

Why Students Don't Practice

“Toil is man’s allotment; toil of brain, or toil of hands, or a grief that’s more than either, the grief and sin of idleness.”

Herman Melville (1819–1891)

Sample Only: Chapter 4

Sections indicated in RED below are included in this sample.

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The Practice Revolution: Chapter 4

- **Time Management Skills** • Reading Problems
- Lack of Parental Help • Parental Interference
- A Week with Wings • Impossible Workloads • Not Clear on what they are Hoping to Achieve
- Discovering that Practice Doesn't Work •

4. Why Students Don't Practice

4.1 Introduction

While the focus so far has been on overcoming practice flaws, there's one major practice flaw we haven't covered yet. Sometimes students will be unprepared for lessons because they simply haven't practiced *at all*.

Teachers are divided along ideological lines as to how to handle this. Some will bear in like a wronged and vengeful SWAT team on the non-practicing student, easing off only when the student's bottom lip is trembling nicely, and there is a general understanding in the room that if the student *ever* comes to a lesson unprepared again, that they had better write a will first. While some students do need an occasional kick in the backside, this approach does nothing to develop a feeling of rapport between teacher and student, instead replacing it with a 19th Century "School-marm" atmosphere of compliance through terror.

Other teachers (and I have been guilty of this at times), are so keen to preserve the atmosphere of trust and warmth in the studio that the reaction can be altogether too gentle. Such non-productive weeks are greeted with quiet encouragements to please try to turn things around in the future. If it's not too inconvenient. There are no fangs, no venom—and often, no change. Granted, at least the student is not terrified of you, but they're probably not practicing either.

The problem has been that for too long, teachers have focused on trying to establish which of the two approaches is better. This debate is actually giving undue attention to *two candidates that shouldn't be in the race in the first place*. The saber tooth tiger teacher will occasionally produce compliance, but never enthusiasm, and will often irreparably damage the child's view of music lessons. And the kitty cat tactic often produces nothing at all, leaving the teacher looking weak and wishy-washy.

At their core, both types of cat fail because each of them targets symptoms, not the cause. When students don't practice, there is *always* a cause. And until you understand the cause, no amount of admonishing, encouraging, cajoling, threatening, pleading or rewarding is going to

produce long term change.

To make matters even more complex, these causes are not always self-evident, despite the fact that we think we know what's going on. For most teachers the cause seems easy to identify – a student who doesn't practice is not motivated. That's the cause. No motivation.

So we deal with that by effectively either yelling at the child to “be motivated” or gently suggest to them to “be motivated”, depending on what type of cat we feel like today. It doesn't matter how we couch this message to “be motivated”, whether it's a request or an order – the message itself is nonsense.

People don't become motivated because they are asked to, any more than people can become long-sighted just because they're told to. Motivation, or lack thereof, is a *symptom*. It's caused by other things. Target those causes, and the motivation will follow.

This chapter is dedicated to looking at causes – an examination of the most common reasons that students are not motivated to practice, and how to turn them around.

4.2 Time Management skills

It can be very easy to confuse students who *can't be bothered* to find time to practice with those who simply *don't have the skills* to find time. And a lecture from you that is appropriate for the former type of student can be devastating for the latter.

It's no co-incidence that books on time management have sold millions of copies, while corporations throughout the world spend fortunes on time management gurus and their seminars. But even those who already have excellent time management skills will be the first to admit that they were not *born* with them. Such skills have to be developed, as most of the principles run counter to human intuition.

Here's the newsflash: it's not just busy executives who need help with time management. Your music students do not come pre-equipped with time management skills either. Which means that some weeks – no matter how motivated they are feeling about their music lessons – they simply won't get *around* to practicing. Their week will have other plans for them.

The problem is that when we hear excuses as flimsy as “I had to work on a school project”, we immediately picture the student lying in front of

the TV all week, only getting up when their Gameboy needs fresh batteries. They're lazy, nothing surer, and the lecture is half delivered simply by the withering look we give them as soon as their plea for understanding is over.

