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Steve Oare

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# Practice Education

## Teaching Instrumentalists to Practice Effectively

**Abstract:** To practice effectively, one must first know how to practice. The practice process is affected by one's ability to set goals, design strategies, self-assess, and to have an aural image of the music being learned. The author proposes a model reflecting the factors involved in practice and proposes a number of strategies that can be used to progressively teach students how to practice effectively.

**Keywords:** practice strategies, aural imagery, goal-setting, assessment, literacy, supervision, motivation

As a middle school band teacher, I often wondered what it would be like if I were a fly on the wall watching my students practice their instruments. Too many times my students had told me that they practiced their music, but the results of their efforts were less than acceptable. Finally, as part of a research project, I was able to become that fly on the wall as I videotaped a number of students while they practiced and talked about their decision-making processes.

Nick, a seventh-grade saxophonist, began his practice session by playing a B-flat-major scale in quarter notes. He had difficulty getting the notes to speak, and he made three fingering mistakes, but did not stop to correct himself. Instead, he immediately began playing his E-flat-major scale, committing the same type of mistakes and ignoring them. As soon as he finished playing through the scale, Nick turned through the pages of his band book and began playing through the line that Mrs. Zielke, his teacher, had assigned the previous day. More fingering mistakes, more missed attacks, and more inconsistent rhythms ensued, but Nick ignored them all.

By the end of his twenty-minute "practice" session, Nick had played through seventeen

exercises and songs! At no time did Nick stop to correct or repeat a section of the music that needed work. Nick's first comment as he reflected on the practice session was, "Well, I wish I had more music to play. . . . I'll bring more music next time, because I ran out." One month later, I videotaped Nick's practice again. He played many of the same songs and, not surprising, no progress was evident.

A key goal for music teachers is to develop literate musicians who no longer need us. For this to occur, they must become independent learners. These are learners who can

- set clear, measurable, timely goals;
- plan and create effective strategies;
- self-monitor and adjust;
- structure optimal learning environments;
- seek out advice and information; and
- display consistent effort and persistence.

These students are self-aware, report high levels of self-confidence, and attribute their growth more to their effort more than to outside influences.<sup>1</sup>

Although success in musical performance is dependent upon the effectiveness of one's self-regulated practice, Gary McPherson states, "Despite the importance for children

*You can help your students get more out of their practice time by using simple techniques that put them in charge.*

Steve Oare is an assistant professor of music education at Wichita State University. He can be reached at [steve.oare@wichita.edu](mailto:steve.oare@wichita.edu).

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to develop an armory of task-appropriate strategies to aid their performance, evidence suggests that school teachers do not sufficiently emphasize this in their teaching, particularly during the early years of schooling.<sup>2</sup> This article suggests a number of ways teachers can help students develop these self-regulated skills.

## Considering a Model for Teaching Efficient Practice

As I analyzed the data from my study of the practice behaviors of middle school band students, a model for teaching music practice to novice students began to emerge (see Figure 1).<sup>3</sup> This model contains four major interrelated components: motivation, goals, strategy choice, and assessment, all influenced by supervision and aural image. By systematically addressing the factors within each of these components, teachers can begin to help students learn to practice more effectively.

### Supervision

Structured practice has been found to be a key component in practice effectiveness.<sup>4</sup> Through structure and supervision, students are led to set goals, develop a repertoire of practice strategies, and assess progress, all of which lead to higher levels of achievement.

Because practice is usually undertaken at home, an open line of communication between parents and teachers is vital, beginning with initial parent meetings for beginning students and continuing throughout the students' education. Young musicians need their parents' help to set a regular practice schedule and to remind them to practice because they have not yet developed the capacity to remind themselves.<sup>5</sup> Parents need to be reminded of their influence and need guidance in how they can help their children. Communication between teacher and parents by including information on student practice sheets, providing information at concerts, or using regularly updated class websites can provide direction regarding what should be practiced at home.

Teachers also enjoy a certain amount of influence over their students even

**FIGURE 1**  
**Self-Regulated Practice Model**



when they are apart. Students practice music that is assigned to them when they know they will be held accountable for improvement. Practice tends to be more goal-oriented when teachers set clear daily assignments with defined criteria.<sup>6</sup> Specific targets and consistent assessment provide guidance for students even when they are away from their teacher.

