

Experiments show people overestimate their abilities after exposure to trivially informative content

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A team of researchers from the University of Waikato and the University of Otago, both in New Zealand and Kwantlen Polytechnic

University in Canada, has found that people tend to overestimate their ability to perform a task after watching others do it. In their paper published in the journal *Royal Society Open Science*, the researchers describe experiments they conducted with volunteers regarding their ability to do a certain task.

Prior research has suggested that people sometimes overestimate their ability to perform tasks based on personality type. Other research has shown that such [overconfidence](#) can sometimes be a good thing, such as when it helps people to land a job. On the other hand, as can be seen in many YouTube videos, overconfidence can lead to embarrassment or even death. In this new effort, the researchers looked at a factor that might play a role in a person becoming overconfident—viewing someone else doing something successfully.

The researchers asked [volunteers](#) who had no experience flying or with flight simulators how they thought they would do if they were on a small [plane](#) and the [pilot](#) became incapacitated and they had to take over flying the plane. But first, half of the 780 volunteers were shown a short video of a commercial pilot landing a plane. It was not instructional and did not even include images of the dials, gauges and other equipment used to land a plane. Also, the video did not even show the actions the pilot took to control the plane.

The researchers found that those volunteers who had been shown the video were on average 30% more confident that they could successfully land the plane than those who had not seen the video. The researchers noted that virtually all of the volunteers agreed that landing a plane is a tricky endeavor requiring special training. Despite that, the volunteers who had not seen the video gave a confidence score of 29% in landing the plane. The researchers also asked some of the volunteers both before and after watching the video about their likely ability to land the plane and found that many of them felt more confident due to nothing more

than watching a video that did not teach them anything about flying. And finally, they also found that male volunteers rated their confidence 12.24 points higher than did females after watching the video.

More information: Kayla Jordan et al, Trivially informative semantic context inflates people's confidence they can perform a highly complex skill, *Royal Society Open Science* (2022). [DOI: 10.1098/rsos.211977](https://doi.org/10.1098/rsos.211977)

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