But before we surrender to such assumptions, let's walk a mile in the shoes of the student who came to you blaming their lack of practice on a school project. The following outline is quite detailed, but as teachers, we sometimes forget just how effectively a seemingly minor commitment can hijack practice, and just how great the feeling of panic and helplessness can be. The aim is not to validate the excuse, but to understand how weeks like this do not necessarily reflect at all badly on the student's dedication to music lessons.

In fact, weeks like this have nothing whatsoever to do with how well music lessons are going. You still have to talk to your student about a better way of doing things, but the issue of motivation can be left well alone, because it's not the problem.

4.2.1 A walk in the shoes of a Time Management challenged student: The Moon Project

At first glance, the project in the scenario below doesn't sound much like a practice-killer. In fact, if all we knew about it was the stated task itself, it would be easy for us to be annoyed with the student for allowing such a trifle to disrupt a whole week of practice. I was – until I found out a little more about what it meant for the student involved. Needless to say, I won't be using real names ☺

The question on the front page of their project is "Observe the moon on seven different clear nights in this month, and draw its shape on each night". Not so bad, and a generous thirty days to complete it all – at least there *were* thirty days to go when the assignment was first given. Problem is, that's three weeks ago now, meaning that there are only *six* nights left this month, ensuring that the whole assignment will have to be completed in a panic this week.

To make matters worse, on Wednesday your student realizes for the first time that there were *more* instructions printed on the reverse side...oh no...they also have to build a telescope...their pulse rate goes up to 150 bpm as they read this...and then hits 200 when they read one more instruction about a two page report on the Apollo XI Mission, or a short film review of

Apollo 13. (Their choice)

For some reason, even though they were your best student last lesson, they're not thinking about practicing too much now. The world seems to be collapsing in on them in an Escherian collage of blurred deadlines, crescent moons and leaking hourglasses, with sand now pouring all over the remains of what was their week. Somewhere in those remains were supposed to be practice sessions.

Their family wants to help, so Dad jumps in the car with them to go to their local video store—"Yes, we have copies of Apollo 13, but they're all out right now...it's strange, nobody hired it for six months and then suddenly WHAM this week, everyone wants it". (Does anyone else in their class have music lessons with you?)

Pulse rate hits 205. Ok, so maybe we forget that and do the Apollo XI report instead. Back home, and time for some research. Now where are our encyclopaedias? Abacus, Apertures, Apples, ah...here were are, Apollo...hang on, doesn't say anything about moon missions, just some god I never heard of before...what year was this encyclopaedia printed? Dad! Mom! 1963! You are KIDDING right? How am I supposed to get into college with resources like this? Five-thirty now—I should be practicing, but I'll have to do it later..."

Uh huh. Later.

Ok, so some practicing goes to accommodate the emergency. What now? Where do they look up Apollo mission info?... Internet maybe? Great, upstairs, hope there's nobody using the computer... there is, but they'll fix that... *"Lucy, get off the computer NOW, I need to look up something. Don't tell me "In a minute", this is an EMERGENCY?...what? when's yours due? Yeah, Chemistry Final, right. Tomorrow huh. You're just making that up so I don't get a turn, you're always hogging the computer and I never get a go, and now I'm going to get an F in my school project and it's all your fault and you don't even care what my report says... Daaaad! Lucy won't let me do my moon research!..."*

Wailing and gnashing of teeth. We've gone beyond simply delaying practicing now. The whole idea of practice has been obliterated from the student's mind by Forces Greater than Themselves. In fact, as I write this, it's pretty much passed from my mind too.

Doesn't matter though. By the time Lucy takes a break, the ISP has gone down anyway. "We regret any inconvenience caused...please try again later". There may well be thirty million websites with information about the Apollo Mission, but this household won't be connecting with any of them in the immediate future.

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Back in the car again. The student is yelling at anyone within earshot, and panic has clearly set in. This time to the local library, both to borrow a book on the Apollo Mission, AND to use their internet connection. Forty minute wait to get access to a computer, then they're in. Finally. Ok...now, hang on, which Apollo was it. Ten? Seven? Eleven? Twelve? It's ok, it's just on the sheet...what do you mean "what sheet?", I thought *you* had it? Oh no...

