

How to Practice

“Practice does not make perfect. Only perfect practice makes perfect.” –Vince Lombardi

Becoming an expert is no simple task. Mastery does not come easy as many people simply do not have the will and discipline to become better bass players. Throughout the years, I have witnessed that the students who progress the fastest and furthest are those who understand how to practice effectively. Before we break down the essentials for effective practicing, here are a few terms that we need to define:

1. **Preparation:** Understanding how to set goals and organise a plan.
2. **Practice:** This is the actual time you spend with your instrument where you are working towards developing skills through repetition, evaluation and re-evaluation. This is the time for “thinking.”
3. **Reflective Practice:** This is where you “track & measure” your progress.
4. **Performance:** This is playing! It is the summation of your technical expertise in the form of self expression. If there is any “thinking” going on, then to some degree, you are not performing, but continuing to practice.

One thing should be obviously clear from these definitions- practice and playing are not synonymous!

Adopt the Beginner’s Mind

This often told Zen parable explains this concept:

The story is about a University professor who visits a Zen master to inquire about Zen philosophy. However, when the professor is there, he ends up talking more about himself than listening to the master. In response, the Zen master began pouring the professor’s tea until it spilled out of the cup and onto the table. “What are you doing?” exclaimed the professor! “Like this cup, you are too filled with your own ideas” replied the master. “How can I teach you anything while your cup is too full? In order for me to teach you, you must first empty your cup!”

When we empty our cup, we get rid of any preconceptions that blocks learning something new. This is the true beginner’s mind that is required for accelerated learning.

Setting Goals

Goal setting is basically writing down collections of long term, medium term and short term goals. Weekly and daily “to do” lists are a great way of listing your goals. The disciplined act of asking yourself questions like, “What do I really want?” “What do I want my playing like in five years?” and then writing down answers is extremely productive in the learning process.

You must learn to link everything to your goals! The reason many people never really improve their skills is because they don’t have enough reasons to improve. You must constantly ask yourself, “Is what I’m doing right now (this minute) leading me closer to accomplishing my goals?”

Time Management

How many hours? Experts say that you need roughly 10,000 hours of diligent practice to become an expert. If you practiced for 4-hours a day for one year you would accumulate 1460 hours of practice. To reach the desired 10,000 hours mark, this would take you just under seven years to accomplish this.

Now, it doesn't really matter whether you practice 10,000 hours or not; the focus should be on gradual improvement. But by breaking down the numbers it puts things into a different perspective whereby you can start to measure your overall progress.

The link to success with allocating the time needed to accomplish your goals is self-discipline. A critical principle about acquiring self-discipline is that it becomes magnetic. The minute that you begin to understand the importance of regime, ritual, commitment and the discipline required to improve your skills, all of your other goals will gradually fall into place.

Developing a Plan

I'm sure you have heard the old saying, "Those who fail to plan, plan to fail." You must have a plan outlined before you hit the practice room.

Become organised by dividing your time wisely and keeping a detailed practice log. I like to break my time into four categories:

1. Technical Studies
2. Ear Training/Transcription
3. Improvisation Concepts
4. Repertoire

Clearing the Mind

There is a certain state of mind that is needed for peak productivity. Often, when people sit down to practice, they end up using their mind to think about several other issues in their life. You need to learn how to clear the mind of all outside problems and directing 100% of your time thinking about one matter at a time to achieve maximum productivity.

If you are working on a project on your computer and decide that you need to start a new project, you would first need to close down all of your current files and save them in a folder so you could come back to them at a later date. Once the computer was clear, you could open up a new project to work on. This is exactly how you should approach your practice- leave all of your other commitments outside of your practice time.

Practice

Always focus your practice on musical content:

1. Melody
2. Rhythm
3. Harmony
4. Counterpoint
5. Compositional Form

Make sure you have a quiet space to practice with no distractions- turn off the phone; shut down the email and close the door! Focus your attention to the goals you have created and then say out loud, "Start!" Avoid noodling or getting sidetracked. Have a definitive start and end to each practice session.

Always practice new things first and review material that you can already play at the end of the practice session. The more you concentrate on what you can already play, the less you will improve. Avoid using a metronome or drum machine while learning new material. This educes a state of performance and will hold back the initial learning

process. Only introduce a click when you can already play something comfortably. Be aware of negative emotions, such as frustration and self defeating thoughts. If you find yourself in this state, then take a five minute break and then return. Remember that discipline is the great equaliser! You don't have to like practice- you just have to do it!

Avoid performing in the practice room. All of your goals that you set out for yourself will become a reality through the window of structured practice.

Remember to write down what you have worked on and reflectively realise what you have learned. At the end of each week always ask yourself, "What have I learned this week that I didn't know last week?"

Often, I have had students come to me saying that they have been playing for 13 years but have made very little improvement. Upon hearing them, it is usually evident that instead of playing for 13 years, they have played for 1 year thirteen times!

Enjoy the Process, Not the Product!

Many people in this day and age are only concerned with the finished product. In the movie Click, Adam Sandler plays an architect who finds a universal remote control that allows him to fast forward his life so he doesn't have to go through the pains of accomplishing the goals he has set for himself. Once he attains his goals without really experiencing the journey, he ends up extremely unhappy.

Learn to enjoy the journey! This is what will give you a sense of purpose. It is human nature to anticipate the finish line, but by doing this, we can easily lose sight of the present moment. Do not focus on the goal itself, but only the process by which you seek to attain the goal!

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