



MOTIVATING YOUR STUDENTS TO PRACTICE

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As a music educator, there is nothing more satisfying than teaching a student who practices diligently each week. Their progress is continuous and new concepts and material can be frequently introduced. Both the student and the teacher leave each lesson/rehearsal feeling successful and their steady progress keeps both parties fully engaged, providing mutual motivation for future sessions.

Unfortunately for most educators, these students are few and far between. Many students exhibit sub-par practice habits. As a result, lessons/rehearsals are often focused on material covered in previous weeks and teachers end up repeating concepts ad nauseam. Further, students often feel anxiety entering lessons/rehearsals, dreading the inevitable conversation, “*Why didn’t you practice more?*” Teachers often find these situations equally frustrating, and count down the minutes until these sessions come to an end.

Is this challenge an inherent trait of music education or perhaps a product of the way we teach? Certainly some students walk in the door with more discipline and a stronger work ethic than others, but I’m convinced it *is* possible to drastically improve the practice habits of all of our students.

Typically, bad practice habits stem from a lack of interest, motivation, or perceived progress. However, when students are taught how to practice efficiently, using fun and creative methods, a successful practice routine can be developed. When programs are able to develop this successful practice culture among its members, the learning process becomes much more enjoyable for both the students and teacher.

This article is designed for educators who are looking for new and innovative ways to motivate their students to practice. I will share methods I have discovered or been exposed to as a student and as an educator at the middle school, high school, and collegiate level, as well as my dissertation research on practice habits.

When motivating students to practice, the first step should include an effective explanation of the importance of practice. While all students and educators intuitively realize that practice is necessary for our development, research on the practice habits of the most gifted consistently shows that innate talent plays a much smaller role than preparation. Further, substantial evidence suggests that mastery can only be achieved after 10,000 hours of practice early in life.

The second step is to require each student to create an individualized practice schedule. Our society operates on a web of schedules, and if students can develop a consistent practice schedule (time and day), practice becomes a routine, rather than something that must be “fit” into each day. When executed correctly, students will “show up” to their designated practice time, much like they attend rehearsals and classes. This approach does not allow for other obligations to prioritize themselves over practicing and eliminates most issues of motivation.

The third step is to create sustaining motivation. While some teachers resort to stern communication as their default routine, there are numerous positive methods that can be much more effective. When implemented correctly, these methods can help a student, and an entire program, develop a long-lasting devotion to practice.

PUBLIC PRACTICE LOGS

Practice logs are an age-old way of encouraging/enforcing practice hours. However, these often fail for a number of reasons: dishonest entries, lack of enforcement, poor participation, added busy work for educator, etc. A simple solution is to make these logs public and highly promoted. Instantly, practicing becomes a competitive activity, as students try to “out do” one another and avoid finishing near the bottom of the list. Practicing then becomes a desirable activity, tied to the program’s weekly culture. This system naturally accomplishes many goals. One, the students who already exhibited great practice habits receive deserved recognition and feel pressure to maintain their reputation as a “top student.” Students also begin to see a correlation between practice hours and ability level. The top players are almost always near the top of the list, while the weak players routinely finish at the bottom. For the weaker students, this is often a tangible explanation as to why there are inferior players. Some students blame their deficiencies on their “lack of talent” rather than accepting it as a product of their work ethic.

While dishonesty will still occur, it is a favorable type of dishonesty. Those who lie about their practice hours do it because they feel pressure from their peers to practice more. Further, these lies are typically debunked rather quickly when they claim to be practicing a high number of hours but consistently show up for lessons/rehearsals unprepared.

Enforcing participation is as simple as giving grade deductions for those who do not complete the public practice log on a weekly or bi-weekly basis. Further motivation can be created by giving out weekly or monthly awards to students who achieve exemplary practice hours.

RECORDED ASSIGNMENTS

With today's smart phones and computers, every student should have access to a recording device. Supplementing weekly lesson assignments or rehearsal goals with individual recording assignments often resolves many practice issues.

A recording assignment could be an exercise, phrase, or excerpt that the student is required to record and submit by a designated deadline. The student may record it as many times as needed (if done correctly, it should take multiple takes), and the version submitted should be as close to "perfect" as possible.

The success of this method lies in the simple fact that it takes a substantial amount of practice to produce a recording of a perfect run-through. Many students have the false notion that if they play it right once in the practice room, they are prepared. However, when the red light turns on, the student will feel added pressure as they attempt to capture a perfect run-through. Successfully capturing a correct repetition requires a much higher level of proficiency.

The pressure felt when trying to record a perfect run-through is very similar to the pressure one feels in a performance. This pressure is rarely felt in the practice room, which is another benefit of recorded assignments.

Before students submit their recordings, require that they listen closely to their final product. This process of self-evaluation can be an eye-opening experience for less experienced players and teaches them what they *actually* sound like. For most, this instills a newfound awareness of their abilities, eliminating distorted self-perceptions.

REGULAR OCCURRING SOLO PERFORMANCES

It is amazing how hard students will practice when they know they have to get up and play for their peers. It only takes one or two unprepared public performances to improve a student's practice habits. While this may sound harsh, the fear of embarrassment is a huge motivator.

These performances could be formal (performance attire, on stage) or in a more relaxed environment (such as a masterclass-type setting). Regardless, frequency is key. It is recommended that each student be required to perform solo at least twice per semester and possibly as frequent as once per week, perhaps in the form of a playing test.

INCENTIVES AND PRIZES

Positive reinforcement is often the most successful type of motivation. Reward your students individually or as a group for accomplishing their practice goals. For example, individuals may receive small prizes or something as simple as candy for learning all their assigned lesson material. In a group context, students could be rewarded with a pizza party after reaching a certain number of combined practice hours. Creating incentive, especially with younger students, can be highly successful.

These methods are just a few ways that educators can motivate their students to practice. There are many other methods and strategies that can be implemented, and regardless of the approach, it is important that educators remain pro-active regarding their students' practice habits. While it is unrealistic to expect that all students will develop great practice habits, it is possible to greatly improve the culture and attitude towards practicing.

Dr. Colin J. Hill is currently the Assistant Professor of Percussion Studies at Tennessee Tech University. As an active performer, Colin has been invited to perform concerts throughout the United States, Europe, and Asia. He performs regularly with the BluHill Percussion Duo, Nief-Norf Project, Bryan Symphony Orchestra, and the TTU Faculty Jazz Combo. Other performing credits include the Lexington Philharmonic Orchestra, Bloomington Pops Orchestra, REP Theatre Company, and the Bluegrass Area Jazz Association Big Band. As an educator, Colin has appeared as a guest artist and clinician at universities and high schools throughout the United States and has been invited to present clinics at several PAS Days of Percussion and PAS International Conventions. He has served as a faculty member for Centre College, the Central Music Academy, Music for All Summer Symposium, and the University of North Texas Drumline Camp. Colin holds degrees from The University of North Texas (B.M.), Jacobs School of Music at Indiana University (M.M.), and The University of Kentucky (D.M.A) and is a sponsored artist of Innovative Percussion, Grover Pro Percussion, Sabian Cymbals, Evans Drumheads, and Pearl/Adams.