

Why Trying to Make Practice Fun Might Be the Wrong Approach

Description

If you've read any articles or books on [deliberate practice](#), you may recall that one of its defining characteristics is that such practice is “not inherently enjoyable.”

Some have even taken this to mean that deliberate practice is actively unpleasant.

That it is “hard” or “painful” and “hurts.”

Urgh. So does that mean that practicing the “right way” is supposed to feel like a chore? That if we want to become great, it's going to take a tremendous amount of willpower to persist in an apparently torturous activity?

Learn how to code, darn it!

I stumbled across [Code Academy](#) and [Stencyl](#) not long ago, and thought it would be cool if my kids could learn to code or design their own video games. So I set up some accounts and tried to get my oldest engaged. But he never really did.

Then [Minecraft fever](#) kicked in, and he got sucked into a world of “mods” and “skins” and was suddenly diving into hidden system folders on the Mac, downloading hacks and programs to create and tweak his own skins and mods, googling for obscure tips, scouring forums, and watching tutorial videos.

I thought CodeAcademy and Stencyl were more straightforward and structured, but that didn't matter to him. Because he's totally invested in solving a seemingly chaotic and never-ending series of puzzles that he actually *cares* to solve.

Is he always having “fun”? No, but he's totally engrossed and engaged.

Caring matters

Indeed, caring about something and being invested matters.

A [set of Canadian studies](#) have found that passion plays a key role in the attainment of a high level of performance. The findings were a little more nuanced than this, but essentially, greater passion leads to more deliberate practice which in turn leads to a higher level of performance.

So saying that deliberate practice “hurts” and is “hard” misrepresents what this kind of practice actually feels like when you care.

Babies vs. groceries

I recently heard [Wynton Marsalis](#) give a talk in which he shared a lesson he learned as a young boy.

It was Mardi Gras in New Orleans, and the streets were packed with people. He was walking with his mother, who was carrying a baby in her arms, and he could tell that she was starting to tire and laboring a bit as they fought to avoid being trampled by the crowd.

He offered to carry the baby, and his mother declined. He asked again, and was turned down once more. He continued to express his desire to help, and finally his mother stopped and said that if it was bag of groceries, she would be happy to have his help. “But this is a baby,” she said. “*How heavy something is depends on how you feel about carrying it.*”

We have it backwards

To an outsider, tuning a note with exacting detail, experimenting with every possible combination of bowings and fingerings, playing long tones, or spending an afternoon poring over manuscripts and comparing different editions of a score may seem painful.

Whereas, playing through a piece or jamming with friends might sound like terrific fun. And at first, it might very well be.

But at some point, repeated rehearsal becomes a drag. Because it’s [not a particularly effective way to get better](#) (seriously, check out that article – it’s worth a read). It’s not very engaging or mentally stimulating. And simply putting in reps hoping that your brain will somehow catch on and do the right thing when the time comes is not going to do much for your confidence.

In reality, it’s the active, thoughtful, problem-solving variety of “practice” – masquerading as painful drudgery to the uninitiated – that leads to a more engaging, engrossing, and gratifying experience in the practice room. Because then you’re thinking. And *learning*. Experiencing daily micro-epiphanies. And solving problems that *mean* something to you.

How to get obsessed

So how do you get yourself to care? To pursue deeper engagement and discovery as opposed to fun?

What if, instead of practicing to simply “make it sound better” or accumulate enough repetitions to maintain a certain level, your larger objective is to leave the practice room having learned something you didn’t know before?

Where your efforts are centered around conducting experiments to (1) clarify what you want, (2) figure out what’s holding you back, (3) brainstorm solutions that get you closer, and (4) test yourself to see if your solutions are sticking?

What puzzles would you care to solve today?

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