

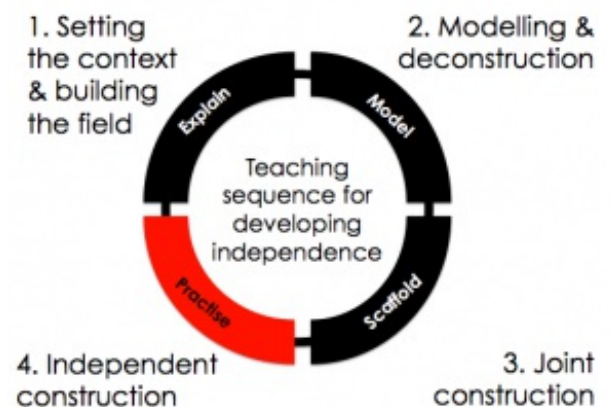
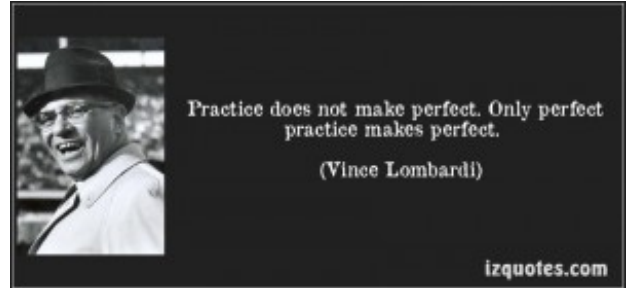
Teaching sequence for developing independence Stage 4: Practise : July 4, 2013

What does practice make? Well, it turns out that my mum was wrong. Doug Lemov points out in [Practice Perfect](#) that practice doesn't make perfect, practice makes permanent. What we practise we get good at. And sometimes we get very good at doing things badly.

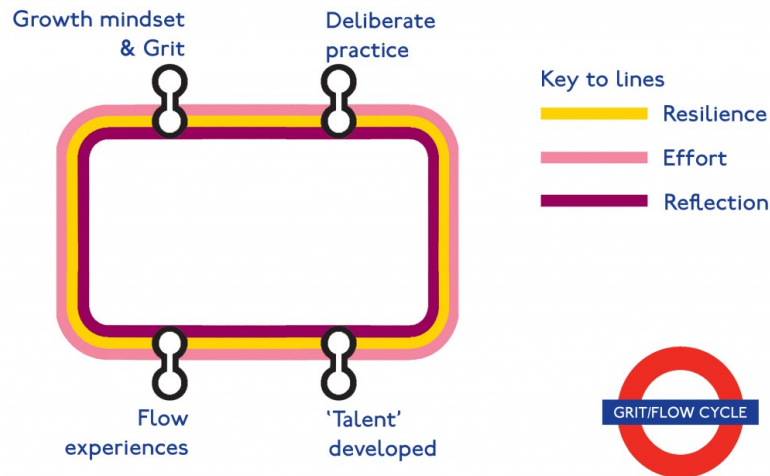
Take writing for instance. When I scribble notes I always use capital letters correctly. This isn't a boast: I just do. It would never occur to me not to, I don't even think about it. When I read students' work they invariably omit capital letters for proper nouns. Now, I rarely meet a secondary student who is unaware of where capital letters should be used and if you point out that they missed some then they generally know exactly where to put them. I used to think this was laziness, but I realise now it's not; they're doing exactly what I do: unthinkingly repeating what they've practised. After years of practice of not using capital letters they've got really good at it, and it takes a real effort of will to remember to do it. This is what Lemov calls 'encoding failure', and is best avoided if we're serious about students mastering the skills and knowledge we're teaching them.

The independent construction stage of the sequence is another one of those hidden areas of teaching. I've often had teachers say something along the lines of, "Oh, don't come and watch that lesson – they'll just be getting on with it." Or, if pushed, abandoning what they need to do in order to lay on the kind of joint construction lesson that observers like. I think this is a little odd. Surely, if what we're *supposed* to be doing is minimising teacher talk and having kids doing independent learning this kind of lesson ought to be ideal? Can there be a better way of demonstrating progress and independence than by seeing a class of kids working in silence?

Part of the reluctance behind want to be seen presiding over this kind of lesson is that some teachers aren't sure what to do with themselves: obviously, drinking coffee and surfing the net don't look particularly constructive. And I understand that. I'm pretty sure that I'd balk at taking this approach even though I think it could be perfectly justifiable. But often the demands of covering content and lack of curriculum time mean we don't give students nearly enough opportunities to practise. We tell ourselves (and them) that it's all about 'skills' which student should be able to transfer from one subject to another, but if they don't get the chance to master these skills in one area before being asked to jump though new, slightly differently shaped hoops then they are never going to transfer them.



