

What are your top five or ten drum instructional books/products that you recommend to most, if not all, of your students?

For me, the answer to this simple question is long and complicated (I'll save it for a future series of in-depth articles). I'll try and keep it (somewhat) brief here. For the past six years, I've been doing extensive study and research into how people learn and develop skills, including drumming. As a result, I believe that using books or instructional products *alone* is not an effective way to develop into a highly skilled musical drummer. In fact, working from 'instructional' materials incorrectly could actually not even be beneficial, so I'm hesitant to just post a list of books and other materials without an explanation.

Which books or instructional materials we use to practice is not as important as **how** we use them. Books tend to be filled with examples; if we just practice and memorize the examples instead of the underlying principles our learning is illusory. Sometimes we tend to mistake fluency in playing examples with mastery of the underlying content. Books and instructional materials are not the problem; issues arise with how we use them and what expectations we create for ourselves in doing so.

If your drumming goal is not to become a professional, and just to enjoy yourself and be able to play the kinds of things and the kinds of music that you like, then practicing and learning some things from books and other sources by themselves is perfectly OK. Neither I, nor anyone else, are the 'drumming police', and I'd never dream of telling anyone what they should, or shouldn't do. Drumming provides a release and a lifetime of pleasure for millions of individuals who don't care to become career professionals and who play merely for the love of it. I encourage everyone to keep doing exactly that! However, if your aspiration is to become a top pro player and be the best drummer you can possibly be, or if you're already at an advanced level and want to continue to expand your professional skills, then you should consider employing a wide range of separate but inter-connected and inter-dependent practicing and learning methodologies, which does include effectively working from instructional materials. The fundamental rule is that we should practice like we play, because we will play like we practice.

Putting a drum book up on a music stand and playing through exercises every day will make us proficient at exactly that - playing those things as long as we're looking at them. The mode of learning and instruction should match, as much as possible, the nature of the subject we want to learn. Music is aural medium and we need to 'hear' what we're playing and how we're playing it; our ears are possibly the most important tool we need to develop. Ultimately, those who hire us will judge us on feel, groove, and sound - that's what we need to work on most, whether we're using books, recordings, or simply playing-by-ear.

Rote knowledge gained from mechanical repetition without contextualization is often unstable and inflexible. It is through the musical application of this knowledge (gained from playing with music - recordings and loops, and with other musicians in a musical environment), and the storage and retrieval of this into, and from, long-term memory (through contextualization, adaptation, and improvisation) that will develop skills the quickest, deepest, and long-lasting. Repetition is not enough; in doing that we only learn to 'parrot' the work/writing of others. Understanding, conceptualizing, and self-expression of what we learn is what makes information practical and usable in building our own musical voice.

For example, you can practice the Stick Control Book (one of my recommendations) all you want, but unless you put that information and those skills into a larger, practical, musical, and personalized context, you'll always be dependent on the book or just playing exercises. Although you'll play them very well, it will take a very long time for anything useful to seep into you're playing on the kit.

In order for practice and learning from books to be advantageous, the information needs to be stored in memory so it can be recalled effortlessly and without thinking while playing - similar to how we learn and use language when speaking. Learning in this way is an acquired skill and itself must be practiced. In a book titled "Make It Stick: The Science of Successful Learning", the authors outline a strategy they call "retrieval practice", which is based on the learned ability to recall things from memory. In order to dramatically improve our

drumset playing, we have to make the information that's available in books, transcriptions, grooves, patterns, etc. our own and internalize the concepts.

This can be achieved by working on one specific thing (pattern/rhythm/concept) in a book, and then closing the book and improvising, creating, interpreting, and re-interpreting those rhythms, patterns, and ideas. This process is what stores this information into our long-term memory. Since we're not bringing the books to our gigs, concerts, and recording sessions, and since we often have to hear and respond immediately in a musical situation, automatic retrieval (memory) is critical. In order for that to happen, we need to practice in a way that makes our learning deeper and long-lasting.

