Brehmer, 1980; Hammond, Stewart, Brehmer, & Steinman, 1975; Slovic & Lichtenstein, 1971). There have been many variations in 30 years of this research, but there has been a common basic paradigm. The subject's task is to predict a criterion value (e.g., length of a line) based on some predictive variables ("cues"). Most often, the cue variables are given arbitrary labels (e.g., A, B, C), and the subject receives numerical information on each cue (e.g., "A = 4, B = 6, C = 1). After receiving this information, the subject makes a prediction, and subsequently is shown the true outcome (e.g., the line

associated with [4, 6, 1]). The true outcome is a lawful function of A, B, and C, plus some amount of random error. For example, several studies have used the rule

$$Y = .8\sin x_1 + .4\sin x_2 + .2\sin x_3 + \epsilon$$

where Y is the criterion, and  $\epsilon$  is a random number, accounting for anywhere from 12% to 75% of the variance in the criterion (Dean, Hammond, & Summers, 1972; Hammond, 1971; Hammond, Summers, & Dean, 1973; Hoffman, Earle, & Slovic, 1981).

Investigators using this paradigm are looking at people's ability to learn the relationships between cues and criterion in the presence of imperfect (i.e., probabilistic) feedback. To summarize 30 years of research very succinctly, people seem to be absolutely terrible at doing this. Consider, for example, the study by Hoffman, et al., using the three-cue function described above, with 12% random variation. Using the optimal combination of factors, subjects could in theory achieve a correlation of .94 between their predictions and the true outcomes. After 200 "stimulus-response-outcome" feedback trials, however, the average subject had achieved a correlation of .21.

In his recent review of probability-learning studies (including many of his own) Bernot Brehmer concludes:

People do not learn optimal strategies from experience even if they are given massive amounts of practice. . . . This is due to lack of adequate schemata for handling the probabilistic aspect of the world. (1980, pp. 233-35)

Subjects seem to be unable to separate "signal" from "noise;" they reject correct hypotheses about relationships, and frequently revive rejected hypotheses. They do seem able to apply information given them, e.g., if the experimenter informs the subject of the relevant cue-criterion functions

(e.g., Deane, Hammond, & Summers, 1972; Hoffman, et al., 1981). However, they seem resistant to any attempts to help them find the relationships, through instruction or through structuring of feedback information (Brehmer & Kuylenstierna, 1978, 1980; Hoffman et al., 1981).

Findings like these do not bode well for people's ability to develop any new understanding of their environments. They are also troubling, though, because they seem to contradict common everyday experiences of learning. Imagine, for example, that you ask about a colleague's whereabouts, and are told, "He usually stays home on Fridays, especially if the weather's nice, although toward the end of the term he's more likely to be around." A statement like this is not extraordinary, yet it expresses a three-factor probabilistic prediction rule. How can this be? One possibility is that we only think we have learned such rules, but they are not, in fact, valid (c.f. Einhorn & Hogarth, 1978 on "persistence of the illusion of validity"). However, it is also possible that the usual probability-learning task misses something important about human learning processes--something that does permit effective learning in natural probabilistic environments.

To explore this latter hypothesis, consider several important ways in which the laboratory learning task may differ from "real-world" learning tasks:

1. Linearity of cues. Most probability-learning tasks include cues which have a non-linear, or even non-monotonic, relationship to the criterion (e.g., the three-cue function described earlier). These relationships are particularly difficult to learn (Brehmer, 1980; Hammond & Summers, 1965), but it may be easy to avoid these difficulties in natural settings. A number of studies have demonstrated that complex systems can generally be well modeled with strictly linear rules. Even when the relative weights are "improper," or

the true rule contains nonlinearities, linear models can often account for a high proportion of the variance (Dawes and Corrigan, 1974; Einhorn and McCoach, 1977; Yntema and Torgeson, 1961). This is especially so if there are many, partially redundant cues in the system. Indeed, the one bright spot in the probability-learning literature is that people seem to be fairly good at learning linear rules, even in the presence of noise (e.g., Brehmer & Kuylenstierna, 1978, 1980; Dean et al., 1972; Naylor & Domine, 1981). Brehmer and Kuylenstierna (1978), for example, used a task with two cues each having a positive linear relationship to the criterion. The maximum attainable correlation was .80, and subjects achieved a correlation above .70 after 60 trials. Thus, even if humans thought only in terms of linear relationships, this would still permit a good deal of predictive ability in many situations.

