

CHAPTER II

The Two Systems

“The only avenue towards wisdom is by freedom in the presence of knowledge. But the only avenue towards knowledge is by discipline in the acquirement of ordered fact.”

Alfred North Whitehead, “The Rhythmic Claims of Freedom and Discipline”

• A Café in Mexico City

Think back to your high school Spanish class. Or French, or whichever language stood between you and your diploma.

You did the work. You filled in the worksheets and memorized the vocabulary lists. You conjugated verbs on the chalkboard, so many verbs. You took the final exam and got an A. As far as the school was concerned, you had learned the language, and your transcript says so to this day.

It’s a comforting picture. We’d like knowledge to be bankable, like a deposit in a checking account: effort paid in on a Tuesday in 1998, withdrawn on demand in 2026.

Now fast-forward ten years. You’re on vacation in Mexico City, and you walk into a crowded, noisy café to order a coffee and a pastry. You step up to

the counter. The barista looks at you. The line forms behind you. And your mind is... empty. Dial tone.

Rusty would be a kind word for it. Standing there, with the line growing, you realize the language was never yours in the first place. What you did in that classroom, for three years, was a performance of learning, graded and certified. We accept that performance as a normal part of growing up, and we spend decades of our lives and trillions of dollars on it.

This chapter explains what happened in that classroom, and what a Spanish class that works would look like. The explanation rests on a claim that sounds, at first, like common sense.

Learning runs on two systems, Inquiry and Practice. A good model of learning optimizes both. More important still, it integrates them, because Inquiry reinforces Practice, and Practice reinforces Inquiry in turn.

Old Wisdom

Every tradition of teaching has some version of this split. Ordinary speech has *learning* and *training*: you learn why a bridge stands, and you train to weld its joints. The decision sciences have exploration and exploitation. James March, writing about how organizations learn, described the pull between searching for new possibilities and refining what already works, and showed that an organization that does only one of them eventually suffers for it. The learning sciences have conceptual and procedural knowledge, knowing why and knowing how, and a long research record on how the two grow together.

So the distinction is universal, and I claim no credit for it.

Schools know it too. Describe learning as understanding something and then rehearsing it until it's yours, and any principal will nod. Teach the concept, then assign the practice problems. The lesson is the Inquiry and the homework is the Practice. The whole school day is built on this common-sense standard.

Let's take that standard at its word and hold school up against it. What turns up is a failure of structure, at every level: in how school handles Inquiry, in how it handles Practice, and in how, or whether, it connects the two.

❧ Three Matrices

Inquiry

	THE MODEL'S INQUIRY	SCHOOL "INQUIRY"
Who owns the question	The learner, whatever its source	The curriculum: a "guiding question" the whole class shares
Fit to the learner	A standing demand that the method meet this learner where they are	One pace, one unit, the same question for everyone regardless of readiness
Contact with the real thing	The domain answers to neither learner nor teacher; Inquiry meets it as it is	Softened until the real constraints are gone, so the "discovery" can't fail
When it fails	A learner who mistakes owning the question for authoring the answer	A learner who performs inquiry for a grade and discovers what the teacher already knew

Start with the first row. Who owns the question at nine o'clock on a Tuesday morning in a biology class? The curriculum does. The teacher writes a guiding question on the whiteboard ("How does cellular respiration work?"), and thirty different people are expected to wonder about it, on cue. You probably remember copying those questions into your notebook so the teacher could check that you had. Wonder can be invited, and it can be caught. Mandated, it becomes a request, and the students fulfill it.

The second row is fit. A learner who owns a question adjusts the pursuit to their own reach without being told. A book that's too hard gets swapped for an easier one; an answer that comes too easily sends them looking for a harder source. Real inquiry keeps finding the edge of what the learner can do. The classroom has one textbook and a three-week unit, and it runs those three weeks whether you understood cellular respiration on day two or were still lost on day twenty.

The third row, contact with the real thing, is where the deepest damage happens. The real world pushes back. It has constraints, and it's indifferent to anyone's feelings or lesson plan. School softens those constraints the way bumpers soften a bowling lane. The lab worksheet lists every step of an experiment whose only possible outcome is the one on the teacher's answer key. If your solution turns blue instead of pink, you rinse the beaker, copy your partner's numbers, and write down *pink*. A discovery that can't fail is a staged reading.