### Aural Image

Scott, a seventh-grade trombonist, stated, "Last year, our books had the CDs in them, so you could listen to the line and get it in your head."

Matthew, an eighth-grade saxophonist, said, "It helps to know what it's supposed to sound like. Because that way if you play it wrong, you hear it more than if you don't know at all what it's supposed to sound like."

Students need to have an aural image of the music they play before they play it.<sup>7</sup> The quality of this aural image is a key component in meeting practice goals for multiple reasons. Scott used an aural image to help give him an understanding of the notes on the page, and Matthew was able to self-assess when he knew what his music should sound like. Amy refused to

practice her band music until she knew how her part sounded. The students used mental imagery to emulate characteristic tone quality and to improve their musical accuracy and expression. As a teacher, I found that practice can be improved when I provided models of appropriate practice strategies, and gave assignments reinforcing their independent use. I also provided models of the thought processes that must be used when one practices. As I demonstrated appropriate practice behaviors, students learned to identify goals and then of choose effective strategies to reach the goals.<sup>8</sup>

Novice musicians also need a strong aural image of the musical syntax associated with the genre of music they are playing. As students listen to recordings and live performances of bands and orchestras, they begin to develop an aural image of characteristic tone and style. Increased exposure to instrumental music also facilitates anticipation of musical events, which allows students to process larger amounts of musical information.<sup>9</sup> Because many students listen primarily to popular music, they often lack a strong aural image of the music played by their instrumental ensembles. Teachers can help their students by providing regular

guided listening lessons that focus student attention on tone quality and recognition of stylistic tendencies. As students are led to identify rhythmic, harmonic, melodic, and formal patterns, they can develop a sense of the musical syntax of the genre they are studying and transfer their understandings to new pieces.

There are two additional reasons for teachers to teach songs for which students already have an aural image. First, when a student can audiate the music before it is played, she or he can allot more attention to technical aspects of playing. Second, students can be led to associate audiated patterns with the notation they see, much like the sound-before-sight process used in elementary music methodologies such as Kodály, Suzuki, and music learning theory.

As I talked with Scott about the recordings that went with his method book, he mentioned that he did not know the songs he found there. I was surprised, because the songs were common folk and classical songs that I grew up with and assumed that everyone knew. It could be that our students no longer know the songs that authors have used in band books for many decades. Although these songs were originally chosen because of their familiarity, contemporary students are less familiar with this repertoire. Many students now must learn to audiate the songs at the same time they are learning to read them. Teachers may be able to provide a strong aural image for their students by teaching songs that can already be audiated by their students. This can be done by coordinating repertoire with general music teachers or by choosing popular songs heard on radio and television.

## Motivation

Amy was a seventh-grade flutist. Before I videotaped her, I asked her how much she practiced each day. Her answer was, "Half an hour or forty-five, or fifteen [minutes], or an hour. It just matters if I fill up the week and that I practice more than three days." In effect, her motivation to practice was to put in the time required by her teacher to receive an A on her practice sheet.

Although the accumulation of practice time has been shown to be a key factor in

**FIGURE 2**  
The focus is on goal-setting with assessment and reflection.

**2<sup>nd</sup> Trimester Monthly Practice Record**

Name Amy Mozart Instrument flute

**Practice Goals:** Your grade for this month will be graded on the average of two things: your ability to reach the goals set for each week and the number of days you practice.

Goal Grade	Daily Practice Grade
Grade yourself each day based on how well you can play each goal based on a + (goal met), √ (improved), - (no improvement) grading system. A = both goals are + B = 1 + and 1 √ C = both goals are √ D = one goal is a √ F = both goals are -	(You must practice a minimum of 15 minutes for every day you record on the practice sheet) A = 6-7 days B = 4-5 days C = 3 days D = 1-2 days F = 0 days

**JANUARY**

Weekly Goals	Su	Mo	Tu	We	Th	Fr	Sa	Parent Signature
#1 <i>Lin 70</i>	5 √	6 √	7 +	8	9	10 +	11 +	Grade: B/B <i>Mrs Mozart</i>
#2 <i>Capric 3 to H level 2</i>	-	-	-			√	√	
#1 <i>Lin 83</i>	12 √	13 +	14	15 +	16	17	18 +	Grade: A/B <i>Mrs Mozart</i>
#2 <i>Capric H - end level 2</i>	√	√		+			+	
#1	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	Grade:
#2								
#1	26	27	28	29	30	31		Grade:
#2								

