What Makes Practice Deliberate

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Influence helps to transmit the ways of seeing and working that accelerate progress toward mastery. That path to mastery is fundamentally shaped by the application of what researcher Anders Ericsson termed deliberate practice. Geoff Colvin distills the essence of this well:

> Deliberate practice is characterized by several elements, each worth examining. It is activity designed specifically to improve performance, often with a teacher's help; it can be repeated a lot; feedback on results is continuously available; it's highly demanding mentally, whether the activity is purely intellectual, such as chess or business-related activities, or heavily physical, such as sports; and it isn't much fun.
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> …. While the best methods of development are constantly changing, they're always built around a central principle: They're meant to stretch the individual beyond his or her current abilities. That may sound obvious, but most of us don't do it in the activities we think of as practice. At the driving range or at the piano, most of us, as adults, are just doing what we've done before and hoping to maintain the level of performance that we probably reached long ago.
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> By contrast, deliberate practice requires that one identify certain sharply defined elements of performance that need to be improved, and then work intently on them.… Tiger Woods has been seen to drop golf balls into a sand trap and step on them, then practice shots from that near-impossible lie. The great performers isolate remarkably specific aspects of what they do and focus on just those things until they are improved; then it's on to the next aspect.…
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> Deliberate practice is above all an effort of focus and concentration. That is what makes it "deliberate," as distinct from the mindless playing of scales or hitting of tennis balls that most people engage in. Continually seeking exactly those elements of performance

> that are unsatisfactory and then trying one's hardest to make them better places enormous strains on anyone's mental abilities. The work is so great that it seems no one can sustain it for very long….
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> Instead of doing what we're good at, we insistently seek out what we're not good at. Then we identify the painful, difficult activities that will make us better and do those things over and over. After each repetition, we force ourselves to see – or get others to tell us – exactly what still isn't right so we can repeat the most painful and difficult parts of what we've done. We continue that process until we're mentally exhausted.[i]

In fields that have clearly delineated arenas of performance, like sports and music, it is easier to see the discipline of practice distinct from the field of play. In other fields, like writing and business, there is greater need to pose problems of practice that can be integrated into the production of one's core work – without diluting the factors Colvin cites that distinguish deliberate practice from common practice.

[i] Geoff Colvin, *Talent is Overrated*, excerpts from 66 – 72.