The failures follow. The mild one is the student who learns to play the game: inquiry becomes the art of discovering what's inside the teacher's head. You learn Mr. Smith's history, well enough to hand it back to him on Friday. The serious one comes from the missing constraints. A learner who never feels the world push back can come to believe that owning a question entitles them to author its answer.

Practice

	THE MODEL'S PRACTICE	SCHOOL "PRACTICE"
Where ownership sits	The destination: the skill becomes truly the learner's, once the effort has done its work	Rarely reached: the worksheet is finished on submission, whether or not the skill became anyone's own
Fit to the learner	Developmental reach: the sequence and reps are built to close this learner's actual gap	One pace, one problem set, the same twenty questions for the whole class
Contact with the real thing	Built to meet a real standard, correct forms that exist in the world	Quantity stands in for correctness: "twenty problems" in place of "until it's right"
When it fails	Structure with no ownership at the end: motion completed, never made anyone's own	A worksheet finished and forgotten, the procedure performed for credit and discarded once the grade is recorded

In the world, you practice a skill until it's yours. In school, practice is complete when the worksheet is handed in. Submission is the finish line.

Consider the difference between a treadmill and a train. On the treadmill, you set the timer for thirty minutes. You can jog lightly, hold the rails, and

watch the television on the wall. When the timer beeps, you're done. The motion happened, and nothing rode on it.

Now picture running for a commuter train. You hear the whistle and see the conductor check his watch. Your heart rate jumps, from adrenaline as much as effort. You weave through the crowd, hop a puddle, and sprint as fast as your legs will carry you, because the constraint is real: you make those doors, or you wait on the platform for an hour. You own the result.

The worksheet is the treadmill. Twenty problems, the timer dings, the paper goes in, and the procedure is performed for credit and forgotten.

Integration

	THE MODEL'S INTEGRATION	SCHOOL "INTEGRATION"
What the two systems share	The same object: one referent, one context, one set of real stakes	A subject label and a slot on the schedule: "we cover fractions this week"
Direction of influence	Both ways: what's discovered reshapes what gets drilled next, and what's drilled raises the next thing worth discovering	One way at best, often none: a lesson precedes a worksheet, and neither changes because of the other
Proximity	Close enough that a result in one changes the very next step in the other: same sitting, day, or week, by the object's size	Same unit, same month, sometimes the same day, with nothing carried across; adjacency stands in for connection
The signal it's working	Engagement moves together across both, because both are aimed at the same real thing	No shared signal: the worksheet gets one grade, the project another, on separate rubrics
When it fails	A shared object claimed on paper and never lived in, so the loop never closes	Two well-tuned halves of a day that never shared anything to reinforce

School integrates by adjacency. On Tuesday morning the teacher lectures on fractions, and on Tuesday night you do a worksheet on fractions. They share a word, so they must be connected.

They share a topic, and influence runs in neither direction. The worksheet you did on Tuesday night was printed on Monday afternoon, before anyone asked a brilliant question in the lecture. The practice is deaf to the inquiry. A

lab on Wednesday meets its multiple-choice test two weeks later. The project gets a presentation grade and the worksheet gets a completion grade, so you can earn an A on one and an F on the other, and the system sees no contradiction. The two halves of the day stay separated by the ringing of a bell.

Hold almost any classroom up against these three matrices and the same failures turn up, in order. Inquiry fails: the question belongs to the curriculum, and inquiry becomes a performance. Practice fails: the worksheet counts as finished whether or not the skill became anyone's own. Integration fails hardest of all. Even where a school gets pieces of each right, one almost never changes because of the other.

The Form Is the Cause

It's tempting to blame the adults in the room. Uninspired teachers, lazy administrators. Let's set that aside. Many of the teachers in these rooms are gifted and devoted, and they fail in the same three ways anyway. The cause sits in the classroom form itself: one adult, thirty children, one room, one shared curriculum.

Imagine being that adult. You can't facilitate thirty individually owned questions at once. So the curriculum has to own the question. The class moves at one pace because the grading period ends on Friday, and the skill is finished on Friday whether or not it became anyone's own. The worksheet is graded on completion because assessing thirty separate paths to mastery isn't possible for one person with a stack of papers and an evening. And because math happens in room 204 at nine and science in room 315 at eleven, and the school stands apart from ordinary life, there's no real object with real stakes for the two systems to share.

The form dictates the failure.

