

## A Simple Technique That Could Help Boost Your Effectiveness With a Struggling Student

### Description

Once you get pretty good at riding a skateboard, hitting a tennis ball, or playing with a nice juicy vibrato, it can be easy to forget what it was like when you were struggling to do these things as a beginner. And be surprisingly difficult to remember just how unsteady, awkward, uncoordinated, or ineffective everything felt in the early stages of learning that new skill.

Because sure, everyone goes through periods where they struggle with vibrato, playing with a straight bow, or executing clean attacks and articulation at some point. But, as your skills develop, and you start playing at increasingly higher levels, you begin to forget many of the little details that become increasingly automatic, and no longer require as much conscious effort.

And in much the same way that you don't remember how hard it was for you to learn how to walk, and would probably be hard-pressed to teach a class on Walking 101 to toddlers, this "curse of expertise" can not only lead to advice that isn't particularly helpful (like "just put one foot in front of the other"), but comes across as being less empathetic, and less encouraging or supportive.

So, how can we overcome the "curse of expertise" and give better advice to our students when they are struggling with something that's no longer difficult for us?

### Expert guitarists

Harvard Business School professor [Ting Zhang](#) conducted a study ([2015](#)) with guitarists to see if there might be a way to help experienced players give more helpful and encouraging advice to beginners.

74 expert guitarists, with an average of 8.7 years of experience, were asked to make a 1-minute recording of themselves playing a piece of their choice.

Half were asked to "play as you would on a typical day" (the **control group**). Which led to some pretty cool recordings like this one:

But the other half were instructed to play the instrument flip-flopped. As in, "flip your guitar around, play on the fingerboard with your RIGHT hand, and strum with your LEFT hand." This was the "**rediscovery**" group. Which led to recordings that sound pretty much like you'd expect, like this one:

## Observing a beginner guitarist

Then, the experts watched a video of a beginner guitarist struggling to play some chords, and were asked to give 3-5 sentences of advice to this person.

They were also asked to answer some questions in response to the video, like:

1. how much potential they thought the beginner had (1=very little; 7=a lot)
2. the quality of the beginner's playing (1=very bad; 7=very good)

## Novice guitarists

75 novice guitarists, all with less than one year of experience, were then presented with the advice given by several randomly selected experts, and asked to rate this advice on the following criteria:

1. how **encouraging** the advice was (1=not at all; 7=extremely/very much)
2. how **motivating** it was
3. the level of **detail** in their advice
4. to what degree their suggestions would "fix the player's technique"
5. and to what degree their input would "help the player produce a better sound"

So did playing the guitar reverse-handed, and reliving the experience of being a beginner help the expert guitarists provide more useful advice?

## A few differences

Well, before we get to their advice, let's look at a couple of the differences that rediscovering the feeling of being a beginner seemed to contribute to.

For one, the guitarists in the rediscovery group thought more highly of the beginner's playing than the guitarists in the control group (3.26 vs. 2.56, where 1=very bad; 4=neither good nor bad; 7=very good). I mean, it wasn't a dramatic difference, of course – the playing was still pretty subpar. But the guitarists who experienced beginner-hood were slightly more generous in their evaluation than those that played their guitar as they normally would.

Another interesting difference was that the rediscovery guitarists also rated the beginner as having more potential than those in the control group did (5.59 vs. 4.94, where 1=very little; 4=some; 7=a lot).

## Better advice?

In terms of the advice given, guitarists in the rediscovery group were significantly more likely to use words

involving specific body parts in their suggestions to the beginner guitarist. Like recommendations on what to do with the fingers or hands.

For instance, one guitarist in the control group said: “This player needs more confidence...This player’s hand placement is wrong,” and “I would say practice that everyday. Practice until you can’t get it wrong.”

Whereas one of the guitarists in the rediscovery group said: “Have that right hand flowing on the strings, and suspend the hand using your pinky finger as a swivel on the body of the guitar...Play slower, and work your way up to full speed; Kirk Hammett didn’t learn it overnight!”

Needless to say, the novice guitarists rated the rediscovery group’s advice as being not only more helpful (4.68 vs. 3.96, where 1=not at all; 7=extremely/very much), but more encouraging as well (4.75 vs 4.23, where 1=not at all; 7=extremely/very much).

## Takeaways

I don’t know if playing an instrument ever feels easy, but the main takeaway for me is that being reminded of just *how* difficult it really is to play one’s instrument might be a pretty great empathy hack. And perhaps make it easier to feel more compassion and less frustration when working with a student who is struggling with something that you’ve been doing pretty effortlessly for years.

It also seems that this may be an effective way for you to get into problem-solving mode, and make it easier to rediscover some of the important technical and mechanical details that are so habitual and well-ingrained in your technique, that you’ve forgotten what it was like when these key elements weren’t so automatic.

## Take action

Going through the list of orchestral instruments in my head, it seems like you’d be able to flip most instruments in some way, whether it involves switching your hands, or reversing/flipping your instrument, or standing on the other side of it.

But I was a little stumped when it came to voice, piano, and percussion instruments like snare drum...

So I thought maybe this is something we could crowdsource. Meaning, if you have any ideas on how singers, pianists, etc. could re-experience what it’s like to be a beginner again (on these instruments), I’d love to hear about it – please share below in the comments!

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## Reference

Zhang, T. (2015). The personal and interpersonal benefits of rediscovery (Doctoral dissertation). Retrieved from <https://dash.harvard.edu/handle/1/17467290>

## Date Created

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