

Towards Independence

*Never help a child with a task
at which they feel they can succeed.*

Maria Montessori

Sample Only: Chapter 16

**Sections indicated in RED below are included in
this sample.**

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The Practice Revolution: Chapter 16

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16. Towards Independence

16.1 Introduction

It's been said that the only certainties in life are death and taxes, but there is actually a third:

Every student that you start teaching will eventually stop having lessons.

The important thing to remember here is that it's not just those students for whom lessons didn't quite work out.

It's *everyone* – that includes your favorite students, your stars, the ones who make you smile, the ones who really listen, and those that seem to laugh loudest at your jokes.

Sometimes their family moves interstate. Sometimes their interests change. Sometimes, after years with the same teacher, it's simply *time* for a change. Sometimes the fact that you were the perfect teacher for them when they were eight means that you are exactly the *wrong* teacher for them now they are thirteen.

Whatever the reason, the single most valuable gift you can leave your student on that final day is for that student *to be able to work independently*. For this reason, when I teach students, my main aim is not to teach them pieces, theory, skills or scales – although we obviously do plenty of all four. My aim is to teach them *how to teach themselves*. To equip them with strategies that they can apply for themselves to a thousand pieces that they haven't even met yet.

So that when they pass through the studio doors for the last time, they simply don't need me any more.

In that way, music teaching is the strangest of professions. There are few careers on the planet that require you to work so hard towards your own redundancy, or leave you feeling so proud and fulfilled when that redundancy is achieved.

As teachers, most of us are well aware of this, and we already work towards independence in our students in many ways. We teach students to read. We teach them to count. We make sure that they can understand all manner of signs and terms. We teach them to regulate their own

tempi, to create dynamics that work, and how to manage nerves before a performance.

But of all these skills, the one that is the most important is to teach them how to *practice*. To gently turn the six days between lessons into the *seven* days that sooner or later, won't actually feature a lesson at all.

What you've read in this book will help with this process, but it still requires *your* regular input – input that one day you won't be there to give. Here's what you've been told so far...and then we're going to add a little extra to the whole process to help students make the transformation for themselves, at which point the Practice Revolution will be complete.

16.1.1 Looking back

If the Practice Revolution achieves nothing else, it's to shift the focus on practice away from the traditional obsession with *time spent*, and towards a focus on *outcomes*. In other words, don't try to impress me with how much practice you did this week – show me what all that practice *produced*.

The student then understands that because you are no longer going to be dazzled simply by how much time they used up, if they are smart about how they work, they can actually *minimize* the amount of time they need to spend practicing in the first place. And for 21st century students who are becoming busier than ever before at a younger age than ever before, this is a very good thing.

In pursuit of this end, you clearly define the goals for the week, together with some tests that the student can self-administer so that they they'll know once the goals have been reached. In other words, so that they'll know when they *don't* need to do any more practice on it.

Their mission during the week is not to do half an hour of practice every day. *It's to complete these goals*, and once they're done, they can stop. And similarly, until they're done, they can't.

You'll also equip them with a range of practice techniques – techniques which are *tailor made for the goals you set*. So if their goal is to get their piece up to tempo, you would equip them with techniques specifically dedicated to speeding pieces up, rather than giving them the general instruction to “practice hard and speed up the piece this week”, and then leaving it to them to work out how.

Providing a *range* of targeted techniques means that if technique A didn't work, then technique B just might, helping the student feel a sense of hope in the face of any setbacks, and also developing an awareness of

just how many different ways forward there actually are. It's much harder to be discouraged about the progress of the game when there is a steady stream of new cards to play.

To help with this, the center of this book has been dedicated to providing a wide range of highly targeted practice techniques, explanations as to why these techniques are effective, and any accompanying cautions or variations. Teachers are also encouraged to go and build their own list of techniques, and for that list to be constantly be growing.

You've also been shown methods of identifying and curing common practice flaws, to save your students hundreds of hours of wasted practice in the course of each year—time which they can then spend either at leisure, or on making their music lessons move forwards even faster.

But there's one more job to be done. So far, *you need to be there for your student at every step of the way*, from the time the goal was first set, to the "week that was" review. It's time to start gently backing away, and to help them to ride this particular bike all by themselves.

16.2 Choosing from the Menu

Don't misunderstand me. We're not going to help students ride the bike by themselves by *suddenly* letting go of the bike completely. It's going to be a gentle process, and one that needs to leave the student with faith in the practice system at all times.

The least dangerous support to remove is that of the *choice* of practice techniques. Instead of telling them that they are to use these two practice techniques to memorize their piece this week, present them with a *list of half a dozen options* for memorizing the piece, and allow them to choose from that menu.

You still retain a degree of control, in the same way that a chef does at a restaurant, in that you'll only put on the menu options that you are happy for them to work with in the first place. But once that option-limiting step has been taken, the student can enjoy a feeling of autonomy as they decide for themselves which of those options they want to use. In the process, they'll learn two important lessons:

- 1) They will discover that they enjoy working with some techniques more than others. This means that they don't have to be condemned

to working through a system that they find tedious or unrewarding – they have plenty of alternatives that they can switch to.

2) Point 1 notwithstanding, they will also discover that some techniques work more *effectively* than others. So while their early choices will probably be dictated by assessing which method is the most fun, six months down the track, they will have learned from experience which techniques are going to require the *least practice time*. And remember, “least practice time” to get the job done well is why the Practice Revolution is so attractive to students in the first place.

Whatever choices they make, at the end of the practice week, spend some time discussing their choice of techniques with them, together with assessments as to how effective they felt each technique was...

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You can read the rest of this chapter in the full print version of *The Practice Revolution*

Chapter 16: Making the Piece Reliable

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