Working backward from the matrices gives three requirements. Learning needs **ownership**, **developmental reach**, and a **shared real object**. The classroom form can supply none of the three. Schools that succeed do so by

leaving the form in some way: smaller ratios, individual pacing, real work with real consequences.

Technology can supply one of the three: pacing. For a decade, education software companies have made exactly this pitch. The classroom moves everyone at one speed, so we built an app that adapts to each learner. They found a real problem, and the solution is impressive. And yet pacing alone builds a highly optimized Practice engine, spinning fast and connected to nothing. Put a child on an adaptive math app for an hour and you get an engine revving on blocks: the child swipes and drills faster and faster, and the fluency never reaches a question they care about.

So the model starts from a different form, built around the three requirements. The rest of this chapter defines them, starting with the two systems themselves.

What Inquiry Requires

The three requirements follow from what Inquiry and Practice are. Start with Inquiry.

***Inquiry** is a sustained pursuit of a question the learner owns, shaped by their own developmental reach and by the real structure of what's being learned.*

The definition has three parts.

Ownership sits with the learner. The question is theirs, whatever its source. A parent can suggest it, a book can plant it, a friend can dare them into it; once the learner takes it up as their own, it counts.¹

Developmental reach is where the learner meets whoever or whatever is teaching them. It names where the learner actually is, and it's a standing demand that the method adapt to that spot. It belongs to the meeting, so it moves when the method moves.

The real structure of what's being learned answers to neither of them. It's the actual shape of the domain, indifferent to the learner's preferences and the educator's plan, and Inquiry has to meet it as it is.

If ownership sits entirely with the learner, don't we invite chaos? A child decides to inquire into the moon, and because it's their question, they develop a theory that the moon is made of cheese. Praise them for owning their learning and you've rewarded confirmation bias, perhaps even delusion. Critics of progressive education have made this argument for a century, and they have a point. Ownership with nothing to push against produces a person who believes reality bends to their curiosity.

The third part is the answer. The moon is indifferent to the child's question. Owning the question gives the learner the right to ask it and the duty to hold it up against the world, and the world decides what the answer is. The safeguard against intellectual arrogance is reality itself.

This is also what separates Inquiry from curiosity. Curiosity is looking at the moon and wondering what it's made of. Inquiry is curiosity given method: the willingness to hold a question long enough, and test it hard enough, for the domain to change your mind. That makes Inquiry uncomfortable by design. Reality is going to push back on your first assumptions, and the pushback is where the learning happens.

The mechanism is the same at every age.

A four-year-old in the backyard asks where the ants sleep. The question is hers. Her reach is exactly right for it: eyes to track the line, feet to follow it, no textbook required. And the ants are going somewhere specific. She can't decide they sleep in the tree because trees are pretty. The trail leads around the rock, across the dirt, and down into the anthill, and the anthill answers her.

A ten-year-old folding paper airplanes wonders whether the nose, folded over twice, will fly farther. The question is his, and the method matches his hands. The domain is now aerodynamics, and gravity is a harsh grader. If the double fold makes the nose too heavy, the plane dives straight into the carpet, and he can't insist it flew farthest in spirit. He revises his idea of how weight sits on a wing.

A sixteen-year-old reads three accounts of the same battle and asks which author had something to gain. The subject is far more complex; the mechanism hasn't changed at all. She may start out rooting for one author as the honest one. If cross-referencing shows he misreported the troop movements, the documents change her mind.

And an adult explains a theory they've held for a decade at a dinner party, and someone politely exposes a hole in it. For an adult, this is the hardest version. Inquiry, at that table, takes courage: holding your embarrassment and the question together long enough for the evidence to take your answer apart.

Here's a hypothesis I'd like to test. We usually assume ownership comes first: you own a question, so you engage with it. I suspect it runs the other way too. Spend three hours adjusting the folds on a paper airplane, crashing it over and over, and the question you asked casually at the start is now much more deeply yours. Sustained engagement may deepen ownership, just as ownership drives engagement. I haven't found this in the literature yet, and Chapter 4, on engagement, picks it up again.²

✶ What Practice Requires

Inquiry gives you the question and the friction. Practice builds the capacity to act on it: to fold the paper precisely, to read the eighteenth-century hand, to conjugate the verb before the barista loses patience.

***Practice** is the deliberately structured effort to acquire and own a domain of skills.*

The definition holds four things together.

