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Skills, training, and activism

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Abstract

Most studies of activism and social movements give more attention to methods and strategies than to the development of skills. Yet skills are crucially important to the success of campaigns. Research on expert performance provides insights into what is required to become highly proficient at a well-defined set of skills. These insights are potentially relevant to activists, as shown by the example of training for lunch-counter sit-ins in Nashville, Tennessee in 1960. Skill development needs to be given greater attention by activists and scholars.

Keywords: activism; skills; expert performance; training; civil rights movement; nonviolent action

Introduction

Military forces put considerable effort into developing the skills of their members. In earlier generations, it might have been enough to give a soldier a rifle and some basic instruction, but in today's modern armies advanced training is essential. Highly sophisticated equipment, for example in communications, electronics and aeronautics, can require much learning to master. This may involve classroom study as well as practical experience. Front-line soldiers in high-tech militaries now use so much elaborate weaponry and communications that training is essential.

Some members of the military require highly specialised skills, sometimes acquired and honed over many years. Examples include piloting of aircraft, development of new weapons systems, and encryption of electronic communications. The development of nuclear weapons in the 1940s famously involved many brilliant civilian scientists and engineers. Since then, weapons development routinely requires scientists and engineers with advanced skills.

Citizen campaigners, in contrast, seldom receive advanced training in activism. At a rally, most participants simply attend. Organisers might arrange for brief training of marshalls to help maintain nonviolent discipline. In a civil disobedience action, for example an illegal entry to a military area, participants might receive training for several hours or several days. Preparation equivalent to military training, lasting weeks, months or years, is rare in organizing and activist circles.

In recent decades, there has been significant research into expert performance, in particular the sort of training necessary to become highly skilled in athletics, chess, music and other endeavours. This research has potential implications for activists. Our aim here is to spell out some of these implications, as well as pointing out the limitations and dilemmas associated with skill development for activists.

In the next two sections, we outline findings from research on education and training and outline their potential relevance to activists. We then examine a particular campaign—sit-ins at Nashville, Tennessee in 1960—and assess the training for this campaign in the light of studies of the development of expert performance.

Developing expert performance

In Western countries, many people believe in the idea of natural talent, namely that some people are born with greater capacities in particular areas, such as mathematics or music. The task of education then is to identify and nurture this natural talent. Those

who believe they have no such talent seldom try hard, for example saying ‘I was never any good at maths.’

This viewpoint has been challenged by research on expert performance. In a pioneering study by Ericsson, Krampe and Tesch-Römer (1993), the authors went into a violin academy in Germany and obtained evaluations of the standards achieved by students, grouping them into categories of ability. They then determined how many hours of practice each student had undertaken in their lifetime. If competence in playing the violin was a product of natural talent, there should have been some students who became extremely good without much practice. But Ericsson et al. found instead that ability correlated strongly with the total duration of practice. Although the relationship was not perfectly linear, the basic message of the study accords with the wisdom of the maxim that practice makes perfect. Subsequent studies have looked at expert performance in a wide range of fields (Ericsson, Charness, Feltovich and Hoffman, 2006), and there are several insightful popularisations of research in this area (Colvin, 2010; Coyle, 2009; Ericsson and Pool, 2016; Shenk, 2010; Syed, 2011).

Thousand of hours of practice may be necessary but are not sufficient for world-class performance: it is possible to practise incessantly but not improve significantly. A key condition for improvement is good quality teaching or guidance: training with the wrong technique or outdated equipment will hinder progress. Just as importantly, the practice must be of a particular type, called ‘deliberate practice’ (Ericsson, 2006; Ericsson and Pool, 2016). This sort of practice involves concentrating intensely on improving, typically by addressing a difficult challenge and struggling to overcome it.

Consider, for example, a pianist who performs in a cocktail bar for four hours every day, chalking up thousands of hours of playing in a matter of years. However, few of these hours are deliberate practice: the pianist is displaying rather than developing skills. A different pianist who practises intently for an hour per day will soon surpass the cocktail pianist in technical ability.

