

Talent Seeks Practice: The Case of Visual Art Prodigies

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A commonly held belief is that the highest levels of human achievement are not the result of any innate capabilities but rather are the result of intensive, deliberate practice. The concept of *deliberate practice*—practicing over and over again with intention and focus—was first developed by psychologist K. Anders Ericsson and later popularized with Malcom Gladwell’s book *Outliers: The story of success* (2008). Seizing on Ericsson’s findings that elite violinists had engaged in, on average, 10,000 hours of practice (1993), Gladwell argued that 10,000 hours of deliberate practice was all that was needed to achieve world-class expertise. Ericsson further argued that we all have the ability to achieve greatness, if only we all would practice more.

In *The Psychology of Creative Performance and Expertise*, Kathryn Friedlander (2024) rejects the claim that deliberate practice is the sole contributor to expert performance. Drawing on recent research, she argues for a multifactorial model that considers several factors that contribute to expert performance including intrapersonal (e.g., personality traits and motivations) as well as contextual (e.g., environmental) factors.

My own work on visual art prodigies lends support to this multifactorial model of expertise. I have found that in addition to presumably inborn talent, prodigies have certain personality traits that set them apart from typical children. I have identified two different kinds of visual art prodigies: precocious realists and abstract art prodigies. Precocious realists create life-like

realistic representations that outstrip what typical adults can create, sometimes resembling the work of adult artists (Drake & Winner, 2021). Abstract art prodigies create non-representational paintings whose forms and colors often resemble paintings by adult abstract expressionist artists (Drake & Jose, 2024). Both kinds of visual art prodigies share three characteristics that are found in all prodigies regardless of their domain of expertise. The existence of these characteristics provide evidence that their high abilities are not a result of merely practicing.

Ahead From the Start

First, these children perform at a level far ahead of their peers (Drake & Winner, 2021). Their abilities are advanced from the start before these children have even had the opportunity to take any formal visual arts lessons or engage in deliberate practice. For example, the earliest sign of precocity in drawing is the ability to draw recognizable and differentiated shapes (Winner, 1996). Typical children begin scribbling around 18 months and continue to scribble until the age of 3 or 4. In contrast, precocious realists create recognizable and easily identifiable shapes by the age of 2. Precocious realists do not depict generic objects but include a great deal of specific detail in their drawings. They use techniques such as occlusion, foreshortening, juxtaposition, and perspective to represent depth.

Teaching Themselves

Second, these children make discoveries on their own, without adult scaffolding (Drake & Winner, 2021; Winner, 1996). This is in sharp contrast to typical children who learn drawing and painting techniques in art class. Precocious realists are able to figure out techniques such as foreshortening and occlusion on their own; abstract art prodigies figure out how to create structured, expressive non-representational paintings.

Motivation Leads to Practice

Third, the defining characteristic of a prodigy is a “rage to master,” an intrinsic motivation to conquer the skills needed to excel in their domain (Winner, 1996). This drive leads them to spend hours honing their skills. This sounds like practice, and my point is that this drive leads to the practice. The drive is part and parcel of their inborn gift, and typical children lack this drive. One cannot force a typical child to spend hours drawing; and one cannot tear away prodigies from this activity.

What then is the role of practice? Clearly, practice is necessary to achieve expertise. But without an inborn, domain-specific talent and the drive that accompanies this talent, children will not engage in the kind of practice that leads to expertise.

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