Ownership is the destination. You don't own the skill when you start. The effort produces a skill that becomes truly yours.

Structure is what makes it Practice. Call it the architecture of effort: a designed sequence, feedback tuned to actual performance, and thresholds that mark real progress.

A **domain of skills** has its own structure, standards and correct forms that exist in the world, and the effort is built to meet them.

Developmental reach sets how well the structure fits this particular learner. A good fit is what makes practice effective.

Practice is bounded and repeatable. The target is known, the reps can be counted, and progress can be measured against a threshold.

Music makes the architecture easy to see. Invite a few friends over, plug in the amps in the garage, and jam for three hours. It's a wonderful experience: loose, expressive, fun. You might even stumble into some inquiry. (What happens if I play a minor chord here?) And you could jam in that garage every weekend for ten years without getting much better at the guitar.

Practice is sitting alone in a quiet room with a metronome set to 60 beats per minute, running one scale up and down the fretboard. It's tedious. Your fingertips grow calluses. It also has every part of the architecture: a designed sequence (the scale), real-time feedback (the relentless click telling you you're behind the beat), and a threshold (no moving to 65 until three clean runs in a row). The metronome is a standard that exists in the world. It has no interest in whether you're tired or expressing yourself. It asks for accuracy.

A musician needs both the garage and the quiet room, and neither one can stand in for the other. The two can also overlap. Midway through the scale you notice your fourth finger always lags on the same string and start to wonder why, and for a few minutes you're inquiring and practicing at once.

Which brings up a trap I'll call the **Experience temptation**. Progressive educators see, correctly, how dull traditional worksheets are, and some overcorrect. *Practice* sounds authoritarian, too much like drill, so they rename it *experience*, or *experiential learning*. The trouble is that Inquiry is also an experience. Rename Practice as Experience and it swallows Inquiry whole, and the split between the two systems dissolves into an undifferentiated soup of doing things. The garage jam wins by default. The experiential quality both systems can carry is real and worth designing for, and the model handles it as its own dial, fidelity, in Chapter 6.³

Two mechanisms make Practice work at every age: **mastery thresholds** and **spaced repetition**. Chapter 12 develops both.⁴ You can see them long before anyone names them.

A toddler sets the smaller cup on the larger one, over and over. The threshold is gravity: the tower stands or it falls. The spacing is the toddler returning to the same cups on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday, until the hands catch up with the intention.

A seven-year-old forms the same letter, erases it, and forms it again, until the hand produces it evenly. The threshold is legibility against the standard of the alphabet.

A fourteen-year-old runs scales. An adult drills a new language's verb conjugations on a spaced schedule: today, again in three days, again in a week. The threshold is instant recall.

Two Gears

Two well-functioning systems running side by side eventually stall. They have to mesh, and the reason lies in how memory works.

Working memory, the part of your mind holding whatever you're consciously thinking about right now, is small. Estimates run to about four new items at once, perhaps a few more. Overload it and the system seizes, like an old computer with too many tabs open. Long-term memory, by contrast, is practically bottomless. John Sweller built cognitive load theory on this asymmetry.

Practice moves a skill out of the bottleneck and into long-term storage. Run the scale against the metronome often enough and the fingering becomes automatic. You no longer spend working memory deciding where each finger goes, and the freed attention can go somewhere else: what feeling you want the solo to carry, say.

If you learned to drive a stick shift, you remember the first time. It took all of you. You stared at your feet, balancing clutch against gas, gripping the

wheel, and if your passenger asked a question you practically told them to be quiet. You had no attention left for language.

Three years later you're on the highway. Shifting, checking mirrors, and working the pedals have become automatic. You can hold a long conversation, follow the radio, and arrive across town with no memory of the last ten miles. Practice freed your attention for everything else.

The flow runs the other way too. Hit a snowstorm and the car starts to slide. Your inquiry into what the car is doing (why it slides, when the tires grip) tells you there's a new response to drill: steering into the skid, easing off the brake. Inquiry gives Practice its next assignment, and its reason.

So the relationship has two directions:

- **Practice produces fluency**, and fluency frees attention for Inquiry.
- **Inquiry produces understanding**, and understanding tells Practice what to drill next and why the drill matters.