Deliberate practice is hard work. To undertake it for hours per day requires considerable willpower (Baumeister and Tierney, 2011), and that requires a good nutrition (exercising willpower depletes energy reserves) and adequate sleep (learning is consolidated during sleep). Those who practise for extended periods on an ongoing basis usually do so in the morning, taking breaks and continuing for a total of no more than four or five hours per day, which seems to be a typical limit for the capacity to maintain intense concentration.

Although achieving world-class performance usually requires thousands of hours of deliberate practice, for most practical purposes far less effort is needed. Learning to drive a car is an example. At first learning is rapid, and typically this early learning requires concentration. After a few dozen or hundred hours of practice, most people acquire an adequate level of competence: they are able to drive well enough for daily purposes. They stop trying to improve, so continued driving is routine, even mindless, and does not improve ability. Their skills have reached a plateau. Only those with ambitions beyond routine driving, such as race-car drivers, need to continue to practise.

With the right preparation, motivation and guidance, it is possible to learn new skills very rapidly. Kaufman (2014) has provided a practical guide, illustrating principles of rapid learning with examples including typing, computer programming, playing the game of go, windsurfing and playing the ukulele. An important lesson offered by Kaufman is that it is now possible to acquire many skills using options, equipment and training methods sourced from the Internet. Kaufman's approach is compatible with research on expert performance: it is a guide to the very early stages of learning, the first 20 hours. To continue to improve requires additional deliberate practice.

Skills are highly specific. For example, learning to play table tennis provides only limited spin-offs for playing tennis (Syed, 2011); there are no examples in which a champion in one of these two sports has successfully switched to the other. It is possible to become extremely good at a set of related events, as shown in the decathlon, but seldom as good as the top specialists.

Intelligence, as measured by IQ tests, is relevant to the capacity to learn, but is of limited importance in relation to highly specific skills. For example, when chess pieces are placed randomly on the board, chess masters are no better than non-players in being able to remember where they are. But when the pieces are placed in game-like positions, chess masters have a phenomenal ability to remember them (de Groot, 2008)

Research suggests that motivation is at least as important as intelligence in learning: personality factors leading to grit—perseverance and persistence in the face of failure or lack of progress—are vital (Duckworth, 2016; Tough, 2012). Devoting thousands of hours to ongoing focused efforts to improve requires incredible dedication and the ability to continue in the face of setbacks.

As will be discussed further in the Nashville case below, another crucial element in learning is the quality of teaching. Guidance is needed, especially in early stages, to acquire proper technique and to monitor progress. Ultimately, good learners acquire the ability to assess their own progress, but may still benefit from feedback from experts. Elite athletes usually have coaches; some have an entourage of support staff. Similarly, many elite performing artists check in with teachers to fine-tune their skills.

In summary, learning a skill to an advanced level requires good teachers, a high level of motivation and grit, and many hours of deliberate practice always tackling difficult tasks at the limits of one's ability until they are mastered. For lower levels of performance, these same factors are important, especially if there is a desire to learn skills as rapidly as possible.

Attending a class is not a particularly efficient way of acquiring skills unless students dedicate themselves to practising. Consider a class in high school or university involving 25 hours of face-to-face contact, in say chemistry or English literature, where relevant skills include laboratory work or analysing texts. If some of this contact is in the form of lectures, students are not themselves practising a skill, but only gaining information relevant to practice. Therefore, how much a student learns depends greatly on how much dedicated effort they put in outside of formal classes. Then there is the question of ongoing effort after the final exam: many students study only what is necessary for assignments, and when courses are over they simply wait until the next course to recommence study. A simple calculation reveals that when students do just enough to get by, they fall far short of the effort required to develop high-level skills.

Military and activist training

In military training, one of the challenges for most soldiers is to overcome their natural reluctance to hurt others (Grossman, 1995). This is accomplished by repetitive training, for example repeatedly firing one's rifle at a realistic target or forcefully sticking one's finger into an orange, presented as the eye of an enemy. The result is that soldiers, in a battle situation, react without thinking consciously about it: they have overcome a predisposition, replacing it with a conditioned response.

Other military-related skills involve developing interpretive capabilities. For example, submarine crew learn to interpret the visual and audio sonar display to detect enemy craft and ignore fish. This has parallels with many other occupations, for

example the skill of physicians to read a chest x-ray or endoscope display and detect signs requiring further investigation or action.

