

Practice

*Practice isn't the thing you do once you're good.
It's the thing you do that makes you good.
~Malcolm Gladwell, Outliers, p. 42.*

We've all heard the aphorism "practice makes perfect." Yet, we've all had an experience where we practiced something and it did not result in perfect performance. For me, it was piano lessons. My mother made me practice for 30 minutes a day. I would sit down at the piano and go through the motions with one eye on the keys and the other on the clock. As soon as the thirty minutes were up, I hopped down from the bench and went back to my toys and books. I didn't think about the piano the rest of the day.

Needless to say, I never did master the piano. Although I practiced regularly, I didn't use my practice sessions to get better. I was simply putting in the time.

My sister is an opera singer. She practices a minimum of two hours a day. However, her practice sessions look quite different from my piano plunking from years ago. They are much more intense and focused than mine were. Even when she isn't practicing, she is listening to music while she mops the floor or humming some aria while she runs errands. She may only practice two hours a day, but in a sense, she is always practicing.

And of course, that is why she is an expert musician while I can barely play Chopsticks. We both practiced, but there is a world of difference in how we practiced.

Throughout *Never Work Harder Than Your Students*, I have made the case that any teacher can become a master teacher with the right kind of practice. If you consistently practice the principles in a disciplined way, you can become a master teacher. But, *how* you practice can significantly accelerate your journey to becoming a master teacher.

The Power of Practice

Research tells us that there is a direct relationship between how long you persist at something and how good you get at it. In his new book *Outliers: The Story of Success*, Malcolm Gladwell argues quite persuasively that in order to achieve mastery at anything, you need about 10,000 hours of practice. He quotes neurologist Daniel Levitin, who states, "It seems that it takes the brain this long to assimilate all that it needs to know to achieve true mastery" (p. 40).

10,000 hours is an extraordinary amount of time. On average, it takes teachers about four years to achieve this amount of practice. Why then do some teachers become master teachers after they have been teaching four or five years while others never become master teachers even after 20, 30, even 40 years of teaching?

The answer lies not just in the amount of practice a teacher gets; it lies in the *kind* of practice you have. Effective practice can help you master the principles. Ineffective

practice, where you simply put in the time can not only impede your progress, it can reinforce bad teaching behaviors. How can you make sure that your practice of the principles is effective? The following are some tips.

Good Practice Is Reflective

Reflecting on your work helps you learn from your successes and failures. It shows you how to make sense of what you are doing and where you need to improve. Reflecting helps you find those “teachable moments,” those mistakes and missteps that, if you take the time to learn from them, actually propel you forward on your journey toward becoming a master teacher. By reflecting on your practice, you can make mid-course corrections and figure out how to get more out of your future practice. Thus, reflecting is essential to effective practice. Without it, you are simply going through the motions.

When I first started in the classroom, I was too busy teaching to give much thought to what I was doing or how I might get better. I was just trying to keep from drowning. During the summer after my first year, I participated in a six-week teacher workshop where I spent time thinking about my teaching practice, learning new strategies, refining my lessons, and recording my reflections in a journal. I began to understand what made my successes successful, why some things didn’t work, and how I might respond differently to my challenges next time. At the end of the summer, as exhausted as I was, I couldn’t wait to get into the classroom that fall. I was a different and better teacher that year, although I was teaching new courses and new students. Taking the time to reflect about my practice made all the difference in my practice.

[Robyn--you have a “yes, but” section in Chapter 3, page 92 with almost the same title as the one below.]



Yes, but...I don't have time to reflect.

Usually, most teachers’ days are full of teaching and taking time to think about what you are doing may seem like a luxury you just can’t afford. But it matters, because reflecting helps you see the relationship between your behavior and student success. Without understanding this connection, you will not be consistent and intentional--the other two components of effective practice.

Reflection doesn’t take as much time as you think it will, and it will save you time in the long run by making your practice much more effective. Even if you spend only five minutes a day thinking about what took place, how you responded, and how your students responded and then determine what worked and what you would do better next time, you would make a significant difference in the effectiveness of your practice. Try reflecting during your drive home from work, or get to work ten minutes earlier and start your day by reflecting on the prior day. Take time to reflect while you are in the shower or cooking dinner. It doesn’t matter where you reflect, it just matters that you take the time to do it.

