

## Pianodao

The Way of Piano

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## Developing Performance Skills

Guest post by [Roberta Wolff](#)

### Success Criteria to Develop and Enhance Students' Performing Skills.

The season of exams, festivals and Spring Concerts is approaching so today I am sharing a simple but powerful approach to help students take their piece from practice room to stage.

The tools we will use are success criteria which leave almost no room for 'failure', and which develop confidence, and a sense of control and awareness as students practise the art of performance.

## Why students benefit from Success Criteria

Elizabeth Harrin, a project manager, puts it well:

*“Projects ‘fail’ in the eyes of the media and stakeholders because people are left to guess what success looks like... If you want project success, you have to define what success looks like for your project.”*

I struggled to be as succinct, but here goes – the above quote in terms of music performance:

Performances often fail to meet the standard in the eyes of the developing performer because the performer is hoping success will feel and sound like their best version of the piece to date.

Left to guess what performance success feels or sounds like, developing performers are in danger of setting their targets too high, forgetting that performance is a skill which needs to be practised and developed gradually.

Setting unachievable targets risks repeated discontent until the idea that the musician is no good at performing becomes set. If you want performance success, you must define what success looks like each step of the way. Skills need time to develop, no single performance will feel the same as another and a performance certainly won't feel the same as playing the piece at home.

## Sample Success Criteria

I have created 6 stages of preparation.

- Establish
- Experience
- Explore
- Embrace
- Extend
- Embody

**You can download your sample success criteria here.**

This is not definitive; feel free to alter any part of it to fit your needs. To download a blank worksheet that you and your student can build together visit my website by clicking here.

*Developing performers must ask: “what am I going to learn from this performance?”*

*Rather than: “will I successfully copy and paste my piece from practice room to stage?”*

It might interest you to know that using Success Criteria in this way evolved through personal experience. Some years ago, I had a minor car accident. The trouble was, the brunt of the impact was absorbed by my right wrist. It hurt to lift a glass, open a door and play the piano. It took a very sensible approach and bucketfuls of patience – but eventually I worked my wrist back to strength.

After some months of practising without difficulty or discomfort, I performed to a small piano group. As I played the last chord I started to feel pretty good about what I had done; and then the wrist pain hit me. Now, had I been in some high-profile venue I might have been quite glad to play through that pain, blissfully unaware, but I was playing to a small friendly group and I was horrified that I had been so disconnected from my body that I did not hear it screaming at me...

My first success criteria took shape. Luckily, the friendly group were happy to keep listening and another evening was planned. This time I had an aim and I took time to focus my mind on my success criteria before beginning to play:

*My performance will be a success when I maintain some level of awareness and connection to my movements and when I ache a little less post performance than I did the first time.*

Although rather extreme, this example highlights two important features worth noting when developing your own, or your students', success criteria.

- There needs to be near to no possibility of failure. I had one thing to remember, to listen to my body. No matter how small, there was something positive for me to take away from the performance and to build on.
- The starting point was taken from a performance. All too often, students base performance success on how favourably the performance compares to their best practice ver-

sion to date, this is like comparing apples to oranges, they are two different things.

*"A ship in harbor is safe, but that is not what ships are built for"*

John A Shedd

A number of students don't want to share their music or preface a performance with a disclaimer.

Nerves arise for different reasons; the desire to impress a parent, teacher or friend, not to let themselves down (musicians, for whom music is part of their self-identity, feel this acutely), and of course no one likes to 'fail' in public.

## Learning to Perform

To start the process of learning to perform...

**The first step** is to separate such 'baggage' (and I don't use this term dismissively) from each performance; no-one can develop and learn under that much pressure!

- Remind students that performance skills also need to be practised, and like practice, some days will go better than others. That applies to everyone. They would do well to learn to laugh at themselves and avoid taking performances too seriously.
- Help students turn every experience into a positive one. Highlight the learning opportunity, and teach them how to implement it going forward. (See Success Criteria below).
- Encourage students to commit to performing as often as possible, more often than necessary. This way, less is riding on each performance.
- Take some weight off their shoulders. In my experience, perfect performances – if they do exist – are a combination of more factors than those within the control of the performer.
- Let students take comfort in knowing they are not the only ones going through this.

**The second step** is to implement a clear list of Performance Success Criteria; this will be gradual and tailored to each student. Success Criteria will:

- Temper unrealistic expectations (no point trying to run before you can walk, you will end up unable to do either).
- Provide some sense of positive achievement in every performance undertaken.

**The third step** is to leave time. It can be useful to remind students that learning to perform a piece can take just as long as learning to play it. In our busy, time-poor society many

pieces are forced into being performed too soon.

## Guidelines for your Success Criteria

These success criteria work because just when your mind feels ready to scramble (notes, starting position, key, phrasing, what did my teacher say about that bar, I don't like the light in my eyes, I can hear a baby crying, I don't remember the pedaling) your success criteria give you something to focus on. As well as honing the art of performance you develop a focus which is more conducive to a successful performance.

Students should take moments during the day of their performance to remind themselves of their success criteria. They should also focus on it just before starting to play. This will help to centre the mind and ground the body.

## Creating nerves

During lessons, when preparing students for a performance use visualization to help set the scene and to help them tap into their own feelings.

"Is your heart beating a little faster? Are there butterflies in your tummy? Imagine they are all getting tired and one by one they land and settle to stillness, use your breath to help them quieten down".

Creating your own nerves, then getting used to working with them is a great asset when practising performance and is particularly useful at stage 3, Explore, in the success criteria.

*"Never make the mistake of limiting the visions of your future by the narrow experience of your past."*

Dr. Lewis Losoncy

When most students think of a successful performance. the first benchmark they cling to is whether they can include everything in that single performance that their teacher has taught them over the past weeks or months. It is a herculean task, and the pressure of this 'make or break' approach puts the odds of failure far greater than those of success.

Embracing performance begins once students understand performance is a skill in itself which can be learnt and practised. Developing the skill will lead the student down a fascinating path – and those who don't take to it naturally have all the more to gain from exploring it.

I wish you and your students a season of successful performances. By that I mean a performance from which they can learn and grow, a performance that they can use to make their next performance better!

Viewed like that there are no unsuccessful performances, and performing can be identified as the fluid, evolving process it is.

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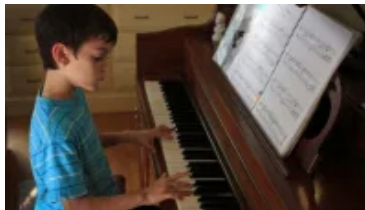
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