

The Practice Process

Revolutionise practice to maximise
enjoyment, motivation and progress

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2 The revolution starts here!

‘So what have you been practising this week?’

It’s a fair question. And here’s what might happen in a perfect world:

If the week’s practice was set up with considerable care ... If our pupil really understood the prescribed activities and all the various ingredients involved ... If, during the actual practice, our pupil felt a sense of achievement and understood how it fitted into an enjoyable and meaningful ongoing learning programme ... And if our pupil knows that whatever has been practised will be duly acknowledged and will form the basis for the next lesson ...

... then we might expect the answer to be enthusiastic, informative and filled with a positive eagerness for the ensuing lesson.

But the truth is (if the answer is indeed truthful) that the question is more likely to be met with a rather negative and defensive response:

‘I haven’t had time to do much ...’

‘I only had time this week to go through my piece last night and it didn’t go very well.’

‘I couldn’t remember the notes of C sharp minor arpeggio and got annoyed.’

‘I didn’t really understand what you wanted me to do and besides, I was too busy.’

Pupils, from time immemorial, have found endless reasons for not practising. In Chapter 4 we’ll look at why. But right now I’d like to suggest a method through which we can get our pupils to change their attitude and begin to think much more positively and enthusiastically about their practice.

The three prongs of productive practice

If practice is delivered as a sort of ‘bolt-on’ at the end of a lesson, we certainly can’t be confident that it will be done enthusiastically, or indeed at all! We need to find a method whereby it becomes a natural extension of the lesson and will always be carried out with purpose and pleasure.

We probably do have one group of pupils who practise with pleasure – and it’s usually more than just pleasure: this group frequently really love it. I’m thinking of our beginners. It’s all new and exciting and they often can’t get enough of it. But for many, that euphoria soon begins to fade as the novelty wears off, progress seems to slow down and everything becomes more complicated.

What goes wrong? How can we retain this enthusiasm?

The whole problem has largely arisen because we have the notion that the success of our pupils' practice is mostly because of things that *they* do rather than things that *we* do. If our part in their practising process is simply giving them a list of things to do, it's highly likely that things will not be done. If we're going to start a real transformation, a practice revolution, we are going to have to take on more responsibility and begin to manage their practice with more care. This doesn't necessarily mean more work or a seismic shift in what we already do. But it will require a change of approach.

The difference is that this new approach puts practice *centre stage* in our teaching and allows pupils to see it as a natural part of a vibrant, ongoing and organic process, rather than an often tedious and only vaguely related optional extra.

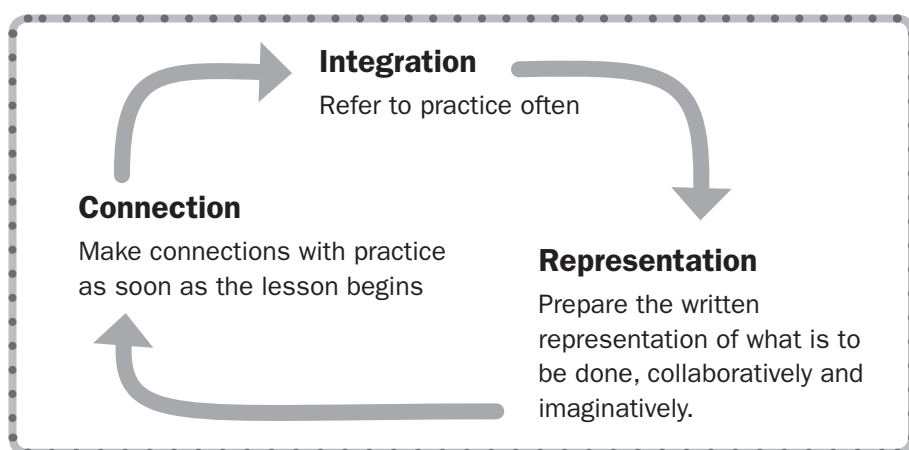
The basis of this approach is really very straightforward and simply requires us to make sure that three things happen. To some extent, we're probably doing them already – it will just be a case of refining and managing them more effectively.

- The first is that we *regularly* talk about, explain, discuss and describe the practice that our pupils are going to do, during the *whole course of the lesson*.
- The second is that we decide and set down what is to be done in collaboration with our pupils, and *in a very clear, understandable and engaging manner*. It's not a question of telling our pupils what they are to practise. The actual substance of a week's practice needs to develop as a result of a dialogue with them and it needs to be set out with imagination.
- The third is that we assiduously generate each new lesson out of the practice that pupils have done.

