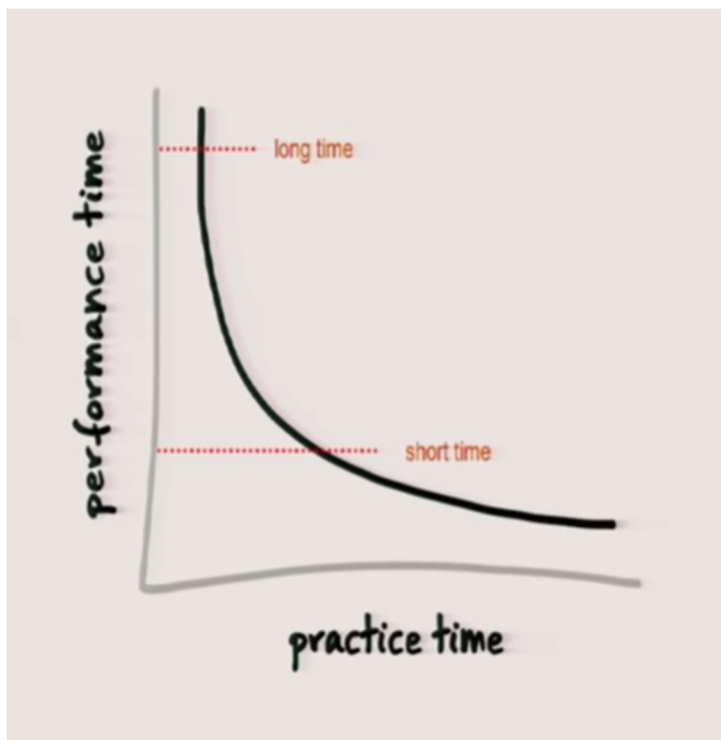


The First 20 Hours – How to Learn Anything - Josh Kaufman

Transcript (Starts at 5 minutes 10 seconds into the video)

An author by the name of Malcolm Gladwell wrote a book in 2007 called "Outliers: The Story of Success", and the central piece of that book was the 10,000 hour rule. Practice a lot, practice well, and you will do extremely well, you will reach the top of your field. So, the message, what Dr. Ericsson was actually saying is, it takes 10,000 hours to get at the top of an ultra competitive field in a very narrow subject, that's what that means. But here's what happened: ever since Outliers came out, immediately came out, reached the top of best seller lists, stayed there for three solid months. All of a sudden the 10,000 hour rule was everywhere. And a society-wide game of telephone started to be played. So this message, it takes 10,000 hours to reach the top of an ultra competitive field, became, it takes 10,000 hours to become an expert at something, which became, it takes 10,000 hours to become good at something, which became, it takes 10,000 hours to learn something. But that last statement, it takes 10,000 hours to learn something, is not true. It's not true.

So, what the research actually says -- I spent a lot of time here at the CSU library in the cognitive psychology stacks 'cause I'm a geek. And when you actually look at the studies of skill acquisition, you see over and over a graph like this. Now, researchers, whether they're studying a motor skill, something you do physically or a mental skill, they like to study things that they can time. 'Cause you can quantify that, right? So, they'll give research participants a little task, something that requires physical arrangement, or something that requires learning a little mental trick, and they'll time how long a participant takes to complete the skill. And here's what this graph says, when you start -- so when researchers gave participants a task, it took them a really long time, 'cause it was new and they were horrible. With a little bit of practice, they get better and better and better.



And that early part of practice is really, really efficient. People get good at things with just a little bit of practice. Now, what's interesting to note is that, for skills that we want to learn for ourselves, we don't care so much about time, right? We just care about how good we are, whatever good happens to mean. So if we relabel performance time to how good you are, the graph flips, and you get his famous and widely known, this is the learning curve.



And the story of the learning curve is when you start, you're grossly incompetent and you know it, right? With a little bit of practice, you get really good, really quick. So that early level of improvement is really fast. And then at a certain point you reach a plateau, and the subsequent games become much harder to get, they take more time to get. Now, my question is, I want that, right? How long does it take from starting something and being grossly incompetent and knowing it to being reasonably good? In hopefully, as short a period of time as possible. So, how long does that take? Here's what my research says: 20 hours.

That's it. You can go from knowing nothing about any skill that you can think of. Want to learn a language? Want to learn how to draw? Want to learn how to juggle flaming chainsaws? If you put 20 hours of focused deliberate practice into that thing, you will be astounded. Astounded at how good you are. 20 hours is doable, that's about 45 minutes a day for about a month. Even skipping a couple days, here and there. 20 hours isn't that hard to accumulate.