2. Number and explicitness of cues. The typical laboratory task involves only a very small number of cues (usually 1 to 3), and these are explicitly identified. In natural situations, though, there are often many possible cues, and almost always an opportunity to discover and incorporate new information. Building a model of an environment, then, involves two basic processes: finding the cues, and figuring out how to aggregate them. Probability-learning tasks eliminate the cue-finding process. Research suggests that the aggregation process is especially difficult (e.g., Dawes, 1971; Goldberg, 1970), and that finding the cues may be much more important. Leaving out a variable is more serious than misweighting it; thus Dawes' prescription that to build a good (if not "optimal") model, "the whole trick is to know what variables to look at and then know how to add" (Dawes & Corrigan, 1974, p. 105; see also Dawes, 1979; Einhorn & Hogarth, 1975).

3. Instructions and rewards. In the usual laboratory task, the gist of the instructions is to "find the right rule" or "best rule." There is, then,

an implied dichotomy between "right" and "wrong" rules. This is reinforced by a reward system in which the principal payoff for the subject is the discovery of "the rule." Furthermore, in many tasks, until the rule is found, little achievement is possible. Thus, there is little reason to retain hypotheses which seem less than perfect, and little opportunity to build upon partial knowledge. In contrast, in natural situations, predictive models are typically better or worse overall, in a more or less continuous way. Improvements in understanding are more likely to be gradual or incremental, and reward tends to vary continuously with predictive accuracy.

4. Time. In these tasks, the time allotted for learning has been extensive by laboratory standards (several hours), but very short in comparison with the time-span of experience usually associated with the development of real-world expertise.

The goal of the research presented here was to look at learning processes in a more natural environment, according to the four points described above. That is, the task tested here: (a) can be understood in terms of linear cue-criterion relationships; (b) provides many possible cues, not all of which are explicitly specified; (c) includes instructions which emphasize improvement, rather than ultimate solution, and payoffs that vary continuously with predictive accuracy; and (d) allows subjects adequate amounts of time for learning.

It is hypothesized that in an environment like this, significant learning will take place. Gradual improvement is expected, as learners discover and test new valid predictive cues, and add these to their rule. As the learner's rule becomes more complete, better prediction is possible. This process of addition of valid factors is hypothesized to be the major means by which predictive accuracy is improved. However, several other processes may also

contribute: Invalid factors mistakenly included in the model may be expunged; weak cues may be replaced with related cues that are more directly predictive; and a more precise understanding of the shape and magnitude of the cue-criterion relationships may be achieved. Note that only the last of these processes is tapped in the typical probability-learning task.

#### Methods

Subjects interact with a computer display by means of a keyboard. The screen displays geometric figures varying in size, shape, line-pattern (e.g., striped, checkered, etc.), and location. Around each figure is marked a circular "area of influence," visible to the subject. In this environment of figures, the path of a point is "traced" from a visible starting location, in a straight line in any direction (see Figure 1). Subjects are told that "were it not for the figures, the point would continue off the screen in a straight line," but that "if a trace touches the area of influence around the figure, the figure may affect the trace by causing it to stop somewhere on the screen, as shown by a little asterisk." It is then explained that

The object of the game is to predict where the trace will stop, or if it will go off the screen. You should understand that this will be difficult, and you are not expected to be able to "solve" it exactly. Rather, you should try and figure out as much as you can about how it works, so you can make the best predictions you can.

