

2. Giving Better Instructions

2.1 The words with the power to shape their week

It all starts here. Before the weekly journey On Their Own has even begun. The final 120 seconds of your student's music lesson—that twilight during which the next student is arriving, books are being collected and instruments packed away.

"How was Sally today?"

"Great, excellent work this lesson. The new piece is really coming along. Scales too."

"Good to hear. That's the stuff Sally. I'm proud of you. Come on, home time—you can carry your own books, let's go. Same time next week?"

Yes, same time. And besides which, now only half of your attention is on Sally and her parent. The rest is on the student who has just come in.

In the middle of this wind-down, there will be a moment, unremarked upon and seemingly unremarkable, when you'll give practice instructions for the week to come. A note jotted in Sally's book. A sound-bite given as she pulls the studio door shut behind her. It's an event that seems innocent enough—one more instruction after half an hour filled with directives.

It's not at all innocent. In fact, it's the most important thing you have said in the entire lesson. For the next six days, *everything* your student works on—or doesn't—will be shaped by what you just said.

The next time a Sally closes the door, ask yourself this just before the next lesson starts:

Would you bet your car that her understanding of what she should do this week is the same as yours?

Because if the answer to that question is "um...no...", then you have no right to be annoyed with her next lesson if she falls short of your expectations.

It just may be that they were never *her* expectations in the first place.

So long before we examine the mechanics of effective practicing, the subtleties of motivation techniques, or the role of parents, we have to start with something much more fundamental.

Communication.

Ensuring that your practice instructions are powerful springboards for the week ahead—directions that are precise, easy to absorb, fun to work with, and impossible to ignore.

2.2 The importance of being specific

It's going to come as a shock to a lot of teachers, but one of the first things that cripples practice is lack of precision when instructions are given.

It feels absurd—and almost insulting—to point this out, because so much of what we do as music teachers is actually nit-pickingly precise. After all, the twenty-five minutes before practice instructions are given is taken up by the music lesson itself—a time usually filled to bursting with directions so detailed that they can sound downright *bossy*:

“Start your crescendo at bar 24, but don't actually arrive at a genuine forte until bar 29. Let go of the B flat after three and a half beats. No...four is not “near enough”...um, no, neither is three...uh huh, yes your school teacher may have told you that, but we don't round down fractions in music...it has to be exactly three and a half.

Why? Because it just sounds better that way, don't lecture me about integers, just do it. Where were we...play this section staccato, except for the last three notes—you have to observe the slur. Change your pedal now. Rotate your wrist to reach the G. Use your fourth finger on the Ab the first time, and your third finger the second time...oops, watch out for the key signature change. Five flats to remember now, instead of only three. That's better. Ok, from the top again—did I mention the crescendo at bar 24?, yes well I don't think you should do it again on the repeat...”

Wow. And that's just for the first page. It's a lot to remember for any student, but it probably all had to be said.

The Practice Revolution

I'm prepared to concede that the information we give *during* lessons is a carefully thought through litany of “when” “what” and “how”—every last moment of the student's piece is analyzed, corrected and polished. We give directions accurate to fractions of a beat, as we become precision watchmakers, insisting that our students scrutinize their work through the same powerful lenses we use.

However, at the end of the lesson—in that moment during which we explain what the student needs to work on at home— things are usually very different.

We abandon our watchmaker's tweezers and eyepieces, and brandish blunt and rusty shovels instead.

Far from giving instructions that are detailed and precise, our here's-what-you-are-supposed-to-work-on-this-week requests are more often like this:

“Learn page three of your new piece”

“Memorize the Waltz”

“Do some work on that tricky bit in the center of the piece”

Now at first glance, there seems to be nothing wrong with these instructions, and as a teacher, it can seem that no additional information is required. It's clear that the student should come back next week with page three *learned*, the waltz *memorized*, and the tricky bit in the center of the piece *fixed*. (That's what you asked for, wasn't it?)

And more to the point, if the student doesn't come back with all of that, they'll be in trouble. It's their job this week—their part of the tuition bargain.

But put yourself in your student's shoes for a minute, and look at just the first of these instructions:

“Learn page three of your new piece”

Now let's see. “Learn”? What does that mean? Have I “learned” it once I can play it up to tempo with no breakdowns...or when I can first lurch through it from beginning to end without startling the cat? If I am a pianist, does “learned” mean hands separate or together? Should I “learn” dynamics and fingerings, or are the notes enough?

Does “learned” imply “memorized”? Or is it a rough sketch with most of the essentials in place? Does a “learned” piece have to be of a uniform high

standard throughout? Or do I just have to demonstrate that I have some idea as to what's going on in the score?

And perhaps most vexing—does “learned” after only a week imply a necessary lower quality than “learned” with a one month deadline?

Taken alone, these ambiguities may appear to be worthy of concern. But there are more powerful forces at work that will soon have you appreciating the full dangers of the open ended nature of these requests.