Many skills relevant to nonviolent activism differ from military-related skills, but are similar in their diversity and complexity. Unlike activities such as chess or playing the violin, few activist skills are well defined. There are no tournaments or performances pitting community activists against each other, nor do highly experienced activists officially act as judges of budding activists. This can happen in informal ways and also more formally during the training and evaluation of applicants to serve on peace teams providing accompaniment services in politically dangerous environments, but nothing so formalised as music competitions in which pianists or other instrumentalists perform from standard repertoires and are judged by experts.

Although skills for social movement activism are diverse, many have parallels in various occupations like bookkeeping, computer programming, fund-raising, policy development, writing, communication and marketing, event coordination and meeting facilitation. Thus, they can be developed through conventional forms of education and training. In many activist groups, though, there is little systematic training in either general or specific skills. Furthermore, in some egalitarian groups there is an assumption or expectation that ‘everyone can do everything’: to break down or prevent acquisition of power through expertise, members are involved in most activities of the group, with the side effect that no one specialises and acquires advanced skills.

Activism can involve some skills not commonly sought or practised in other parts of life. One of them is the ability not to be provoked. In rallies, sit-ins and occupations, campaigners often seek to maintain ‘nonviolent discipline’ (Sharp, 1973, pp. 573–655): no participant should use violence against police or anyone else. If police do use violence against peaceful protesters, this can trigger greater support for the protesters, in a process called political jiu-jitsu (Sharp, 1973, pp. 657–703; see also Martin, 2007). Because many potential protesters may instinctively respond to attacks with counter-violence, training and preparation is required to reprogram their gut reactions and adhere to the campaign’s plans. Ironically, this is parallel to training of soldiers to overcome their reluctance to use violence.

One particular activist skill has elements in common with the interpretive skills used in business or politics: ‘reading’ the strategic situation. It is highly valuable to be able to assess the current state of play of supporters and opponents—their numbers, networks, resources, motivations, strengths, weaknesses and objectives—and especially

the likely responses of both supporters and opponents to possible actions. This is strategic thinking, applied to particular circumstances. Experienced organizers and activists can weigh up possible initiatives, assessing whether supporters can be mobilised and the likely response of opponents, and judge which initiative has the best prospects for achieving the movement's goals.

To summarise, key elements relevant to development of skills are: motivation to learn; capable teachers; circumstances conducive to learning (including safety and absence of interruptions); habits conducive to learning (including daily routines and getting plenty of sleep); and many hours spent in deliberative practice.

For activists, motivation to learn is usually high. Seasoned teachers from nonviolent campaigns across the globe are available, but this requires coordination and funding. Circumstances vary enormously, with some learning attempted in high-stress and high-distraction environments and other learning pursued in secure locations that enable more focused attention. Habits also vary considerably, but few social movement activists pursue their craft with a programmed approach like that used by athletes in training. Planning, preparation and training for actions is now occurring regularly in some activist circles thanks to the work of Training for Change, CANVAS, Ruckus Society, Quaker Earth Action Team and others. Nonetheless, many insights from deliberative practice are missing. Deliberate practice in activism is still too rare because sustained practice itself is not as common as it should be. All this suggests that there is considerable opportunity for activists to improve their skills by adopting insights from research on learning, including research on expert performance.

Nashville workshops in nonviolent activism

An instructive historical example of a sustained effort to develop highly trained and disciplined activists is the training workshops held as part of the student sit-in campaign to desegregate downtown lunch counters in Nashville, Tennessee in 1960. In this article, we are not able to cover the range of past or current training, both of which are marked by considerable diversity in quality, scope and sophistication. We use the Nashville case as an illustration, without suggesting it represents the best in training or the latest developments. We focus here on nonviolence training to prepare for confrontations with police and other opponents; training can also be used for other goals such as formulating strategies, improving media skills, preparing for court hearings and thinking up creative actions.