Twelve college-student subjects participated in this study. Each subject received two types of experience with the system: learning and testing. Learning sessions were 30-minute periods in which subjects could freely design their own screens and conduct their own tests. They could draw figures of any of three sizes, three shapes, and three patterns, and place them anywhere on the screen. They could trace points starting anywhere, and going in any

direction. They were free to experiment, observe, calculate, and take notes for as much of the 30-minute period as they liked. Then, they went on to a testing phase. Here, they observed a set of 16 screens representing a random sampling of situations in which a point passes close enough to a figure to be (possibly) affected. In each test trial they were shown what event would be tried, and they made a prediction as to the outcome, indicating whether they believed the point would stop, and if so, where. After their prediction, the true outcome was observed. The testing sessions were only about one-third the length of the learning sessions and new trials proceeded quickly. Thus, most learning took place in learning sessions, despite feedback during tests.

Learning and testing sessions were alternated, with two of each on each of seven days (about 10 hours of experience with the system). During this time, the subjects were paid according to the number of points they achieved in the testing session. Points were awarded according to the closeness of their predictions to the true observed stopping point of each test trace.

The true rule underlying the behavior of the system was a linear combination of six cues: Shape of figure; closeness of approach of trace to figure; direction of trace toward right or left; size of figure; distance from trace origin to figure; closeness of figure to center of screen. These cues were weighted such that each of the first three accounted for roughly twice as much variance as each of the last three. Note also that only two of these cues were directly specified in the display (size and shape of figure). The other four had to be discovered among the plethora of possible spatial relationships existing in the environment. Note also that one very salient cue, the line-pattern of the figure, was a false cue in this case.

The subjects were divided randomly into two conditions, six in each. In the protocol condition, subjects were asked to "think out loud" during the

procedure, and were also questioned about their thinking at various points. Those in the non-protocol condition were not asked for any verbal responses, although an experimenter was present to help operate the computer, and to handle any problems.

### Results

Based on the model of learning proposed earlier, the main expectation was that learning would take place gradually. Learning should be incremental, as subjects discover and test new valid predictive cues, and add these to their predictive models.

Figure 2 shows that gradual improvement was indeed observed, at least through the sixth session. The results were analyzed using an ANOVA with one between-subjects factor (condition: protocol/no-protocol) and two within (session: one to seven; half: first test of the day/second test). The improvement with sessions was highly significant ( $F[6, 60] = 8.78, p < .001$ ), and no other effects were significant.

There are also some data about the processes through which learning was accomplished. One of the responses required of the six verbal-protocol subjects was to provide written "hints" after each day's experience. Their instructions were to provide as many clues about the system as they could, as though to a naive participant whom they wanted to help master the game. Subjects were encouraged to include any information they thought might help, even if they were not yet sure.

The hints were categorized according to the nature of the predictive cues they utilized. Correct cues were those which corresponded to one of the six valid cues in the model. Partly correct cues were those which captured some, but not all, of a correct cue-criterion relationship (e.g., a cue which was

positively correlated with a correct cue). Incorrect cues were cues which had little or no predictive value in the environment. The most common example was a belief that figure-pattern mattered. Also, any postulated interactions between cues were scored as incorrect.

Figure 3 shows the changes in these categories of cues across the seven days of experience. It was hypothesized earlier that the principle mechanism of change would be the addition of new, valid cues to the model, and this is supported by the data from the helpful-hints reports. The number of partly-correct cues seems to remain constant, but this is the net result of two processes. New partially-valid cues are being discovered throughout the process, but partially-valid cues are also being replaced with stronger, correct cues. Finally, it is interesting that the role of incorrect cues is relatively small here. This is so despite the fact that cues were scored as remaining in the subject's model until explicitly discounted or until an incompatible new hypothesis was expressed. In some cases, incorrect cues persisted in subject's models, but in many cases there were a series of different incorrect cues (e.g., interactions) with only brief tenures.

