

Lesson 2 - Purposeful Practice

Statements such as 'correct practice makes perfect' and 'practice makes permanent' are commonly used in relation to improving skills and there is no doubt that without sufficient practice you cannot expect to develop your skills to a high level let alone achieve **mastery**. But practice needs to be more sophisticated than simple repetition. It needs to be **purposeful** and if possible **deliberate**. In this lesson I will look at what purposeful and deliberate practice are and how you can ensure that the time you spend developing your skiing skills is time well spent. I will also look at what 'mastery' is and how you can remain motivated to achieve such high skill levels.



Interski 2015, Ushuaia, Argentina.

The Danish Team practicing their formation skiing.

What is purposeful practice?

Anders Ericsson (2016) differentiates purposeful practice from 'naive practice' in that the latter is where you simply do something repeatedly expecting that the repetition alone will improve your performance. Purposeful practice, on the other hand, is thoughtful, structured and focused. There are four key aspects to purposeful practice; well defined specific goals, focus on the task in hand, ongoing and immediate feedback and getting outside of one's comfort zone (see figure 1.1).

Goal setting is vital in so many areas of life and the acronyms SMART and SMARTER (Lockerbie & Tate, 2012) are well established pathways to both setting and achieving your goals. So your goals need to be specific, measurable, achievable, realistic, broken down into chunks of time, create enthusiasm and have some kind of benefit or reward.

Focusing on the task in hand was covered in detail in the first lesson titled 'Focus Your Attention' (Tate, 2017) and by developing this skill you can ensure full engagement on skills that you are practicing.

Without **feedback** there is no way of measuring your progress or knowing how you are doing. Essentially, feedback can come from an **extrinsic source**, such as a teacher or watching video playback, or an **intrinsic source** i.e. from you as you are doing the task. The latter is very important especially as the skill becomes more reflexive and ultimately is more likely to lead to optimal experience (flow).

Getting outside of one's comfort zone "is perhaps the most important part of purposeful practice" (Ericsson & Pool, 2016 p.17). It is too easy to stick with what is familiar and comfortable but in order to improve you need to challenge yourself beyond what you can already do. There is a clear link here with the 'challenge skills balance' aspect of flow (Jackson & Csikszentmihalyi, 1999). What is important is that the challenge is just enough to stretch your performance rather than push beyond your limits.

"The right sort of practice carried out over a sufficient period of time leads to improvement. Nothing else."

(Ericsson & Pool, 2016)



Questions: Which areas of your performance do you need to practice most? Can you allocate sufficient time to this practice? Will you practice with others or alone?

What makes practice deliberate rather than just purposeful?

Deliberate practice includes all the components of purposeful practice plus the following; guidance from a teacher or coach, rigorous formal training methods, a well developed field with experts who have achieved mastery and effective mental representations (see figure 1.1).

Guidance from a teacher or coach can not only help you to learn what and how to practice but also helps to ensure you learn the correct fundamental movement patterns from early on, reducing the need to unlearn bad habits. For this reason finding a good teacher is important.

One of the suggested defining outcomes of deliberate practice is, that because it demands **rigorous formal training methods**, it is not always fun! You are often required to work outside of your comfort zone and at "near maximal effort" (Ericsson & Pool, 2016 p.99).

Deliberate practice also requires a **well developed field with experts who have achieved mastery**. A sport like Alpine skiing clearly has such a field with experts who perform to an exceptional level across a number of disciplines.

Finally, deliberate practice needs effective and sophisticated **mental representations** that are developed over time to correspond to external reality. In skiing this takes the form of mental imagery and forming these mental pictures comes from a combination of knowledge, understanding, seeing and feeling. Higher level performers often use mental imagery as an integral part of their practice.

What is Mastery and where does talent fit into the equation?

It has been widely publicised that to reach mastery in any domain takes around 10,000 hours of quality practice (ideally deliberate practice). The actual number of hours required is difficult to nail down but suffice to say “nobody develops extraordinary abilities without putting in tremendous amounts of practice” (Ericsson & Pool, 2016 p.96).

Mastery can be defined as comprehensive knowledge and/or skill in a particular domain. For us, in skiing, this translates to ‘expert performance’. There are many examples of expert performers but one that springs to mind is the American slalom specialist, Mikaela Shiffrin who also epitomises the importance of deliberate practice. See **7 Keys to Drill Mastery** https://youtu.be/96VN_Brmnz0.

The nature vs nurture debate often comes up when discussing ‘talent’. The best description that I have found on talent is by Scott Barry Kaufman who says, “Instead of treating talent as an ‘innate ability’, with all the knowledge and skills fully present at birth, I think talent is more accurately defined as a *predisposition and passion to master the rules of a domain* (2013, p. 247). So the good news is that no matter where you start you can get better with purposeful practice.

How do you maintain motivation?

So it's been established that to become an expert performer requires a great deal of quality practice, but how do you maintain motivation? Once again goal setting is all important here. If you follow the SMARTER process then you are more likely to maintain interest and it is interest that shapes your motivation.

Understanding your learning style will also have a positive impact on how you structure your practice and even better if you can build learning flexibility where you move through the learning cycle using all nine ways of learning (see [Peterson & Kolb, 2017](#) for more information).

Finally, but by no means exhaustively, developing ‘Grit’ can benefit your ability to keep practicing and pursuing your goals. The components of grit are passion and perseverance over the long term despite set backs and failure (Kaufman & Duckworth, 2015).

