

## Clinic: Now Go Home and Practice! — But How?

presented by Mark Bjork  
reported by Faith Farr

*Mark Bjork is Professor of Violin and Pedagogy at the University of Minnesota School of Music. Mark is recognized internationally as a leader in the field of Suzuki Talent Education. In 1967 he started one of the first Suzuki programs in the United States at the MacPhail Center for Music. In his clinic presentation, he addressed practice habits of students at all levels.*

Students tend to be clueless about practice; they need to be taught how. It would be a bad thing if the student hears, “Well, you know what needs to be done.” Or, “We’ll it’s obvious what needs to be done.” It may not



be obvious to the student. How to practice is something that needs to be taught in the lesson. How we organize a lesson shows our priorities, and will show the student what to do at home. If we don’t do it in the lesson, it won’t get done at home.

The unsuccessful practitioner will report, “I did what I was supposed to do: I played through everything every day and it took me 7 minutes.” But mindless play-through will only cement bad habits.

Teachers should be specific in giving instructions: what to practice; how many times; at what speed. It is more important to emphasize what is to be achieved rather than emphasizing the time the practice should take. Involve the student in the process at the lesson so they will know how to do it at home. Involving students will get them hooked and let them take ownership of the process. Avoid putting the student in a passive situation where you tell them what to do; instead involve them in the process of choosing what and how.

Mark suggested a 5-point plan, based on a medical diagnosis:

1) Examination: Play the piece, scale or etude.

2) Diagnosis: Is there a problem? What is the problem? What needs to be improved or fixed? If the student says, “I don’t know,” have them play again and notice. The teacher should guide the student, but not give the answer. For instance tell the student to mark the half steps in the run, or mark where the beats are, or use a drone tone to check the pitch of a final note. After all, the teacher won’t be at home with the student during practice.

In searching for the diagnosis, students should practice with a pencil. They should stop immediately where they notice a problem and bracket it. Immediacy is important. Many spots are usually small, e.g. two notes on a shift. If it’s not marked, they may forget to work on it and the spot will become an, “Oh-oh; that spot.” Instead the student needs to have the mental approach, “This is the spot I worked on.”

Using a lesson or practice notebook to list the problem spots can also help the diagnosis. Students should check their list the next day, and hopefully cross some things off the list.

3) The medicine and dosage. Engage the student in deciding how they are going to take care of the spots. Hopefully, they will develop a repertoire of how to fix various problems such as shifts or playing for speed.

Make sure the student is clear about the dosage. Most teachers encourage slow practice; most students think “slow” means barely under tempo. Mark recommends metronome at 30 or 40. Most teachers recommend repetitions; most students think two or three times is plenty. Mark recommends asking for the student’s suggestion, then have the teacher suggest around 50, and negotiate to something in the middle.

Repetition is useful in practice, and brain research is relevant to what we are doing. Repetition develops pathways in the brain, and research says it takes 29 repetitions to make a permanent connection. One of Mark’s students experimented with an orchestral piece. He practiced one tricky passage 29 times, and another only 5 times. Two weeks later, the 29-times spot was still solid even without another rehearsal. When

we see success in Olympic athletes like Michael Phelps, we can find out that his motion is perfect because he did it over and over, slowly, and only correctly. Students need to practice like that.

4) The check-up. After applying the medicine for a while (possibly the same day or in a few days), play the passage again. Is it fixed? Or is more medicine needed?

5) Maintenance plan. If you repeat until you get it but then stop, you haven’t got it to stick. You need to continue repetitions to maintain the skill.

To help students practice, keep a notebook at the lesson and write things down so they remember what to practice. If the student writes it down, it is more likely they will remember it than if the teacher writes it down. But it is good to look over the student’s shoulder as they write—you’ll find out if what they think you said matches what you think you said. The student could record lessons to check back on what they are supposed to do. Take a picture or video of a portion of the lesson—to show bow hold, or bow stroke for instance. Have students be responsible for their practice by emailing, “I practiced” or sending a recording of their scale.

Help students have a practice routine. Write down the assignment. Ask the student how much time each practice segment will take, then add it up to help the student see how much is to be done. The main emphasis should be on tasks and goals but time is a reality check.

At the beginning of the lesson, ask, “What did you work on for today’s lesson?” The student has to ask this of themselves on every practice day. The teacher’s lesson question needs to be specific. Not, “Did you practice?” (The student will say, “Yes.”) Not even, “How much did you practice?” (The student will say, “Not as much as I had hoped.”) Instead ask: “How many times?” “What was the metronome set at (how slowly)?” “Is the passage comfortable yet?”

In a group class, you can ask for a show of hands on how many are willing to work on the spot. The next week, you can ask for a show of hands on how many actually did

it. Peer pressure can help practice.

Most students will do anything for stickers or pizza. Often you can get the student to do the right thing for the wrong reason—you just need to find the right reward. In the summer, you could have a contest for a number of days of practice and have prizes for being consistent.

Use a practice chart with categories of scales, technique, tone, new piece, review. Have 7 check boxes after each category for students to check off.

Explore on-line services where students can report practice and teachers can check in.

Mark's book, *Expanding Horizons: the Suzuki Trained Violinist Grows Up* can be used by any student in the early-advanced level. It contains practice ideas and repertoire suggestions, as well as Dorothy Delay's suggestions on how to organize five hours of practice.

Students need to realize that athletes preparing for the Olympics do not spend

all their time on their event; they spend most of their time doing basic conditioning. Similarly, music practice should not be primarily performance/play-through. Most of the time should be spent doing basics.

*Faith Farr is a free-lance cellist and a founding member of the Minnesota Sinfonia. She has won the ASTA Best State Newsletter Award five times for this magazine. ♪*