The helpful-hints results are not definitive, of course, but they do provide support for the hypothesis that addition of cues is a primary source of learning, with replacement of weak cues and removal of invalid cues as secondary processes. In their comments, subjects very seldom expressed any quantitative relationships. Expressions of rules were almost always ordinal, e.g., "the bigger it is, the sooner it stops." It was rare even for subjects to say anything about the relative importance of different cues. Thus, there is little evidence of attention to cue weights, or to the shape of the cue-criterion function.

### Conclusions

This study is clearly just a beginning, but it demonstrates the need for new consideration of processes of learning in probabilistic environments. The focus should be on adding, revising, and eliminating cues rather than on pinpointing the cue-criterion function. There are a great variety of interesting questions for further research along these lines. For example:

(a) Is it important that subjects be allowed to experiment, rather than just observe? Hoffman et al. (1981) found that this made no difference in a typical probability-learning task, but it might be important in discovering and validating new cues.

(b) This particular task was not deterministically predictable from the subject's point of view. There were always unknown controlling factors, but there was no explicitly random element. There are many important issues concerning what "random" means (see, e.g., Lopes, 1982). Suffice it to say here that the present experiment does not contain any factors which vary unpredictably with time. This may or may not prove to be important in the ability to learn from experience. Perhaps for learners not all unpredictability is equal.

(c) What would happen with additional learning time? Most of the subjects in the present experiment were still improving at the last session, and in all cases there was considerable room for further improvement. It is possible that different learning processes may play important roles in the longer term. For example, replacement of weak cues and attention to the shape of the cue-criterion function might be more prominent in later stages of learning.

(d) What is the effect of an initial knowledge base? In the present task, as in most learning tasks, the subject starts with very little knowledge of the workings of the system. Natural learning situations provide varying

amounts of initial knowledge from prior experience and various kinds of social transmission. How is such information applied in new learning situations? And what happens in the presence of false, misleading, or outdated initial information?

These questions, and many others of equal interest, arise from a focus on the learner's construction of a predictive model, cue by cue. It is proposed that these constructive processes are central to the ability to learn from experience in complex probabilistic environments. Certainly, much of what we know comes from learners of the past. The ability to learn from experience, though, is critical for understanding and controlling new environments, and for going beyond what is already known. In studying the construction and revision of predictive models during learning, then, we are looking into a critical element in the development of expertise.

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## FIGURE CAPTIONS

Figure 1. Example of a display screen used in this study. A point is traced from a starting location (A). The point's behavior is affected by a geometric figure (B) if it comes within a close enough range (indicated by the circumscribed circle). In that case, it may stop before reaching the edge of the screen (C). Except for the letters A, B, C, all aspects of the display were visible to the subject. (Adapted from Mynatt, Doherty, and Tweney, 1978, with the help of Don N. Kleinmuntz.)

Figure 2. Average total test score per subject ( $n = 12$ ), by days of experience. Each "day" consisted of up to one hour of learning trials, and one-half hour of test trials. Maximum possible score is approximately 750.

Figure 3. Changes in constituents of subjects' predictive models ( $n = 6$ ), over days of experience. The optimal model contained six correct cues.

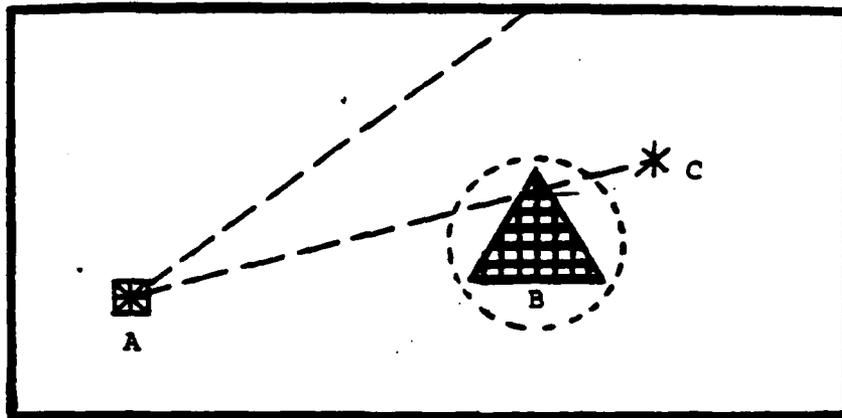


Figure 1.

