

EAD 860

At Work: Practice and Performance

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Dr. Atul Gawande states that success is determined by the challenges that face an individual or system and how that person or system performs. He questions that “practice makes perfect” instead preferring to ask a different question. What if practice is not to make perfect, but instead what if practice is to simply make better? A key theme in Dr. Gawande’s teaching and thinking is the need to do away with all illusions of perfection. His idea of performance is the betterment of existing methods and technologies as well as in the creation of new methods and technologies in order for one to do one’s job better. According to him there are specific concepts that individuals must practice in order to achieve betterment. Those concepts are diligence, doing right, and ingenuity. These are important aspects for students developing an understanding of the emerging Learning Society.

Diligence is the necessity of giving sufficient attention to detail to avoid error and prevail over obstacles. Diligence as a concept is very often overlooked and underappreciated in today’s society where many humans expect things to come easily and quickly. Gawande understands that such constant attention to detail and the perseverance that can lead to betterment demands that we learn the importance of starting with the basics and working your way up to more complex actions. The mirror of this concept is to ask what we do when expertise is not enough. There was a tremendous amount of diligence needed in India for the doctors there to leave “no stone uncovered” in the successful vaccination campaign to defeat the Polio outbreak that took and threatened so many lives. A surgeon with the highest level education cannot expect to begin by performing the most complicated surgeries. They must first appreciate the very basics of their profession such as how to wash one’s hands diligently and properly so as to not spread infection.

Doing right implies a moral and ethical component that can be translated as the requirement that persons do the most good as is possible. The implication is for people to always look for what more they can do. Gawande implores that we must always observe the results of what we do and try to understand and better them. This provides the best possible chance of avoiding the worst error of all which is understood as giving up the fight. If we do not try and do not practice then failure is inevitable. Many medical doctors must face the inevitable decision of whether to continue to fight for the life of a person or let them go. There

are times when fighting does seem to pay off while at other times fighting seems to simply cause prolonged pain and suffering. There is an implied lesson that even when we attempt to learn by doing the most good we often need to appreciate the understanding that some things cannot be understood and that we should focus instead on more tangible goals. Medical doctors must learn empathy to move more easily amidst the uncertainty, ambiguity, and sadness that is a part of learning their profession.

Ingenuity is the final concept that Gawande believes can lead to the betterment of practice. This concept does not imply that we must find a way to eradicate the world from a particular disease but can be as simple as implementing a checklist in the operating room. Dr. Gawande highlighted the efforts of Virginia Apgar, the doctor who in the face of some of the world's most advanced technologies, devised a simple checklist and scoring system that rated an infant's health status and drastically improved infant mortality rate. The simple system was not a medical treatment and pen and paper are not often thought of as medical tools yet this process represents an ingenious idea that drastically improved existing medical practices.

Practicing betterment using the concepts above can create what Dr. Gawande identifies as the "positive deviant". These individuals, organizations, and presumably, these type of learning societies constantly focus on improving their own performance. They strive to learn more even beyond the standard concept of expertise. Most of these type of deviant behaviors occur in the professional work workforce long after their practitioners have completed their formal education. Gawande observes that the five important guidelines to learning for positive deviants are asking unscripted questions, do not complain, count something, write something, and change. These then are very good examples of the concept of the Learning Society for students to study. Does real learning occur upon entry into the professional workforce and after our formal educations end? The duality and paradox that exists between knowledge and learning must become crucial concepts in the student's understanding of the Learning Society.

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Hello Sean,

This paper serves as an effective review of the major unit themes and ideas featured in Gawande's writing. When Gawande writes, he shares both a personal reflection of his own interest in performance and as well as a systematic perspective. In this way, do you think Gawande models the behavior of a "good citizen" at work with his continual quest to not only improve himself, but also the field of medicine? Even in its most idealistic forms, Gawande is an unusual character. Is Gawande a representative illustration of what we should expect in a learning society? Or is part of the admiration we have for Gawande stem from the fact that he is a unique talent and intellect?

One of the distinguishing characteristics of Better is its modest aim --- to improve. Notice that the book is not called "Best." Yet, how many times do we hear about best practices in education and medicine? We have become obsessed with the idea of the single best way, so much so, that we may have lost sight of a more attainable (and therefore valuable goal) --- to become better through diligence, ethical behavior, and a dash of ingenuity. Perhaps in this way, Better is the next generation of Best.

And though his message is simple, we shouldn't take it as one that is easily accomplished. For those who are inclined to do better, Gawande notes that sometimes "the steps are often uncertain [and] the knowledge to be mastered is both vast and incomplete." He's speaking specifically about medicine, but I wonder if such a statement isn't descriptive of other fields, such as education. Having worked in and around schools for a while, I meet a number of well-intended educators who want to improve their craft, but aren't sure how to do it, and balk at the many possible branches for improvement. That's the other thing about human nature that Gawande so astutely observes: we often desire to improve, but not if the yoke is heavy. "We always hope for the easy fix: the one simple change that will ease a problem in a stroke. But few things in life work this way. Instead, success requires making a hundred small steps go right--one after another, no slip-ups, no goofs, everyone pitching in." In your profession, have you noticed this?

Great work, Sean. I'm glad you are enjoying the readings.

Grade: 4/4

Nick