

# Feedback-Balanced Creative Practice

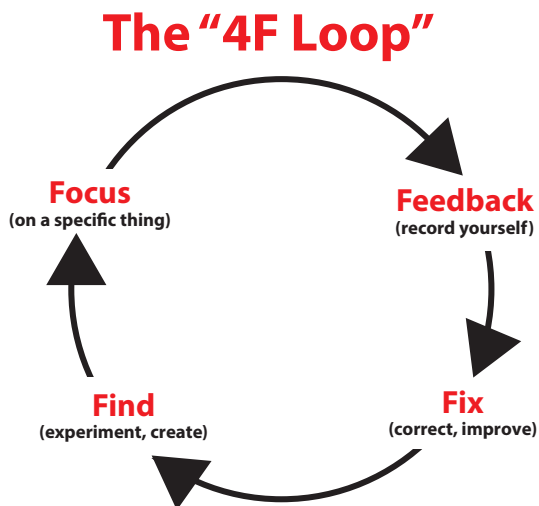
## An Effective Approach to Modern Challenges

by Marc Dicciani

Learning is a skill, just like, say, playing the drums, or flying a plane. At the core of teaching and learning to play is the ability to diagnose specific 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 forty-plus years, a drumset professor for more than two decades, and a researcher in areas of neuroscience, neurophysiology, and cognitive psychology for twelve years, I believe I can't teach anyone how to play drums. Rather, 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. 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 "Four Fs"—focus, feedback, fix, and find.



**Focus** your practice on the specific concept you're trying to learn or improve. Then, create a process for objective **feedback** to inform you of whether you're learning it correctly or playing it the way you want to. If you're not, then **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 four Fs in some detail.

### Focus

Over the past fifteen years, there's been an abundance of new research in the area of motor skill and cognitive development for musicians. There are some differing theories on the best way to develop these skills, including that of "Deliberate Practice" from the Swedish psychologist Dr. Anders Ericsson. The training for someone wanting to play traditional Western European (classical) music differs greatly from what's required of 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 require purposeful, focused, methodical, systematic, and regular practice. This type of practice is very specific and goal oriented. It's not naïve practice, in which you just continue doing something repeatedly while gaining experience but little improvement.

In order to progress, we need to pinpoint things we want to learn or identify weaknesses we're trying to address. It requires that we spend about 75 percent of our time working on things that are outside of our comfort zone and that are very specific. Here are a few examples of general versus specific items for practice. Keep in mind that the more specific, the better.

**General:** Play jazz time with the right hand on the ride while the left hand plays rhythmic independence on the snare. **Specific:** Practice jazz time with the right hand while the left hand develops rhythmic and volume independence between various drums at 90–140 bpm.

**General:** Play Groove Study 14 from the Dave Garibaldi book *Future Sounds*. **Specific:** Play the first four exercises of Groove Study 14 as written, varying the accents and sounds. Then create four of your own variations.

**General:** Work on your brush technique. **Specific:** Practice brushes in a 4/4 jazz ballad at 60 bpm at low volume.

**General:** Work on soloing. **Specific:** Practice soloing over an ostinato. For example, the hi-hat foot plays quarter notes while improvising using the snare, toms, and bass drum in straight 8th- and 16th-note subdivisions at 120 bpm at a moderate volume.

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 recommend contextualizing what you're working on. That is, practice with music—recordings, play-alongs, MP3s, loops—and then record yourself. We make the best use of our practice time by working on a specific concept for a maximum of thirty 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 skill development require focused attention without distraction. Attempting to do other things while practicing decreases the effectiveness of learning.

The ability to multitask may be a myth. Cognitive neuroscientist Dr. Indre Viskontas discounts our ability to multitask, especially when we're trying to learn something new and/or challenging. According to Viskontas, "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're also watching television or routinely checking your smartphone, "You likely aren't doing the hard work of learning by engaging deeply with the content," says Viskontas. "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're 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," Viskontas says, "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 percent effort for less time than 70 percent effort for a longer period. So work on the exact skill you want to develop, and avoid distractions while practicing.

### Feedback

In this case, feedback is referred to as information obtained about some aspect of our playing that we should work on. This can come from a teacher, another 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 enough 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 can be difficult to unlearn.

As I mentioned earlier, I always recommend that my students practice with music, record themselves, and listen back to create their own feedback system. For beginning students, it will take some time to understand what to listen for. But they'll learn quickly, and this method of self-feedback will become extremely valuable.

Also, when practicing a pattern, try switching up the music you're playing with. 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 your ability to transfer learning into different playing situations that you may have never been in 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 and/or watch our version and compare that to what they're working on. 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

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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 really 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. For this reason, I rarely assign pages, exercises, patterns, styles, and more from a book without first demonstrating those ideas, sending a link to a recording, or making a recording for the student so that they'll have something to model.

If a correction is made, the teacher should explain in detail what was incorrect, 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 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, 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 to knock down students' imaginary or self-built walls, rules, and regulations to find

some different ways to play something.

Charles Limb, a neuroscientist, researcher, and surgeon at the University of California, San Francisco, 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," he says.

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 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 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!

### In Closing

We're all students of the instrument, and all of us can benefit from using the four Fs. Learning and practicing correctly are often frustrating, and feedback, even if it's constructive and honest and comes from ourselves, can be difficult to take. Don't compare yourself to 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 judgment and those close to you. Drumming is a long journey—be patient and enjoy the ride!

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