



The Skill of Wisdom by Dr. Chris Swanson

This article is adapted from a talk titled "How Do You Get To Carnegie Hall: A Skill-Based Life," given on February 21, 2014, by Gutenberg tutor Chris Swanson at the Gutenberg education conference, "Mastery Not Factory: How We Learn What Matters."

We all recognize that wisdom is a desirable prize. We admire those who are wise. The Bible praises the wise and chides the foolish. What is less clear, however, is how wisdom is gained. Perhaps it is a gift of God; perhaps the intelligent are wise; perhaps it is the blessing of age. These all touch upon gaining wisdom, but I propose that, in its essence, wisdom (and thus wise living) is a skill that must be learned and developed. Like other skills, it must be gained through a sort of apprenticeship. It is not something that can be memorized or learned from a book. In order to make my case, I need to talk about skills in general—their nature and how they are imparted.

How Skills are Developed

Consider the skill of handwriting. In first grade, writing letters was a difficult task. I recall that my lines never seemed to go in just the right place. At first, I did not even know where to put the pencil down to start a letter. As I practiced and compared my letters to the accepted letters, I improved. I got faster. I became more skilled.

Now consider the skill of playing soccer, which, like any other sport, takes a lot of practice to be able to play well. I have played soccer since I was quite young, but in the last five years I have thought more about how to develop skill at soccer and the best approaches to achieve success. I have identified the following three essentials: mastery of fundamentals, training, and self-evaluation. While these may seem like obvious aspects

of learning soccer, they are also common to developing all skills, not just soccer.

Before discussing these three aspects of skill development, however, I must mention a prior factor essential to developing any skill: the desire to improve. The importance of desire, or will, cannot be underestimated. No one can be forced to become skilled. Whether the skill is handwriting, soccer, or some other more important skill, like wisdom, each learner must decide to take on the training. At some point when I was learning to handwrite, for example, I quit improving; I was more interested in getting the words down quickly than legibly. In short, I did not desire to improve. Teachers or coaches can give incentives, both carrots and sticks. They can model the skill. They can provide powerful arguments for the benefits of developing the skill. But they cannot force someone to take on the task of developing a skill—including wisdom. But assuming a person has the desire to improve, mastery of fundamentals, training, and self-evaluation will enable him to do so.

Mastery of Fundamentals. In all skills, fundamentals must become mastered and ingrained. In soccer, these fundamentals are the acts of stopping and controlling a ball and passing. Being able to do these things without thinking is one of the keys to playing well. The best players are not great because they are concentrating on ball control more than others. In fact, they seem to be concentrating less. Their muscles know what to do from long training. Like learning letters, ball-control actions need



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to develop to the point where attention can be focused on something else. When I am practicing ball control, I am self-conscious about it, trying to improve. But in a game, I can focus my attention elsewhere because the skill has become ingrained. The fact that the skill is ingrained in me and does not require my focus is a feature of all skills.

Training. Practicing a lot is not sufficient; one must practice in the right ways. Simply making a thousand passes does not necessarily make me a good passer if my technique is poor; poor technique results in poor passing. In my early years, I developed some bad habits in my game. To retrain myself, I have had to self-consciously practice the better technique. To the extent that I have not thoroughly trained myself out of the bad habits, they come back. I tell myself over and over, "Don't do that," but I do it. If I have learned to do



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something poorly, that poor practice will become ingrained, just as a good technique becomes ingrained. I always unconsciously act in accordance with how I have trained. In most cases, this sort of training occurs in an apprentice-style relationship. An individual will rarely just happen upon good techniques and good methods of practice. It is much better to find a good coach who has learned the best methods and best training. Under the tutelage of a good coach, players learn only good techniques. That way they do not need retraining later. The other key feature of coaching is the constant correction. A coach can watch and see problems in my technique and correct them before they become ingrained. The more complex the skill, the longer the apprenticeship must last.

Self-Evaluation. Finding others to coach me, however, is not enough. If I want to improve, I must become my own coach to correct mistakes. During training, every time I stop the ball or make a pass, I am judging my performance. I am making adjustments to what I am doing, trying to get a good result. I cannot rely solely on someone else to tell me what to do because ultimately I have to make the skill my own. No one can do it for me. Those who desire to excel tend to achieve success because they are constantly self-evaluating.

Thus gaining skill in soccer requires (1) developing and practicing good habits, (2) getting input from a good coach, and (3) constant self-evaluation. And although I have been talking about soccer, these same aspects of skill development are true for other skills.

Intellectual Skills. Most of what I have been discussing so far has been related to developing physical motor skills, specifically those necessary for playing soccer. But because soccer is complex, an intellectual aspect is important to the game as well. Let me explain.

