

Creating a Deliberate Practice Schedule

Creating a deliberate practice schedule is a great way to speed up your progress in learning a particular skill. The first step is to set a thirty day trial to devote a specific amount of time every single day to practice the skill. So if you're working on design or programming, or even learning a language, you might want to set aside a certain amount of time to devote exactly to that task, focusing on it, even if it's only twenty minutes a day. That can be enough to get yourself in the habit of practicing every single day.

The next step is to make sure that the difficulty level is what I call the "Goldilocks' Zone", where it's not too easy and it's not too hard. If you have the task too easy, you're not really going to get the benefits of deliberate practice and really improving your skill at the rate that you want, if you make the task too hard, then you're going to be frustrated, and you're going to have set-backs, and you're also not going to learn that much. The goal should be that it should be achievable, but just on the edge of your abilities. So, if you're doing programming, then choose projects where you're constantly pushing yourself into this Goldilocks' Zone, where you're trying algorithms and new techniques that push you to the edge of your ability. Choosing easy projects, which involve a lot of repetitive work that you already know how to do, is not very productive. At the same time, trying to do programming challenges that are way beyond your current ability, and you can't even compile a program or you can't even get close to what you want, are also not going to be terribly helpful.

The second component is to focus on getting immediate feedback. So for some skills this is fairly easy, if you're speaking a language and you're with another person, you can ask them to correct you right away. If you're programming, then you can see if your program compiles and works correctly. For other skills it may take a little bit of work. If you want to work on your writing ability, then you may want to get in the habit of publishing through a blog or some other medium, so you can get people to get you immediate feedback, or relatively immediate feedback, on how you're writing and what you're doing; whether it's interesting, whether there are mistakes, whether they don't understand a part of your prose. If you can focus on publishing in those settings, then you can get immediate feedback.

The final element is to focus on technique over results. Now often when you're working on a project and you're doing a performance, you're focusing on results. So your project is picked based on what gets me the results that I want. Deliberate practice is different in that you want to focus on the actual element that you're trying to master. So, whether or not you actually produce something that's valuable is beside the point. What matters is that you're practicing the particular skills. So how can you apply this? Well with programming, if you're actually working on programming; you may be building a project that you personally find interesting or is something that you want to accomplish, either for your work or for business, or for your hobbies or just for your professional education, you'll be working on a project that you find interesting, because the result of that project you find interesting. Whereas, with Deliberate Practice, and this third element of focusing on techniques over outcomes, you'll be focusing

not on trying to produce a great program but on specifically choosing small projects that focus you on learning particular programming skills. So you would pick projects that force you to learn a lot even if the at end outcome is not necessarily a really useful outcome. And you can do this in a lot of other ways, for design; for writing; of forcing yourself to try using different methods to try practicing particular techniques, rather than just getting outcomes of having people celebrate your work or have something that's particularly useful.

So, try this now. Set up a thirty day trial, to set aside a specific amount of time each day for Deliberate Practice, and then make sure that your practice is in the "Goldilocks" difficulty. That you're getting immediate feedback or at least feedback relatively soon, and finally that you're focusing on techniques over outcomes.