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Welcome to our sixty second edition of "The Academic Journal," a bimonthly bulletin in which you can read about MCA's educational philosophy, instructional methodology, and the various viewpoints and positions of our faculty, staff, students, and families.

Perfect Practice Makes Perfect

In the English language, we have a proverb asserting, "Practice makes perfect." This saying was first attested in the United States to the "Diary and Autobiography of John Adams." As a younger teacher, I had a strong distaste for this so-called wisdom because it simply is not true. I argued against the saying with Vince Lombardi's own edited assertion that "Perfect practice makes perfect." Here's an example of why practicing imperfectly, in fact, does not make perfect.

We were all taught the order of operations in our math classes. Many people are absolutely convinced that the basic mathematical order of operations is parentheses, exponents, multiplication, division, addition, and then subtraction sequentially, without deviation. We know to "Please Excuse My Dear Aunt Sally." Yet many of us learned this incorrectly, and on Facebook there are regular debates about the solutions to various equations. For example: $8 \div 2 (2 + 2) = x$. The solution to this equation is 16, not 1; if you've practiced this imperfectly, your math won't add up. Many of us know PEMDAS, but we have not sought to understand the order of operations, which has led to an imperfect application of this mnemonic device. This practice did not make "make perfect;" it made a weak foundation upon which mathematical knowledge could have been constructed.

Having nurtured this mistake concerning the order of operations for so long, many people are unwilling to budge, and some of them find themselves seemingly unable to do so. Correcting an imperfect habit requires purposeful, meaningful effort, and a lot of it. An adjustment to one's habit will require repeated, perfect practice. If a student practices the order of operations twice incorrectly, then he will need to perform it perfectly eighteen times consecutively in order to raise his average effectiveness up to 90%; for this student to be 99.5% accurate cumulatively, he would need to practice this concept flawlessly four-hundred times. Even then, his record will not be flawless. As I have continued to grow, it has become evident to me that Mr. Lombardi's wisdom was also far from perfect, and that perhaps perfection is not what we should be seeking. What both of these proverbs have indeed proven, however, is the importance of practice.

Rather than practicing so that one may attempt to do something perfectly, I suggest a shift in our cultural mindset: practice makes progress. Rather than perfection's connotation that something is done all the way through leaving nowhere else to grow, I find both the connotation and etymology of "progress" to be filled with hopeful optimism. "Progress" comes from the Latin combination of pro ("forward") and gressum ("having been walked"). Whereas perfection implies that there is an end in a thing's development, progress implies that there is an unending journey of little steps ahead. To think that I will always be learning how to read Latin, how to play my banjo, or how to be empathetic to others in literature as well as in life fills me with ambition while easing the burdensome impossibility of perfection. As long as we keep learning and practicing, as long as we are working toward our goals, we are ever able to progress.

In order to make progress, we must be purposeful and repetitive in our practice. Purposeful repetition may seem to fly in the face of progress, but reiteration is indeed the foundation of growth. Basketball players never outgrow fundamental drills; musicians never outgrow their scales; mathematicians never outgrow addition and subtraction. These fundamentals never leave their repertoires because all future knowledge is constructed on their firm foundations. In order for these foundations to be poured firmly, they must be repeated ad infinitum until they come across as second nature. The Jesuit sect of Catholicism has as its motto *Repetitio mater memoriae* ("Repetition is the mother of memory"), which shows an

understanding that in order for someone to grow in skill and knowledge, that person must repeat information and habits many times before they move from short-term to long-term memory. Without purposeful and repetitive practice, there can be no second nature, nor can there be progress. Practice makes progress. Practice makes permanent.

As stated above, mathematicians never outgrow addition and subtraction. Likewise, Latinists never outgrow any of their verb conjugations or noun declensions. I deeply enjoy repeating these series of endings, which, by now, are second nature for me. In my classroom, I have always led students joyfully in chants of the various endings that are requisite for working with this language. There were entire days in which all we did was revisit and repeat noun and verb endings while discussing their meanings. This was not a punishment, not a drill and kill, but a joyful exercise punctuated by laughter, which I hoped would result in my students etching this knowledge on their hearts.

This exercise can be transferred into any discipline because memory work is necessary in all things. Children need to learn math facts. They need to learn to spell and how to read. Repetition is required for reading, math, Latin, music, and, truly, all skills. Once a poem is memorized by a student, once it is made permanent, one's analysis and interpretation of it can progress, it can deepen. This process of memory practice leading to permanence leading to progress through yet even more practice is one that should never end. We should be happy to "do it again" because with that repetition, we may continue to grow; with practice, we progress.

We must instill the virtue of repeated practice in our children from an early age. While for an adult, doing the same thing over and over can become tedious; for a young child, monotony does not exist. My toddler daughter can listen to "The Wheels on the Bus" for hours on end (I know because we have done this together) and will do so with great joy each rotation that goes "round and round." My six-year-old son will practice his forms from Taekwondo for days and weeks on end in order to earn his next belt, but he does not forget those primary moves upon which everything is built. I still remember poems that I learned in middle and high school even though those parts of my life are well in the past. Practice has made those things permanent. The following quote, which is one of my wife's favorites, speaks wonderfully to the beauty of childlike, delightful repetition:



"Because children have abounding vitality, because they are in spirit fierce and free, therefore they want things repeated and unchanged. They always say, 'Do it again;' and the grown-up person does it again until he is nearly dead. For grown-up people are not strong enough to exult in monotony. But perhaps God is strong enough to exult in monotony. It is possible that God says every morning, 'Do it again,' to the sun; and every evening, 'Do it again' to the moon. It may not be automatic necessity that makes all daisies alike; it may be that God makes every daisy separately but has never got tired of making them. It may be that He has the eternal appetite for infancy; for we have sinned and grown old, and our Father is younger than we" (Chesterton, Orthodoxy).

May we all stay youthful in our pursuits of understanding. In order to understand, we must memorize fully and practice thoroughly. A Japanese proverb encapsulates the discipline involved in this level of commitment, which is foreign to Western civilization's idea that 10,000 hours leads to expertise, and that statement is, "Ten-thousand times and then begins understanding." Ten thousand repeated practices will allow us to begin, not to end. Practice does not make perfect. Practice makes permanent. Practice makes progress. Practice leads to understanding. May we all practice repetition of those things that we need and love, so that we are able to deepen and widen our own passions for those things that we do. Let us engender in ourselves and in our students a love of diligence that transforms the "daily grind" of study and repetition into delightful progress toward excellence. Let us practice not seeking an unattainable perfection, but for the practice itself. For the sake of its own delight, may we, "Do it again."

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