As you practice applying the principles, think not only about what you are doing, but how it is affecting both you and your students. Ask yourself how you can make the principles your own, how you can bring your own personality and preferences to bear. Honestly look at your own beliefs and values and how they may be affecting the way you apply the principles. Pay attention to how you handle your challenges, examine the results of your decisions, and then think about how you might do things differently or better the next time.

Try This:

- Use the reflection sheet on page 224 to help you think about your practice. Select the principle you are currently practicing and then ask yourself the reflection questions for that principle.
- Explore mental practice and visualization as powerful tools to help you think through a teaching situation, problem-solve a teaching dilemma, and come up with options for how you could handle a situation better the next time.
- Keep a teacher journal that fits who you are. If you are not a writer, don't bother writing in full paragraphs. Just jot down a few key points. For instance, you can quickly note a teaching challenge you faced, how you handled it, and what you will do differently next time in the margins of your plan book.
- Find a buddy in your school with whom you can reflect. Make the effort to talk at least once a week. The reflection sheet on page 224 can help you shape your conversations.
- Make the principles your own. The power of a principal versus a strategy is that you can apply a principle in multiple ways. Think about who you are as a teacher. As you practice each principle, think about ways to apply the principle that are consistent with your personality and teaching situation.
- Invite another teacher whom you trust into your classroom and ask him or her to be an objective set of second eyes. Ask your colleague to track specific things related to the principle on which you are working, such as who is doing more work in the classroom, you or the students? How do you respond to students' questions? Or how often are you providing support for students and how effective is that support? You can also ask your colleague to look at some of your teaching artifacts and give you feedback. For instance, he or she can look at your plans and see if they are directly connected to the assessment, or examine your assessments to see if they are giving you the feedback you say you are looking for.
- You can also collect feedback from students that will tell you how well you are progressing in a particular principle and provide fodder for reflection. Give students surveys and collect their feedback or ask them directly. Monitor their work and their assessment progress and look for implications these have on your future teaching decisions.
- Slow down. Things in the classroom move so fast. Reflection allows you the chance to examine what is happening in the classroom. Often this simple act of just slowing down helps you see things from a different or multiple perspectives, work out minor kinks in your practice, and identify small things that may be impeding your progress.

Good Practice Is Consistent

It may seem obvious but it is worth saying: You can't just apply the principles one day and abandon them the next. You have to apply them consistently over time if you want to see a significant change in your teaching.

I worked with a school once where the state was threatening to take over if they did not raise their scores by the time of the next test. They asked me to work with their teachers to increase the level of rigor in their instruction so that their students would be properly prepared for the state tests. Over time, we took the seven principles and applied them to every classroom in the building. I worked with the administration to develop a plan for consistently monitoring teachers' progress and worked with the teachers both in groups and individually to make sure that they were applying the principles consistently and pervasively. Other consultants came in to show teachers how to improve their reading instruction and use co-teaching models for students requiring special education services. The entire school worked together to improve instruction and to provide students with the supports they needed to pass. At the end of the year, not only did the school make AYP, but they were commended for the tremendous progress they had made.

I called the principal the following spring to check on their further progress only to receive disappointing news: One year later, the school had come dangerously close to not meeting AYP.

"But Jonathan, we had made so much progress. What happened?" I asked.

"I don't know Robyn," he sighed. "I thought that after we made AYP, we were safe."

Somewhere in the back of my mind, alarm bells began to sound. "What changed?"

"Nothing," he replied. "We did all the things you and others asked us to do and we made it. We thought we would be okay from here on out."

"Do your teachers still get together to go over assessments and use the feedback to plan?" I asked.

"We tried to continue that but the scheduling got too hard, and the teachers complained that it was starting to get tedious."

"Oh. Well, do your team leaders still go into classrooms and monitor the ratio of student to teacher work to make sure that teachers aren't doing all the work?" I asked.

"Not any more. We don't think we still need to do that since we made so much progress last year." He answered.

"I see," I murmured, trying to hide my growing disappointment. "How about the work audits you were doing? Are you still looking to see whether teachers are providing quality versus quantity work?"

"Sometimes," he sighed. "I get to it when I can."

"Jonathan," I said finally. "It's no wonder the scores are not as high as they were a year ago. You are not the same school you were a year ago."

The same is true for your own teaching. If you practice applying the principles for a little while and then abandon them once you begin to make progress, you can end up undoing the progress you've made. Staying consistent is difficult, I agree. Practicing the

principles will get tedious at times and you will wonder, with everything else going on, why bother? But, it is only through deliberate and consistent practice that the changes that you make will take hold and become integrated into your teaching. Only consistent practice will create lasting changes in your instruction.

