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RID VIEWS

A man in a dark jacket is shown from the chest up, performing sign language. His hands are raised, with fingers spread, and he has a focused expression. The background is dark with some light rays or smoke-like effects, creating a dramatic atmosphere.

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TALENT or DELIBERATE PRACTICE?



Windell "Wink" Smith, NIC Master, Florida

You Can't Beat Talent! Actually, Did You Know?



You arrive at your assignment and meet your team for the first time. You settle in as your team starts, and then you are struck by your team's skill! The sign production is fluid, the concepts are flawless and your team displays a kind of self-assurance that rocks your world. You are amazed at his or her apparent effortless work.

Have you ever experienced this?

There are three stages we can assume most of us feel when we encounter such distinction. Stage one: Awe. We are seduced by our team's use of cascading ASL. Stage two: Jealousy. There is a dearth of omissions and corrections. Stage three: Resignation. Expletives run through our minds, chastising ourselves for not being on par with such **talent**. We stand up, take our turn and prepare ourselves for the client's eye gaze to disappear. This happens to all of us, and hopefully it does not discourage us but rather has the opposite effect. This article is not about teaming or self-esteem but about the implicit message and implications of what we call **talent**.

The following paragraphs will cite research and debunk the myth that the demarcation between perceived unattainable skill (unless your mother did 23½ non-manual markers and four classifiers just seconds before your head appeared from the birth canal) and acquired skill is a fallacy, because **talent** does not actually exist as we think of it. In order to fully understand the researchers' reasoning, we must first strip down the term **talent** to its core meaning. As a society, we tend to misuse or adapt a word to have a conventional meaning, or we tend to use certain words or phrases for a lack for a better word. So what then is **talent**?

Talent, at its core meaning, is that "thing" someone has obtained as a gift of certain specialized skill(s) which then makes him or her an expert in that skill set. The gift is not something that person has acquired but it was given to him or her inherently. Once the individual begins to use the gifted skills, it just flows from him or her; and, in a short period of time or almost immediately, he or she masters it. Some use the term to identify those who perform certain tasks with such gracefulness that it seems effortless. In essence, what we are discussing here is: (1) did that person receive such a gift? and, (2) if not, how did that person become proficient?

Researcher Benjamin Bloom, a professor of education at the University of Chicago who published *Developing Talent in Young People*, took an ingenious approach. Instead of trying to isolate a "**talent** gene" or taking brain scans of a young prodigy, he looked to those who were already experts in their respective fields, ranging from music to arts to sports to neurology. The criteria he used was that they had to have already achieved some international awards for their work. He then worked backwards to determine how they achieved their current level of skill.

The research ruled out the premise of inherently natural **talent**, because all of the people he researched had common factors that pushed their success: practice, teachers and supportive families. Further research supported Bloom's findings that even IQ had not played a role in their success, but that quality practice was the key factor to their improvements and eventual mastery. He determined that their **talent** was not something with which they were born, but rather it was something that they had made for themselves.

The point is that if you look at the experts in the world and those who have achieved success in the form of international awards for their craft, it is almost never the fact that they were just born with "it." They, in fact, practiced. We therefore see that every one of them succeeded because they worked hard, not because they just "had it." This is counter-intuitive to the

mainstream concept of **talent** which denotes that you just innately have it without any real effort of your own. Thomas Edison stated it more accurately, “Genius is 1 percent inspiration and 99 percent perspiration.” (Edison is first reported as saying this sometime around 1902, in the September 1932 edition of *Harper’s Monthly Magazine*.)

Some might then assume that the responsibility for students’ proficiency solely rests on interpreter training programs (ITPs) or that once one completes an ITP’s degree requirements, the student would then have all the information and tools necessary to interpret competently. Neither is the case. If that were true, then it would be logical to assume that every high school football player would have free passes to the pros (or at the very least a college scholarship), or that every law student would pass the bar exam, obviously that does not bear true. Therefore, if there is no such thing called “**talent**” because the term has been misused, this means that the responsibility for working at **talent** level lies on you -- but you do not have to be alone. How then do people become incredibly proficient?

Deliberate practice is the term used to describe the process to the end result as espoused by psychologist K. Anders Ericsson. This is a vehicle for goal-setting, facing challenges and actual practice enhanced with great coaches or mentors in our interpreting environment. What does this mean for us? How do we apply **Deliberate practice**? The research shows it is not only repetition of a task that will help, because that is just practice; **Deliberate practice** requires much more of our thinking processes. Practice is doing repetitively something you can already do. **Deliberate practice** is challenging yourself to do something you cannot do well or cannot do at all, achieved with specific and short-term goals.

“If this idea is applied to interpreter education or working interpreters who wish to improve their skills, it means that exercises must be logically related to relevant interpreting tasks and must be done with deliberate intention.” (Patrie, 2007)

When we rely on just interpreting for the same client to improve our proficiency, we will not see improvement since we get stuck in one mode. We will not see significant improvement when we interpret habitually in a mode, register and affect that we have been doing for years. Likewise, just watching videos online without actively voicing aloud without some type of review or measurable tasks is passive and does not improve receptive skills. When, however, we challenge ourselves by exercising our mental muscles to work with different client stimuli to include more complex topics, complex language use and complex tasks, with guidance and goals, we begin to see progress toward proficiency.

The access to and validity of mentors is significant in self-assessment and improvement of a person’s skills. The former, having access to a mentor, may make sense; but the latter is vital for the process of **Deliberate practice**. For example, you start out at a young age in a sport like swimming. By high school, you might have a swim coach who also doubles as the track, hockey and volleyball coach. Although that coach is adequate, would you want to have him as your college swim team coach or as your personal coach for the Olympics? No, because as valuable as that coach is

to the high school swim team, that coach may not meet your needs or have the time to devote to you as you strive for excellence in the Olympics.

The same is applicable in our profession. As you deliberately practice, you may associate with various mentors who supplement you with materials to help you bolster your skills. You will, in the course of time, develop trusting relationships with these mentors because you expose your weaker areas to them. However, you cannot rely on them exclusively forever. In fact, most skilled mentors will help you build your own “internal reactivity” or internal self-monitor so that you can set goals for yourself, analyze yourself for weaknesses and ultimately become self-sufficient. Just like an Olympic swimmer, it is wise to maintain ties with your coach/mentor in your journey for life-long learning.

The research cited shows that some inherited or born-with qualities labeled as **talent** are never truly there. There is, however, a difference between someone who is an expert and one who is not. Expertise is not quickly obtained; however, it often takes as much as a decade of **Deliberate practice** to achieve expert level (Simon & Chase, 1973), followed with constant attention and refresher training to remain an expert. Thankfully, there is a wealth of material out there for professional development. Seek it out to find the resources that you need and can apply to **Deliberate practice**. The end result is not to turn the tables on another team down the road, who will then look at you and cringe due to their feelings of incompetency. We should be diligent and disciplined with our craft out of self-respect and respect for the Deaf community we serve; we better ourselves so that we can provide true access when they use our acquired expertise. ■

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Wink, NIC Master, performs and presents various workshops and shows across the United States. He also co-hosts on a weekly radio show “That Keith Wann Show: Building Cultural Bridges” every Wednesday, 8:00 p.m. EST.

For more information about Wink, visit www.WinkASL.com or e-mail Wink@WinkASL.com