

# EXPLORING GAMBLING PRACTICES IN WORK AND EDUCATIONAL ENVIRONMENTS

BY MARK GRIFFITHS

The question arises to what extent gambling techniques and theories can actually enhance the educational and transferable skills process as appropriately applied? Could a set of programmes be built into the process as a tacit preventative measure at the vulnerable stages of early life? At present, we do not really know the answer to these questions but it is certainly feasible. The question remains of whether it is desirable. This article therefore examines many of the alleged skills used in gambling situations and attempts to apply them to the workplace.



In gambling there seems to be almost never ending commercial opportunities arising from rapid technological changes and the interactive effects of that on the international stage with regulatory, social and economic implications. I have written a fair amount in the computer game literature highlighting the positive benefits that can be gained by playing videogames including the health and educational benefits. For instance, this includes young people learning about economic concepts by playing games like *Sim City*, the use of videogames as training aids (e.g. simulators), as distracter tasks in pain management, and as an aid in occupational therapy.<sup>1-3</sup>

Given such examples, there is perhaps an argument for incorporating the concepts, techniques, and methods of gambling into certain educational and workplace environments. An obvious example is the use of gambling to teach probability to children at school. Using real life examples as a way of educating people about mathematics is seen to be "a good thing." However, I do recall the economist Professor Ian Stewart claiming that the National Lottery was a tribute to public innumeracy! The management of chance and odds in an educational context is clearly not new and we know there is a basis implied in playing the stock market – something older school children as young entrepreneurs are sometimes encouraged to do.

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is desirable. This article therefore examines many of the alleged skills used in gambling situations and attempts to apply them to the workplace.

### GAMBLERS AS ROLE MODELS IN THE WORKPLACE

Whether it is an act of problem solving in a work meeting or a major corporate decision, we act in the hope that we will achieve the desired result, even if it is unknown before we start. To some extent, this sounds like gambling. A 2005 book by Harvard academics Howard Stevenson and Eileen Shapiro called *Make Your Own Luck* argued that the best gamblers serve as an ideal role model in how to get on in the workplace<sup>4</sup>. They argued that the best gamblers are those that use "predictive intelligence" in their day-to-day lives. These are the types of gamblers who in the face of uncertainty know how to bring about the desired outcome by assessing the decisions they make on the basis of relative impact and uncertainty.

Using these two variables (i.e., the degree of certainty and the impact), Stevenson and Shapiro created a "gambler's prediction map" of four zones based on these two factors. The first of these is the 'wallpaper zone' in which decision-making has high certainty and high impact and is (they argue) like wallpaper because it is often ignored but can be very powerful. This is a classic low risk, high return gamble. The 'wild card zone' is where decision-making has high uncertainty but high impact and is the classic high-risk gamble with huge rewards if it comes off. The "ant colony zone" is where decision-making has high certainty but low impact and is so-called because when ants act together they can still have a positive effect. This is the low risk but moderate pay back gamble. The worst scenario for decision-making is in the 'strategic rat zone' where there is both high uncertainty and low impact that in effect is putting all your money on an absolute no-hoper.

By using various strategies in the right zones, gamblers with good predictive intelligence will come out winners in all walks of life. So what are these winning strategies? In a nutshell, winning gamblers:

- **Identify big goals:** Winners imagine the future they

want to create and formulate a strategy that will help them achieve their goals.

- **Weigh the upside/downside:** Winners calculate the possible upsides and downsides to decide if the risk is worth taking in the first place. They know all the rules of the venture they are getting themselves into.
- **Jump bets:** Winners are able to change plans at the appropriate moment. They may have to decide very quickly whether to stay or shift from their chosen path. Gamblers with high 'predictive intelligence' jump before all the available information is to hand so that they can grab the opportunities that they think will not be there later down the line.
- **Have an implicit strategy:** Winners make sure that it is their actions (and not just words) get them to where they want to go. They focus on the micro-details as well as the macro-goal.
- **Create a real alternative:** Winners make sure they have a back-up plan in case their main strategic decision-making plan goes wrong.
- **Use prediction maps:** Winners need to forecast all the major potential influences in their chosen strategy by assessing the relative impact and uncertainty of the situation.
- **Risk splits:** Where possible, winners calculate how to reduce or spread risk to others and consider all possible outcome scenarios.
- **Know what's the 'it' they're betting on?** Winners know in advance what they are going to do, why and what the expected outcome is likely to be. This helps clarify whether the decision is the right one in the first place.
- **Assess possible domino effects:** Winners know what actions they will take in the future based on the ones they are making now. They can assess very quickly if they will be locked into a series of follow-on bets as a result of their decision.
- **Know when it's game over:** At the simplest level, winners know when to call it quits.

