

Practice Makes Perfect? Describing the Deliberate Practice Habits of CDE Participants

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Introduction/Need for Research

Students enrolled in school-based agricultural education (SBAE) have the opportunity to develop skills directly related to their content knowledge and leadership skills (Croom, 2008). As a component of this skill development, many students choose to pursue assessment through participation in a Career Development Events (CDE) or Leadership Development Events (LDE) (Croom, 2008). Agricultural educators have noted their desire for students to use CDE and LDE events as an authentic assessment of knowledge learned in the classroom (Knobloch, Brady, Orvis, & Carroll, 2016). Developing skills in CDE and LDE areas can take a lot of instructional time (Torres, Ulmer, & Aschenbrener, 2008). Torres, Ulmer, & Aschenbrener (2008) found experienced teachers ($n = 11$) utilized 11% of their time on CDE preparation. Bolton (2016) found 32% of teachers ($n = 59$) devoted 51-150 hours per year to CDE preparation.

Researchers have concluded that students who are willing to spend time practicing for a CDE or LDE receive benefits including being more likely to learn something new, increased competitiveness for scholarships and awards, heightened career skills, and enjoyment during the competition (Knobloch, et al., 2016). It seems readily accepted by teachers and students alike that individuals do not require the same amount of practice time to reap those benefits (Ericsson, 2008). This notion suggests that success is not defined by the amount of time a student spends practicing, but instead the methods by which they are practicing (Ericsson, 2008). Lehmann & Ericsson (1997) found that individuals focused on time alone were less likely to recognize improvements as students who were focused on effective practicing techniques. Therefore, it is important to know more about the number of hours students spend in each of the methods of deliberate practice, including individual, group, and coached practice times. This study aligns with research priority four of the AAAE National Research Agenda. The purpose of this study was to describe the types of practice used by students competing in a CDE or LDE.

Conceptual Framework

To better understand the practicing habits of students competing in a CDE or LDE, this study was conducted utilizing Ericsson's (2008) model of deliberate practice. The theory of deliberate practice states that the quality and quantity with which one approaches practicing are key factors in the development of elite performance (Ericsson, 2008). "After years of daily practice, aspiring expert performers become able to monitor their performance so they can start taking over the evaluative activity of the teacher and coach" (Ericsson, 2008, p. 991).

Methods

This descriptive study was conducted using descriptive survey research methods. The population was a census $N = 98$ of all students attending the fall 2017 North Idaho FFA District Leadership and Career Development Events. Events competed in during the event included; Agricultural Sales, Creed Speaking, Extemporaneous Speaking, and Greenhand Quiz. Care should be taken when generalizing the results of this study outside of the study population.

Respondents were recruited through the registration process for the event. Consent and assent documents were collected in line with the University of Idaho IRB approval documentation. Students completed paper survey instruments in conjunction with the orientation meeting for all students attending the event. The instrument included sections to gather demographic information including age, grade, events competing in, and number of years competing in each of their events. Students also self-reported the amount of time spent practicing for each of the three categories of deliberate practice (individual, group, and coached). A limitation of this study was the use of self-reporting to collect practice data. Surveys were entered into an Excel spreadsheet and analyzed with IBM SPSS v. 24 to obtain descriptive information related to student demographics and practice time.

Results/Findings

Of the students surveyed $n = 38$ were male, $n = 59$ were female, and one preferred not to answer. There were more freshman students (44%) than any other grade, which was to be expected given the events conducted at this meeting. Students who competed in the agriculture sales CDE spent $M = 5.88$ ($SD = 6.04$) hours per week practicing on their own, $M = 3.85$ ($SD = 4.22$) hours with a group, and $M = 3.5$ ($SD = 4.13$) hours with a coach. Students who competed in the creed speaking LDE spent $M = 8.29$ ($SD = 6.04$) hours per week practicing on their own, $M = 7.7$ ($SD = 10.46$) hours with a group, and $M = 4.94$ ($SD = 8.39$) hours with a coach. Students who competed in the extemporaneous speaking LDE spent $M = 3.75$ ($SD = 1.58$) hours per week practicing on their own, 2.88 ($SD = 3.31$) hours with a group, and $M = 2.56$ ($SD = 1.12$) hours with a coach. Students who competed in the greenhand knowledge quiz CDE averaged spending $M = 2.97$ ($SD = 4.14$) hours per week practicing on their own, 2.06 ($SD = 2.17$) hours with a group, and $M = 1.48$ ($SD = 1.89$) hours with a coach. From the total population, $N = 98$, $n = 11$ of the students indicated they did not practice or compete in a CDE or LDE during this event.

Conclusion, Implication, Recommendations

Ericsson (2008) suggests that an individual's performance is a reflection of the amount of time spent deliberately practicing. For students in this study, the most time was spent practicing on their own over both time with a group, and time with a coach. This suggests there is a need for further research about the specific techniques students are using to practice for CDE or LDEs on their own. There was a wide variation in the amount of time spent between individuals, as evident by the large standard deviations observed. More research is needed to examine the influence of event, teacher time available, and the guidance levels given to students by agricultural educators. We recommend expanding this examination to events on a larger scale, with more CDE/LDE events, and at different times through the school year to examine potential patterns and differences between events. Developing a better understanding of the ways students practice for CDEs and LDEs could provide a glimpse into more effective methods for both preparing students to compete in events, and how teacher time spent in CDE/LDE coaching activities could be allocated most effectively.

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