

Practicing & Learning Processes

By Merlin B. Thompson

How do music teachers provide guidance for students' learning processes? Where do music teachers' strategies for practicing come from? From other teachers? Our own experience? Past masters? When it comes to practicing and learning, is it possible that – Times have Changed?

This essay is the second in my series devoted to the theme: Times have Changed. My goal is to demonstrate how various dynamics related to music teaching have changed. It's all about using the beauty and power of change to inspire teachers in transforming their teaching.

Practicing & Learning Processes – Many of the ways music teachers think about practicing and learning to sing or play a musical instrument date back several centuries. Such strategies have their origin in educational strategies associated with compulsory public schooling developments during the 1800s across Europe and North America. With strong links to the prevailing scientific/industrial revolutions, educators of the era developed instructional processes modelled after the effectiveness of a factory assembly line. Music teachers followed suit by deconstructing music learning into processes characterized by linear progression, isolation of skills, and systemized mastery. Teachers implemented sequential and replicable methodologies to promote efficient musical development. The practicality of such principles may explain why music teachers have continued to incorporate them across multiple generations.

Recent research has revealed significant new details about practicing and learning processes. For example, researchers in neuroscience point out how varied practice actually produces a greater accumulation of skill and learning over time than repetition of isolated skills. This means successful learning benefits from music students exploring the desired goal as well as variations on the desired goal, exaggerations of the desired goal, and even opposites to the desired goal.

From education research comes the delivery of learning as a cyclical process in which students naturally circulate from stages of concentration through reflection to playing around. While historical learning models emphasize the importance of cognitive involvement (goal setting), each aspect of the cyclical process plays an important role in supporting and guiding students' musical progress. Concentration means students have clear ideas about where they're heading; reflection means students find out what's working and what's not; and playing around means students avoid overthinking or micromanaging their efforts to make room for taking risks and letting go. This cyclical process enables students to gain awareness of what they don't know or cannot do; which may trigger explicit actions; which may need to be tested out through musical performance or playing around.

Times have Changed – Two centuries ago, our educational forefathers got the ball rolling by deconstructing music learning. Since then, music teachers have benefited from their attention to linear progression, isolation of skills, and systemized mastery. At the same time, it's obvious there's more to music learning than our forefathers' conclusions.

Fortunately, recent research into learning sheds light on what's missing from historical models. Yet, many music teachers may remain committed to a singular diet based on historical learning models. Why is this so? Familiarity most certainly plays a key role. Teachers naturally incorporate learning strategies they are most familiar with. Equally relevant is the aspect of success. Achievement of successful results by using historical learning models would most certainly reinforce continuation. However, my impression is that most teachers hold onto historical models because of fear. They remain committed to what they already know, because they're not sure what they'll encounter in trying something new. They're held back by fear of the unknown.

What seems noteworthy is that new teaching strategies come with a requisite amount of trial and error. The more often teachers incorporate strategies like varied practice and cyclical learning, the sooner teachers and their students find out how they work. In this context, successful teaching isn't something frozen in time; it's a

continually evolving journey of exploration and experimentation that builds on and expands what we already know.

Now that I've got you thinking about how Times have Changed regarding music learning strategies, here are a few questions for your attention:

1. Which aspects of your teaching are based on historical learning models?
2. How much of your teaching is devoted to varied practice and cyclical learning strategies?
3. What are the benefits of varied practice and cyclical learning strategies?
4. How do you feel about change?
5. What makes you nervous about varied practice and cyclical learning strategies?
6. What makes you excited about teaching varied practice and cyclical learning strategies?
- 7.