

It's NOT About Talent, It's About Practicing Correctly

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Practically every day I hear someone speak or write about an individual as having 'talent'. When we're impressed by the abilities of an athlete, chef, writer, racecar driver, or a drummer we often say something like... "that person is very talented". Most times these kinds of statements are pretty harmless and are said without too much thought. But, when we begin to believe that success in any field is reserved for those with 'talent', and denied for those who believe they don't possess this magical mysterious indefinable element, then it could be a very limiting barrier that stops or deters us from pursuing what we love and want to do. And, worse than that...in the end success is not about talent anyway!

I'm not a big fan of the entire concept of talent – I don't know what it means or how to measure it, and I absolutely don't believe that it determines success.

In drumming, talent is often defined as a 'natural aptitude' or an 'innate ability' to do or perform some, many, or all aspects of the art and skill of playing drums. In other words, if you're born with talent you have a huge advantage over the rest of us, and you don't have to do much to advance that skill and become a great and successful player. The trouble with that kind of thinking is that the evidence all around us proves that's just not true.

We watch and listen to the great drummers and we remark how talented they are, as if they were born with that ability, sounded that way the first time they ever picked up the sticks, and never had to practice. Dave Weckl once told me "The more I practice, the more talented people think I am."

If you do have any natural talent to play the drums, it's probably best to believe you don't. Because, you'll likely work harder and ultimately that will have more to do with improving your skills and being a great player than talent. I believe the greatest 'talent' that we drummers have is that we figured out that we really love to play the drums, and because we love something that much, we do it often, and if we do it often, we improve. It is almost that simple...except for one thing. Yes - if we do it often, we do improve; but if we really want to improve at it, we don't just play, we practice, and we practice correctly.

Practicing and playing are two very different things...when I sit down and just play – at a live performance or a recording - I'm bringing together all of the musical skills I've already developed up to that point in my performance. But, I'm not necessarily developing any new ones. I can play drums all day every day, but if I don't practice in a very focused way, I won't improve and add new skills...or if I do develop some new abilities it will take a much greater time than if I practiced it.

So, what is 'correct practice' and how do I develop and add to my drumming abilities? Here is the 10-step process that I use, and that I teach my students...

- 1) **IDENTIFY** those very specific things in your drumming that need improvement. These cannot be general ("I want to play better", or "I want to play faster"), but must be very specific ("I need to improve the coordination playing doubles between my hands and feet", or... "I need to work on improvising with brushes at medium fast tempos").
- 2) **REPEAT** those things often and over a long period of time. This may mean working on a specific thing for 20 to 30 minutes, every day, or every other day, for 3 or 4 weeks. Because of how we all learn and develop new things, it is not a good idea to practice that one thing for 6 hours non-stop. Nor can you expect to hear dramatic improvement after three days no matter how many hours you put in (see "Be Patient" below).
- 3) **BE BRUTALLY HONEST** with yourself about your own playing, and realistic about those areas that need improvement. Record yourself often and listen intently, and try not use subjective terms to describe your playing like 'cool', or 'killin', or 'awful'. Instead, learn to listen clinically and objectively to things like feel, tone, balance, evenness, accuracy, and sound, and come up with a plan to improve these specific areas that need work.
- 4) **EFFECTIVE PRACTICE IS DIFFICULT** because it's about improving those things that you don't do well, and as a result you may not sound very good while practicing them. Also, it's frustrating to try to do something and not do it very well. Remember, the harder and more focused your practice is, the more fun and rewarding your playing will be later on.
- 5) **ELIMINATE DISTRACTIONS** when you practice by working by yourself with no cell phone, television, or other interruptions. If you concentrate and focus while practicing, you'll learn much quicker and retain it much better.
- 6) **GET AN EXPERT OPINION** from the most qualified teacher you can find. You may have to travel a greater distance and pay a higher rate to study with this person, but it will be well-worth it. You don't have to

take a lesson every week – maybe every other week or third week. The feedback you get from a great teacher will be invaluable and will help you improve more efficiently and effectively.

- 7) **PRACTICE DOESN'T MAKE PERFECT – PRACTICE MAKES PERMANENT.** Whatever you practice is what you'll improve at, so make sure that there is a direct link between what you want to improve at, and what you're practicing. Think carefully about what you're practicing and why. If you want to improve your Afro-Cuban feel and independence, then playing rudiments for an hour on a drum pad won't help much. Specific goals need specific plans.
- 8) **CREATE A SCHEDULE** of five or six things you want to work on, and write them down. Maybe the first day you practice for 90 minutes and work on the first three things on your list for 30 minutes each. Then, the next day you start where you left off and work on the next three things. Keep working on these items for a couple weeks, or until you feel you're starting to improve. Then, identify four, six, or eight other things you'd like to improve, and work on those for the next few weeks.
- 9) **PRACTICE CONSISTENTLY**...every day if you can, even if it's just for 30 minutes. Most of us don't have the time to practice four or more hours a day, but know that you can achieve terrific results by practicing an hour to an hour-and-a-half, as long as you do it consistently.
- 10) **BE PATIENT** and realize that drumming is a lifelong pursuit and that you are a lifelong learner. Don't expect miraculous results in a few weeks time, but over months and years you will become the drummer you want to be.

If you follow this method, you will notice continual and rapid improvement in your playing. Then you can let other people think how talented you are, and that you were born with all of these skills. But, of course, you will have learned that it never was, and never is, about talent anyway.

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