

## **Naïve versus Purposeful Practice**

The usual approach that many of us take when learning poker (or any new skill) falls under the category of naïve practice. Most of the time we start off with a general interest that leads us to get some instruction from a book, a website, a forum, and/or a coach. We then take our newfound knowledge for a spin at the tables until we achieve what we consider to be an acceptable level of playing skill. From then on, we tend to run on autopilot – making the same plays (as well as errors) over and over again. Most of us believe that the experience of playing will make us expert players. However, research has shown unequivocally that once a person reaches a level of automatic, acceptable performance, additional years of playing experience produce no discernable improvements.

Simply putting in more playing time is considered a form of naïve practice and this is what most poker players do. We go through the motions, repeating what we normally do without challenging ourselves or having any set goals for improvement. We naively stumble along and have only marginal results. The reason for this is usually because when we are playing, we don't have a specific target for improvement. Sure, we might be trying to win hands and money and take the highest EV lines possible, but often we are making lots of mistakes in the process. We often think that we play all of our winning hands perfectly and that our losing hands are due to bad luck. Another issue with only using playing time as practice is that there is no way for us to repeat and refine actions in-game so that we can ensure that we improve a particular aspect.

Some (and maybe it is even most) poker players convince themselves that they are putting in the hours of study required to become an expert by passively consuming poker content, but Ericsson's work shows that effective practice and learning is active – something we'll discuss extensively as we go through the book.

As Ericsson advises,

*“people often misunderstand this because they assume that continued... playing... is a form of practice and that if they keep doing it they are bound to get better at it, slowly perhaps, but better nonetheless... But no. Research has shown that, generally speaking, once a person reaches that level of “acceptable” performance and automaticity, the additional years of “practice” don’t lead to improvement.”*

Ouch! So if simply playing more and consuming content passively are not useful routes to improvement, then what is? All practice is not equal. You want to avoid naive practice at all costs and don't worry about the 10,000 hour rule. It might take you more than that or it might take less. If you've found yourself stuck in a plateau where your game is not improving, then it's time to try something new and different, like purposeful practice, which has been shown time and time again to be effective for improving performance. It's important to note that you can do a version of purposeful practice while playing if you set goals and targets for improvement in-game. To count as purposeful practice, you've got to set goals and have a plan for improvement.

## **Purposeful Practice**

It is a given that in order to improve your poker performance, you must engage in effective training, and according to Ericsson, effective training comes in the form of a specific type of practice known as purposeful practice.

Purposeful practice has a number of components that make it superior to naïve practice. The good news is that we can use these components to design effective poker practice and we don't even have to bore ourselves with memorizing long lists of random numbers; although we might need to knuckle down and learn those ranges!

## *Purposeful Practice in Poker*

Purposeful practice is a highly structured activity that requires intense effort and focus. It is not, according to Ericsson,

*“the mere execution or repetition of already attained skills, but repeated attempts to reach beyond one’s current level which is associated with frequent failures.”*

Your mission for each study session is to improve in some tangible way. Every time you practice you need to be thinking about how you can do a certain thing better. To do this, you must isolate a specific component of a skill that you want to get better at. You then find or construct training activities that you can do that will ultimately cause you to improve.

As you can see, it’s not about just putting in a certain number of hours – so forget about the 10,000 hour rule for now. The only thing you need to remember is that in general a huge volume of practice over a long period of time is required to achieve peak poker performance. What is critical is that you design your practice so that it gets you to a higher level of performance. It entails sustained efforts to do something that you can’t currently do (or if you can, you don’t do it as well as you would like). It requires that you constantly push yourself to get better.

To make sure you’re engaging in purposeful practice, make sure each study session has the following components:

- ♠ You need to set a goal to work on a one specific skill or technique at a time and forget about setting vague goals like “improve my game” as those will not get the results you want. Your mission is to establish an attainable, specific goal for each study session.

- ♠ You must be maximally focused during your study session. You want your sessions to be fairly intense, distraction free and repetitive so you get the skill or concept down. We'll offer many study/practice strategies throughout the book that you can experiment with, and our hope is that by using our examples, you'll be able to come up with your own practice strategies.
- ♠ It is critical that you receive immediate feedback on how you are performing. If you don't have a way to see where you are making errors, you'll be hard pressed to improve. Use this feedback to design more practice activities to fix your identified weaknesses. Finding ways to eliminate mistakes and errors is the only way to progress to higher levels of proficiency.
- ♠ When working on your game, you simply must get out of your comfort zone. According to Ericsson, all adaptation comes from stress and the only way to feel the stress that will trigger change is to make errors. Most folks don't like making mistakes and so they avoid getting out of their comfort zone, but that is a recipe for mediocrity. Failure is your friend because it acts as an indicator of what you need the most work on.

Following the above strategies to the letter is the secret to getting really good at poker – or really getting good at anything! It is the linchpin of success when studying. You must identify a weakness (i.e. find your leaks), set a goal to remove each weakness (only focus on one at a time for best results), ask for feedback on how you're doing (or find a way to track it and measure it for yourself), and design new practice activities to make continuous improvements in areas of weakness. You keep following this cycle and eventually, you'll be a bona fide poker expert.

To reiterate, when you follow a purposeful practice strategy, you carefully craft practice routines where you isolate the skills you need to improve and work on them individually. There is a tendency to want to work on everything at once, but that usually leads to experiencing

## *Purposeful Practice in Poker*

feelings of overwhelm which typically results in complacency. A better tactic is to take the skills you need to improve one at a time and give each micro-skill your full focus and concentration until you master it. Only then should you move on to the next one. In an upcoming chapter, we will lay out the exact steps you should take to design your own learning projects that meet the purposeful practice standard, but for now we want to share some general tips for engaging in purposeful practice.