The message is simple. Good gamblers with high predictive intelligence possess many life skills that in the right



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circumstances can be transferred to the workplace. The following section extends some of this thinking and looks at one very particular form of gambling – namely poker.

### LEARNING FROM LUCK

Gamblers are one of life's great believers in luck. There is also much to be learned from the psychology of luck and applying it to situations outside the gambling context. Professor Richard Wiseman at the University of Hertfordshire has spent many years studying luck and believes he's discovered four principles of luck and knows how to help people improve their good fortune<sup>5</sup>. The results of this work reveal that people are not born lucky. Instead, lucky people are unconsciously using four basic principles to create good fortune in their lives.

Wiseman's research has involved him in being with those who define themselves as either lucky or unlucky, and examining the reasons why. Wiseman started by asking randomly chosen UK shoppers whether they had been lucky or unlucky in several different areas of their lives including their careers, relationships, home life, health, and financial matters. Of those he surveyed, 50 percent considered themselves lucky and 16 percent unlucky. Those lucky or unlucky in one area were more likely to report the same in other areas. Most experienced either consistent good or bad fortune. Professor Wiseman therefore concluded luck could not simply be the outcome of chance events. So what do lucky people do that is different from unlucky people?

- Lucky people **maximise chance opportunities**. They are skilled at creating, noticing and acting upon chance opportunities. They do this in various ways, including networking, adopting a relaxed attitude to life and by being open to new experiences.
- Lucky people **listen to lucky hunches**. They make effective decisions by listening to their intuition and gut feelings. For example, they take steps to actively boost their intuitive abilities by meditating and clearing their mind of other thoughts.
- Lucky people **expect good fortune**. They are certain that the future is going to be full of good fortune. These expectations become self-fulfilling prophecies by helping lucky people persist in the face of failure, and shape their interactions with others in a positive way.
- Lucky people **turn bad luck into good**. They employ various psychological techniques to cope with, and often even thrive upon, the ill fortune that comes their way. For example, they spontaneously imagine how things could have been worse, do not dwell on the ill fortune, and take control of the situation.

Research has also shown that lucky people use body language and facial expressions that other people find attractive. For instance, they smile twice as much as the unlucky, and engage in more eye contact<sup>6</sup>. In addition, they

are more likely to have a broad network of friends and take advantage of favourable opportunities. Lucky people view misfortune as short-lived and overcome it quickly. In short, self-fulfilling prophecies appear to affect lives. Those who expect to fail may not even try. Lucky people try to achieve their goals even when the odds are against them. Luck is not a magical ability or a gift from the gods. It is a mind-set, a way of perceiving and dealing with life. This is something that gamblers should know and try to apply to their day-to-day gambling activity.

### POKER AND TRANSFERABLE SKILLS

Quite recently, my research unit was approached by an online gambling company to examine the skills involved in playing poker (both on and offline) and to assess to what extent the skills involved had any transferability to real life educational and workplace situations. This provided an interesting challenge as much of our unit's work concerns the potential dangers of excessive gambling and social responsibility. In a paper written with my colleagues Adrian Parke and Jonathan Parke, we argued that playing poker has the potential to help develop a whole range of different transferable skills particularly in a workplace situation.<sup>7</sup>

We claimed that poker gambling could offer lessons for success, even in non-mathematical lines of work. For instance, being given an assignment or a particular team to manage might be akin to playing with the cards that you have. Playing with the cards you have is a winning strategy in poker. And top poker players are insatiable in their desire to win. Being this focused is an important leadership skill in the workplace. Then there's the art of deception, not normally seen as a desirable skill, but in poker it's all part of the game. In many workplace situations the ability to get away with white lies, to save face or be diplomatic, or to smooth over or disguise mistakes and errors, is a big advantage.

We also claimed that both online and offline poker requires much skill to succeed and that winning requires many integrated skills and abilities. Below is a list of some of the traits and skills we speculated are needed to be a successful poker player and the characteristics needed to be a good poker player. We argued that all of these can be utilised in other contexts to bring about success in other areas of peoples' lives, particularly in the area of employability and future success within that job.