As a student, there are two things that will be important to me as I practice this week—and every other week. The first is to make sure my teacher is not unhappy with my progress next lesson (even the most recalcitrant of students would rather have “good” lessons than “bad” ones).

And the second is not to do any more practice than I absolutely have to in the pursuit of that first end.

Reconciling these two concerns can cause problems...particularly if the practice instructions are open to interpretation.

As a student, I am going to dance in the grey areas caused by sloppy definitions. In fact, I am highly likely to hereby define “learn” to mean “be able to approximately play most of the notes from beginning to somewhere near the end, without needing to stop for directions too many times”. I’m not going to worry about trivial extras such as rhythms, dynamics, fingering or tone production. (Those things seem to me to come under the category of “polish”—and I wasn’t asked to “polish”!) That way I can stay faithful to my teacher’s request, while still keeping my own practice to an acceptable minimum.

Next lesson rolls around, and I’ll be feeling ok. I’ve not only done some practice during the week, I’ve actually finished all the jobs that were asked of me. As I put my books on the music stand and tune my instrument, a feeling of well-being pervades—my teacher is smiling at me, and all is well.

It’s not going to last long.

As the lesson progresses, it becomes clear that there is a yawning gulf between what I have produced, and what my teacher was expecting. It probably won’t be far into the lesson before I am asked whether I have done any work on this piece or not.

That question is NOT going to go down well with me. After all, I was asked to “learn” the piece, and I did. Not only did I give up some of my free time to comply with that instruction, but now I’m being given a hard time about it! Well, we’ll just see how much practice I do *this* week. Apart from anything else,

if my silly teacher wanted dynamics included as part of “learning” the new piece, they should have said so, instead of suddenly changing the rules on me. It’s bad enough I wasn’t allowed to round three and a half beats down to three...

As the student, I’m still out of line about the double dotted half note. It is worth three and a half, and three was never going to be good enough.

But as to my practice efforts this week, I’m within my rights. I was given instructions, followed them to the letter... and was then told off as a result. There is a range of possible expressions you could use to describe how I would feel about that, but “highly motivated!” is really not one of them.

So how do you solve this problem?

2.3 Challenges, not requests

The core of the problem is actually in the language used—there is an over reliance on verbs that are at best vague, and at worst, actively ambiguous.

Unless you have actually established a lexicon that defines for all students what “Learn” or “Improve” or “Spend some time on” actually means in terms of practice sessions, they will always be open to abuse from unmotivated students, and misinterpretation from even your most genuine pupils. So don’t use them.

It’s time to replace the standard requests with something much more tangible. Something that can’t be argued with.

Instead of lodging a request, issue a *challenge*—a clearly defined and objective test that the piece *needs to be able to pass at some stage before the next lesson*. Once defined, this test would always have identical requirements, whether it were undertaken in your studio, or in the student’s living room. In other words, they can replicate it next time they see you, creating a powerful feeling of unity between what goes on at home, and what happens in the lesson.

The idea is that once they can pass this test, they’re ready for the lesson. Better still, they can attempt the test at any time during the week to see how the piece is progressing, knowing that until they have passed the test at home, there’s still work to be done before they show the piece to their teacher. They can’t fudge on your expectations, because the rules of the challenge are clearly defined.

One example, instead of “Learn Page 1”:

“The challenge: To be able to play Page 1, from beginning to end THREE TIMES IN A ROW, with no false notes, and correct fingerings throughout. While you are allowed to pause to consider the next note where needed, the entire challenge needs to be completable with six minutes.”

Ok, so as the student, I am allowed to compromise rhythm a little with this challenge (so I can stop and figure out whether that next note is really still an E flat or not), but the six minute rule means that I cannot sit and contemplate too many notes in that fashion. So I know straight away that sight reading it at my next lesson is out of the question. This immediately changes my assumptions about the sort of practice I will need to do.

The requirement for “Three times in a row” also rules out the possibility of simply being happy with fluking it once—my practice is going to have to produce a high degree of consistency in the final result, or I won’t be able to perform the challenge in front of my teacher. So if I have one glorious shining moment on Tuesday, during which I finally played page one right through with no errors, I won’t rest on my laurels. It might have been nice to get from beginning to end like that, but the challenge demands more.

I also know that at the next lesson, instead of my teacher’s question being “did you work on the piece this week”, it will be “On which day did you pass the test for the very first time?”. So I cannot relax after I have “done some practice”—I have a job to do, and I’m not done until it’s been completed.

There is a flip side though...while I’m not done until I’ve completed the job, I *am* finished as soon as I have. This is actually very good news for me. It means that in theory, if I work so well in the first three days of the week that I complete the challenge with days to spare, then I can reward myself with a couple of days of lighter practice (or no practice whatsoever!). Knowing this will have me concentrating harder when I do practice—the trade-off being that if I work well, I can be doing something more fun sooner.

The point at the center of this (and The Practice Revolution will stress it over and over) is that practice is there to achieve specific goals, not simply pass time. How long it takes is actually irrelevant.