Now, there's a method to doing this. Because it's not like you can just start fiddling around for about 20 hours and expect these massive improvements. There's a way to practice intelligently. There's a way to practice efficiently, that will make sure that you invest those 20 hours in the most effective way that you possibly can.

And here's the method, it applies to anything: The first is to deconstruct the skill. Decide exactly what you want to be able to do when you're done, and then look into the skill and break it down into smaller pieces. Most of the things that we think of as skills are actually big bundles of skills that require all sorts of different things. The more you can break apart the skill, the more you're able to decide, what are the parts of this skill that would actually help me get to what I want? And then you can practice those first. And if you practice the most important things first, you'll be able to improve your performance in the least amount of time possible.

The second is, learn enough to self correct. So, get three to five resources about what it is you're trying to learn. Could be book, could be DVDs, could be courses, could be anything. But don't use those as a way to procrastinate on practice. I know I do this, right? Get like 20 books about the topic, like, "I'm going to start learning how to program a computer when I complete these 20 books". No. That's procrastination. What you want to do is learn just enough that you can actually practice and self correct or self edit as you practice. So the learning becomes a way of getting better at noticing when you're making a mistake and then doing something a little different.

The third is to remove barriers to practice. Distractions, television, internet. All of these things that get in the way of you actually sitting down and doing the work. And the more you're able to use just a little bit of willpower to remove the distractions that are keeping you from practicing, the more likely you are to actually sit down and practice, right?

And the fourth is to practice for at least 20 hours. Now, most skills have what I call a frustration barrier. You know, the grossly-incompetent- and-knowing-it part? That's really, really frustrating. We don't like to feel stupid. And feeling stupid is a barrier to us actually sitting down and doing the work. So, by pre-committing to practicing whatever it is that you want to do for at least 20 hours, you will be able to overcome that initial frustration barrier and stick with the practice long enough to actually reap the rewards.

That's it! It's not rocket science. Four very simple steps that you can use to learn anything. Now, this is easy to talk about in theory, but it's more fun to talk about in practice. So one of the things that I've wanted to learn how to do for a long time is play the ukulele. Has anybody seen Jake Shimabukuro's TEDTalk where he plays the ukulele and makes it sound like -- he's like a ukulele god. It's amazing. I saw it, I was like, "That is so cool!" It's such a neat instrument. I would really like to learn how to play. And so I decided that to test this theory I wanted to put 20 hours into practicing ukulele and see where it got.

And so the first thing about playing the ukulele is, in order to practice, you have to have one, right?

So, I got an ukulele. It's not just an ukulele, it's an electric ukulele. Yeah.

So, the first couple hours are just like the first couple hours of anything. You have to get the tools that you are using to practice. You have to make sure they're available. My ukulele didn't come with strings attached. I had to figure out how to put those on. Like, that's kind of important, right?

And learning how to tune, learning how to make sure that all of the things that need to be done in order to start practicing get done, right? Now, one of the things when I was ready to actually start practicing was I looked in online databases and songbooks for how to play songs. And they say, okay, ukuleles, you can play more than one string at a time, so you can play chords, that's cool, you are accompanying yourself, yay you.

And when I started looking at songs, I had an ukulele chord book that had like hundreds of chords. Looking at this and "Wow, that's intimidating". But when you look at the actual songs, you see the same chords over and over, right? As it turns out, playing the ukulele is kind of like doing anything, There's a very small set of things that are really important and techniques that you'll use all the time. And in most songs you'll use four, maybe five chords, and that's it, that's the song. You don't have to know hundreds, as long as you know the four or the five. So, while I was doing my research, I found a wonderful little medley of pop songs by a band called Axis of Awesome. And what Axis of Awesome says is that you can learn, or you can play pretty much any pop song of the past five decades, if you know four chords, and those chords are G, D, Em and C. Four chords pump out every pop song ever, right? So I thought, this is cool! I would like to play every pop song ever. So, that was the first song I decided to learn, and I would like to actually share it with you. Ready?

(Music)

(Singing and music ends) (Applause)

Thank you, thank you. I love that song. And I have a secret to share with you. So, by playing that song for you, I just hit my twentieth hour of practicing the ukulele. Thank you.

And so it's amazing, pretty much anything that you can think of, what do you want to do. The major barrier to learn something new is not intellectual, it's not the process of you learning a bunch of little tips or tricks or things. The major barrier's emotional. We're scared. Feeling stupid doesn't feel good, in the beginning of learning anything new you feel really stupid. So the major barrier's not intellectual, it's emotional. But put 20 hours into anything. It doesn't matter. What do you want to learn? Do you want to learn a language? Want to learn how to cook? Want to learn how to draw? What turns you on? What lights you up? Go out and do that thing. It only takes 20 hours.

Have fun.