Picture two gears. They're distinct, they're shaped differently, and they turn at different speeds. Their teeth have to lock for either one to drive anything. The mesh is imperfect, and the gears slip, catch, and slip again, which matches what researchers on conceptual and procedural knowledge found: each advances the other in iterative turns.⁵

The turns follow no fixed schedule. A session never has to run five minutes of Inquiry, then five of Practice. Sometimes Inquiry slams into a wall and you realize you lack a skill, so you drop into Practice to build it. Sometimes crossing a threshold in Practice opens a view for Inquiry you couldn't see from below. And sometimes, as with the lagging finger on the fretboard, both gears turn in the same moment.

Growth compounds when the gears mesh, faster than either system produces alone. A Practice gear spinning without its partner is the engine on blocks. An Inquiry gear spinning alone hits a ceiling, because nothing has been built to test the next idea on.

Inquiry and Practice drive each other where they mesh

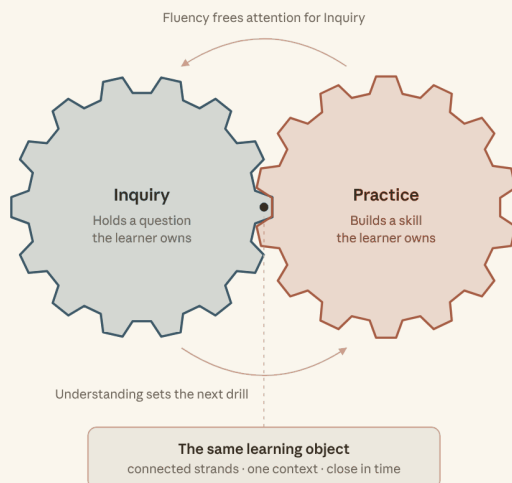


Figure 2.1 · the two gears

The gears lock only at one point: a learning object both systems share.

🔧 The Same Learning Object

How do you make the gears mesh, and keep from building shinier treadmills? Here's the rule: for Inquiry and Practice to integrate, they have to work on the same learning object.

An object here means more than a physical thing. A learning object rarely stands alone. It sits in a web of related skills and understandings, joined to others by shared strands, much as Kurt Fischer described development.⁶ Two activities are on the same learning object when they share three things:

1. **Connected strands.** Both activities work on connected strands of the same web, so a gain in one changes what's possible in the other. Improve the drill and the inquiry can reach further.
2. **A context.** The same setting and the same stakes, so that what happens in one activity changes the conditions of the other.

3. **Proximity.** Close enough in time that a result in one can alter the next step in the other: within the same session, day, or week, depending on the object's size.

Sameness comes in degrees. The more strands two activities share, the more strongly they reinforce each other. Objects also nest: scaling a recipe sits inside baking, which sits inside running a household. When all three conditions hold, Inquiry and Practice feed each other directly. When any one fails, the activities become parallel tracks that share a topic and little else.

A Loaf of Bread

In Chapter 1, Nora doubled a recipe to feed the neighbors. Let's follow her into the next month, when doubling has become a household habit.

The object is the loaf on the kitchen counter. The web around it includes arithmetic, the chemistry of dough, and the stakes of feeding a family.

The Practice is scaling quantities. Every bake, Nora measures the flour, water, salt, and yeast and doubles each one. Across several bakes in a month, two times three-quarters of a cup becomes one and a half cups without a pause.

Then, on a warm Tuesday, the doubled dough rises explosively, collapses in on itself, and bakes into a dense brick. The arithmetic was perfect. Dinner is ruined.

A kitchen disaster, and a rich one. A question is born on the spot: why did doubling work for the flour and fail for the yeast? Nora owns that question completely, because it's her loaf and her family's dinner. The domain pushed back on her assumption that every ingredient scales the same way.

So she forms a guess. Maybe yeast behaves less like an amount and more like a rate, a speed at which the dough works, and a big warm batch of dough runs faster. On Thursday she tests it: double the flour and water, and hold the yeast closer to a single batch. The dough rises more slowly, and the loaf comes out right. The guess survives its test, and her mother shows her how bakers write it down: large batches, less yeast per cup of flour.

All three conditions hold. Both activities work on the loaf on the counter. The kitchen and the family's dinner are the context for both. And the collapsed loaf on Tuesday sets the drill for Thursday: the scaling rule Nora practices now has an exception in it, and the exception is hers.