...you get the idea. I could relate immediately to the scenario because I was a child like that. I teach plenty of them too, and so do you.

Throughout every second of this madness, your student was actually still a dedicated music student—just with much more urgent and terrible things on their mind. Trust me, they would much rather be practicing than doing this project.

But for them to satisfy our daydreams and announce "FORGET my project...I have PRACTICE to do!" would not be the utterance of a dedicated music student, but the pronouncement of a fanatic, or someone in deep denial. School deadlines can loom very, very large.

They will still be a dedicated music student tomorrow too, when they have to use up their practice time writing up their first draft of the Apollo XI article. And the day after when they discover—to their horror—another website that contradicts most of the information they already had, but is sanctioned by NASA.

And the day after that, when the school teacher reminds them that although 500 words was the *minimum*, that those who really want to do well should really be thinking of 800. 1000 if they want to excel. You could not conspire to destroy practice this week more effectively.

You see, your student is not just a dedicated music student. You would hope that they are also a dedicated *school* student. And sometimes these scatter-headed but dedicated students can be the most dangerous kind of person to be taking music lessons—hopelessly disorganized, and with the time management skills of a herd of camels, but genuine in their desire to excel. Which means now that they *have* to turn 500 into 1000 words...no problem, they just have to spend some extra time tonight and tomorrow...

The week used in the illustration above might seem like an extreme and isolated example, but any parent will tell you it's not. This week was the great science project. In two week's time there might be a school camp to prepare for, go on, and the recover from. Two weeks after that, and cousins might come to stay for an extended weekend to co-incide with grandpa's

eightieth birthday. Poor time management skills will guarantee that life's everyday events become frequent and impossible to ignore emergencies.

None of these things actually is severe enough to prevent adequate practice—in the hands of someone with even rudimentary organization skills. But for the majority of students who have no TM skills whatsoever, they are practice killers, and there are plenty more where they came from.

There was a sign at the student help center at Indiana University that said "Lack of planning on *your* part does not constitute an emergency on *my* part". It's true, but lack of planning on your student's part at the very least constitutes a reason for discussions about planning. It's not "none of your business" —if a student decides to do no regular revision at school at all for a whole year because they "can always cram later", it's not just their marks their messing with. When their world ends for a month while they panic cram before their finals, their practice will end too for the same month, and that's very much your business.

So when they come to you with the Project that made practice impossible, don't talk about how they could have handled their practice better. Ask instead how they could have handled their *project* better.

Of course, there are ways you could have helped to head all of this off before it even began.

Tips for dealing with this problem

Ok, so you've identified a couple of students who seem to be exhibiting all the classic signs of having Time Management problems. It's obviously an issue which goes well beyond the scope of music lessons — and therefore your expertise — so how can you help usefully without being seen as interfering?

First thing is to assess the extent to which their time management adversely affects their music lessons — this is to give you permission to become involved. It's *not* unreasonable for your response to this whole issue to be in proportion to the degree of impact the problem has on your job. If your student is frequently coming to lessons with little or no practice because their week tossed them about like a small dingy in the North Atlantic, then it's entirely appropriate to spend some time talking with them — and their parents — about the problem.

Find out what the other pressures are — both regular and unpredictable. Who are the homework givers? What sorts of patterns are there in this

homework? Is assessment based on the completion of small weekly tasks, or does it depend instead on one REALLY big annual project, and two mid-term quizzes? You need to know about these things now, not once they are already causing problems.

In fact, is there a big annual project underway at the moment? How far is the student into it? Can you be of any help? (Hey! We don't just know about music after all – maybe we have a book on the subject we could lend). If they were given the assignment details a month ago, and haven't started it yet, which day this week would they like to choose to kick it all off? (That's one of those "You don't get to go home today until you've answered this" questions, and make sure their parents hear the answer!). And before you squirm, remember, it *is* your business. If the student fails to plan for this assignment, you could easily lose them for a couple of weeks while they do it in a panic.

