Perfecting practice

Instructional leadership requires the principal to work closely with teachers to practice the skills they need to improve their work.

A few weeks ago, I watched my daughter practice for a public speaking competition. Arriving at the school several minutes early, I found her and her teacher engaged in intense practice. Every few minutes, her teacher gave her a small correction. “Turn your body more this way.” “Lower your volume and slow down at this line to provide more emphasis.” “Lean in as if telling us something very important.” At the end, the teacher had my daughter do several full run-throughs of her speech without interruption. They practiced those run-throughs until my daughter had it perfect.

Surprising? Of course not. For everything from sports to music to surgery, we know — scientifically as well as intuitively — that practice is the key to perfection.

When Daniel Coyle, author of The Talent Code (Bantam, 2009), set out to determine how ordinary circumstances produce extraordinary talent, he ultimately attributed the most phenomenal successes in every field he studied to targeted, repetitive practicing. And, often, what gave a real star’s practicing its punch was an expert coach who knew which minute aspects of the superstar’s performance to address and when to do so. With one tiny piece of feedback at a time, these coaches used practice to train their protégés in the principles of excellence.

So, here’s the question: If we know practice leads to perfection in other fields, why don’t we expect educators to practice teaching? It’s not as if no one cares about coaching teachers to greatness. Principals nationwide customarily observe teachers in action and generally provide feedback. In some cases, they help teachers plan lessons, too. They also hold rigorous professional development workshops that train teachers in specific skills to do their jobs well. Leaders and teachers alike want excellent teaching to happen, and they work hard to this end — that much is clear.

All too often, though, their hefty investments in time and energy don’t boost student learning. Teachers don’t get a chance to try new skills until they’re back in their classrooms, and, as a result, implementation suffers.

Practice is the missing piece that solves this puzzle. After all, as Doug Lemov puts it in his new book, Practice Perfect (Jossey-Bass, 2012), teaching — like sports, music, and surgery — is a “performance profession.” Teaching requires getting everything right in the few moments of performance and with no do-overs. So, it follows that teachers, like other performance professionals, should practice their work offstage.

You’d never encourage a surgeon to step up to the operating table without having practiced and perfected the surgery in some less critical context. Given how immensely we value teachers, students, and education, why should teachers have less preparation than that? If a teacher tries a new teaching skill right there in front of you, you don’t leave implementation to chance — you offer praise and correction until you’re sure the teacher can do it right.

Practice changes

How could this idea change our profession? For several years, I’ve studied principals who are having the biggest effect on teacher development. These leaders take new teachers to proficiency as quickly as I’ve ever seen. One of those leaders is Juliana Worrell, principal of Fairmount Elementary School in Newark, N.J. In a recent feedback session that I observed, Juliana worked with Stephanie, a new, struggling teacher. Stephanie’s professional development goal was to use a think-aloud to help 3rd graders understand how to read a scientific article. After identifying an upcoming lesson where Stephanie could implement this think-aloud, the pair pulled out the lesson materials.

“OK, let’s practice. Deliver your think-aloud for this article,” Juliana said.

Stephanie improvised an introduction. “I know that my skeleton is made up of bone,” she began. “No. I’m not getting the idea across.”

She tried again, unsuccessfully.

At this point, Juliana took over, modeling a think-aloud herself. “What did you notice about how I did it versus how you did it?” Juliana asked after she had finished.

Stephanie readily answered, “You’re using a really small think-aloud literally from the text the students have already read, coming to conclusions based on what you’re reading.”

Juliana nodded and asked...
#1. Build a culture of practice.

School leaders sometimes find that practice initially makes people nervous. After all, to practice well is to make errors, and making errors in front of others can be extremely unnerving — especially if the principal who hired you is one of them. And it’s very multicultural for school leaders to ask teachers to practice in a feedback session.

This changes by communicating the need to change the culture of teacher development and by creating safe spaces for teachers to practice. The resultant feedback from observations changes the character of one that carries an evaluative tone to one that offers the chance to work together to improve. At that point, improvement will take over. Results from repeated practice build buy-in as nothing else can, and the improvements set in quickly.

Building the right attitudes for practicing is key, but perhaps more important is making time for it. Think about the responsibilities you juggle and the burgeoning task lists of everyone else at your school. Will you all engage in practice just because you believe you should? Not a chance.

If, on the other hand, you etch practice sessions into your respective schedules, you’ll make practice real — and sustainable.

The educators I’ve worked with have developed a variety of ways to protect time for practice. They work it into professional development sessions, or, ideally, make it a consistent follow-up step after observing classrooms. The most successful leaders never scheduled an observation without scheduling a follow-up practice with the teacher in question. Knowing that the teacher would show up at 2:15 p.m., ready to receive feedback and practice new skills, held leaders accountable for protecting that time for that teacher. Even during a busy school year, practice always happened.

#2. Keep it bite-sized.

The key to effective practice is to focus on small challenges, not large ones. Great coaches don’t begin practices by presenting complex plays; they start with the basics and practice until their pupils get those right. Likewise, if an instructional leader and a teacher try to practice “keeping a class on task” as a whole, they’re unlikely to make substantive progress. Instead, the instructional leader should choose one narrow practice area — such as how to scan the room for compliance — that the teacher could try over and over until reaching success. Here’s a way to keep it bite-sized. Ask yourself: Can the teacher accomplish this action in a week? If not, the action is too large.

Little by little, precise action steps like these develop schools in which every teacher has mastered the principles of excellent instruction and management. The process may sound excruciatingly slow, but every moment pays off in permanent improvement. The effect of practice is undeniable and far too powerful to turn down. If we want all students to get a great education, we must coach teachers in the skills they need to give it to them, one small step at a time.

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MEET THE COLUMNIST

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