With regard to needing a capable teacher, the Nashville movement was particularly fortunate in having Jim Lawson. A religiously-motivated conscientious objector to war in general and to the US war in Korea in particular, Lawson consequently spent a year in federal prison and then went to India to work as a Methodist missionary, teaching at Hislop College in Nagpur for three years. Whilst there to teach, he also became a student, carefully studying Gandhian nonviolence and the campaign for Indian independence and meeting with leading Gandhian organisations and activists. He wanted to discover how to transfer Gandhian nonviolence and its powerful blend of clear strategic thinking married to values-based principles to the struggle for civil rights in the US. The most powerful dynamic in the world to Lawson was the intersections of race, poverty and the drive for liberation across not only the so-called third world but also in the black United States—a different sort of third world (Halberstam 1998; Chabot, 2010).

Employed by the Fellowship of Reconciliation to promote and teach nonviolent action theory and practice across the US south, in 1958 Lawson settled in Nashville, Tennessee and immediately set to work giving workshops in the philosophy of nonviolence; he tirelessly promoted nonviolent action as the approach best able to finally break open hardened segregationist policies. One of Lawson's protégés, John Lewis, described his teaching style: 'He was very smart, brilliant. He persuaded us. He came across as the embodiment, as the personification of the philosophy and the discipline of nonviolence. He was not just preaching a sermon. In a sense he was living it ... The concept of the beloved community ... Making Nashville an open city ... In all inclusive community ... It was very appealing to me ... That ordinary people, students, could change the world' (quoted in Isaac, Cornfield, Dickerson, Lawson and Coley, 2012, p.171).

We noted above that a requirement for sticking with a training regimen to develop expertise is high motivation and commitment. Diane Nash, who grew up in the north and was aghast at the overt segregation in Nashville, said that she originally went to the workshops on nonviolent action because segregation made her 'feel chained' (Hogan, 2007, p. 19).

Lawson knew that new understanding and skills development was most likely to be achieved if the material and skills resonated with and were seen as relevant to the lived experiences of the trainees. He recognised that southern black Americans appreciated the religious values and language that were so central to their community,

no matter their own personal beliefs (Isaac et al., 2012). So he used this pedagogically, presenting principled nonviolent action as the best way to apply Biblical ethics to the problem of contemporary racism. To the young students yearning for a way to effectively confront the evils of racism and segregation, nonviolent action was a potent tool. It was, nonetheless, a tool one had to learn how to use with disciplined precision, and that required purposeful practice.

Workshops were held weekly on Tuesday evenings for more than three months in a local black church toward the end of 1959, recommencing in February 1960. As such, they honoured two additional requirements for developing advanced skills: creating circumstances conducive to learning, including being mindful of each other's safety; and engaging in many hours of deliberate practice. With regard to the former, the black church was a familiar, culturally rich and yet safe political space for civil rights organising that was at least partly beyond the reaches of prying authorities, a sort of petri dish, or what Aldon Morris (1984) has referred to as a 'movement half-way house,' controlled by African Americans.

Detailed aspects of the workshops were carefully considered in advance; objectives were identified so that materials and activities could be designed to achieve the desired outcomes, including isolating behaviours so that trainees' responses could be disciplined once they were in the field (Branch, 1988, p. 260). The workshops were usually structured around a historical section followed by role-playing, what Lawson called socio-dramas.

Reading materials and lists were distributed, including works by Thoreau, Tolstoy and various Eastern philosophers and Christian pacifists (Limbo, 2006). Yet it is also true that the participatory, cooperative learning format of the workshops ensured that the students learned greatly from each other as they shared their experiences with racism and their varied personal reactions to this new material, challenging and supporting each other in the hard work of skills development, i.e., learning how to think and act in new ways (Poletta, 2002, p. 45).

Training long-oppressed people to act on their own behalf to overcome that oppression is essentially an exercise in self-liberation. Lawson's exercises helped the Nashville students grasp how segregation, not their personal failures or their fears, was responsible for any feelings of inferiority, shame and disempowerment. They learned that although they may have unconsciously internalised oppression, they could consciously throw it off, too (Clark and Coy, 2015). Lawson's style as a trainer was

Socratic, posing questions and listening respectfully, honouring the insights of the trainees. In this way his workshops created a safe but challenging shared space where through deep sharing of their personally painful experiences with segregation a debilitating taboo of silence was finally broken (Halberstam, 1998, p. 75; Chabot, 2012, p. 141). Soon a collective identity was forged around the notion that if they acted in extraordinary ways, if they were brave and skilful enough, they would contain their fears and their examples would inspire others such that theirs would not be an ordinary movement but one whose growth would transform their communities.