Grand Unified Theory of Mastery



For those who might be feeling that 'mastery' is an unattainably giddy height to which mere mortals cannot aspire, let's quantify and distil the term to something on which we can agree. Gladwell's bastardisation of Erikson's work into the neat figure of 10,000 hours may not be in any substantive way true, but it is a useful way of looking at mastery. There isn't a short cut. Mastery, however we define it, takes time. But, and this is the good news, if we want it enough, if we're prepared to put in the effort, mastery is achievable. Mastery is not perfection; it's just being really good at something.

Grit & growth mindset

So, the Grit/Flow cycle begins with the determination to work towards mastery and the belief that, with hard work, mastery is possible. The process of explaining, modelling and then scaffolding out to have prepared students for this. If it hasn't you may need to revisit some of the steps. As teachers our job is to convince any particularly truculent or apathetic students that a) they can and that b) they should work towards a goal. 'Mastery' may seem like like too glossy a coat to wear, but for the sake of convincing students to work, we can just call it 'getting better'. The better you get, the closer you are to mastery.

I'm often suspicious of lesson time spent on [meta-cognition](#): I'd rather they expanded their cultural capital instead. But it may be profitable to teach students about the process of learning to enable them to monitor, control and regulate their own practice. We should definitely encourage them to see that hard work is its own reward and that anything worth learning will be challenging. At the Explaining stage of the sequence I often begin a new topic by telling students that it's really hard, that they'll struggle but that this is normal: if it wasn't difficult what would be the point in doing it? I tell them that they will make mistakes and that this is not only OK, it's essential. I tell them that they can achieve more than they believe possible if they're prepared to put the effort in, and that whatever they do achieve will be exactly proportionate to that effort. If, for any reason, you've managed to avoid hearing about Dr Carol Dweck's Mindset theory, you can read about it [here](#).

Deliberate Practice

Part of the path to mastery is understanding the value of deliberate practice. Boring? Well, maybe not. Many students commit many hours to playing computer games where the goal is to master the game and reach the end. They get constant and instant feedback about what works and what doesn't and then they get the opportunity to try out this feedback again and again until they get it right. Kids that quickly throw in the towel at school are willing to persevere at Call of Duty until they overcome their limitations. Why do they do it? Because they want to win. Being killed endlessly is all kinds of frustrating; the pleasure comes from mastery.

But why is it that these same kids moan at doing something hard in class? What is it that 'engages' them with computer games but turns them off with, say, grammar? Well, mainly it's because choosing to squish

things in your own time is fun and writing stuff in books because you're told to isn't. But fun be damned. Hattie says in *Visible Learning for Teachers*, "Sometimes learning is not fun. Instead, it is just hard work; it is deliberate practice; it is simply doing some things many times over." If our students always expect 'fun' lessons they will never get good at what we're trying to teach them. But be warned: without corrective feedback students' practice may just be encoding failure. Most errors should have been picked up in the scaffolding phase, but we must make sure that we have sky high expectations and clear models to refer back to.

'Talent' Developed

When you start getting good at something, you start to see the point. If we accept that talent is the product of deliberate practice an individual has put into mastering a skill then we can help to explode some of the short cut culture which society seems to value so highly. We're much too inclined to just see the performance of a professional athlete, musician or, dare I say it, teacher and conclude that, well, it's alright for them. They have talent. And we don't. So why bother trying? What we don't see are the hours and hours and deliberate practice that has gone in to producing the performance. We don't see the failures, the sweat or the frustration so we decide it mustn't be there. There is not a musician or sports person alive who will not readily admit to the fact that natural 'talent' is almost irrelevant. You only get to the top of your game through determination and hard work. But when talent is developed, all the hard work seems to suddenly pay off and we're granted magical moments when everything just 'flows'.

I was recently observed by some NQTs seeking to develop their questioning. They watched a lesson where students carried out a very sophisticated, high level discussion with very little input from me. The kids took turns at evaluating each others' responses and everyone in the class took part: it looked great. Unfortunately, the NQTs learned very little. They went away having just seen the independent construction phase of my teaching sequence and believed (wrongly) that I'm somehow a more talented teacher they they are. They hadn't seen any of the struggle or frustration that the class and I had gone through to get to this. They hadn't seen me explain, model and scaffold what I wanted; just seeing the tip of the iceberg is not very useful for helping us understand what icebergs look like.

Flow experiences

I've been fascinated by the idea of 'flow' since reading [Mihály Csikszentmihályi](#)'s book some years ago. The idea is that if you're totally immersed in the experience of performing a task you will perform it to a higher standard. It's has been billed as "the ultimate experience in harnessing the emotions in the service of performing and learning." Who wouldn't want to feel "a feeling of spontaneous joy, even rapture, while performing a task"? Sounds good, right? Maybe too good. In a quick-fix culture the belief that we're somehow entitled to experience flow without effort is pernicious. And something that the slavish demands to demonstrate 'progress-every-20-minutes' only encourage. The mystical, effortless beauty of the flow state can seem to be the antithesis of grit. Grit is carrying on despite the pain. Grit is being able to practise until your fingers bleed. Grit is *not* fun. Grit is doing it even when it's boring! This is the master skill and we should encourage students to delay the tempting gratification of flow.

