Deliberate practice makes perfect

Jennifer Jacobs and Raina Ng

In Walter Isaacson’s biography, Steve Jobs describes how he perfects his product by talking about one of his prized CDs — a bootleg copy of a dozen or so taped sessions of the Beatles rehearsing Strawberry Fields Forever.

“It’s a complex song and it’s fascinating to watch the creative process as they went back and forth and finally created it over a few months. It’s so raw in this version. It actually makes them sound like mere mortals. You could actually imagine other people doing this, up to this version. Maybe notally makes them sound like mere mortals. You could actually report entitled The Role of Deliberate Practice in the Acquisition of performance in a specific domain,” say the researchers in their work, but in the end it just gets better and soon it’s like, ‘Wow, then begin refining and refining, doing detailed models of the design, or the buttons, or how a function operates. It’s a lot of work, but in the end it just gets better and soon it’s like, ‘Wow, how did they do that? Where are the screws?’” Jobs says.

There was a time lapse between the recordings, during which the Beatles kept working on the song. “They kept sending it back to make it closer to perfect. The way we build stuff at Apple is often this way. Even the number of models we’d make of a new notebook or iPod. We would start off with a version and then begin refining and refining, doing detailed models of the design, or the buttons, or how a function operates. It’s a lot of work, but in the end it just gets better and soon it’s like, ‘Wow, how did they do that? Where are the screws?'” Jobs says.

This, in a nutshell, is what deliberate practice is all about — practising something over and over again so that you not only get it right, but your performance becomes world-class.

In his book, Talent is Overrated, Geoff Colvin says deliberate practice is “what really separates world-class performers from everybody else”. However, there is some misunderstanding about what deliberate practice actually is.

For some, it is doing the same thing over and over again. But Colvin points out that extensive research in a wide range of fields shows that many people not only fail to become outstandingly good at what they do through repetition, frequently they don’t even get any better than when they first started.

It would even appear that in a wide range of professions, experience counts for nothing: experienced auditors are no more likely to detect fraud than inexperienced ones, and while auditors are better at detecting corporate fraud than inexperienced ones, there is some misunderstanding about what deliberate practice actually is.

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given this kind of freedom.

World squash champion Datuk Nicol David was only five years old when she started playing squash. Her father’s colleague and some of his friends had built the first public squash centre in Penang and invited Nicol and her older sisters, Lianne and Cheryl, to take lessons.

When Nicol was eight, she started to get serious about the game. “I was getting some regular training two to three times a week for maybe one to two hours per session. When I was 10 or 11 years old, I was probably at the squash courts five days a week.”

That was when her talent started to be apparent to those around her. “From the age of 12, I thought if I was given a chance to play international tournaments, I could win them. And I did.”

Nicol estimates that she put in 1,456 hours of training in the first four years. Today, her training schedule is rigorous by anyone’s standards — two sessions a day of two to four hours each, six days a week, with a half-day rest in the middle of the week. The training alternates between squash and fitness sessions covering endurance, speed, strength as well as running and jumping techniques and specific stability exercises.

“I wake up, have my breakfast and head over to the squash club for training, either a squash or physical session. I’ll have a lunch break then my next training session will either be a physical or squash session depending on what I’ve done in the morning. After my second session, I’ll have dinner at the squash club or head home for dinner. Then I’ll rest on my sofa, put my feet up and watch some TV to get ready for the next day of training,” says Nicol.

She puts in the hours, week in, week out. “Sometimes we tend to compete in too many competitions back to back that it can get tiring mentally, but I never get discouraged. The more experience I have, the better I am at gauging when I need to take a holiday to be fresh for the next season of training or competition. Yes, I do work on my mental toughness, but it is too difficult. “I felt I had to go overseas to really make a good run. After the commonwealth games, I was not only under assault, but in the process of being obliterated by my own weaknesses.”

But even with all the enthusiasm in the world, she does get tired sometimes. “Yes, of course there have been times when I thought, no more novels for me. Like in the last two years. But I’ve never thought of quitting. It’s like quitting deep breathing. Mental toughness is not such a big thing if one has no notion of failure. If you write because you have to, then failure is not only not an option, it is not even a word you understand.”

How did she do it? “Unfortunately, or fortunately as the case may be, the books that were available to me were those that were available at a British missionary school. The Old and New Testaments, the collected Shakespearean works, lots of Victorian and Georgian poets and authors — what children the world over probably detested as classics to be studied for the Cambridge Overseas Examinations.

