

How Do You Organize Your Practice Sessions?

This has been one of my primary research and clinic topics for the past 6 years, so I have great interest in learning as much about how our brains and bodies work to develop music and drumming skills and to translate that into creating the most effective and efficient practice sessions possible, both for me and my students.

Over the past 30 yrs, cognitive psychologists and neuroscientists have built a body of evidence to clarify what works and to discover the strategies that get results. I've come to understand that some of how we currently learn and train is based on outdated theories that have been handed down, some of which are more effective than others. Although many drummers, including me, have benefitted from having great teachers, lots of trial and error, and countless hours practicing, studying, and playing, if some of this research had been available to me years ago, I could have saved myself some time and frustration and it could have helped me to learn and develop quicker and deeper.

Recently, I've been doing numerous clinics on this topic, which I've titled *Changing the Brain: Improving Learning, Memory, Practice, and Music*. It's not important to become expert in neurobiology, neuroscience, psychoacoustics, cerebral physiology, anatomy, genetics, perception, and cognition, but it is important to adapt and make use of the available research. By understanding and utilizing some of the principles of how we learn, and how our brains, nervous systems, and bodies work, we can develop methods to maintain and increase our skill levels and our musicianship by maximizing whatever time we have available.

Some of the specific and recent research that impacts musical performance, learning, and development include:

- brain function and 'plasticity'
- kinesiology and the mechanics of body movement
- neural systems, pathways, and circuits
- learning and memory
- 'talent' and genetics
- musculoskeletal structure and the efficient & safe use of joints, muscles, tendons, and ligaments
- 'handedness' and preference.

Learning is an acquired skill, and successful learning and effective practice is intentional, and not just the result of putting in the time. There are no shortcuts. Acquiring skills and developing potential still requires...

- Time
- A Plan
- Commitment
- Emotional Engagement
- Concentration
- Consistency
- Perseverance

- Patience

Here are the top three things I've learned about effective practice. It must be *Deliberate and Effortful*, mostly in the *Learning Zone*, and incorporate *Constant Feedback*. Since this is a just a short article, I'll have to list some of my findings in bullet-point form (I'm also in the process of writing a series of in-depth articles as a result of my research.)

Practice is *Deliberate and Effortful* when it is designed specifically to improve performance, and is focused, directed, mentally demanding, conscious, controlled, dedicated, discrete, highly repetitive, but *interleaved**, and broken into do-able components. It is never automatic.

- Interleaved practice is when you practice something for a shorter period and you follow that with some improvised playing based on what you've learned. Then, after a period of doing this for 20 to 30 minutes you move on to practice something completely different (what I refer to in a recent article as *Cross-training*). Then, maybe the following day, or two days later, you return to practice this same thing, at first relying on your memory, and again incorporate improvisation, interpretation, and testing into your practice, using different tempos, volumes, etc.

Practice in the *Learning Zone*. Ideally, work on a ratio of about 3 to 1 between Learning Zone (development/growth) and Comfort Zone (maintenance) practice. This will keep your practice 75% in the 'Learning Zone,' which is ideal for rapid development. Learning Zone practice is characterized by when you feel challenged, excited, curious, and engaged in what you're working on – you're working on things that you can't yet do fluently, but that you understand and can see and hear progress. They're also things that 'stretch' us. You know that you're practicing and playing in the 'Comfort Zone' when you're doing things you can already do, and you feel safe, stable, relaxed, and maybe a bit bored. They're things that you don't have to concentrate on very much in order to do.

In order to incorporate *Constant Feedback* into your practice routine, you need to

- ✓ *LISTEN* to recordings
- ✓ *LISTEN* to your teacher
- ✓ *LISTEN* to yourself playing with recordings, play-alongs, loops, your band, etc. (make daily audio and video recordings of yourself)
- ✓ *LISTEN* to the musicians with whom you're playing (musical socialization)
- ✓ *TEST* yourself (try playing without the books and parts in order to internalize)

Change it up! Contrary to popular belief, most people do better over time by varying their study and practice locations. The more environments in which you rehearse/study the sharper and more lasting the memory of that material becomes, and less linked to one 'comfort zone.' Since we cannot predict the context in which we'll have to perform, we're better off varying the circumstances in which we prepare...different times, different locations, different methods. This kind of experimenting reinforces learning and strengthens memory.

WHAT to practice is often less important than **HOW** to practice. For example, books tend to be filled with exercises, but if we just practice these instead of the underlying principles our learning is illusory, mistaking fluency in playing examples with mastery of the fundamental

content. Books/printed materials are not the problem; it's the expectations we create by relying solely on them.

Here are the six subject areas that I practice in, spending at least 20 minutes, but no more than 30 minutes in each category before moving onto the next one. After 90 minutes of continuous practice, take a break.

1. Movement/Mechanism
2. Technique
3. Styles/Musicality
4. Improvisation
5. Reading/Literature
6. Other

Finally, here are some reminders and tips I tell my students:

- Make your practice deliberate and effortful
- Practice mostly in the learning zone
- Create systems for constant feedback
- Play with live musicians as often as possible – there is no substitute
- Practice with recorded music as often as possible – loops, bass lines, play-alongs, etc.
- Practice in context through a wide range of tempos
- Don't play when you practice; don't practice when you play
- Practice mentally (imagining, hearing, observing)
- Don't rely heavily on drum method books – use every tool available
- Learn many styles of drumming and music, even if it's just to inform your primary style
- Read and research often and much
- Technique is not playing, technique is not music, and music is not a competition
- Use your imagination and develop your own unique voice
- Work in small do-able chunks
- Be patient
- Set a goal to become a great musician drummer, not a great 'practicer'
- Be engaged, enthusiastic, and have fun!!