Compare fraction worksheets in the morning and baking in the afternoon. They share a topic, scaling, and fail the test on context and proximity. The worksheet's fractions never touch the loaf.

A Household Budget

A richer object can hold several connected strands at once, with Inquiry and Practice running on each. Take a family's budget for one month, and a teenager given a real share of running it.

STRAND	INQUIRY	PRACTICE
Choosing	What does it feel like to choose between two things you want, and why does one choice sit better afterward?	A daily personal spending log, kept until recording comes before spending
The arithmetic	Why did the projected total miss the real one by the same amount every month?	The ledger and the spreadsheet formulas, repeated until the monthly close takes minutes
What "enough" means	What does this family mean by <i>enough</i> , and how did that meaning come to be?	The weekly budget conversation, same time, same form, until it runs itself
The bills	Why did the electricity bill rise while usage stayed flat, and who sets the rate?	Reading each bill's line items monthly until a utility statement's layout is familiar

The strands share one web (this month's money), one context (this household, with real consequences), and one window of time (the month). Because they're connected, a gain on one changes what's possible on another. The family's answer about *enough* reshapes the spending log the following week. The arithmetic makes the question about the bill answerable.

The object is also strong on the two dials from Chapter 1: fidelity (real money, real bills) and worth (the family uses the result).⁷

✿ Across the Lifespan

One example per age band, each with Inquiry and Practice on the same object, in the same setting.

Early childhood: setting the table. Every evening, a four-year-old lays out the same count of forks and plates, until matching one fork to one plate is automatic. That's the Practice. Then a guest is coming, and the count changes. Why one more? What if two people come? That's the Inquiry. The table is the object, and both systems run through it.

Middle childhood: a lemonade stand. A nine-year-old makes change on a spaced schedule, a few Saturdays running, until it's fast. When the price rises by a quarter, sales drop, and she wants to know why, and what a graph of the afternoon would look like. The cash box is the mastery gate: she runs it alone once her change comes out right every time.

Adolescence: restoring a bicycle. A fifteen-year-old trues a wheel until the wobble is gone, then does it again on the next wheel, and the next. Along the way he asks why tightening the spokes on one side pulls the rim toward it, and what that says about force and balance. The wheel is the object, and the physics rides on it.

Adulthood: a language for a move. An adult moving to Mexico City drills verb conjugations on a spaced schedule and reads the local paper every morning. She notices the same verb form in headline after headline and asks why. The newspaper feeds the drill, and the drill unlocks the newspaper.

Picture her six months later, in the same crowded café where the high school Spanish went silent. She orders the coffee and the pastry, and then asks the barista what's good today. The language she practiced is the language she asked her questions in. It's hers.

✿ What Carries Forward

The chapter leaves four claims for the rest of the book to build on.

Both systems belong at the foundation. Neither one accounts for learning on its own.

Growth compounds when the two mesh, faster than either system produces alone.

Integration is a property of a single experience. Two well-tuned loops running in parallel, however good each is on its own, fail to reinforce each other.

Integration requires the same learning object on both systems, in the same context, close in time. Later chapters on fidelity, worth, and the design of the environment build on this rule.⁸

The two systems alternate and overlap, with no fixed order. Chapter 3 grounds that claim in the evidence, and Chapter 13 takes up Fischer's account of how skills grow along a nonlinear web.⁹

• Open Questions

A few questions stay open, and later chapters return to them.

- How close in time must Inquiry and Practice on the same object be for the mesh to hold? The same day, the same week, the same season?
- Does the alternation between the two systems generalize to lines of development where the “procedure” is a habit of attention (moral, aesthetic) rather than an algorithm?
- What's the smallest workable mesh for a school that has already built a strong engine for one system alone?
- How can engagement be read to show whether the mesh is working?¹⁰

If you have a sharper version of any of these, or a fifth, I'd like to hear it.

• Breakout: Alpha School Under the Model

Alpha School is the most serious recent attempt to fix the classroom form with technology. Its students finish core academics in about two hours a day on adaptive software, supervised by adults called guides, and spend the rest of the day on life skills, projects, sports, and the arts. The software runs on

Timeback, a platform Alpha launched for the 2025–26 school year that gathers the individual apps under one dashboard and counts “XP,” one point per minute of productive learning. In August 2026, two Houston ISD elementary campuses announced they would pilot it.

