



Artisan teacher NOTES

Pause to Practice *at the Cusp of Mastery*

When is the best time to practice something? Should a teacher build in practice time at the beginning of the instructional period or would it be better to wait until later? Practice is appropriate and beneficial at many points in the school day, but it is particularly powerful when applied at the precise moment following initial mastery of a skill or concept. This moment is called the cusp of mastery.

Some examples...

An elementary teacher is teaching addition of fractions with like denominators. The teacher is using guided demonstration to walk the class through example after example at the board while students work on the same problems at their seats. The lesson is going well. With each example, the teacher is able to do less of the work and the students do more. At 10:07a.m., the teacher exclaims "I think you've got it!" The teacher gives two more examples and monitors students' work to be sure. "Yes, they're doing it exactly right," he says to himself. "OK class," the teacher exclaims, "here's what I'd like for us to do. Our daily schedule says it is time for guided reading now, but we're going to make a change and stick with math a bit longer. I want you to practice by completing eight more problems right now. I'll watch as you work. We'll make up the reading time later."

A high school tennis coach is working with a player on how to put extra spin on her second serve. She's not having much success and practice time is almost up. Finally she cranks one out perfectly—a curving loop that hits the court and kicks sharply to the side. "Wow," she says. "Now I see how that works!" The coach pulls out his cell phone and calls home. "I'll be a bit late tonight. Sophia finally found her second serve and I need to spend 30 more minutes with her right now."

A middle school social studies teacher is working with a group of four students who have yet to master the concept of longitude and latitude. Eventually they start to get it right. They are accurately plotting the landfall coordinates of recent hurricanes. The teacher praises the group. "Good work! That's how it's done! Now, let's do three more." The students complain. "Why do we have to do more if we got it right?" "It's always best to practice something as soon as you get it right. Trust me on this," the teacher says.

All three of these teachers are correctly applying the concept. They noted when mastery occurred and applied practice immediately after. They paused to practice at the cusp of mastery.



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Professional Development for Educators

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Some additional notes on this concept:

1. Notice that practice is easy to schedule but mastery is not. A teacher never knows exactly when a student or group of students will reach mastery. Teachers who are flexible in their plans and can shift gears easily are better able to apply this principle. *The most successful teachers write their lesson plans in pencil!*
2. Timing is everything. Five minutes of practice at the cusp of mastery may well be equivalent to fifty minutes later that day or that evening as homework. Also, the “forgetting curve” for newly acquired learning is steep. Pausing to practice right away increases the accuracy of the learning. Less is forgotten.
3. Pausing to practice at the cusp of mastery will not only increase retention of the newly acquired knowledge or skill, but will also increase the transfer of new learning into future applications.

Definition: Learning Transfer—The ability of the learner to recall prior learning and apply it in new or expanded situations.

More information can be found in the *Artisan Teacher: A Field Guide to Skillful Teaching*, Chapter 10: Practice, pages 71-76.