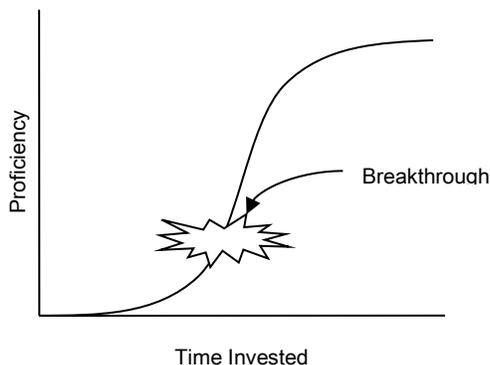


## Developing Expertise through Deliberative Practice

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In his book *Outliers*, Malcolm Gladwell popularized the idea that it takes ten years or 10,000 hours to develop expertise in a specific domain (2008). The same concept holds true for developing your professional identity in the fraternity/sorority community. We gain proficiency in the first few years during the formative and application stage of our professional identity development, but we lack the base level of competence needed to achieve mastery until later in our careers (Trolan, 2010).

If investing 10,000 hours or ten years were the only factor in becoming an expert, then everyone would qualify. However, we often overlook one caveat: learning does not develop in a linear fashion. It follows an S-shaped curve called a sigmoid function. Wikipedia explains this concept best: "Many natural processes, including those of complex system learning curves, exhibit a progression from small beginnings that accelerates and approaches a climax over time" ("Sigmoid Function," 2012). In other words, practice on a new task, a new program, a new skill, or a new concept leads to small immediate gains. Continued study creates a breakthrough that results in more dramatic increases in proficiency.

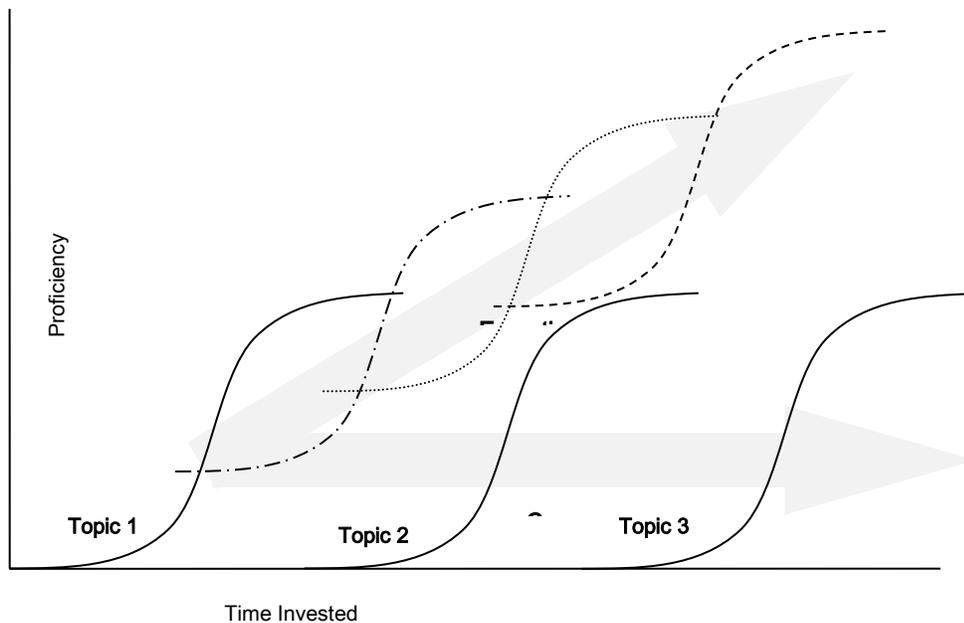


At a certain point, though, learning plateaus at a level of basic competence. Additional investments of time provide diminishing marginal returns. In his study of expertise, Ericsson found this to be true. "Research has found only a weak correlation between representative performance in a wide range of domains of expertise and the amount of experience in the corresponding domain, at least beyond the initial period when minimal acceptable proficiency is attained" (Ericsson, 2005). Simply put, that summer leadership conference might boost your facilitation skills the first few times, but by the 10<sup>th</sup> time, your improvement is essentially zero.

If there are so few gains after reaching competence, then what makes the difference between a competent professional and an expert? Ericsson has more to say about this. "The crucial factor leading to continued improvement and attainment of expert performance is the engagement in special practice activities that allow performers to improve specific aspects of their performance with problem solving and through repetitions with feedback," (2005) or what he calls deliberate practice. The amount of time you invest is irrelevant. How you invest that time determines whether you will advance to a higher level of expertise.

Once achieving competence in an area, many professionals move on to develop their proficiency in other areas. Experts, on the other hand, further invest their time by chasing additional breakthroughs in the same area. They continue focusing on their areas of weakness by rehearsing, applying themselves, seeking new insights, and soliciting targeted feedback from mentors or coaches. For example, after your third summer leadership conference it might be time to switch programs, attend a training institute on facilitation, create unique opportunities to practice the

skills that you find most challenging, hire a coach, seek a mentor, or research formal techniques used in other fields. Deliberate practice activities like these can elevate competent professionals to a new level of expertise and create a learning curve like the graph below.



It is important to develop a base level of competence on a broad array of areas in fraternity/sorority life, but it is impossible to become an expert in everything.

If you hope to excel beyond the level of the competent professional, challenge yourself to set high goals. Do you aspire to be the foremost expert on establishing a viable community of culturally based organizations? Will you create a model for helping students leverage their fraternal experience in the workplace? Are you the one who will finally create an acceptable framework for partnership between national organizations and chapters?

These objectives are what Collins and Porras might call BHAGs, and they create a sense of creative tension: a situation where the goal and the current skill set are out of reach, creating a dissonance that draws us up beyond mere competence toward our expert objective like the pull of a rubber band (Collins & Porras, 1994; Senge, 2006). These aspirations also fit Ericsson's criteria for expertise in that they require the development of component skills, knowledge, and experience that we can attain through practice activities that are "tightly coordinated and focus sequentially on improving one specified aspect of performance at a time" (Ericsson, 2005).

Once you know the topics or talents in your desired area of expertise look for opportunities to stretch yourself. When was the last time you leaned into something that you only partly believed was possible? Think skydiving, presenting research results to faculty, or agreeing to publish an article about cutting-edge research in a field you are unfamiliar with. These experiences provide a sense of creative tension that can lead to new breakthroughs beyond your current level of proficiency. To close, I have included a few ways you might better invest your time to move beyond mere competence:

- Volunteer for a different type of student organization;
- Join an organization outside higher education;
- Partner with local or national experts who deal with the same challenges;

- Find a mentor outside your immediate peer group;
- Identify and interview the foremost experts in your topic area;
- Create a lesson plan that involves reading, reflection, studying, and writing;
- Produce a resource or report on the topic to benefit other professionals;
- Apply for professional positions that require the expertise you desire;
- Hire a coach or trainer to focus your learning and provide practice opportunities.

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