If you have ever watched kindergarteners or first graders playing soccer, you will have seen them move around as a great clump of bodies: herd ball. They are all just trying to kick the ball toward their opponents' goal. To them, that seems to be the obvious thing to do no matter what their coach may be

telling them to the contrary. As the kids age, more tactical issues come into play, mostly because the kids now have the necessary fundamentals to actually control the ball and pass successfully. Nevertheless, young or inexperienced players are still tempted to make poor decisions on the field.

This skill of making good decisions on the field is a skill just like the motor skills of ball control. A player must be able to take into account a broad range of information and judge what is the best move. A player with a poor understanding of successful strategy, tactics, and the layout of the players on the field will not make good judgments. Like ball control skills, the intellectual side of the game can be learned through practice and training. It must become ingrained in the thinking of the player through long exposure. Head knowledge is insufficient since no one has time to pause and recollect diagrams the coach drew before the game. Proper training by a knowledgeable coach is required as well. Even the professional players improve substantially under the leadership of a great coach. Finally, the players need to self-correct their mistakes. Consider the player who always tries to dribble around defenders. If the player does not recognize, or worse, is unwilling to recognize the deficiency of this move, he will not improve. So then, mastery of fundamentals, training, and self-evaluation are important to developing both motor and mental skills.

Let me give another example of a purely intellectual skill—speaking—which will help us to see more clearly the way in which wisdom is a skill. By “speaking,” I am not referring to public oratory or some other specialized, professional speech but rather to the act of talking that we all learn as toddlers. I have watched all three of my children learn to talk. I myself learned to talk as a child. However, the process of learning language is, at least to me, a bit mysterious. I don't recall giving my children much instruction, but they still learned how to talk. We did not have our toddlers attend “Baby Language Acquisition 101.” There was no formal training at all. Learning to speak was an informal, organic part of growing up. How do kids acquire language? I would suggest that learning language is a skill acquired in much the same way as other skills are acquired—through practice (mastery

of fundamentals), coaching (training), and self-correction (self-evaluation).

Babies and children certainly get lots of practice. They want to communicate and are constantly figuring out how to do that. As they continue to practice, they improve. As they improve, their words are internalized. The words are no longer sounds used by others that need to be mastered; they become tools through which the children communicate and think. Speech is so much a part of children, so ingrained, that they are unconscious of their use of it. They have achieved mastery.

Children also have live-in coaches who are able to properly train the child. And usually the training is just the right kind for skill acquisition. It is corrective, but there are no memory cards or quizzes. Parents are modeling the proper use of words and the proper pronunciation. If a child makes a mistake, typically a parent will say back the correct word. Eventually it sinks in. I believed that long skinny noodles were called “pasketti” for many years until my siblings got on my case.

But parents are not the only ones correcting. The child self-corrects. Most babies say “mik” instead of “milk.” I have yet to hear an adult call it that. Learning to speak is a subtle, long process. Without that self-evaluation, children would never improve. Speaking, then, is a skill acquired in the same manner as other skills.

How We “Know” Skills

An important feature about skills has thus far been implied but not made explicit. It is not about how skills are gained but about the way in which we “know” skills. Skills cannot be articulated; they are known tacitly. Allow me to elaborate.

By “articulated knowledge” I mean knowledge that I can explain and describe to another person or that I can write down in a book. I am making an attempt to articulate my ideas about skills right now. “Tacit” or “ingrained” knowledge is knowledge that I cannot explain or describe, but it directs our actions and thoughts. A nice example of the difference between the two is the knowledge you have about directions to your house. Most of us have both articulated knowledge and tacit knowledge of how to get to our house. You have articulated knowledge if you can give

directions to a friend: go down such and such street and turn right, etc. However, when you go home, you do not replay those directions in your head. You just know where to turn. You use lots of little hints: a bush here, a store there, a sense that you have driven the right distance. Lots of times kids will have tacit knowledge of directions home but not articulated knowledge. They have never been asked to articulate their tacit knowledge. They know how to get home but would be hard-pressed to explain to someone else how they do it.

Skills are all tacitly known. I cannot give you information that will enable you to handwrite or control a soccer ball. I cannot describe to you how to choose the right words to use when you speak. I just “know” these things. They are tacit knowledge.

The Skill of Wisdom

I have now laid out what I see to be the features common to all skills, so it is time to turn the discussion to wisdom. How is wisdom—which I will assume is understanding and living in accordance with the truth—a skill?

