

## “Practice Makes Improvement” and why “Perfect” is the Enemy

By Vincent Tribello

Why do some people learn better than others? Why do some people seem so resistant to change while others just let go and learn? Are they scared? Are they trying to justify what they already know? Is there something wrong with them?! As a ski instructor I've struggled with these questions, and I set out to write this piece intending to discuss ways of covering different learning styles so everyone could make changes more quickly and end every lesson with a deeper knowledge of the sport. The more I thought though, the more I realised that presenting in exciting and creative ways is something we excel at; yet the questions still remained.

So where does this difference in learners come from? I believe one of our common failings as instructors and trainers is in assuming that simply because someone has booked a lesson, signed up for a training programme or even enrolled in a ski exam, they are ready to learn and alter their habits. Before they can have any sort of meaningful learning experience they need to accept a mindset which allows them to develop, and it is our responsibility to help them find it.

People may start out with different aptitudes and temperaments but success comes from training, experience and personal effort. We all know this, so why are some of us so much more able to adopt new skills than others? After all, we are all born with an intense drive to learn so where does it go? According to Dr Carol Dweck, prominent psychologist and author, our willingness to learn and be challenged can whither as our ability to evaluate ourselves develops. Some of us grow into a fixed mindset, the belief that our basic qualities and abilities are finite and that we must use the amount of intelligence we start with to do the best we can. This creates an urgency to prove oneself over and over, a fear of being evaluated and found wanting and an aversion to perseverance in the face of obstacles.

'I failed' becomes 'I am a failure' and the onus shifts to judging results rather than acknowledgment of effort and process. Risk and effort become things that could expose our inadequacies and show we weren't up to the task in the first place.

The alternative, the growth mindset, allows for change through application and increased experience. Our qualities and intelligence become things that can be cultivated through effort, so there is no need to waste time continuously proving how great we are. In the growth mindset it's ok to be a novice.

The belief that we can change and grow also allows for a more accurate appraisal of our current abilities, however unflattering, and therefore helps

avoid over-confidence and defensiveness in the protection of our precious traits. As a result, we can accept as well as create better strategies for improvement.

So how can we instil a growth mindset in our students? Firstly, challenge them. Mastery of skiing is tough and delusion has never helped anyone. Much has been made of Malcolm Gladwell's claim that 10,000 hours of deliberate practice are necessary for mastery of a given field, but given that this equates to around 4.5 hours per day for 6 years it is simply not a reasonable goal for the majority of people we teach. They must be reminded that the process of achieving expertise in complex tasks is often slow and challenging because this expertise is not a single skill but a collection of mini skills all strung together.

How many people arrive at the bottom of a run and ask: "Was that it?" or "Did I get it?" We must be careful of how we define success in our teaching. Praise for doing something right first time or really quickly means we acknowledge speed and instant success over determination and persistence. As Dweck puts it: "speed and perfection are the enemy of difficult learning". There is no 'perfect turn' but there is definitely maximum effort. We must be sure to praise the hard work and decisions that lead to the success and in so doing empower their commitment, not judge their talent.

In summary, for us to be good coaches we need our students to succeed. To achieve success, our students need to commit to what they are doing and focus and practice effectively. The better they want to be, the longer and harder they will have to work so we must constantly strive to create a mindset in which focused attention on this practice becomes natural. Crucially, progress must not be barred by fixed mindset overconfidence or a fear to open up to new strategies. We must nurture a passion for challenge and perseverance. Practice makes improvement, and for those who truly love it, the practice is no longer work but is enjoyable in itself. Improvement is the goal, which through our efforts we can achieve, enjoy and thankfully never quite surpass.

## Sources

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- Kahneman, Daniel 2011 *Thinking Fast and Slow*
- Gladwell, Malcolm 2008 *Outliers, The Story of Success*