If the problem is particularly well entrenched, it might be worth taking the initiative and offering to convene a coalition of Adults Who Have To Give Jason Deadlines. Sort of like a support group, but for him, rather than for each other (most of the time anyway!). You, his school teacher, his parents and his soccer coach, swapping occasional phone calls that just quickly bring each other up to speed on what's coming up for Jason, and how he's coping with it. That way, you can tell Jason that you heard from their School Teacher that their most recent project was the best yet, while their soccer coach can praise the music practice Jason has been doing recently. Jason won't mind the extra positive attention – and in fact will probably love it that you know when he does something good at school.

Which means that when you want to try to influence how early he starts his work at school, he won't resent it.

You can even give him occasional "scoops":

"Hey Jason, you don't even know about it yet, but Mrs. Henderson mentioned to me that next term's project is going to be on Egypt. Nobody else knows either – I certainly wasn't supposed to tell you – but you might want to start borrowing all the cool Egypt books from the school library before the other kids find out and get them all. She said it's a three month project, but I'm hoping you can get it in a few weeks early so that it's not hanging over you while you're trying to polish things for the end-of-year-concert."

(This liaising with Jason's teacher, quite apart from giving you both a better understanding of Jason, is highly likely to have that teacher singing

your praises to anyone who will listen...there are much, much worse ways of building student numbers than having local school teachers who think you're fabulous. But that of course is studio promotion...which is another book entirely, stay tuned.)

The second thing is to create a single chart which allows Jason to record all his deadlines. He brings that chart to music lessons. He takes it to school to record homework and project details. He reviews it with his parents on a regular basis—it tells him what's coming up, when it's due, and gives him enough space to make notes about where he's up to on the whole adventure.

That chart will also allow all the Adults Who Have To Give Jason Deadlines a glimpse at the big picture—ensuring that they don't unwittingly create situations where all his deadlines seem to converge on a single date.

But the final thing is the most important. Students don't normally stop going to school for a few days, simply to create time to finish a project. Why not? Because school is regarded as being a non-negotiable. You have to steal time in emergencies, but you can't steal time from *that*.

Well, guess what. The practice time that you had carefully scheduled as part of his week is not negotiable either. It's not a "practice now—as long as there are no more pressing demands on my time" arrangement. It's a "practice now, no matter what" arrangement. In other words, Jason is more than welcome to steal time to complete the project...but he can only steal it from his *discretionary* time. And there's nothing discretionary about the time he has earmarked as "practice time".

None of these steps is designed to suddenly have Jason as a Time Management expert. But they will put in place some important basic changes:

- 1) His various Deadline Givers will know about each other, and will also know about other existing deadlines which affect Jason.
- 2) Jason is being sent the important signal that those various Deadline Givers in his life are actually on his side, and are very, very interested in what he does. It reminds him that there is help all around him, and handling all of this does not have to be a struggle he undertakes alone.
- 3) It will help you to better tailor Jason's workload to meet the ebb and

flow of his other demands. If his cyclic pressures at school really can be charted by a giant sine wave, then you should probably construct his practice demands to be the inverse of that wave, so that your peaks coincide with the school's troughs.

4) While it provides support for Jason, nowhere does it give him permission to continue this inefficient behavior. In fact it's sending him the message that a week of no-practice-because-of-my-project was an emergency he probably sowed the seeds for quite some time ago—and that procrastination of such projects has consequences that go well beyond the project itself. He knows that from now on his parents won't be the only ones taking an interest in why his latest project remains unstarted after three weeks.

5) It tells him that the trade-off he made this week is *not* a valid one. He cannot react to time crises by stealing time from practicing. He has to get the time from somewhere else.

6) And most importantly, it reminds you that Jason is not an uninterested music student. He's simply a disorganized school student. So stop giving him a hard time about "being motivated", and help him to be organised instead...

...End of sample

The complete fourth chapter of *The Practice Revolution* looks at a total of 8 different obstacles to practice—this preview has been but one.

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