Consider first the nature of wisdom. An understanding of the truth about God, about ourselves, and about the world around us is not something we can pick up in a textbook. How many children have been raised in Christian homes and gone to Sunday school or catechism, only later to reject the faith? How many people may be able to give academically satisfactory answers to various moral, personal, or theological questions but do not make those ideas a part of their deepest beliefs and instincts? The understanding necessary for wisdom is the tacit knowledge that becomes ingrained in us, the sort of understanding that we do not have to think about or ponder in our day-to-day lives. Whether we are wise or not wise is based on an understanding deeply ingrained in our psyche.

The next step in our process is to consider how wisdom is acquired. I think it must be gained much like any skill, mastering an understanding of truth through practice under the tutelage of a coach, or coaches, with a healthy dose of self-evaluation until it becomes ingrained in us. In the case of wisdom, the type of “practice” needed is not like soccer or handwriting practice where a

student focuses on a skill for a set amount of time. The practice of wisdom is more like the way a baby learns language. It is part of the routine of our life, something we spend our entire lives practicing and honing—but especially during our youth.

An example of practicing wisdom would be a young adult trying to come to an understanding of the truth about sinful human nature. Consider a young man who has been instructed and nurtured to seek goodness and kindness. As he matures, he begins to be-

come conscious of the fact that he is not always kind and good. His actions are not in keeping with his understanding of what he believes about himself. He begins the process of self-evaluation. These realizations are then brought to bear on his beliefs about what people in general are like. His beliefs are most likely going to come from the culture around him. There will be differing perspectives, some explicit and others implied. He may choose one doctrine over another. Or he may simply imbibe the culturally popular outlook. But how that plays out in his life will depend on whether that doctrine or outlook becomes ingrained. He will continue to have experiences and receive teaching about his nature. If he is fortunate, he will have good coaches and teachers to guide him toward what is true instead of what is false. If he begins to take on beliefs which are wide of the mark, then those beliefs will be hard to reverse, much like poor technique on the soccer field.

Perhaps most important of all, the young adult needs to constantly self-evaluate. If he comes to a conclusion and dogmatizes it, he has little chance of making improvements in his understanding. To self-evaluate, he needs to develop other important skills to allow his evaluation to be accurate and just. He needs to be able to weigh the information he receives from his teachers and from his culture. He needs to begin to build a coherent view of himself that explains not only his own experience but also the experiences of others, whether those others are from his present or from the past. He needs to develop critical thinking skills to compare differing claims to each other and to experience. In short, he needs to develop the tools of learning.

To the extent that the young adult understands in his heart what is true about himself, he will gain wisdom. As he lives and grows, God, the best of all coaches, continues to show him his shortcomings and failings, and he will become even more wise.

I hope you can see how this example can be applied to other aspects of understanding the truth about the world around us. We learn to understand how God looks at us and what

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He values. We gain an understanding of compassion and mercy. We understand better what

drives other people in their choices and what satisfies us. This is the wisdom that the Bible refers to. But the same process is true about more mundane wisdom, wisdom about the truth of nature and society. We can gain an understanding of plants and animals as well as the media or bureaucracy. We can take classes and read books on these things, but a more personal understanding must come from interaction with these things over time. The more we understand them, the more that understanding becomes ingrained in our thinking; the more that understanding is a part of our everyday responses to life, the wiser we become. This sort of understanding is not something that can be taught in a book. It is a skill.

Clearly, everyone’s path to wisdom will be different. For some, the process is more difficult and painful. Some have had horrific coaches that have taught them terrible habits. Some may have been injured either intellectually or emotionally, thus putting another stumbling block in their path. Some have more or less talent in the development of wisdom, just as some are more or less athletically or intellectually talented. Most often these obstacles are not from our own choices; they are foisted upon us. Coming to grips with them may even play a role in our developing wisdom. I mention these obstacles because I do not wish to downplay the difficulty of the task. In the end, we must trust that God is merciful and loving and will grant us the wisdom we desire. But working to develop the skill of wisdom is a worthy task, one to which we are called and one we can improve on our whole lives. It is certainly a worthy goal of education. Ω



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Circe Conference



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Beauty: The Beginning and End of Classical Education." Other speakers include Andrew Kern, David Hicks, Gregory Wolfe, and Sarah MacKenzie. Tickets can be purchased at www.circeinstitute.org.

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Gutenberg College
 McKenzie Study Center • Art Project
 1883 University Street
 Eugene, OR 97403

TELEPHONE: 541-683-5141
 541-485-4801 (MSC/AP)
 FAX: 541-683-6997
 EMAIL: office@gutenberg.edu
 INTERNET: www.gutenberg.edu

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