"Mass Practice", which is similar to cramming for a test, is when you spend hours playing one, or a few, specific things. You feel like you've attained some mastery over what you're working on, but in actuality it is short-lived. "Interleaved Practice" is when you practice something for a shorter period, which could be from a book, 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 as "Cross-training"). Then, maybe the following day, or two days later you return to practice this specific thing from the book you're working on, and again incorporate improvisation or interpretation into your practice, using different tempos, volumes, etc. This is also known as "Elaboration", which forces your memory to kick-in and give meaning and practicality to newly learned material by playing it in your own way and connecting it to things you've already learned. I also call this "Contextualization." It's the same process by which we learned and internalized vocabulary...understand the word and its meaning and use it in a sentence (contextualization).

As we learn patterns and combinations, our brains re-encode each individual stroke, limb, sound, movement, and accent into a single group or 'procedure', which can then be executed with little conscious effort allowing us to focus on the musical conversation in which we're involved and play 'in the moment.' This is very similar to how we engage in conversation – we don't think of the letters and words that we're saying, we think of the thoughts in the context of the conversation. It is our vocabulary (technique and skill) that allows us to converse in thoughts and ideas rather than just words. When we're completely 'in the moment' playing musically and locked in the groove we're not trying to think of what we're going to play next – it comes naturally. If that is the goal, then that is how we should practice.

Here's an example of that kind of practice, step-by-step, in working from an instructional book - Future Sounds by David Garibaldi (another that I recommend): 1) select a pattern and practice it until you feel very comfortable playing it and can do so without looking at the book; 2) stop playing it, look away from the book, and play that pattern from memory; 3) then, (this is important) try to create some slight-to-moderate variations based on what you've been playing (accents, sounds, stickings, etc.); 4) then (this is critical), put on a recording, loop, or play-along that matches the feel, tempo, and style of the pattern you're playing and play!; 5) record yourself playing it and listen back in order to assess how you're doing and make corrections to your playing, as needed; 6) the next day, you can start by trying to play the patterns(s) you've already worked on from memory – you don't have to recall it exactly, just your interpretation of it, then create some variations, and record yourself again.

I strongly recommend practicing this way (using improvisation, interpretation, and building your own patterns, etc.) with everything you work on. Drummers who understand the underlying principles in things they are practicing are more successful learners and develop quicker and deeper than those who practice things at a surface level. Using your recall helps to work larger concepts and infinite applications of those ideas into your long-term memory and ultimately your playing.

FINALLY, this leads me to the top three books that I recommend for all students. It's ironic that these three books are not really drum books at all, but are often found at or near the top of the lists of many instructors and players: Syncopation (Ted Reed), Modern Reading Text in 4/4 (Louis Bellson), and Stick Control (G.L. Stone). They're effective because, when practiced correctly, they allow for YOUR interpretations and ideas of the stickings and rhythms. A couple more books that have helped me and my students a great deal in that they are more open-ended and encourage you to experiment and improvise include anything written by John Riley, Rick Latham, David Garibaldi, Gary Chafee, and the late Chuck Silverman. These helps us in developing three

essential drumming skills – technique (playing), understanding (knowing), and improvisation (hearing and creating) – all of which are essential as we develop our own voice.

Rote skills and techniques need to be put into a musical context, which is where play-along recordings, loops, tracks, or existing recordings, all of which are indispensable in our development.

Also, using a qualified instructor (who can give you instant objective feedback), listening and practicing to existing recordings, recording yourself playing, watching drum DVDs and video clips, visiting and studying drum equipment web sites, reading books about music, drumming, drummers, and Modern Drummer Magazine, going to concerts, attending drum clinics and workshops, experimenting with tuning and setting-up your kit, and sitting-in/jamming with others all come into play and all work together to help you learn and grow.

It is the combination of all of these things that help us progress the quickest and deepest. Whether you practice a couple times a week or hours every day, practicing correctly is the most important thing you can do.

There is no magic, no quick fix, and no short-cut. To become a top player or just improve your skills so you can enjoy playing more requires time, commitment, enthusiasm, and patience along with with humility and respect for the instrument and the music. I tell my students to go where others don't, dig deep, ask the right questions, 'keep the main thing the main thing' (keep your eye on the ball and never lose sight of your goal), take risks, and be brutally honest with yourself. Good luck and enjoy the ride!