**SUGGESTED PRACTICE TOOLS**

FINGERINGS	RHYTHMS	TONE
5 x in a row with no mistake Take small bites Start slow, then speed up Start in different spots Change up the rhythm	Count and Clap! Play it on one note Take out the slurs Use a metronome Sing it	Long Tones Experiment with your tongue placement Crescendo drill Breathing exercise

musical development, the use of practice time as a motivator for practice may be detrimental to students' growth as musicians.<sup>10</sup> Since their goal is to put in time, they are less likely to set goals related to improvement. Instead, they tend to play through songs for the required number of minutes and neglect to identify and correct mistakes. Students must learn to strive for improvement rather than to simply put in the time. Once again, the provision of daily assignments, along with guided self-assessment, can help guide young instrumentalists to practice for results.

Motivation is also affected by a student's aural image of the music to be

played.<sup>11</sup> If one cannot hear "how the song goes" internally, and does not have the skills to sound it out independently, that student is much less likely to practice a given assignment. Teachers can alleviate this by providing recordings of songs that are beyond their reading level but within their technical reach, or by requiring them to use specific strategies (counting, singing) as they learn assignments that they are capable of reading on their own.

Various types of practice sheets and practice assignments can be used to help students develop intrinsic self-motivation (see Figures 2, 3, and 4).

### FIGURE 3

This is directed practice, focusing on repetition.

**Beginning Band Practice Goals**  
Week #4 September 22-26

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Classroom teacher \_\_\_\_\_

GOAL: By the end of this week, you should be able to:	Put an "X" in a box each time you play an assignment correctly.									
Play line 12 with a steady tone										
Play line 17 with good position										
Play line 31 with a steady tone										
Count rhythm lines 1-15 on page 45										
Accurately complete the theory worksheet questions on the back of this sheet	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

### FIGURE 4

This practice sheet can be used to help students set a routine, create goals, and self-assess using a simple plus (goal met), check (improved), and minus (no improvement) system.

*Josh Bell's* PRACTICE FOR *November 28- December 4*

WARM-UP & TECHNIQUE	T	W	Th	F	Sa	Su	M
G major 3, 4, 6, 12, 16 notes per bow	√	√	√	+	+		√
Home base shifting (du-di, du-di)	+	+					+
Review D and A major 3 octaves			+	+			
SONGS							
Vivaldi G minor 3rd movement all	√	√	+	+	+		+
Clare A section	√			√			√
OTHER							
Brandenburg #5			√		+		
Sight reading - p. 28		+		+			+

Teachers can provide opportunities for students to set their own goals by requiring them to write daily or weekly goals as part of their practice. To help students develop high self-efficacy, students must see that they can be successful. Practice assignments that ask students to self-assess progress toward

challenging, but attainable, goals can effectively encourage confidence in their practice ability. Finally, student interest can be encouraged when students are allowed to make choices about what or how they practice. Other strategies include providing a menu of activities or goals to choose from and

teaching students to set aside time in their practice for creative play.

### Goals

Scott's strategy for goal-setting was to pick "whatever's farther forward in my folder. I just grab it and practice it for however long I want and I need to." The process of setting goals is a key component of independent practice, but young students often do not set goals or know how to set goals. Students who do not set goals are less likely to develop effective practice strategies; tend to attribute performance failures to uncontrollable personal sources, such as low ability; and fail to perceive their chances for future success. They accomplish more and enjoy practice more when they work to accomplish goals rather than practice for a required amount of time. Also, by setting goals and the intermediate tasks needed to reach the desired outcomes, students engage in meta-cognition, which aids in planning, monitoring, and assessing learning.

Goal-setting and motivation are strongly interconnected.<sup>12</sup> When teachers instruct their students to set clear, challenging, and proximal goals, students become empowered to learn on their own. We can begin by modeling goal-setting and providing opportunities for student practice in class. Many teachers already write their goals for the day on the chalkboard. The next step is simply to clarify each goal for the students by describing exactly what should be accomplished, what steps must be taken to reach the goal, and how they will know when they have achieved it.