Alpha gets a great deal right. It attacks the pacing problem head-on, it takes mastery seriously, and it gives children their afternoons back. It also illustrates, with unusual clarity, the failure this chapter predicts: two loops, one for academics and one for everything else, each well tuned and neither feeding the other.

Scoring “Alpha” as a single thing would be unfair to it. Alpha is a stack of distinct tools serving distinct subjects, and the stack doesn’t score uniformly. So let’s take it apart, tool by tool, and ask three questions drawn from this chapter’s definitions:

- 1. **Ownership.** Does the tool leave room for a question that’s the learner’s own, or does it supply the question and route the learner to an answer?
- 2. **Developmental reach.** Does it adapt to where this learner actually is?
- 3. **Contact with real structure.** Does it respect the actual shape of the domain (a real mathematical structure, a real text), or flatten the domain into whatever is easiest to score?

A tool that scores well on ownership is doing Inquiry work, whatever the subject. A tool that scores well on reach and structure, without ownership, is optimized Practice: legitimate and useful on its own terms, and no substitute for Inquiry. High engagement or high test scores on such a tool are no evidence that Inquiry happened.

TOOL	SUBJECT	OWNERSHIP	REACH	REAL STRUCTURE	READS AS
Beast Academy	Math	Room for owned questions	Sequenced	Strong	Inquiry-capable

TOOL	SUBJECT	OWNERSHIP	REACH	REAL STRUCTURE	READS AS
Math Academy (formerly IXL)	Math	Supplied	Strong	Strong	Optimized Practice
AlphaRead	Reading	Supplied	Strong	Thinner (AI-generated passages)	Practice
AlphaWrite	Writing	The learner's own interests	Mastery-based	Detached from content	Ownership, reached by leaving the curriculum
eGUMPP	Grammar	Supplied	Sequenced	Strong	Practice
MobyMax	Science	Supplied	Mastery-based	Moderate	Practice
Afternoon block	Life skills, projects	Depends on the campus	Depends on the guide	Real stakes possible	Unscored: too little outside evidence

Math

Beast Academy, from Art of Problem Solving, is built around puzzles: non-routine problems with no obvious first move, which make a learner wonder why something works before they can go on. A child working one can plausibly hold a real question of their own (why does this trick work, what happens if I change this condition?) inside a structured, sequenced curriculum. It's the strongest Inquiry case in the stack, and it shows that structure and ownership can live together.

Math Academy sits at the other end of the same subject. It's diagnostic-first, mastery-gated, and built on spaced repetition: find the gap, drill the gap, confirm mastery, move on. Alpha moved to it from IXL, which works on the same principle. This is excellent Practice, and I'd score it highly on its own terms. It isn't designed to raise or sustain an owned question.

So "Is Alpha's math Inquiry or Practice?" has an awkward answer. It's both, in the same subject, side by side, with no evident mechanism

connecting them. A puzzle that stumps a child in one app doesn't set the drill in the other, and the other's drill doesn't raise the next puzzle. The chapter's whole critique, in miniature.

Reading

AlphaRead gives students progressively harder short passages, generated by AI and tailored to each reader, followed by comprehension questions. The question belongs to the tool, and the learner's job is to extract the right answer from the text. A student can have a live question about a passage (why does this character act this way?), and the tool has no way to take it up, sit with it, or follow it. It scores low on ownership however good the passages are. The shift to AI-generated passages raises a further question, separate from the two systems: how deep and coherent is the material a comprehension engine tests against?

Alpha's reading path doesn't end there, to its credit. Students move on to interactive choose-your-own-adventure stories and then, once they've shown strong reading, to physical books and classic literature. That last step is where a reader's own questions finally have somewhere to live.

Writing

Writing is where the stack splits most sharply. eGUMPP drills grammar mechanics directly. That's Practice, and defensibly so: fluent composition needs automatic command of mechanics, much as calculus needs algebra to run on its own.

AlphaWrite, a mastery-based program that moves students from sentences to paragraphs to essays, is more interesting. Natalie Wexler, reviewing a sample lesson, found the student writing about drums, and observed that the activity "isn't embedded in any curriculum content." Look at what that design implies. Alpha's writing tool finds ownership by routing around the assigned curriculum to something the student already cares about. That's the ownership clause working as intended. It's also a quiet concession: left to itself, the curriculum-facing side of the stack doesn't reliably produce

ownership, and when a tool reaches for engagement, it reaches for the learner's own interest over the syllabus. (By one Alpha parent's account, the school itself regards AlphaWrite as weak and has taken it back to the drawing board.)