So, in three words:

Integration, Representation and Connection

I call this the *Simultaneous Practice Cycle*. Let's have a closer look at how it works and the ways in which we can develop our present strategies to get it going.



Integration – Representation – Connection

Transformation No.1 **Integration:** refer to practice often.

It's as simple as that. As a lesson develops we need to integrate talking about and referring to practice regularly. Try to use the following kind of questions and comments frequently:

'What would you like to practise?'

'What do you think is important to practise here?'

'When you practise this ...'

'Are you clear about how to practise that?'

'Which connection will you make first?'

'How might you practise this?'

'I think you'll really enjoy practising ...'

'Do you think you'll need to practise this? How will you do it?'

'How much of this piece would you like to work on?'

'What will you think about when practising this?'

'Could you tell me how you're going to practise that?'

'What will be your first thought when you begin practising?'

In a way the *primary function* of a lesson is to set up the week's practice – especially if we'd like some to be done! As we continually integrate practice in this way, two very important things are happening in our pupils' minds. Firstly they are learning to feel comfortable with the idea, and secondly we are beginning to develop their confidence and appetite to engage willingly and enthusiastically with it. We are personalising it and making it feel friendly. The *concept* of practice begins to feel warmer, cosier and more secure rather than cold, distant and perhaps threatening – the sort of place so many pupils currently associate with practice. Listen to your tone of voice, too, when discussing practice – it should always be warm, encouraging and sincere. From lesson one onwards practice must be delivered as a natural and pleasant *extension* of the lesson.

Integration – **Representation** – Connection

Transformation No 2 **Representation:** prepare the written representation of what is to be done, collaboratively and imaginatively.

How do we usually indicate what pupils are to practise? Perhaps we make a list in our pupils' notebooks, or in one of those special practice books that come with inviting cartoons on the cover. Perhaps we simply tick pieces in their book. And when do we scribble down these requests? Usually at the end of the lesson when the time is running out fast ...

Do pupils take much notice of these often barely decipherable invitations to work at this technical point, practise such and such a piece or song and work at these (probably unrelated) scales?

Perhaps I'm being a little unfair – many teachers do take a lot of trouble over their practice wish list. Even so, many pupils still take little notice. In regular conversations I've had with young learners, the number who admit to ignoring their teachers' practice suggestions is disturbingly high.

If we are to engage the maximum number of pupils in the most effective practice, we need to move away from the end-of-the-lesson list and find an alternative that will attract the imagination, cause pupils to look forward to practising and help them really develop their playing or singing.

The answer to that alternative lies in embracing the knowledge that brains are organic rather than linear learning devices. Instead of 'the list', we need to show pupils how the various elements connect. How, when practising, pupils can flow easily and knowingly from one element to another, *always achieving* and developing true understanding and confidence. This really is very important – too often the effort that pupils put in to practice shows little benefit and there are few (or indeed no) rewards: a process destined for failure. **Pupils must see and understand the rewards of their work if we are to turn practice into a positive experience.**

1 A style of teaching I have developed and written about in *Improve Your Teaching, Teaching Beginners* and *The Virtuoso Teacher* (Faber Music). See the end of this chapter for a brief explanation.

If you are a Simultaneous Learning teacher¹ you will know how important it is to teach through making relevant connections, all the time showing pupils how those connections fit into the bigger picture, and travelling through each lesson by building on existing skills and understanding. This is how you need to proceed within the practice environment, so to this end I have devised the **Simultaneous Learning Practice Map**. Instead of a list, we can map the areas and activities for practice in a visual way so that pupils really see the relevance of what they are doing and how it all connects. Additionally, the great advantage of the Practice Map is that we generate it *during* the lesson (not at the end) and always in collaboration with our pupils. We'll go into detail on exactly how to use the Practice Map in the next chapter.

Integration – Representation – **Connection**

Transformation No.3 **Connection**: make connections with practice as soon as the new lesson begins.

The third prong of the Simultaneous Practice Cycle is making meaningful and clear connections with what has been practised, *at the beginning of the lesson*. Whilst teachers do usually draw on what their pupils may have practised at some point in the lesson, if we are to make a real difference, we must make that connection *right away*. This demonstrates to pupils the considerable importance we attach to their practice (whatever they managed to do) and how it will constitute the basis of their ongoing learning process. I have seen so many lessons where pupils' practice was only alluded to, almost in passing, or was even taken for granted. Neither approach will strengthen pupils' relationship with practice.

