

# Practice Makes Perfect!

## Teaching Effective Practice Strategies

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### Review of Research

- Practicing effectively is a learned skill. We must never assume that our students know how to practice, regardless of their level of development.
- Good practice habits need to be taught and reinforced throughout a student's development
- Practice expectations are often given in terms of time to be spent rather than goals to be achieved.
  - While practice time is important, setting expectations this way places emphasis on quantity rather than quality, although recent research suggests that employing effective practice techniques is more important than amount of practice time.
  - Students may choose music that is easy to play to fulfill time requirements rather than the more challenging parts that actually need the work.
  - Students generally end up with a better idea of what to practice than how.
- Practice may be more effective when it is structured and goal-oriented rather than time-oriented.
  - Beginning students (and even some advanced and college-level students!) often use ineffective, unstructured methods, such as playing a piece straight through a number of times with no specific goal.
  - Teachers can help students set specific, appropriate, achievable goals
  - Setting specific goals can provide a sense of purpose to practice sessions, and when a goal is met, a sense of accomplishment and purpose, which can improve student motivation, perseverance, and attitudes about practice.
- It is important for students to enjoy practice on some level if they are going to continue to improve, but unfortunately many students have negative attitudes toward practice.
  - Some factors which may help improve student attitudes include:
    - Having a quiet, comfortable place to practice free of distractions.
    - Setting specific, achievable goals, both short and long term.
    - Having a teacher model specific strategies and set clear expectations for practice.
    - Using specific practice strategies to improve effectiveness and likelihood of success.
- Practice strategies which may be effective, according to research:
  - Practicing with inflection early.
  - Identifying and immediately correcting errors.
  - Anticipating errors and slowing down or stopping in preparation.
    - Allowing errors to go uncorrected can result in "practicing in" errors.
  - Thoughtful practice.
  - Tempo manipulation.
  - Chunking, or isolating difficult sections.
  - Resting during practice or dividing practice into smaller segments.

- Listening to a model.
- Use of tools such as a metronome or pencil for marking music.
- Mental practice.
- Self-reflection and –evaluation.

### **Takeaways and Suggestions for Teaching**

- Teach students how to use specific practice strategies.
  - Chunking
    - Learn and practice music in small sections. Beginners can focus on a few measures at a time, more advanced students can focus on phrases, larger sections, and they can learn how to identify and isolate difficult sections.
  - Thoughtful/mental practice
    - Look over the measures or sections to be practiced and think through what you see. Beginners: What notes and rhythms do you see? Are there any special symbols such as bowings, articulations, or dynamics? Advanced students: Identify key signatures, tempo, potential trouble spots etc. Try to visualize the music before playing.
  - Set specific goals for each run through of the measures or section.
    - For example, “I am going to focus on intonation,” “I am going to focus on keeping my fingers close to the fingerboard,” “I am going to focus on keeping my bow straight,” “I am going to focus on character and tone.”
  - Self-reflection and error detection.
    - Review what went well.
    - Was the practice goal met?
    - If so, try again. If not, what else needs work? Set a new goal.
- Be explicit and model good practice habits.
  - It’s not enough to simply tell students what to do!
- Allow time during class or lessons for mock practice sessions.
  - In group settings, students can practice in groups or partners and assist and evaluate one another, which also promotes evaluation and error detection skills.
- Revisit practice habits consistently.
  - New skills require new practice strategies (Shifting, for example).
  - As student skill develops, practice habits change.
- Set practice expectations in terms of specific goals.
  - Review and anticipation.
    - Assign practice goals which review what was covered in class as well as preparation for work to be done in rehearsal the following day.
  - Tutorial videos.
  - Practice journals.
  - Dropbox recordings.

## References and research articles for further reading

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