I worry about those lessons that just seem to flow: are students learning or just performing really well? We're conditioned to look at the tip of the iceberg and the graceful swan above the surface. We often say that learning is messy, but do we believe it? Bjork tells us that when learning is really happening, short term performance is reduced: it *feels* like we're getting worse. *That is why we shy away from gritty lessons; especially when being observed.* But if the journey is *always* hard we may not have the motivation to carry on. We need to glimpse the magic of flow in order to trudge on and experience it again. If life was *just* rehearsal, if sport was *just* training, what would be the point? We train because we want to perform at our peak when it really matters. For our students this may well be in their examinations, for us it may well be in that high stakes observation when the inspector comes to call. What ever the reason, we want to be able to experience flow when it really matters.

The role of feedback

We all know that giving feedback improves performance. And if it was as easy as the sentence makes it sound all would be well. As teachers we need to know what kinds of feedback to offer in a given situation. Sometimes a simple 'right' or 'wrong' might be enough, at other times it needs to be much more complex. For feedback to be effective it needs to meet a whole host of conditions:

- Specific – as Ron Berger says, feedback should be as specific as 'put more stripes on the legs' or 'make the tail black'. It's no good telling students to 'use more expression in your writing'. If they knew how to do that they'd probably already have done it.
- Clear – sometimes even specific feedback isn't clear. Make sure you are able to describe exactly what you want and use questioning to make sure that students understand.
- Limited – too many instructions are overwhelming. It's much more likely that students will improve when offered one piece of advice at a time. Consider which piece of feedback is most likely to have an impact first
- Kind – it's all very well being kind, but this also requires honesty. Berger talks about feedback needing to be "hard on content, soft on people". If our feedback makes people feel bad they're not going to listen. One of the simplest ways to offer feedback that is palatable enough to listen is to phrase it in the form of a question. *Have you thought about adding more adjectives to that second sentence?*
- Balanced – this is a tough one to get right. If we only focus on correcting negatives we can easily miss the opportunity to give feedback on what students are already good at. But, it turns out that positive feedback can be counter productive. Saying 'well done' might feel good but it won't help anyone improve. Hattie says, "if you are not challenged you do not make mistakes. If you do not make mistakes, feedback is useless." We must ensure that the work students are doing is hard enough that they will make mistakes if we're going to help them improve. But we can still focus on the positive: *Your sentence structure is really improving – now see if you can embed some subordinate clauses.*
- Timely – if our feedback is going to have impact it has to come at the right time. And the right time is usually immediately. Hard to do in a classroom situation. Waiting a week to mark books probably won't be useful but we also need to have a life. The most useful feedback is therefore often verbal. But what isn't written down is easily lost and forgotten. I hate the idea of verbal feedback stamps in students' books – who are we doing this for? Instead, have students repeat the feedback and articulate precisely what they are going to do differently. In this way we can 'lock it in'. (Lemov p136)
- Helpful – if students don't understand how the feedback will help them improve then it's hard to commit to acting on it. If we take the time to describe a solution which focuses on the 'so that' students are more likely to see the point. *You should use discourse markers to connect your paragraphs together **so that** your writing is more coherent.*

Independence

Independence isn't possible without a period of dependence. When universities complain that students can't work independently they assume that the reason must be too much spoon-feeding in schools. Actually the opposite is true; students aren't good at being independent because they been made to work with too little direction and don't *know* how to work independently. To be independent we need to know what to do and how to do it. And if we we don't teach students what they need to know we run the risk of them never discovering it.

The four stages of the teaching sequence are all essential components of independence. Explain and modelling require teachers to be experts and to teach. Scaffolding allows us to start to let go. As long as students are sufficiently clear about what they meant to be doing then collaborative and reciprocal teaching can be highly effective. And then we need to let them practise. Practise will make permanent. If we are there to offer feedback to prevent them encoding failure they can and will become truly independent. We need to be able to explain what we're doing and why we're doing it. Teaching should never be judged as outstanding

if teachers are unclear about how their lessons fit into a sequence. If we can rid ourselves of the myth that [performance is evidence of learning](#) and to be able to say, *here* is where they will be independent and *this* is how I know. As teachers it's about knowing when to apply the different skills of the teaching sequence. It's about knowing that if we ask students to run before they can walk we're going to have a lot of grazed knees. And it's about having the confidence to reclaim our professional expertise. We are the experts. No one else knows our students in our classrooms the way we do.

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