Talk to pupils about what they actually did and ensure there is lots of praise for their choices, the connections they made, the effort they put in and the strategies used as well as their achievements. In fact, giving pupils the chance

to talk about their recent practice and offering positive and constructive feedback and appreciation in such close proximity to their work is the *lifeblood of this method*. This conversation has to occur when pupils are most interested and can make the best use of the feedback.

So, in summary, we need to make three transformations:

- In the lesson, refer to practice a lot more often.
- Make the written representation of practice imaginative, engaging, and very much in collaboration with the pupil.
- Make connections with practice as soon as the lesson begins.

Not massive, but massively significant. Put the Simultaneous Practice Cycle into motion and watch how self-motivation and self-responsibility begin to grow.

‘So what *have* you been practising this week?’

Over time, and if we really get into the flow, this question will begin to be treated seriously. Pupils will grow in their deep understanding of how the whole process works. Their practice ceases to be a remote or disconnected activity – it is acknowledged as a major part of their learning. They know that the first thing the teacher will ask is what they have practised – not to find out whether they did any, but because it will play a vital role in what happens next. It is then up to us to accept, unconditionally for the most part, whatever the answer is.

‘I just practised the first note of this piece – working on sound quality and expression.’

‘I’ve been exploring and connecting all the ingredients in this piece.’

‘I worked on the first two notes of the C sharp minor arpeggio.’

‘I’ve been working on an improvisation based on the ingredients from my new song.’

‘I’ve been working on the whole first movement of this sonata.’

‘I’ve been experimenting with staccato.’

Whatever the answer, we take it (or part of it) as the starting point of our lesson: our Simultaneous Learning warm-ups. It is always our pupils who will determine the initial direction of the lesson. They will soon begin to understand their fundamental importance in the teaching/learning process. Allow the process to develop naturally and don’t be in a hurry for the penny to drop. It will eventually, and you will have begun to develop pupils for whom the concept of practice is seen as a natural and approachable extension of the lesson.

As this method becomes more and more familiar, we will begin to notice a momentum building up, a flow of energy that will really enthuse our pupils – and, in turn, ourselves.

Simultaneous Learning

I devised Simultaneous Learning as an entirely positive, non-judgmental and imaginative way to teach. Through this method, we move far away from the tedious and negative form of teaching that spends most of its time reacting to poor work, mistakes and a general lack of real understanding. It is based on an approach that takes into account the fact that the brain is an organic, not linear, learning device. It embraces the understanding that all the elements of music are connected. It sets up a positive energy and a positive learning environment that really motivates pupils because they are always achieving and understanding. I have written about it extensively in *Improve Your Teaching!*, *Teaching Beginners* and *The Virtuoso Teacher*.

Here is a brief introduction for those who are not familiar with it. It is based on three principles:

Teach pro-actively

To begin, we set up short, single-focussed *sequential* activities – each one leading to and from something the pupil can do. The pupil is therefore always achieving and building up a broader understanding of how everything fits together. Learning and skill building become enjoyable, imaginative and positive, and the process becomes an exciting voyage of discovery.

As the understanding of a piece's ingredients and musical concepts becomes clear, we can then move on to setting up (still pro-actively) longer sections or passages – four bars, half a piece and eventually a whole piece. We will 'react' (as we did in the shorter activities) but always to well-prepared work. Our response can then be affirmative, suggesting refinements and more single-focussed work where necessary. Simultaneous Learning is energising for both pupil and teacher. Mistakes are few and far between (pupils will generally know if they make one and will be able to deal with the problem creatively). Pupils are always motivated.

Teach from the ingredients

We identify and work at various ingredients in the piece or song being learned (the key, scale, character, rhythmic patterns, markings, etc.) through short improvisation and imaginative exercises and then ...

... make connections

We move forward (through these short sequential activities) by making appropriate connections using the chosen ingredients. Perhaps we begin with the key of the piece and connect with the scale ... then the scale with a rhythm from the piece ... the rhythm with some aural ... aural with some theory ... theory with some sight-reading ... sight reading with some improvisation. Then back to another aspect of the piece for the next Simultaneous Learning journey.

2 Of course, everything connects to everything, but the map gives a good general impression.

By working with our pupils around the 'map' of learning, they really understand how it all fits together.²

The Simultaneous Learning map