- **Critical evaluative skills** - The ability to appraise information and situations realistically and to anticipate problems and difficulties is paramount in poker. To critically evaluate your own playing decisions yourself ("did I play that right?") and of others is commonplace. These are also essential skills in the workplace – particularly in management.
- **Numerical skills** – The ability to handle and interpret

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numerical and statistical information is an important skill in many areas of employability. In poker, there are many levels of numerical skill such as the micro management of funds – every penny is important; or with the cards themselves. Not many jobs require mathematical whiz-kids but many decision-making judgements can be based on the balance of probability or the ability to interpret data summaries.

- **Pragmatism skills** – The ability to make the best of a non-ideal situation and to work within pre-set constraints is a valuable skill in poker. For example, accepting what you cannot change (your cards) and playing with what you have. Pragmatism is also an undervalued skill within the workplace – most probably because it is more of an inherent skill rather than something that is learned. Succeeding in almost any job will require good use of pragmatism.
- **Interpersonal skills** – Knowledge of the mechanisms of social communication and the potential sources of interpersonal conflict can be the difference between a good and great poker player. Being able to identify an opponent's 'tell' can pay huge (financial) dividends. Having good interpersonal awareness is not the same as being socially skilled (although it contributes). Interpersonal skills contribute to emotional intelligence, i.e., how to respond in to different people in different situations. Interpersonal awareness skills in the workplace can make a difference in understanding and dealing with interpersonal problems. They may also help in telling whether colleagues are lying or trying to be economical with the truth.
- **Problem solving skills** – The ability to identify different strategies and approaches is of great benefit when playing poker. Problem solving skills in the workplace are paramount to anyone wanting to be successful in their career, especially when tied in with pragmatism skills.
- **Goal orientation skills** – The ability to set goals and to formulate strategies to achieve those goals can be of benefit while playing poker. Being hungry and insatiable in the desire to achieve (i.e., winning) is a common characteristic of good poker players. Having goals gives people a purpose to what they are doing and this is very valuable in the workplace. It allows people to measure their success in some way just as the poker player does when winning or losing.
- **Learning skills** – The ability to continually learn and not to rest on your laurels is a valuable skill in poker (as it is obviously in almost all areas of one's lives). In poker, being humble enough to learn from those more experienced and to take others' expertise into future games, is akin to other learning experiences in other environments – including the workplace. In poker, such learning can bring about objectivity. For instance, poker players should not act in haste but ponder and deliberate responses objectively. In essence this is continuing professional development. It doesn't matter what walk of life you find yourself in, learning from others is paramount.
- **Higher order analytic and strategic skills** – The ability to extract general principles from immediate or concrete situations and to formulate appropriate strategies can be paramount while playing poker. For example, good poker players know not to let the cards

get them frustrated or not to engage in fighting battles they can't win. There are clear parallels in the workplace including office politics.

- **Flexibility skills** – The ability to adapt to any situation or to be opportunistic when a situation presents itself underlies skills in flexibility. In poker, adapting to your environment (e.g., who are you playing against, how big is your stack) is something that comes with playing experience. The ability to look from several points of view is not something that can necessarily be taught but is certainly a valuable skill to an employer.
- **Face management/deception skills** – The ability to knowingly deceive someone is not normally seen as a desirable skill but in poker is all part of the game. Good acting ability needed to demonstrate 'poker face', bluffs etc. The telling of non-verbal 'white lies' is important here. In some situations in the workplace, such skill will be of great importance. Telling white lies to keep face or be diplomatic are good examples. There are also many situations that employers have to bluff in order to succeed (e.g., in giving a presentation to the board, or being interviewed for a dream job). Whilst such skills are not encouraged, they can certainly be of great benefit to the employee.
- **Self-awareness skills** – The ability to play to your strengths and acknowledge your weaknesses are common traits in many walks of life. In poker such skills can be very important. For example, remembering bad luck doesn't always last and good luck definitely doesn't last. Poker players also know that there is no room for apathy or complacency (in winning and/or losing streaks). In the workplace, self-awareness skills will help you succeed in areas of strength, and help you delegate in areas of weakness. Another related skill that experienced poker players acquire is to realise their boundaries. This is applicable to several areas. Firstly they must choose a game that suits their bankroll. Put simply, they should not play in a table where they are forced to play their blinds based on pot odds. Secondly, they should play at a level where they can keep their head above water (i.e., players should walk before they can run). A cheaper way to gain experience from the experienced players rather than 'sitting' with them is to simply observe the profitable players at the high stakes table by viewing their games. The final parameter is for a player to know when they are beat. Conceding defeat in a battle does not equate to losing a war. The war in poker consists of hundreds of battles. For a player to use all their "ammunition" in a battle they are unlikely to win is bad strategy.
- **Self-control skills** – The ability to act with a cool head under pressure and to show that you have the nerve and the mettle to cope under adversity is critical in good poker playing. Quite clearly in the workplace, many team leaders and managers will need such skills in order to get the most out of themselves and/or their team. Such skills are also important in terms of stress management.
- **Work ethic skills** – For a poker player to be profitable they need to view the game as a financial exchange rather than a social entertainment activity. This includes micro-management of their "stack." In other words they should not play loosely simply because they have the chip lead. They shouldn't differentiate pots based on the