Skill development and identity formation are mutually reinforcing processes in activism, military service and team sports. The collective identity forged in the Nashville workshops proved integral to the success of the campaign. Identity transformations occurred at multiple levels. Some, like Curtis Murphy, began the training with deep scepticism, only to emerge with a new, hard-won sense of self and a skill-set to use against segregation.

My initial reaction was nonviolence? What are you, scared? You coward! Only a coward would allow people to attack them and they don't defend themselves. But then the more I went to the meetings the more I began to learn from Jim and my readings, I realized that it took a much braver person to practice nonviolence than one to strike back... I began to see nonviolence as a very practical tool... I am not a pacifist. I am not nonviolent. But when I am with you I am those things, because... I knew that I would never do anything that would hurt the group (quoted in Isaac et al., 2012, pp. 172–173).

The socio-dramas and role-plays that were such an integral part of Lawson's method have since become a standard dimension of most nonviolent action training regimens. But in the late 1950s, Lawson's approach, if not exactly novel, was far from the pedagogical norm. He had to find a way to create disciplined warriors, activists who had developed mastery over their thoughts and emotions, who were able to resist taking the violent bait whenever it would be presented to them in the field of action at the lunch counter sit-ins. He chose role-plays and tried to create realistic and prescient simulations of the verbal and physical violence the activists would face during their lunch counter sit-ins, where their commitment to winning over even their opponents was foremost. Bernard Lafayette put it this way:

We knew that you can't bring about change unless you accomplish one goal, and that is to win the sympathy and support of the majority. The key to our success was the training. We had anticipated hostility so, in our role-play training sessions, we acted out the ways we thought people would respond. We acted out 'turning the other cheek' and thinking about other people and not yourself. It's so interesting that our role play was really re-enacted on the real scene (Choi and Lafayette, 2011).

They had to learn how to nonviolently protect themselves not just physically but emotionally so that they would not fight back physically or verbally when coffee or ketchup was poured on their hair or when they were called 'dirty niggers.' These critically challenging moments in the field—when the success of the campaign hung in the balance—is when the skill development and the identity transformation brought on by the workshops bore their fullest fruit. Joe Goldthread, a workshop attendee, expresses this well.

We went to the meetings and we started to learn how to be nonviolent, people knocking you around ... I could handle everything but spitting, the white guy walked by and spit in my face, if you want to be a part of the program at that time, you couldn't fight back. You put everyone in jeopardy of getting hurt or killed. So I had to accept it if I want to be a part ... Don't give them a reason to turn to violence. That was the number one thing that was preaching. I guess when they knocked me out of the chair and spit on me and drugged me, I was prepared for that because I'd been trained day in and day out (quoted in Isaac et al., 2012, p. 173).

Lawson even took the simulations into the field, helping his charges test and refine their new skill-sets. On consecutive Saturdays in November and December 1959, the Nashville student movement conducted 'test' sit-ins at lunch counters in downtown department stores. Small groups of students would enter a store, purchase some small item to establish themselves as paying customers and then sit down at the lunch counter and ask to be served. When denied service they would talk with the customers around them and with the waiters to see what their attitudes were (Hampton and Fayer, 1990).

Then they would ask to speak to the manager and politely ask him to explain the store's policy.

These training exercises were not simple scouting missions; they had at least four inter-related purposes. First, they established the fact that the store was denying lunch counter service to its paying customers solely on the basis of skin colour. Second, they served to identify, make contact with and develop relationships with those individuals at the respective stores who were responsible for decision-making about the segregated seating policy. Third, they helped the activists to more fully understand the layout and operations of the store and its lunch counters. Fourth, and most important, these dry run missions were designed by Lawson 'to allow people to test themselves' so that they would be more fully prepared for their own emotional reactions when engaging in the ensuing action (Lovett, 2005, p. 123). In this sense they were carefully designed deliberative practice.

