Homework 6- How Hard Is It to Become an Expert? By Kendra Cherry, MSEd part 1

Expertise is what separates the amateur from the true master in almost any field, from medicine to science to sports to artistic performance. The question of whether experts are born or made is related to the age-old nature versus nurture debate in psychology: Do genetics or experience play more of a role in shaping who we are?

There has been a considerable amount of attention paid to the "made" aspect of the debate. According to many researchers, expertise is acquired through dedicated practice.

But how exactly does someone go about becoming an expert? Can anyone be an expert with the proper study and training?

This article explores what expertise is and how people become experts. It also discusses how long it takes to become an expert.

What Is Expertise?

While it might be easy to point out who is and is not an expert, agreeing on a formal definition of expertise is not always so easy. Is it about how much you know? Is it about being able to perform an action well? And at what point does a person move from being merely good at something to being a bona fide expert?

Expertise can be defined as exceptional, elite, or peak performance on specific tasks in specific domains.1

Labels for Experts

People who attain this level of expertise may be referred to as experts or by other terms such as: Authority, Genius, Maven, Master, Prodigy, Virtuoso

Such labels are intended to indicate that the individual is at the top of their field. That field could be academics, writing, art, sports, music, science, mathematics, or another discipline. But each word tends to have its own subtle nuance that conveys what type of expert a person might be.

If expertise is perceived as being the result of hard work and practice, the expert is often described as a "master" or "virtuoso." If people see someone's abilities as arising from pure inborn talent, they might be referred to as a "genius" or "prodigy."

Components of Expertise

Knowledge, skill, and achievement are all critical components of expertise. People who become experts tend to acquire a body of knowledge that makes them one of the most informed individuals in their field.

They also possess the skills that they need to determine when and how to use their knowledge. Such skills are often learned, but they can also be influenced by natural talent and ability.

Finally, people who possess expertise also tend to achieve far above and beyond what the average person does. They not only possess knowledge and skill; they also put their talents and know-how to work.

Recap

Experts aren't just very good at what they do. They possess skills and knowledge that others do not and they use those abilities to achieve success in their field.

How Long Does It Take to Become an Expert?

Researchers have tried to investigate how long it really takes to become an expert in any given field. They have sought to determine how much time someone would have to devote to the study and practice of a subject to be considered an expert.

The 10,000-Hour Rule

One popular belief is that the key to becoming an expert is to devote at least 10,000 hours to the study and practice of a subject. This idea is based on a 1993 study in which researchers found that the most accomplished violinists at a music academy had spent an average of 10,000 hours practicing their instrument by the age of 20.2

This idea gained prominence when pop psychology author Malcolm Gladwell coined the phrase "the ten-thousand-hour rule" in his 2008 book Outliers. Gladwell pointed to the results of the music study as well as observations of other experts in their fields.

According to Gladwell, a person could become an expert in nearly any field as long as they were willing to devote the requisite 10,000 hours to studying and practicing the subject or skill.

Problems With the 10,000 Hour Rule

Anders Ericsson is an expert on peak performance and the author of Peak: The New Science of Expertise. He has studied experts from all walks of life including areas such as chess, sports, music, and medicine. He is also the researcher behind the study from which Gladwell drew his conclusions about what it takes to become an expert.

Ericsson points out a few key problems with the ten-thousand-hour rule:3

Skilled Isn't the Same As Expert

First, while the students in the music study were very good violinists by age 20, they were not masters. In other words, they were excellent players, but that did not necessarily mean they were masters of their craft. Ericsson suggests that it is sometimes around the 20,000- to 25,000-hour mark that people truly become experts or masters of a skill or subject.

Some Skills Take Longer to Acquire

Secondly, not all skills are the same. Some skills require far fewer than 10,000 hours to reach the expert level, while others require much more.

10,000 Hours Was an Average

Ericsson also points out that Gladwell's interpretation of his research is flawed. While Gladwell assumed that all of the violinists in the music study had put in the 10,000 hours of practice, that number was really only an average. Half of the violists studied by Ericsson and his colleagues spent less than 10,000 hours practicing their instruments by the age of 20, while half spent more.

Does Talent or Practice Matter More? The Role of Deliberate Practice

If 10,000 hours isn't the answer, then what separates the amateur from the expert? Researchers believe that deliberate practice is the key.

Answer the following questions on a separate sheet of paper.

1. What is the difference between an amateur and an expert?
2. What does the term "nature versus nurture" refer to in the debate about expertise?
3. According to researchers, how is expertise most commonly acquired?
4. What are some labels used to describe people who are considered experts? Give at least two examples.
5. What are the three main components that make up expertise?
6. What is the "10,000-hour rule," and who made it popular?
7. Why does Anders Ericsson believe that the 10,000-hour rule may not be enough to become a true expert?
8. What is deliberate practice, and how is it different from regular practice?
9. Do you think it is more important to have natural talent or to practice hard to become an expert? Explain your answer.
10. Can you think of an area or skill where you would like to become an expert? What steps could you take to achieve that goal?