

A Gauge for Measuring Effective Practice – Daniel Coyle <http://thetalentcode.com/>

If you distilled all the new science about talent development into two words of advice, they would be “practice better.” That’s it. **Practice. Better.**

Forget everything else about your genes, your potential - it’s all just noise. The most basic truth is that if you practice better, you’ll develop your talent - and you won’t develop your talent unless you practice better. Period.

For most of us, that’s precisely where we bump into a common problem: *how?* Specifically, which practice method to choose? Do we focus on repeating a skill we’ve got, or do we work on new skills? What kinds of drills work best? What’s the best way to spend the limited time we’ve got?

When it comes to figuring out how to practice better, we often feel like we’re standing in the cereal aisle of the grocery store. There are lots of seemingly attractive choices. But how do we pick the ones that have the most nutrition, and avoid the ones that are empty calories?

I’ve been thinking about this a lot lately, and I’d like to use this blog as a test drive for a new gauge for comparing practice methods. I’m calling it the **R.E.P.S. Gauge**.

(Okay, acronyms are cheesy, I know. But they’ve been around for a long time because they work.)

R stands for Reaching/Repeating.

E stands for Engagement.

P stands for Purposefulness

S stands for Strong, Direct, Immediate Feedback.

The idea behind the gauge is simple: you should practice methods that contain these key elements, and avoid methods that don’t. Below, you’ll find a description of each element along with a sample choice to illustrate how it works.

- Element 1: **Reaching and Repeating.** Does the practice have you operating on the edge of your ability, reaching and repeating? How many reaches are you making each minute? Each hour?

Scenario: a math teacher trying to teach multiplication tables to 30 students.

- Teacher A selects a single student to write the tables on the board.
- Teacher B creates a “game show” format where a math question is posed verbally to the entire class, then calls on a single student to answer.

Result: Teacher B chose the better option *because it creates 30 reaches in the same amount of time.* In Classroom A, only one student had to truly stretch - everybody else could lean back and observe. In Classroom B, however, *every single member of the class has to stretch* (picture the wires of their brains, reaching) in case their name is called. Not a small difference.

- Element 2: **Engagement.** Is the practice immersive? Does it command your attention? Does it use emotion to propel you toward a goal?

Scenario: a violin student trying to perfect a short, tough passage in a song.

- Student A plays the passage 20 times.
- Student B tries to play the passage perfectly - with zero mistakes - five times in a row. If they make any mistake, the count goes back to zero and they start over.

Result: Student B made the better choice, *because the method is more engaging.* Playing a passage 20 times in a row is boring, a chore where you're simply counting the reps until you're done. But playing 5 perfectly, where any mistake sends you back to zero, is intensively engaging. It's a juicy little game.

- Element 3: **Purposefulness.** Does the task directly connect to the skill you want to build?

Scenario: a basketball team keeps losing games because they're missing late free-throws.

- Team A practices free throws at the end of a practice, with each player shooting 50 free throws.
- Team B practices free throws during a scrimmage, so each player has to shoot them while exhausted, under pressure.

Result: Team B made the better choice, *because their practice connects to the skill you want to build:* the ability to make free throws under pressure, while exhausted. (No player ever gets to shoot 50 straight in a game.)

- The fourth element: **Strong, Direct, Immediate Feedback.** In other words, the learner always knows how they're doing - where they're making mistakes, where they're doing well - because the practice is telling them in real time. They don't need anybody to explain that they need to do X or Y, because it's clear as a bell.

Scenario: a high school student trying to improve her SAT score.

- Student A spends a Saturday taking a mock version of the entire SAT; receiving results back one week later.
- Student B spends a Saturday taking a mini-version of each section, self-grading and reviewing each test in detail as soon as it's completed.

Result: Student B made the better choice, *because the feedback is direct and immediate.* Learning immediately where she went wrong (and went right) will tend to stick, while learning about it in a week will have little effect.

The idea of this gauge is simple: **practices that contain all four of these core elements (R.E.P.S.) are the ones you want to choose, because those are the ones that will produce the most progress in the shortest amount of time. Audit your practices and get rid of the methods that have fewer R.E.P.S. and replace them with methods that have lots.**

The other takeaway here is that small, strategic changes in practice can produce huge benefits in learning. Making a little tweak to the learning space - for instance, teaching multiplication through a little juicy game that keeps 30 people on their toes - can have big effects on learning velocity. **Spending time strategizing your practice is one of the most effective investments you can make in developing talent.**

But as I said at the start, this idea is still in the experimental phase. What other elements should we consider including? How do you achieve your best practices? What else should we add here?