Ultimately falling in love with the activity will fuel your motivation and help give you grit. Remember: Learn it, Love it, Live it.



TRY THIS

Use videos of skilful skiers to develop more sophisticated **mental representations** of expert performance. A great place for this is <https://www.projectedproductions.com>



TRY THIS

What kind of **learner** are you? Understanding this can help you to practice more effectively, purposefully and ultimately deliberately. Go to Kolb Learning Style Inventory 4.0 to find out more. <http://learningfromexperience.com>

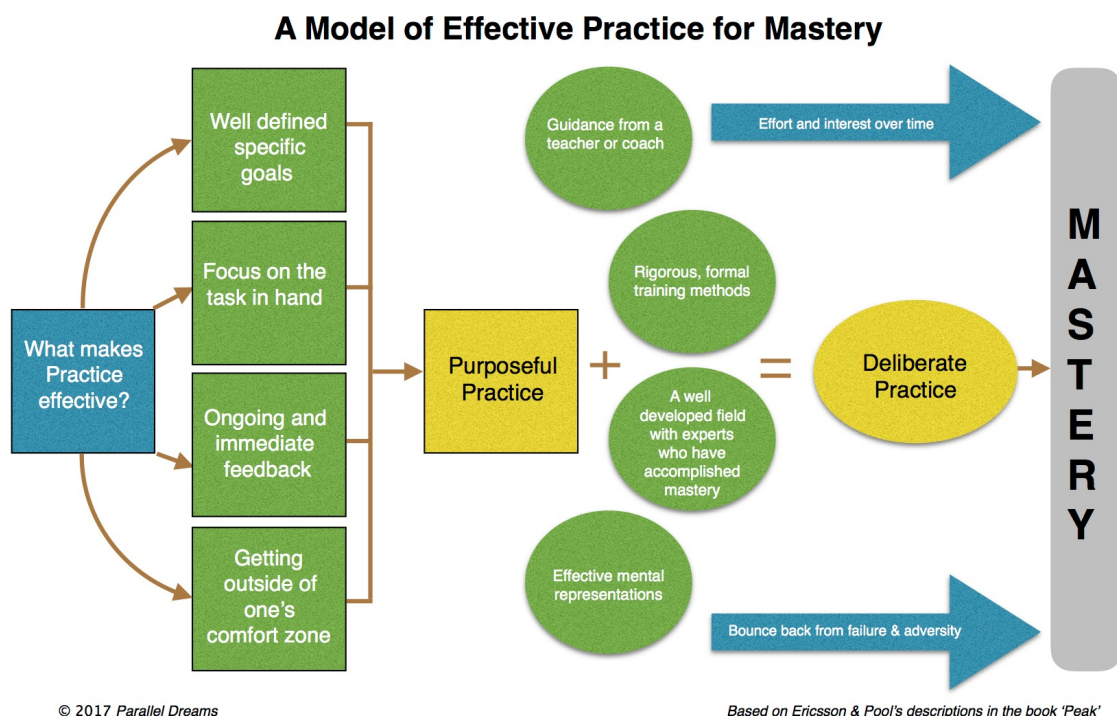


Figure 1.1

Key Points

- Purposeful Practice is thoughtful, structured and focused with four key aspects; well defined specific goals, focus on the task in hand, ongoing and immediate feedback and getting outside of one's comfort zone.
- Deliberate Practice is deliberate and requires all eight components to be most effective (see figure 1.1).
- Mastery is a comprehensive knowledge and/or skill in a particular domain. In the context of skiing this means 'expert performance'.
- Attaining mastery requires a tremendous amount of purposeful and ideally deliberate practice.
- Talent is not a fixed or innate quality but rather a predisposition to master the skills of the domain or sport. So no matter where you start from you can get better with purposeful practice.
- Interest shapes motivation. And goal setting, understanding your learning style and grit are all part of the mix that help to maintain that motivation so that you continue to put in the hours of practice required.

References

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- Lockerbie, A., & Tate, D. (2012). *Ski Instructors Handbook, Teaching Tools & Techniques*. Edinburgh: Parallel Dreams Publishing.
- Peterson, K., & Kolb, D. A. (2017). *How You Learn Is How You Live*. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler.
- Tate, D. (2017, June). Lesson 1 - Focus Your Attention. *Optimal Snowsports*.

Web links

British Alpine Ski School Chamonix	www.basschamonix.com
Kolb's Nine Ways of Learning	www.learningfromexperience.com
Learn it, Love it, Live it	www.optimaexperience.co.uk
Ski Coaching & Mountain Life	www.paralleldreams.co.uk
Ski Instructional Videos	www.projectedproductions.com

NB: Please note that the spelling of the word 'practice' is the same for both the verb and the noun, as in American English, as the sources used are predominantly American.

About the author

Derek Tate holds a postgraduate diploma in Sports Coaching and has completed the first year of the MSc Applied Positive Psychology (MAPP). He holds the BASI International Ski Teacher Diploma and the IASI Alpine Level 4 Euro Ski Pro. He is a former trainer of ski instructors for the British Association of Snowsport Instructors (BASI) and current Head of Education for the Irish Association of Snowsports Instructors (IASI). He lives near Chamonix, in France where he is director of British Alpine Ski Schools (BASS) in Chamonix and Megeve.

Want to improve your performance this winter and learn how to practice more purposefully? Then book a lesson with Derek at BASS. To find out more go to <http://basschamonix.com/lessons2>

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