When the actual campaign commenced in February 1960, the students maintained exquisite nonviolent discipline in wave after wave of hundreds of activists sitting in even while facing significant violence from white thugs. They effectively shut down the lunch counters and forced Nashville leaders and white residents to critically consider segregationist customs for the first time. Unjust arrests and imprisonment backfired on city officials and empowered Nashville's black adults to support the campaign in various ways, including mounting a crippling boycott of all downtown stores during the busy Easter shopping season. The expert application of nonviolent tactics shifted power in Nashville such that negotiations led to the full integration of downtown lunch counters. The scholarly literature on the Nashville is in complete agreement about the critically important role that the training workshops played in the campaign's success. Indeed, the same literature suggests that the skill training that occurred for so many student activists in Nashville had significant impacts on the broader civil rights movement in subsequent years as the Nashville campaign inspired a broader sit-in movement and as its student activists moved into key leadership positions in other civil rights campaigns and organisations, particularly the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee.

Conclusion

To be effective, activist groups need members with a variety of skills, for example in accounting, communications, fund-raising, lobbying, planning, recruitment, writing and

public speaking. Some activist trainers run workshops and coach individuals in particular skills, yet it is fair to say that, compared with athletic or military training, most activist groups spend relatively little time and effort in systematically developing and practising their skills, planning and preparation. Although seasoned participants from successful social movements are today sharing knowledge and lessons more than ever before, incorporating insights about deliberative practice and expert performance may further improve the useful training that is already being done.

Recent research on expert performance shows the importance of practice in building skills, in particular what is called deliberate practice, involving highly focused attention on repetitively exercising skills at the limits of one's capability. Becoming a world-class performer usually requires thousands of hours of deliberate practice. The body of research on expert performance is directly relevant to activism, with several important messages. First, skill development is necessary for everyone; relying on 'natural talent' is a mistake. Second, the key to improvement is continued deliberate practice, under the guidance of a knowledgeable teacher or guide. Third, motivation and good habits are needed to maintain arduous efforts to improve.

Attending workshops is only a start—to become really skilled, ongoing private practice is required. The benefits of workshops may be limited if they involve entertainment at the expense of strenuous skill development. Because high-quality instruction is crucial, it would be useful to carry out studies comparing the effectiveness of different approaches to activist training.

We showed the relevance of deliberate practice in the preparations for the 1960 Nashville sit-ins. These preparations continued for months and involved learning about the history of nonviolent struggle, community organizing, repeated role-plays, field investigations done in advance of scheduled actions, and highly detailed plans that were nevertheless open to refinement. The success of these preparations was shown in the performance of protesters when confronted by surprises, verbal abuse and physical assault after the sit-ins began. Even a single breakdown in nonviolent discipline would have jeopardised the effectiveness of the campaign, but the training had been so thorough that all participants refrained from reacting violently, a dramatic change compared to their initial instincts before the months of preparation.

In the history of the US civil rights movement, the Nashville sit-ins are usually presented as a case study showing the power of nonviolent action. We have offered an additional instructive historical analysis showing the importance of training,

preparation, planning and practice to develop a particular type of expert performance, including the maintaining of nonviolent discipline in the face of assault and reprisals. The lessons concerning preparation, practice and expert performance deserve wider application in activist campaigns.

In addition to maintaining nonviolent discipline, there are many other areas in which sustained efforts in preparation and training would be worthwhile for activists. Examples include persevering in the face of setbacks (for which research on ‘grit’ is relevant: Duckworth, 2016), development of strategic insight and tactical acumen (for example, knowing when to switch from methods of concentration to methods of dispersal: Schock, 2004), and dealing with severe repression (Summy, 1994). There is relevant research and practical experience in these and other areas, but they have yet to become the basis for extended training using the principles of expert performance.

Many organisations provide training in nonviolent action, including the Alternatives to Violence Project, Centre for Applied Non Violent Actions and Strategies (CANVAS), the Highlander School, the Ruckus Society, Training for Change, the War Resisters League and others. Furthermore, many nonviolent campaigns do involve training of participants before undertaking actions. The implication of research on both expert performance and of the Nashville campaign is that it may often be worthwhile providing considerably more training over a longer period, with the training designed to take into account the power of deliberate practice in building expert skills, including in planning and preparing. Activists need to recognise that they should be practising their skills on a regular basis in a variety of ways and contexts, continually striving to be better and not relying primarily on formal workshops.

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