

Feedback-balanced Creative Practice

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Learning is, in itself, a skill just like playing the drums, piano, baseball, flying a plane, or almost anything. At the core of teaching and learning to play is the ability to diagnose specific playing issues and goals, create a balanced game plan for improvement and change, and find a distinctive musical voice through creativity and experimentation.

As a drummer for more than 40 years, a Professor of Drumset for over 20 years, and a researcher in areas of neuroscience, neurophysiology, and cognitive psychology for 12 years, I believe I can't teach anyone how to *play* drums; I can only teach them how to *learn* to play drums and find their own style and concept of playing.

The goal of practice is to improve our technical facility, musicality, and originality, so we want to practice in a way that balances those areas in our playing. The idea of balance is a strategy and a way of thinking that broadens our self-expression on the instrument. I use a practice formula with my students that I call the 4 F's – *Focus, Feedback, Fix, and Find*.



Focus your practice on the specific thing you're trying to learn or improve, then create a process for objective Feedback to inform you if you're learning it correctly or if you're playing it the way you want and if you're not, then you Fix it. Find is a critical step on the road to discovering who we want to be as drummers – how we want to play and sound. This may be the most challenging step since it requires experimentation, exploration, and risk.

Let's look at each of the 4 F's in some detail.

FOCUS

Over the last 15 years, there has been a great amount of new research in the area of motor skill and cognitive development for musicians. There are some differing theories, including that of *Deliberate Practice* (Dr. Anders Ericsson), on the best way to develop these skills. The training for someone wanting to play traditional Western European music (classical) differs greatly from those who want to play contemporary, jazz, popular, and most music that includes drumset. However, there is general agreement that learning and developing motor skills and physical

ability requires purposeful, focused, methodical, systematic, and regular practice. This type of practice is very specific and goal-oriented, and is not 'naïve practice' where you just continue doing something over and over again while gaining experience but little improvement.

In order to improve, we need to pinpoint things we want to learn, or identify weaknesses we're trying to address. It requires that we spend about 75% of our time working on things that are outside of our comfort zone, and that are not general, but very specific. Here are a few examples of general versus specific items for practice (the more specific, the better):

- #1 general: playing jazz time with the right hand on the ride cymbal while the left-hand plays rhythmic independence on the snare
 specific: jazz time with the right hand on the ride while the left-hand plays rhythmic and volume independence between drums at 90 and 140 bpm at medium volume

- #2 general: play the Dave Garibaldi Book "Future Sounds" Groove Study #14
 specific: play the first four exercises of Groove Study #14 as written, varying the accents and sounds, then building four of your own variations

- #3 general: working on brushes
 specific: practicing brushes in a 4/4 jazz ballad at 60bpm at low volume

- #4 general: working on soloing
 specific: practice soloing over an ostinato – for example, left foot plays quarter notes on high hat while improvising using the snare, toms, and bass drum in straight 8th/16th rhythms at 120bpm at moderate volume

You get the idea - the more specific your practice is, the quicker your playing will improve in those areas and the better your retention will be. In almost everything you practice, I strongly recommend contextualizing what you're working on. That is, practicing with music – recordings, play-along recordings, MP3s, loops, etc., and then recording yourself (more about that in a little while). Also, as I wrote about in a previous article, we make the best use of our practice time by working on a specific thing for a maximum of 30 minutes, before moving on to something different. This process, known as 'interleaving', boosts learning and promotes rapid development.

One more critical point I'd like to make here is about concentration. Deep learning and efficient new skill development require focused attention without distraction. Attempting to do other things while practicing decreases the effectiveness of learning; the ability to multitask may actually be a myth. Cognitive Neuroscientist Dr. Indre Viskontas discounts our ability to multitask, especially when trying to learn something new and/or challenging. "When you think you're multitasking, you're actually switching quickly between tasks, or mixing tasks, and each one comes at a cost." If, while practicing, you are also watching television or routinely checking your smartphone "you likely aren't doing the hard work of learning by engaging deeply with the content. But even perhaps more nefarious is the illusion that you're learning when in fact

you're not. Some tasks aren't always enjoyable, and making them enjoyable via distraction doesn't mean you are accomplishing what you set out to do." This is true even if, by the end of the TV show or after repeatedly checking social media, you've made your way to the next chapter in the method book. "Social media and email can be especially troublesome as you might find yourself inadvertently thinking about a response or something you read or saw while you should be focusing on the task at hand."

It's better to train at 100% effort for less time, than 70% effort for a longer period. So, work on the exact skill you want to develop, and avoid distractions while practicing.

FEEDBACK

Feedback is defined as information obtained about some aspect of our playing that we should work on. This can come from a teacher, another drummer or musician, and ultimately and ideally, from ourselves. As our drumming and creative skills increase, we become more aware of what we need and want to work on simply by paying close attention to what we're doing and how we're doing it.

Of course, a teacher can give immediate feedback during a lesson, but we can also do this for ourselves by recording our playing and analyzing what we did. For an advanced player, this feedback should be sufficient in order to self-correct, and also to help identify some new and different ways to play something. For the student who is home practicing on their own and unsure of their accuracy, waiting a week or more for the teacher's feedback at the next lesson is too long to wait for correction. In addition to having wasted a lot of time, the student may have gotten pretty good at playing it inaccurately. Our brains and nervous systems become used to doing something incorrectly and develop a bad habit that, over time, can be difficult to circumvent.