Practice sheets, check-off sheets (e.g., Figure 3), and performance rubrics are especially useful for teaching these skills. Instead of grading practice solely on the number of minutes or the number of days practiced on a practice sheet, it may be beneficial to ask students to write goals for their practice and to describe the intermediate goals needed to meet their desired outcomes. Teachers and students both can choose to list specific songs and études on check-off sheets that emphasize repetition as a means of improvement.

I used rubrics to clearly describe the targeted goals (see Figure 5). I have also found it beneficial to post long-term goals on the music room wall and then check off subgoals once they were achieved (see Figure 6).

## Strategies

During my study, I asked Nick to tell me what he did when he noticed a mistake. His reply was that he would “keep going, because I’m not going to stop . . . I’m not going to stop and do the whole thing again. I’ll just remember to fix it next time.”

I asked Sarah, an eighth-grade flutist, whether her teachers had ever taught her the strategy of learning music in small chunks and then putting the chunks back together. She stated, “Well, they probably have, but I don’t usually do it. I don’t think it really works.”

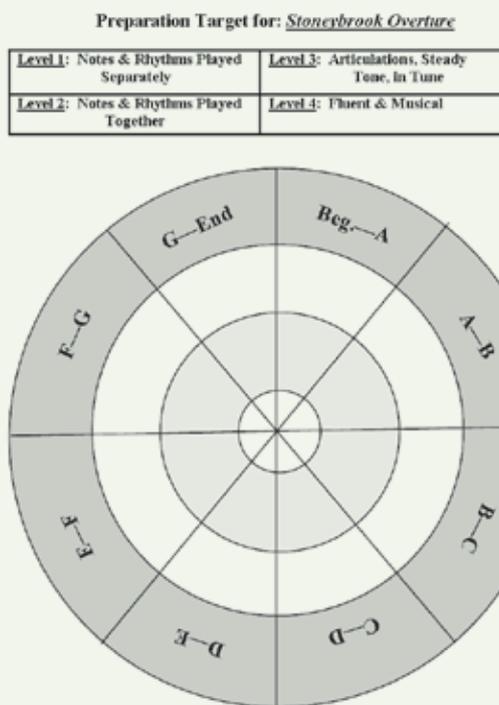
Although teachers often demonstrate practice strategies for their students, the students seem to disregard some of the advice. Students who do choose to use strategies, such as repetition or slowing down difficult passages, often use these techniques inappropriately. For example, students may repeat sections of music that they missed, but play it correctly only one time before moving on rather than playing it correctly multiple times in a row. Other students play sections of music with inconsistent tempi because they abruptly slow down each time they encounter technically difficult spots, losing fluency and musicality in the process.

I found that when I taught my students about how they learn on the basis of research and best professional practices rather than my opinion, they seemed to listen to the information and use it to enhance their learning. By understanding how information is retained and how motor skills become automatic, my students chose appropriate practice strategies for given tasks. I reinforced this by creating practice strategies posters for the music room wall and asking students to record the strategies they used on their practice sheets (see Figures 7 and 8). As time progressed, students began to

**FIGURE 5**  
Sample Performance Rubric

PLAYING TEST RUBRIC					
	Developing D	Novice C	Intermediate B	Advanced A	Mastery A+
Note Accuracy	•Lots of mistakes •Can't finish	•4+ mistakes many re-starts	•<4 mistakes •re-starts	•1-2 mistakes •no re-starts	•No mistakes
Tempo / Rhythm	•Can't feel beat or tell the rhythm	•4+ mistakes •Unsteady Tempo	•<4 missed rhythms Unsteady tempo	•Tempo is slightly off •1-2 mistakes	•Steady tempo •No rhythm mistakes
Tone	•Uncharacteristic tone	•Muffled •Lots of notes don't speak	•Unsteady •Some notes don't speak	•Slight unsteadiness	•Characteristic steady sound
Articulation	•No tonguing	•Very little tonguing	•Some tonguing	•Most articulations •Some clear tonguing	•Consistent articulations •Clear tonguing
Musical Expression	•Dynamics and breathing ignored	•Some dynamics and some breathing at phrase endings	•Dynamics and breathing usually observed	•Implied dynamics beginning •proper breathing used	•Implied dynamics, breaths, appropriate notes emphasized
Performance	•Severe Problems	•Some attempt to use good posture, hand position, and attitude	•correctible problems	•No problems with: Posture •Hand position and Attitude	

**FIGURE 6**  
This poster helps students see the goals that need to be met as they prepare a new concert piece. Each ring is a different section of the concert piece. Once a section of the target is met, it is colored in.



