

Having a Bad Practice Day? Turn It Into a Good One With This 3-Step Self-Coaching Technique.

Description

Growing up, there was a period of quite a number of years where I enjoyed lessons much more than I enjoyed practicing. After all, practicing was always frustrating and unpredictable. I never knew if it was going to be a good practice day where I improved and sounded better – or one of those bad practice days where nothing seemed to work.

Whereas in lessons, my teacher always seemed to be able to coax a higher level of playing out of me, and I'd usually leave lessons feeling much more encouraged and optimistic about my playing.

At the time, it seemed like one of those mysterious qualities that made teachers teachers, and students students. Even though my teacher made it clear to me from an early age that her goal was to help me learn how to teach myself. And that this was something she fully expected me to get better at doing from week to week, as I continued my violin studies.

But...how exactly are we supposed to do this?

Well, it turns out there's a whole area of research devoted to learning how to learn. And there's one particular basketball study that I thought would be fun to explore today, as I think there's a lot there that we can apply to music.

A group of basketball novices

A group of researchers ([Cleary et al., 2006](#)) recruited 50 college students to participate in a study about learning how to shoot free throws.

Everyone started out with 10 shots, to establish their baseline level of shooting skill. And none of them had any real previous basketball experience, so it was not pretty. ?

Then they were randomly divided into 5 groups.

Five groups

The participants were all given a quick 10-minute coaching session on correct free throw shooting technique and form. So everyone started out with a basic understanding of the mechanics involved – the correct stance, how to hold the ball, how to aim and align their shot, execute and follow through, etc..

Then, three of the groups received additional instructions. Not on shooting technique, but on how to *practice*.

Group 1: 3-phase process

The 3-phase group was asked to 1) set **process goals** before each shot attempt. Where they were encouraged to focus on the essential technical components of a successful shot (i.e. stance, grip, keeping elbow in, etc.), rather than focusing on their shooting performance.

They were also asked to 2) engage in **self-recording**. To monitor their use of these shooting strategies as they were executing the free throw, and to pay attention to what their body was doing as they shot a free throw. Like, were they bending their knees, following through with their shooting hand, etc.?

Lastly, they were instructed to 3) engage in **strategic reflection** immediately following each free throw. To consider:

- **What happened** (e.g. Was my shot too far to the right or left? Short or long?)
- **Why** (e.g. Oops! I forgot to keep my elbow pointed at the basket.)
- **Make adjustments to technique for the next shot** (e.g. Gotta keep my elbow in this time.)

Group 2: 2-phase process

The 2-phase group only received instructions on how to set **process goals** before each free throw, and engage in **self-monitoring** during the free throw. They didn't learn how to do the **strategic reflection** after each free throw.

Group 3: 1-phase process

The 1-phase group only learned how to set **process goals** before free throws.

Groups 4 & 5: two control groups

And then there were two control groups.

A **practice-only** group just practiced shooting free throws with no guidance on how to practice. And then a **no-practice** group, didn't practice free throws at all.

12 minutes of practice...and another test

After 12 minutes of practice, the students shot 10 free throws to see if there were any improvements in their shooting performance¹

Any guesses as to which group did best?

Did learning how to practice make a difference?

Shooting performance

When it came to shooting performance, the **3-phase** and **2-phase** groups performed better on the post-practice shooting test than the 1-phase group, practice-only group, and no-practice group.

Admittedly, it's not like they were suddenly shooting the lights out, but after just 12 minutes of practice, there was already a statistically significant difference in their level of performance.

That is pretty cool in and of itself, but what I think might be even more notable (given the [importance of getting it right](#) more often than getting it wrong), is what happened *during* their practice sessions after poor shots.

Shooting adaptation

The **3-phase** and **2-phase** groups demonstrated a far greater ability to rebound (ha!) from bad shots than the other groups. Specifically, they were much better at correcting and improving their performance on the shot attempt immediately after a miss. While the 3 and 2-phase participants got a higher score on the next shot attempt 65% and 66% of the time, the 1-phase and practice-only groups got a higher score on their next shot attempt only 43% and 40% of the time.

Quality over quantity

Because of the extra time it took to go through the self-coaching process (technically, this process is known as “self-regulation” FWIW), the 3-phase and 2-phase groups actually took much fewer shots than the 1-phase and regular practice groups. The 3-phasers only took 21 shots in 12 minutes, while the 2-phasers only got in 30. Whereas the 1-phasers took 51 shots, and the regular practicers took a whopping 56 shots in 12 minutes.

To me, this suggests that when practicing, the most important factor is not so much the number of repetitions we put in, but the mental process we go through *before*, *during*, and *after* each repetition. Referred to as the “forethought” phase, “performance” phase, and “self-reflection” phase by the authors of the study.

Or as someone on the internet² once said, “We do not learn from experience. We learn from reflecting on experience.”

Take action

So this week, try thinking less about maximizing the number of repetitions you put into working on a tricky passage, but experiment with being more reflective with the 3-phase self-coaching model.

1) Before playing a passage: *Plan!*

What do I want it to sound like? What technical strategies will I utilize? e.g. Lift up more with left hand, release with thumb, etc.

2) During your next attempt: *Self-monitor!*

Am I lifting up with my left hand, and releasing thumb?

3) After playing: *Reflect and strategize!*

How'd that work out? Was the shift in tune? If not, why not? What adjustments do I need to make technically, to get it in tune the next time?

Want to explore this concept even further?

As you can probably guess, I was totally in that non-self-reflecting-56-repetitions-in-12-minutes group for most of my life. So I didn't have a ton of confidence or trust in how things would go on stage, and I felt a lot of negativity around practicing too. Because no matter how many repetitions I put in, things were frustratingly hit or miss in performance. But I just didn't know what else to do!

So when I began using more effective practice strategies, and started to work more on the mental side of performing, it was pretty empowering to see how the work I was doing actually began to stick from one day to the next. And kind of awesome to see the gains I heard in the practice room ultimately transferring to the stage as well.

Which made practicing more fun (what?!). And performing as well.

If you can relate to some of this sort of practice/performance frustration, and would love to explore this self-coaching strategy and other related concepts even further, with a bit of guidance and accountability, alongside a cohort of fellow learners to feel a little more supported in your daily practice, you might be interested in the live, online 4-week class I'll be teaching starting Saturday, March 19th. We'll meet via Zoom and try out various research-based strategies for being more effective in the practice room, and also experiment with techniques for managing nerves, getting into the zone, and playing with more confidence on stage.

Registration **ends tonight** (Sunday, March 13, 2022), so if you're interested, you can get all the details and sign up right here: [Performance Psychology Essentials for Learners](#)

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References

Cleary, T. J., Zimmerman, B. J., & Keating, T. (2006). Training Physical Education Students to Self-Regulate During Basketball Free Throw Practice. *Research Quarterly for Exercise and Sport*, 77 (2), 251–262. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02701367.2006.10599358>

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