Try This:

- To help you be more consistent, use the strategies outlined in Chapter 8.
- Set aside at least one lesson per week where you consciously practice a principle. Plan the lesson with the principle in mind and spend some time after the lesson briefly reflecting on what you have done.
- Take each principle one at a time. Incorporate each principle fully into your teaching before taking on the next one. Chapter 8 gives you a strategy for deciding what principle to practice first.
- Cultivate a cheerleader. You need someone who will encourage you to keep going when you hit a difficult point and celebrate with you when you experience success. This person does not have to be a colleague; almost anyone can serve in this role. Your moral support just needs to be someone who will listen sympathetically to your triumphs and challenges and encourage you to keep going.

Good Practice Is Intentional

Another key factor in practicing effectively is to make your practice intentional. Do you know the difference between a habit and a practice? A habit doesn't require much conscious thought. A habit is something you do because that is what you've always done. A practice is something you do because you have made a conscious decision to do it. It is purposeful. It is intentional.

The point of practicing the principles is not so that they become a habit. Habits alter your behavior while principles change the way that you think. When you practice the principles without intentionality, they may become a habit. But if you practice them with intentionality, they become your natural response to any teaching situation.

The difference between intentional practice and habitual practice became clear to me one day when I was working with Allison. She had been teaching for about five years and was struggling to get her students to complete their assignments, especially their homework. We had already determined that Allison should focus on principle six and work on developing more quality assignments rather than worry about producing a quantity of work. As we were developing an action plan for the next six weeks, I asked Allison a few questions.

“So let's take a look at a few of your upcoming assignments.” I picked up a folder containing the worksheets she would be assigning for homework during the coming week. “What is the purpose of this assignment?”

Allison reached for the worksheet and briefly scanned it. “Well, that is a worksheet I usually use for this chapter.”

“Why?” I prodded.

She thought for a moment and then laughed sheepishly. “I think it was the worksheet my co-operating teacher used when I was a student teacher. I used it during my first year teaching because I didn’t have anything else and I’ve been using it ever since.”

“Do you need it? I mean, does it help your students understand this unit or could something else be more useful?”

Allison held the worksheet up and examined it again. “Actually, this isn’t very helpful at all. I could probably use something else. I might be able to do a review exercise in class that could help them get it just as well.”

Later in our conversation, I pointed to another assignment Allison was considering and asked the same question. “What is the purpose of this assignment?”

“Oh that,” Allison smiled. “That is a great worksheet to help them prepare for the lesson on vectors. I have them complete it the night before and it really gets them primed for the mini-lecture and lab I do the following class period.”

“Could you get them ready another way?”

“I suppose I could but I am not sure that it would be as effective. I want them to work this out on their own first before they come to class. It really gets them thinking about vectors without bogging them down with formulas and definitions. I want them to understand how vectors work on a macro level first. Then, we can drill down and understand them on a micro level.”

The difference between her two explanations was drastic. The first assignment was a habit, something she did consistently but without much intention. But she had given a lot of thought to the second assignment. It was intentional.

In order for your practice to be most effective, be intentional. Take time to understand why you are practicing a particular principle and set a tangible goal for your practice. I am not talking here of some lofty or vague goal such as “become a better teacher.” I am talking about a small, concrete, goal that can be achieved in no more than six weeks. Then, make deliberate decisions about what you will do during that six-week time period to move you towards your goal. Don’t just leave your getting better at a particular skill to chance. Make conscious decisions about what you will practice and how you will practice so that you are more likely to reach your goal. Making your practice intentional rather than habitual will make all the difference in your progress towards becoming a master teacher.

Try This:

- Use the action planning steps on page 208 to help you create an intentional plan for the next six weeks. This will help you develop a concrete goal and specific action steps that will keep your practice from becoming habitual.
- Examine your current practice and look for things that you do that are habitual. Think about how those behaviors became habitual and determine whether they are effective or if another behavior would be more effective.
- Spend some time reflecting on the assignments you give. Ask yourself the purpose for each assignment and teaching approach. If you do not have a sound instructional reason for something, consider revising it or deleting it altogether. Chapter 6 can help you determine which assignments to keep and which to let go.

- Don't try to jump from novice to master teacher in one step. Take your time and intentionally develop your skill in each of the principles. As you do, you will find that you will make exponential progress towards becoming a master teacher.