As I mentioned earlier, I always recommend that my students practice with music – recordings, loops, etc., record themselves and listen back to create their own feedback system. For beginning students, it will take some time for them to understand what to listen for, but they'll learn quickly, and this method of self-feedback will become extremely valuable. Also, when working on a particular groove/pattern try switching up the music you're practicing with from time-to-time. This develops something called 'far transfer', which is a classic research finding that states that 'breadth of training predicts breadth of transfer'. In other words, changing the music you're practicing with helps our ability to transfer learning into different playing situations, songs, etc. that we may have never been in or played before. This ability is a trademark of the originality and authenticity that all great drummers possess.

For beginning players, teachers can make a short recording on a smartphone demonstrating the correct way to play something, and send it to the student. They can listen to/watch our version and compare that to what they're doing. The student can also send a quick email, text, or private posting of an audio or video to the instructor for feedback. Whichever method is used, constant, quick, and accurate feedback is crucial for precise learning and quick development.

The most difficult part of feedback is to decide, ultimately for ourselves, what we want to fix or keep, what is incorrect or what may actually be the discovery of something new or different. Too much feedback, even if accurate, can stifle creativity. Sometimes, what we or others may think of as a mistake can in reality be something that broadens our individuality and enables us to uncover a new and unique way of playing something.

FIX

As mentioned, a good teacher will give feedback on what you're doing correctly or incorrectly and, if necessary, instructions on how to fix it. Don't practice mistakes – correct them instantly. For this reason, I rarely assign pages, exercises, patterns, styles, etc. from a book without first demonstrating, sending a link to a recording, or making a recording for the student, so that they will have something to model.

If a correction is made, the teacher should explain in detail what was incorrect, and why, and what to listen for in the future so that the student can self-correct (teaching someone how to *learn* to play). Introducing these self-teaching skills from the very first lesson, regardless of age, is a good idea.

As I mentioned earlier, when we receive feedback and devise methods to improve, we want to make sure that we always balance our goal of skill development with that of maintaining our own authenticity and unique musical voice. Playing something incorrectly is not the same as playing it differently. Learn correctly but then improvise and make it yours – use your imagination and find your own way; identify a problem or an idea and create your own solution and path.

FIND

In addition to the importance of *Purposeful Practice*, I'm adding one other indispensable and often overlooked piece – *Purposeful Play*. This is a time reserved to explore different ways of playing in a risk-free non-judgmental setting, and when we purposefully stretch our own individuality and seek to *Find* our own drumming voice. I sometimes call this process *What If or Why Not*, where I try and knock down some imaginary or self-built walls, rules, and regulations to find some different ways to play something.

Charles Limb, a neuroscientist, researcher, and surgeon at UCSF has found that brain areas associated with focused attention, inhibition, and self-censoring 'turn down' when musicians are creating and improvising. "It's almost as if the brain turns off its ability to criticize itself." Drumming should be much less about rules and much more about individuality, personal satisfaction, and extending the boundaries; 'purposeful play' is a way to do exactly that.

It sometimes helps to listen to master drummers and study and research their ways of playing in order to identify things that make them unique and their playing great. In addition to playing the patterns and ideas they created and recorded, I ask my students to transcribe and study what these innovators did. In other words, don't just imitate their playing, imitate their drumming imagination and the process that got them there; study and analyze what they did

and apply those methods and that process to your own playing. Many/most of our drumming heroes were self-taught and experimented a great deal, relying on their own intuition and imagination. Often, it's best to forget about the right/wrong and good/bad of drumming and just PLAY!

FINALLY

We're all students of the instrument and all of us can benefit from using the 4 F's.

One of the easiest and most effective ways to employ the 4 F's is by using the new Yamaha DTX electronic kits, some of which have built-in recording capability and external syncing ability to a laptop. Some of the most affordable DTX models, including the EAD10 for your acoustic drums, also work with free Rec'n'Share app – an amazing tool that allows you to practice and play with your favorite music, make a video, and quickly share the results to your teacher, or on social media. Even if you don't connect to a DTX kit, you can use the Rec'n'Share app to load songs, slow them down and loop sections on the song for repeated practice. These and other features make the DTX kits one of most valuable tools for learning to play the drums, since they simulate a virtual reality environment for playing and learning which enables rapid and accurate development.

Learning and practicing correctly is often frustrating, and feedback, even if it's constructive and honest and comes from ourselves, can be difficult to take. Don't compare yourself with anyone else; only compare yourself to you yesterday. It's important to surround ourselves with positive people, and avoid those who use negative, abusive statements and actions and employ irrational criticism. Find supportive, understanding, knowledgeable, qualified teachers and good friends who reinforce your aspirations and provide encouragement. Stay away from social media 'experts' and critics, and trust your own judgement and those close to you. Drumming is a long journey – be patient and enjoy the ride!

And speaking of feedback, please feel free to contact me regarding this article – I'd love to hear from you!

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