

The Art of Purposeful Practice
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When the student is ready the teacher will appear.
When the student is truly ready... The teacher will Disappear. ~ Tao Te Ching

To become the expert that you'd like to be in any field of endeavor, it is going to take practice. If you're not regularly practicing and making efforts to improve your ability through reflection and practice, then it will certainly become harder to be the expert you want to be or have the business that will make a positive difference in this world. Quality improvement always requires the right kind of practice carried out over a sufficient period of time.

The gold standard for anyone in any field who wishes to take advantage of what they have learned and move it to the next level, is to operate with what is called "deliberate practice." Most people practice something only to a certain level of comfort or a level when they can participate, have some fun, and/or perform that task at a rudimentary or acceptable level. You might call it "mastering the easy stuff" and leave it at that.

An easy example of this is your ability to drive a car. Do you remember when you were a teenager, first learning how to drive? You were serious about getting every little thing correct, going over a checklist in your mind, and cautiously performing each task to ensure that you arrived safely at your destination of choice. You practiced with someone else in the car and over time you got comfortable enough with your driving skills to get your driver's license and "solo" to your destination without anyone else watching over your shoulder.

Today you're a driving expert – or at least an expert at a certain level of driving. It's doubtful you've had the desire to improve your driving skills to the next level to, let's say, driving in a race. Even now, you might be uncomfortable if you have to drive through Chicago, New York, or Paris. (You're definitely not ready for the movies *Fast and Furious* or *Transporter*). You'll have to admit that you'd be challenged if you had to drive at another level. Why? Because you haven't practiced at that level.

Whatever your current skill level in your chosen profession, you're going to have to practice in order to become better. Perhaps you've "mastered the easy stuff" and you're ready for the next level. Or perhaps you've assumed that what you've already learned was enough and additional practice isn't necessary. Of course, that ties back to the axiom attributed to Albert Einstein, "The definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over and expecting different results." Therefore, if you're not currently content with your skillset or business acumen, and you're wanting different results than what you're currently getting, it's highly probable that you need to be doing something different.

Research has shown that once a person reaches that level of "acceptable" performance and automaticity, then more "practice" does NOT lead to any real improvements. If anything, most individuals lose their edge and actually become a bit worse. Why? Because they're not practicing correctly. And as Shakespeare wrote in the third act of *Hamlet*, *ay, there's the rub*.

To truly improve your skills and abilities, you need what is called, “purposeful practice,” which has several different characteristics setting it apart from what might be called “naive practice.” The definition of naive practice is essentially simply doing something repeatedly and expecting that the repetition alone will improve the performance. Sadly, naive practice, in any and all professions, does not produce better results. It is only purposeful practice that changes one’s ability and produces better results.

Purposeful practice begins with well-defined, specific goals for the task(s) to be performed. Without clearly defined goals for that practice, it is impossible to judge if the efforts have produced a better performance. For example, purposeful practice:

- Puts a large number of small steps together,
- Has specific goals or purpose,
- Is focused,
- Involves feedback,
- Requires getting out of your comfort zone,
- Involves getting immediate feedback, and
- Works you through your current plateau with new techniques.

Now, improving your skillset is NOT easy. It’s not supposed to be! In reality, for most people, learning through purposeful practice is not something they normally count as “fun.” But it is essential, and it is deliberate – which takes me to the next step. Putting yourself into a position of using purposeful practice means you need to be deliberate about what you want to do and why you want to do it. That’s called “deliberate practice.”

Now let’s add a few more thoughts to your decision to become better at your skillset and/or business. Deliberate practice differentiates between the novice and the expert. It clarifies levels of proficiency. Deliberate practice also involves a teacher/coach who actively tailors your practice and learning toward what you need in order to build something that is not already in place.

Quoting Anders Ericsson, “We are drawing a clear distinction between purposeful practice— in which a person tries very hard to push himself or herself to improve— and practice that is both purposeful and informed. In particular, deliberate practice is informed and guided by the best performers’ accomplishments and by an understanding of what these expert performers do to excel. Deliberate practice is purposeful practice that knows where it is going and how to get there.”

One of my favorites saying is, “Christ in you is a reason to do more... not an excuse to do less.” I stand by that statement. There are people throughout the world who are willing to get the training, coaching, and purposeful practice they need to become highly proficient. From my perspective, Christians can and should always be do it better.

When you have the desire to improve your chosen skills, God will bring someone into your life to help. You should always be on the lookout for them and when you find someone who can help you with purposeful practice, give them the respect due to their abilities and desire to help you to become more of what God has called you to be.