“But as they were all the treasure I had at hand, I loved reading and re-reading these texts, savouring the sound of the words, the pictures and feelings that this reading aloud would raise in me. My brothers, everyone, teased me for being a bookworm. I would easily go through four books a day. Writing was simply my tribute to the books I had read,” she says.

By the time Lim was 10, she was winning prizes for poetry. But her first big break came when she won the Commonwealth Poetry Prize for her first book of poems, *Crossing the Peninsula.* “I expected the poems to quietly disappear as they were published in KL, and at a time when the English language was not only under assault, but in the process of being obliterated in the schools and government.

“But that prize, the first for an Asian and a woman, gave the poems visibility, credibility and some kind of permanence. Many of the poems in that first book have been anthologised all over the world,” she says.

How does she write? “With poetry I write using a pen on scratch paper, whatever is around, and I move words around, and get rid of lines and move text to get to some form, pushing for fiercer diction, more precise figurative language, more alliteration, slant rhymes, and so on. With prose I compose directly onto the screen and try to write a couple of pages every day. If you write two pages a day, you’ll have a novel before the year is over.”

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So much for the traditional arts. What about deliberate practice in something a little different? Sheng Saw is one of the top make-up artists in Malaysia. As a little boy, he loved colour, painting and calligraphy. He would follow his mother to the beauty parlour or when she shopped for cosmetics, taking in the brilliant palette of colours available.

However, becoming a make-up artist was not something he had even considered. He became a car salesman instead. But on the side, he experimented with anyone who would let him take a brush to their face. “At 16, I began doing a lot of make-up for those on the local cross-dressing scene. Drag queens were the only ones who would allow you to be extravagant with their faces. I was constantly on the lookout for faces I could paint, trying out colours, even on paper and with paint.”

But when he tried to do it professionally in Malaysia, it was too difficult. “I felt I had to go overseas to really make a good...
living out of it.”

It was not easy. He went for a few interviews and kept being rejected until he landed a job as a part-time sales assistant at Givenchy. “They began to notice my potential and gave me a permanent position as a make-up artist at Givenchy, Harrods. I began meeting a lot more people and was offered a permanent contract with Isabela Rosellini’s make-up brand, Manifesto Cosmetic.”

Sheng Saw had been practising, but it was here that he finally received proper feedback. “My technique improved when I started working for MAC. I was able to compare my skills and techniques with other artists and I learnt from the seniors. I learnt a lot about how different colours complemented different skin tones and, being in London, I got to practice on people from all over the world.”

And he continues to practice and hone his style, although he is already one of the most acclaimed (and expensive) make-up artists in Malaysia. As the years go by, he has learnt that less is more. “I think my technique has changed and my work is getting finer. I used to like the big, the showy and the avant garde, but as I grow older I am learning how to make people look more natural, what I call the ‘effortless look’, rather than just plastering a mask on their face.”

Writers are shaped by the books they loved and trusted as much as by people whom they may love and trust in more difficult ways. Every atom of breath, dust particle from a particular road, rain shower one afternoon, whether it was in a country long vanished or just yesterday in the town one will probably die in, the writer makes use of whatever is at hand. And the lies, smiles, fears, confusions, the razzle-dazzle of ordinary living — those are the cracks that make one heart distinctive from every other heart.

— Shirley Lim, award-winning writer and poet
You have to pour yourself into your work to ensure that what you do is authentic. You can be technically proficient, but to be a good make-up artist, you need to have a personality. Appreciate the people you meet along the way, especially your mentors. And finally, work with passion. As Leonardo Da Vinci said: ‘...where the spirit does not work with the hand, there is no art.’

– Sheng Saw,
make-up artist
Being a singer is not just about having a good voice; anyone can have that. You need to know the technical side of it, be able to sight-read music. The saddest part is that once they’re good, many singers are not interested in improving themselves. You have to keep on learning, you have to be grounded. No matter how good you are, there’s always someone better. And you have to learn how to accept constructive criticism.

— Syafinaz Selamat, singer and music instructor
Trust and believe in your capabilities, in the things that you're good at or that you're passionate in, whatever field it may be. Have a dream or goal for yourself because once you have something to aim for, then you can set your path towards it. You have to love what you're doing, then you can bring out your full potential to achieve the best that you can be.

— Datuk Nicol David, world squash champion