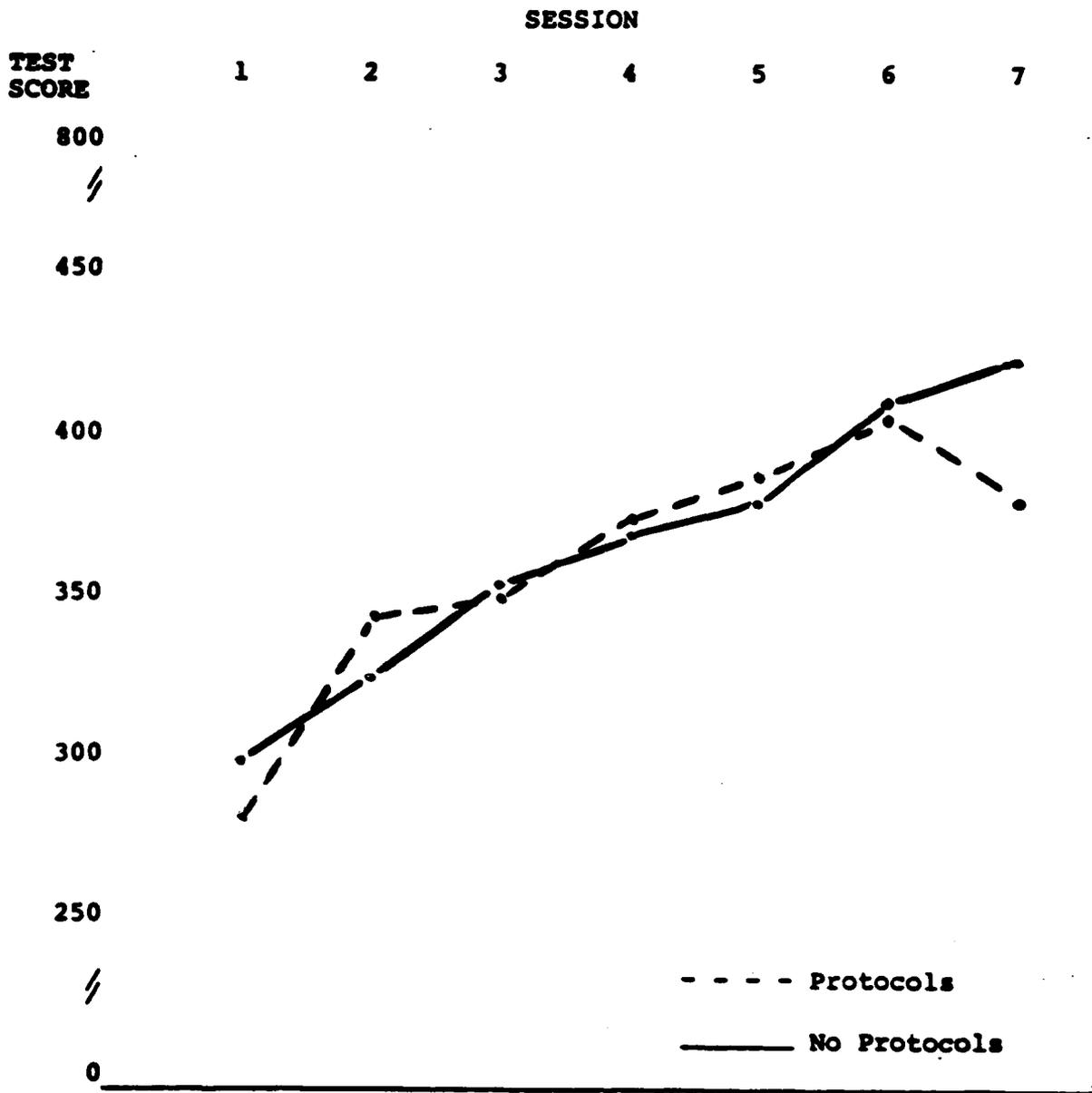


Figure 2

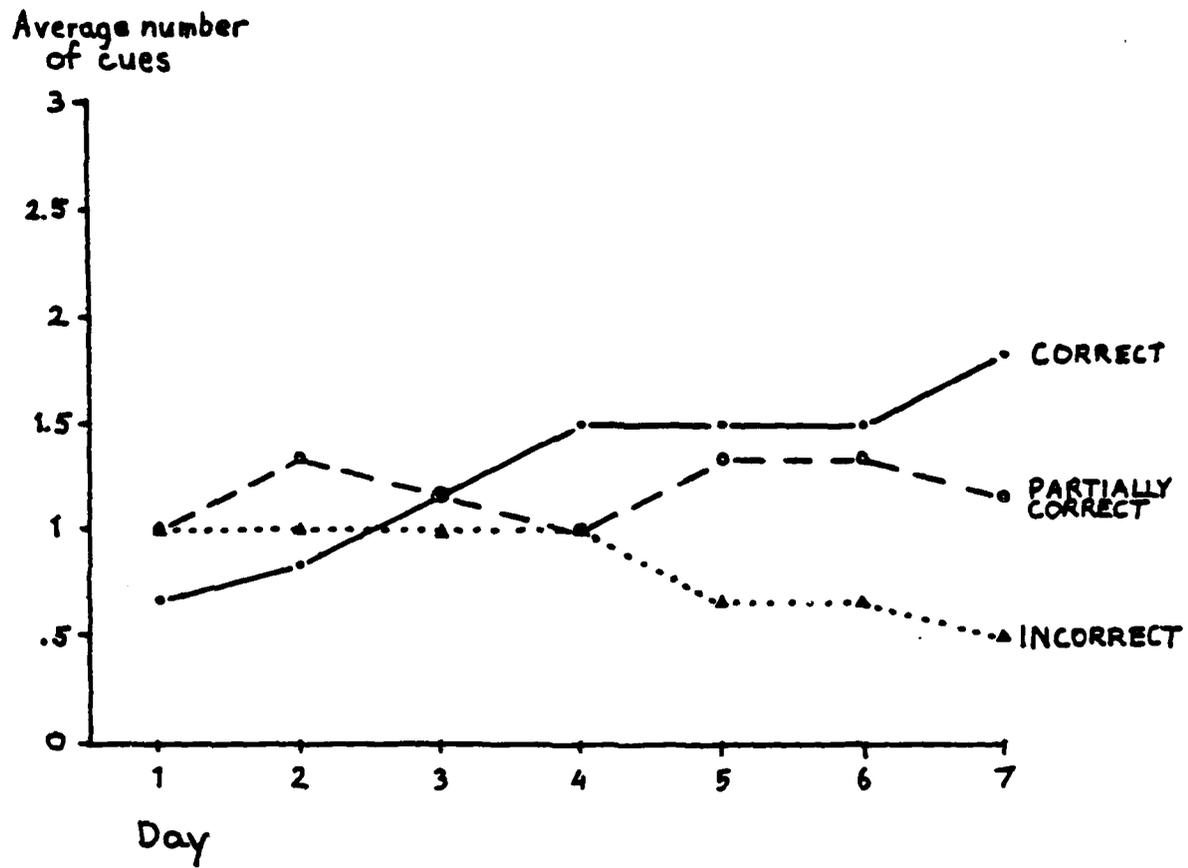


Figure 3.

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