**FIGURE 7**

**Poster of Practice Strategies**

P R A C T I C E  S T R A T E G I E S	<b><u>REPETITION:</u></b>	Play it correctly 5 times in a row
	<b><u>SMALL BITES:</u></b>	Take the smallest pattern that makes sense – 5 to 9 notes is usually enough to learn at a time
	<b><u>CHUNKING:</u></b>	Little bites can be combined to form single thoughts
	<b><u>SCHEDULING:</u></b>	Frequent, high repetition practice sessions at first, followed by review sessions gradually spread out over time
	<b><u>REMEDIATE:</u></b>	Break your large goals down into smaller ones that ensure success
	<b><u>ANALYZE:</u></b>	Are there patterns / pitfalls that you recognize? Use the knowledge you've already gained!
	<b><u>THINK:</u></b>	Count it, say the note names, alternate fingerings, ASSESS YOURSELF!
	<b><u>FOCUS:</u></b>	Discipline yourself to concentrate
	<b><u>BELIEVE:</u></b>	Whether you think you can or whether you think you can't, you're always correct!

**FIGURE 8**

**This poster helps students use the scientific method in an authentic and meaningful way, and helps students transfer knowledge to a new situation.**

<i>THE SCIENTIFIC METHOD IN PRACTICE</i>	
<i>The Method:</i>	<i>Example:</i>
Select a problem	My tone is fuzzy.
Review the knowledge base	What affects tone?
Develop a hypothesis	My embouchure is weak.
Test through experimentation	Play with a firmer embouchure.
Collect data	Listen
Analyze data	It's a little better, but I still hear some fuzz
Interpret the results	A firmer embouchure helps my tone – but there's more!

build a “toolbox” of strategies to use on their own.

### Assessment

Self-assessment is a key component of independent learning because it provides students with feedback that spurs new goals.<sup>13</sup> Novices who have not yet developed a sense of strong aural imagery are often unaware of their own errors, while more capable musicians are more aware of their strengths and weaknesses.<sup>14</sup> I found that novices tend to focus first on pitch as they assessed themselves, followed by rhythm and other technical aspects of playing, but that they tended to neglect their tone, even though an inconsistent tone was often the root cause of many of their difficulties.<sup>15</sup>

To develop self-assessment skills, students need to be taught what to attend to and need to be given guided-practice opportunities to assess themselves and others. By providing a performance rubric (see Figure 8) and directing student attention to only one or two dimensions of the rubric at a time, teachers can guide student attention toward key aspects of performance that may normally be neglected. Teachers can also utilize peer assessment in conjunction with self-assessment to provide an additional means of feedback. Finally, teachers can encourage their students to assess themselves during their home practice by asking them to record their practice goals and self-assessments on their practice sheets.

### A New Paradigm for Practice Sheets

Renate Caine and her colleagues emphasize that learning is developmental.<sup>16</sup> Students gradually develop new performance skills as they build upon previous learning. The same is true as they learn practice skills. The more effective we are in helping them gradually develop their practice skills, the more students will become self-regulated learners.

The model presented in this article suggests that teachers can become more intentional in their teaching of practice skills by (1) informing students about goals, (2) empowering students to achieve these goals, (3) modeling for students, and (4) using practice assignments wisely. The traditional purpose of practice sheets is to encourage practice time, but time is only one factor in the practice puzzle. Practice sheets can also be used to encourage distributed practice, goal-setting, strategy use, and self-assessment. Other types of practice records, like reflective journals, can be used to enhance reflective thinking and self-efficacy.

I have talked with music teachers who use the same practice sheets with the same grading policies week after week, month after month, and year after year. Few, if any, other subjects-area educators use the same assignment week after week. Instead, we need to consider student needs and developmental levels when creating practice assignments that methodically lead our students toward becoming self-regulated learners. By being as intentional about practice education as we are with other aspects of music

education, we can teach students to practice more effectively.

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