

Jean Piaget and the pivot table: turning strategists into superstrategists

"Intelligence is what you use when you don't know what to do," Piaget, the Swiss child psychologist, used to say. "Moreover, a child cannot build new, increasingly complex systems without interacting with the environment; nature and nurture are inexorably linked."

 By Sid Peimer 6 Jul 2004

That's why a strategist of average 'intelligence' can outperform a strategist who is 'very intelligent' - if the former is able to assimilate the information they receive from the environment and change their approach with abstract thought.

As my karate instructor wisely informed me: "Intelligence will hamper your progress in this game." I guess was trying to convey the art of the 'empty mind', that is so important in a game when your fist needs to show in a millisecond, although humans are equipped with a brain that takes 75 milliseconds to respond.

In the old days (last year), we used to get our media planner to run AMPS, and then sit for hours as we tried to make sense of the cross-tabulated data. We hoped that we cross-tabbed sufficiently and that the client would not ask a silly question like "Yes, but how many people own a fridge in Johannesburg?"

Even if you memorised the thousands of discrete pieces of data, you would not be that much more intelligent than if you did not interact with the data. The former is just rote learning, the latter is building your 'intelligence'. So knowing data and interacting with it, move you from strategising to superstrategising.

Interacting with data should be like having a conversation with an expert in the field. The pivot table in Excel allows you to do just that. You can then drill down to your heart's content, discovering that 7.3% of fish owners, versus only 4.5% of bird owners, were victims of violent crime. The pivot table then allows me to get an instant answer to the postulate that maybe bird owners are older and less mobile or any other field of data. I think can try and explain what we all try and explain all the time: human behaviour.

The beauty of the process is that it's immediate - it's a drag and drop function that takes a second - giving you the speed of analysis you're looking for: that of a conversation.

For further information on the use of pivot tables with South African demographic data, is the guy to know.

ABOUT SID PEIMER

Sid Peimer tried to return his high school diploma when he discovered that, of the economically active population, those with matric are less likely to be employed than those who have completed matric. "Crikey," he was heard to exclaim, "intelligence really does hamper your progress!" You can visit him on his website. [View my profile and articles...](#)