

The last word Try, try again

STEVE HOLDEN DISCOVERS THAT, IF AT FIRST YOU DON'T SUCCEED, YOU SHOULD PRACTICE, PRACTICE, PRACTICE.



Guess what? The maxim that practice makes perfect is wrong, or at least inadequate. 'The truth is, practice makes myelin, and myelin makes perfect.' So says Daniel Coyle in *The Talent Code: Greatness isn't born. It's grown. Here's how.*

What's this myelin? It's a thick fatty white substance that wraps around the active nerve fibres in our brains. According to neuroscientists, the more we practise a particular activity the more layers of myelin get wrapped around those nerve fibres. The idea is that the more myelin gets wrapped around the faster and stronger are the nerve impulses, so the more you practise a particular activity in a sustained and intense way, the better you get at it.

Equally, of course, you might repetitively watch so much mindless reality TV and wrap so much myelin around your glued-to-mindless-reality-TV nerve fibres that you become the world's biggest couch potato – so be warned, practice can make you perfectly incompetent.

The promising thing about all this, though, is that becoming good at something has less to do with talent or born genius and more to do with being a resolved-to-practice myelin maker. According to Algis Valiunas – and, no, he's not a character from *Harry Potter*, he's a fellow at the conservative Ethics and Public Policy Centre

in the United States – even the legendary prodigy Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart was a resolved-to-practice myelin maker, not a born genius.

Writing in 'The science of self-help' in the quarterly *New Atlantis*, Valiunas observes that Mozart 'almost from infancy received rigorous instruction from his father, about as fine a music teacher as could be found, and did not produce works of mastery until he was 20.'

The idea that the apparent prodigy of prodigies, Mozart, was really a resolved-to-practice myelin maker is cause for some thought about ability and achievement, but the fact is, some students arrive at school with more ability than others, even if that's made, not born. The story is about what they do with that ability in terms of achievement.

Valiunas's aim is to praise schools where the emphasis is on long hours of myelin-making practice through direct instruction, and strict adherence to rules and homework, on the basis that if at first you don't succeed, try, try again. Mind you, you won't find Valiunas using the F word – that's *failure*, by the way – even though many of us don't succeed at first.

Valiunas's other aim, by the way, is to tip the bucket on the mindless self-help drivel published in the US these days for con-

sumption by Americans sold on the idea that there's a magic potion to help them win friends and influence people, acquire the seven habits of highly effective people or otherwise plug in to the self-help cosmic powers of the universe without any real effort while sitting on the couch watching mindless reality TV.

The only and proper response? Forget it. You don't have to be a raised-by-your-own-bootstraps US conservative to realise that; you just have to think about the things that you've become truly good at doing. Chances are you didn't apply any snake oil, unless the thing you've become really good at is treating joint inflammation with genuine oil of a high eicosapentaenoic acid content from an actual Chinese water snake, and you probably got good at that treatment through practice, practice, practice. **T**

This month's Last Word was written painstakingly and with much resolved-to-practice myelin-making practice, practice, practice by Steve Holden, Editor of Teacher. His latest book is Somebody to Love published by University of Queensland Press.

REFERENCES

Coyle, D. (2009). *The Talent Code: Greatness isn't born. It's grown. Here's how.* New York: Bantam.