Science

MobyMax teaches science in the elementary grades as a mastery-based sequence, typically about twenty hours per grade level. It's Practice-shaped, foundational, and useful. Science is also the subject where Inquiry most naturally lives, which makes its absence from the software here more noticeable.

The Afternoon Block

The afternoon is where Alpha's own framing puts self-direction: life skills, public speaking, entrepreneurship, projects, physical and social activities. It's the hardest part of the stack to score, because it depends on the campus and the guide, and specifically on how far a child's own question drives a project versus a menu of pre-built options. Some of it is plainly Practice-shaped even here: the public-speaking coaching is skill drill toward a defined competence, with feedback on pace, filler words, and clarity. The entrepreneurship projects could carry real ownership and real stakes. The evidence available from outside the school isn't detailed enough to score them with any confidence, and I'd rather say so.

What the Pass Shows

The chapter's claim holds up: Alpha runs its academic loop and its afternoon loop in parallel, and they don't reinforce each other. The tool-by-tool pass sharpens that claim in three ways.

The split runs inside subjects. It crosses the line between academics and afternoons: math alone holds an Inquiry-capable tool and a Practice-only tool, side by side, with no bridge between them.

Reading and writing diverge. AlphaRead is Practice-shaped throughout. AlphaWrite is the one academic tool built around the ownership clause, and it gets there by leaving the curriculum.

The afternoon's Inquiry credentials are asserted more than shown. The afternoon block may well be doing real Inquiry work. Claiming it does because it's unstructured is exactly the mistake this chapter's definition of Inquiry is built to catch.

A Caution on the Evidence

Most of what's known about Alpha's stack from outside comes from independent reviews, parents, journalists, and the school's own marketing, rather than from the tools themselves or a published curriculum. The stack has changed at least once (IXL to Math Academy) since some of the strongest published outcome data, and Alpha's MAP growth figures rest on internal analyses that haven't been independently verified. Treat every claim here about a specific tool as a reasoned inference from its stated design and third-party descriptions, and check it against Alpha's current materials.

Notes

1. Kieran Egan's imaginative education makes the same case for the learner's own engagement; see Chapter 14.
2. See Chapter 4, on engagement.
3. See Chapter 6, on fidelity.
4. See Chapter 12, on the mechanisms within Practice.
5. Bethany Rittle-Johnson and Robert Siegler's iterative model of conceptual and procedural knowledge, introduced in Chapter 1; see Chapter 3.
6. Fischer's dynamic skill theory describes development as a web of skills that grow in specific contexts and join as they are coordinated; see Chapter 13, "Why Each Line Must Be Raised on Purpose."
7. See Chapter 6 (fidelity) and Chapter 7 (worth).

- 8. See Chapter 6 (fidelity), Chapter 7 (worth), and Chapter 17 (designing the environment).
- 9. See Chapter 3 for the evidence on sequence, and Chapter 13, “Why Each Line Must Be Raised on Purpose,” for Fischer’s account.
- 10. See Chapter 4.

 Sources

SOURCE	USE
Alfred North Whitehead, “The Rhythmic Claims of Freedom and Discipline,” in <i>The Aims of Education</i> (1929)	Epigraph
James G. March, “Exploration and Exploitation in Organizational Learning,” <i>Organization Science</i> (1991)	The decision-science cousin of the split
John Sweller, “Cognitive Load During Problem Solving,” <i>Cognitive Science</i> (1988)	Fluency frees working memory for reasoning
Bethany Rittle-Johnson, Robert Siegler, and Martha Alibali, “Developing Conceptual Understanding and Procedural Skill in Mathematics: An Iterative Process,” <i>Journal of Educational Psychology</i> (2001)	The two gears advance in iterative turns
Austin Scholar #177: <i>The Alpha App Stack</i> (August 2025)	Alpha’s tools by subject; Timeback
Natalie Wexler, “The Alpha School Debate”	AlphaWrite’s detachment from content; AlphaRead
Alpha School, Wikipedia	Model overview; outcome claims and their verification
Houston Public Media, on Houston ISD’s Timeback pilot (August 2026)	The Houston pilot

From Inquiry and Practice, by Anatoly Lezhen. Working draft, October 2026.