level of action or entertainment value. A 'pot won is a pot won' and each one is important. Poker is a zero sum game – the pot won must not be graded only by how much it increases the player's stack, but how it affects their chip position with your opponents. A stack is primarily built by grinding out small wins consistently rather than erratic, high risk plays. Again, there are many analogies here with how to get on in the workplace by working consistently at the job rather than high risk work bingeing.

Many of these skills are transferable to other arenas and are the kinds of abilities and traits that will help people achieve in the workplace and aid promotion. Diplomatic use of 'white lies' can aid employees in a variety of situations and can help smooth over (or disguise) mistakes and errors. The next few sections examine some very specific issues in relation to playing poker and transferable skills.

### ONLINE VERSUS OFFLINE POKER PLAYING

Online and offline poker are not synonymous. A very useful tool in poker is to "read" a player through their body language and their verbalisations. In online poker, the gambler is denied this advantage therefore, they must seek to manipulate opponents by the tools at their disposal. The key is to take your weakness (i.e., not being able to physically see other players) and turn it into an advantage (i.e., use non-transparency to the player's advantage). Online poker permits gamblers to create a false identity. Gamblers could portray the façade of being a young attractive novice female player when in fact they are actually very experienced recognised professionals.

The key to a 'hustle' or manipulating other players in poker is by gamblers projecting a character and hiding their identity. Essentially, it is about *representing* a façade, whether it is for one hand or even the whole game. Gamblers can adopt any 'character' they wish to suit any game which they engage in. Perhaps in the case of playing with novices it may be profitable for gamblers to portray themselves as experienced professionals in order to intimidate players into submission.

Using the Internet relay chat (IRC) band provided, it is easier for a gambler to develop their persona. The tone and pitch of what a gambler says is not revealed in text, so fundamentally they are acting with their most unemotional 'poker face'. Put simply, they can exude confidence as they go all in on a bluff, when in reality their hands might be shaking and they may be sweating. The key to winning is by inducing emotional reactions from other players. With knowledge of their opponent, it is possible to 'tailor' interactions to induce the desired response.

Online social interaction at the poker table is not confined to adversarial chastising. It is possible to develop amiable relationships between players. Online poker – particularly at low stakes tables – is often more about entertainment than making profits. In poker, it is not necessary to reveal your hand if nobody calls (i.e., pays to see it). Without seeing cards it is more difficult to understand player behaviour. However, at more sociable tables, people will reveal what they had to opposing players, if nothing else but to indulge the observers. Creating false 'alliances' is a way gamblers have of ascertaining more information about their opponents and improving their ability to 'read' them.

### CONCLUSION

Hopefully this short article has provided some speculations and ideas as to how and why gambling can be educational and may help in the development of transferable skills particularly in the workplace environment. In short, gambling, and more specifically poker, may help in the development of such skills as critical evaluation, problem solving, numeracy, pragmatism, goal orientation, self-awareness, self-control, flexibility, interpersonal awareness, and management.

Much of poker's appeal is due to the fact that, unlike many other forms of gambling, the scope to influence the outcome is vast. Put simply, it is primarily a game of skill. Although some of the skills necessary can be inherent (such as emotional intelligence, i.e., the ability to process emotional information, particularly as it involves the perception, assimilation, understanding, and management of emotion), many of the more idiosyncratic skills are only acquired through experience. As a result, a successful poker player will always be seeking to improve by being critical of their own play and assimilating a behavioural repertoire of opponents playing styles. In essence, this appears to be a good analogy for improving performance in the workplace. **CGI**

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