Why It's Probably Not a Good Sign If Practicing Starts to Feel Easy

Description

I once heard a guitar teacher say that the point of practicing is to make things easier.

This totally resonated with me, and struck me as the kind of statement that manages to be both obvious and profound at the same time.

The problem, is that sometimes, I think we fall for the trap of wanting *practice* to be easy. Where we spend our time working on things we already do pretty well. Or engage in repetition-based practice as opposed to goal-based practice.

Which may not seem like a big deal in the early stages of learning a piece. After all, in much the same way that a total workout newbie will get stronger no matter what they do at the gym, when we're working on something new, we'll hear improvements in the practice room no matter how we approach the task.

But as time goes on, we eventually hit that dreaded plateau…where progress seems to slow to a crawl. Like the agonizingly slow drip of ketchup out of a brand-new bottle.

Is this just one of those unfortunate practice room realities we have to learn to live with? Or are we missing something?

"Progressive" practice

A [team] of Danish researchers recruited 24 participants to spend 4 days practicing and performing a "visuomotor accuracy-tracking task."

Basically, this was a vaguely Flappy Bird-esque computer program, where the goal was to keep the cursor inside rectangular target zones as long as possible (by squeezing a controller) as the targets drifted across the screen.

Like Flappy Bird, there were different levels of difficulty in the game. At Level 1, the targets were pretty good size, and moved across the screen relatively slowly. Not easy, but not too crazy either. By Level 6, the targets were a lot smaller, and flew across the screen much more quickly.

Everyone got 30 minutes of practice time per day, but half of the participants spent all of their practice time training at Level 1 (the **"non-progressive" practice group**), while the other half engaged in "progressive" practice (the **progressive practice group**), where they'd automatically get bumped up to the next level if they achieved a score of 60 or above on either 3 consecutive tries or 5 out of 20 tries.

And to see how these different approaches to practice would affect learning and performance, participants were tested at both Level 1 *and* Level 6 each day.

Level 1 results

When tested at Level 1, both groups demonstrated daily improvement, performing better with each passing day. That said, the non-progressive group's progress did seem to plateau a bit after Day 3…

Performance-wise, the two groups' scores were pretty comparable from day to day as well – except on Day 4, when the non-progressive group scored about 4% higher than the progressive practice group.

So, as far as Level 1 performance goes, there didn't seem to be any real benefit to bumping up the difficulty of the task as performance improved. Or in musical terms, it seems like it would be perfectly fine to practice scales at a moderate tempo all week, simply trying to make them cleaner and more precise. As opposed to increasing the challenge by increasing the tempo when you reach a certain level of accuracy.

Hmm…but what about their performance at the more challenging Level 6? Might there be some differences there?

Level 6 results

Well as it turns out, both groups made significant daily improvements on the Level 6 test too. Although, once again, the non-progressive group's performance appeared to plateau after Day 3…

Both groups reached approximately the same level of performance on the much tougher Level 6 test as well. Or at least, they did on Day 1 (18.4 for the progressive group vs 15.6 for the non-progressive group).

Because from Day 2 onwards, things began to diverge, with the progressive group performing **markedly better** than the non-progressive group.

Day 2: **25.6** (progressive) vs. 17.3 (non-progressive)
Day 3: **30.9** (progressive) vs. 23 (non-progressive)
Day 4: **31.9** (progressive) vs. 23.4 (non-progressive)

What does this all mean?

To recap, both groups improved their performance from one day to the next at the easy level. And likewise at the more challenging level.

The key difference, is that the progressive practice group, whose practice was set up so that it remained continuously challenging – always at the edges of their ability – made significantly *greater* improvements on the challenging test.

In other words, it's only when participants were tested at the more difficult level, that the benefits of progressive practice became apparent.

Well, duh?

In some ways, I feel like this study goes in the "well, duh…" category. Because of course we know how important it is to ensure that we are constantly challenging ourselves in the practice room, instead of simply engaging in one repetition after another.

But as I chewed on this for a few days, I began to wonder…do we push ourselves outside our comfort zone as often as we think we do?

The plateau

I'm intrigued by the non-progressive group's performance plateaus following Day 3.

Because you know how when you start a new piece, it's all sunshine and puppy dogs because everything's fresh and new, and going from sounding awful to pretty decent is easy and fun? And how it's when we hit that phase of having to go from good to great, that the real teeth-gnashing and hair-pulling sets in?

I wonder if by the 3rd day, the non-progressive practice folks reached that "pretty good" level of performance, and so even though there was room for improvement, their engagement in the task waned a bit.

Whereas the progressive group, from Day 1, was continually kept at that uncomfortable phase where you're on the verge of feeling like you're starting to get something, but never quite get settled. Which was probably frustrating, but also may have kept them engaged and challenged throughout each practice session.

Take action

All this to say, I wonder if it's ok sometimes to "level up" sooner than later.

It goes without saying, that striving for excellence, and working hard to take a piece from good to great is essential. But at least in the early stages of learning, maybe we'd improve faster if we didn't worry quite so much about perfection and just kept pushing ourselves out of our comfort zone?

Like assigning a set of scales at quarter note = 60, but asking a student to increase the metronome by 2 clicks as soon as they can play it [3] times in a row with <[5] mistakes. As opposed to simply asking that they play the scales at quarter note = 60, and not increasing the tempo until they're 100% mistake-free.

Or as another example, looking back on my Suzuki days, I can recall times when my teacher moved me on to the next piece in a book, even though I knew I hadn't really polished the piece to as high a level as I could have.

I remember being a little confused (yet excited too) – and would always be pleasantly surprised and marvel at how much easier the piece felt when I went back to it a month or two later.

Maybe this is what one of my teachers meant, when he remarked, "if practicing feels easy, you're probably not doing it right."

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