

Pianodao

The Way of Piano



Musical Afterthoughts

That, Not That, And Other Musical Afterthoughts...

[Guest post by Roberta Wolff](#)

Teaching offers ongoing opportunities to reflect and learn. For me this is one of its great attractions.

We learn how to present what we teach in easy-to-remember, bite-size chunks. We learn about our students and ourselves, and we learn about learning. As well as enjoying watching my students develop their skills, teaching has made me a better musician.

The key to maintaining our learning lies in reflection.

In this day and age, with “information overload” and countless media vying for our attention, it is easy to forget that we often learn more by looking inward.

Instead, we are distracted by a near-constant stream of external input, and as a result it is becoming easier to overlook the importance of reflection in the learning processes of ourselves and our students.

This results in the development of reactive tendencies rather than considered responses. It also inhibits progress and self-knowledge.

Experiential Learning and Reflection

In 1984, David A. Kolb first addressed this topic in his book *Experiential Learning: experience as the source of learning and development*. Basically, a person will learn best through *discovery and experience* **when it is undertaken in conjunction with reflection**.

The learning process is explained as follows:

Phase 1

- Concrete Experience – doing something.

Phase 2

- Reflective Observation – taking time out from the concrete experience to observe, re-view and question what has been experienced.

Phase 3

- Abstract conceptualisation – making sense of the experience (phase 1)
- Interpreting what was observed and reflected upon (phase 2)
- Making links to what is already known and choosing responses.

Phase 4

- Active Experimentation – putting what has been learnt into practice.

To put it simply,

“It is only when the learner actively engages in reflecting on the experience that the learning may be recognised and applied”

(Andreson, Boud and Cohen, 1995, p.3).

Piano Teaching and the Experiential Learning Model

As piano teachers, we are quite lucky. Phase 1 in the above model fits the practical nature of piano lessons very well. It seems the greater challenge lies in teaching phases 2-4. However, they are also the more valuable phases to get good at teaching.

Teaching in a way that encourages our students to reflect

With the model above we can start to see how a lesson might look. In this scenario, let's imagine the student has come back having done great work on a piece. There is that 'tricky section' though that needs further attention.

After appreciating the playing we may continue like this:

Phase 1 – concrete experience

“Shall we work a little more on getting that section as good as the rest?”

“Let's start by playing it through in isolation.”

Phase 2 – reflective observation

After playing, the student will be in a position to reflect and discuss observations. If prompting is needed this can be done in the form of open questions.

- What did you like?
- What is the single thing you can work on which will give you the most improvement? I call this a *mega fix*.
- What can you write on the score to give you greater confidence?
- What do you notice if you study the score without playing, can you see any patterns that you didn't notice while playing?

- What do you not feel certain about?
- What concerns you? How did you deal with that in previous pieces?
- What is your favourite part?

Phase 3 – abstract conceptualisation

Based on the phase 2 observations the student can now tailor new approaches.

For example:

- If I improve my rhythm I will feel more convinced by my overall performance.
- I will do this by writing in the beats, and doing clapping and conducting exercises.
- I stumbled at the end of each section, spotting patterns and practising cadences will help.
- I liked the tone in quiet, bass chord.
- I see those chords form a sequence I recognise, that makes them easier to play.
- Last time I played chords you reminded me to consider the voicing. I will try that again now.

Phase 4 – active experimentation

Now the student can put the solutions into place and the sequence can begin again.

Personal Reflections on a Term

There is often some personal development required when honing reflection skills.

I enjoy reflecting at the end of a term and choosing the areas I want to explore further in the coming term. For me it works like this. I write down ideas when they spring to mind, often it is mid sonata, driving children or cooking dinner. Later, I look back on my thoughts, keep those that are relevant, and set about grouping them into easy to teach concepts.

Following, is my personal reflection on last term and what I plan to cover more regularly and directly this term.

Repetition is key, and re-imagining how we teach concepts deepens learning. I will start with my general observations and chosen responses. In a following article, I will cover more specific reflections on Learning, Correcting and Practising.

My General Reflections

Reflection 1

Surround yourself with what helps, and, know yourself well enough to recognise what is helpful.

Practice, by its very nature has an element of challenge. If it is not challenging then we are not learning anything and consequently we are not practising. We can't hope to change this fact but we can hope to change our responses to the challenge. View challenge as a sign of advancement of skills and surround yourself with the means to keep going when the level of challenge peaks.

Can this be fun? Yes!

Here are some ways to surround yourself and your students with help.

My three responses to Reflection 1:

The Box

To physically incorporate *help* into my studio I have created a box, The Box.

I have filled it with miscellaneous items and teaching props. When I see the inward battle with impatience and frustration tipping in favour of the negative, I send the student to the box to get "*something that will help*".

What I have discovered is that no matter how unlinked the prop is to the task, it helps. A personal bonus is that I get to put my teaching brain into warp drive as I think of ways to use the prop constructively. Of course, it is right that the student be given an opportunity to use the prop in their way first, but it is handy to have another suggestion to offer.

Strategic Structuring of Practice

We can also help ourselves start a practice session.

First, we avoid asking "*will I practice today?*" and rather ask "*what can I do to ensure practice is done today*". Then, we teach students to structure their practice in a way that is going to help them kick off a practice session.

- Do they need to bash through at forte, with heaps of pedal just once before getting down to refining the piece?
- Do they need to delay an indulgent moment or favoured piece until they have done some note crunching?

Planning each practice session strategically means we make the most of our time, and we get to look inward at any patterns developing in our weekly routine. I think we all have the odd day when the allure is something which has been planned for after the end of our practice session. This is also ok.

Developing A Positive Personal Narrative

Some days we can't wait to get back to the piano. This is because we really feel that our efforts are paying off. How can we capture these moments and save them to help and inspire ourselves during the inevitable plateaus?

Here is a unique idea. If you are reading this via a link in social media then you may well have already carved out some time each day for your personal narrative. So, try posting to yourself, *only you*. Post the great feedback received from a teacher, the story of the student who you helped beyond what they believed possible, the "thank you" letters from 6-year olds (etc.) and go back and read these when you need a little morale boost.

We mustn't forget our pupils, we are their morale boost. They also need to be reminded of past struggles followed by successes at key times. Looking back at successes is healthy.

Reflection 2

Realism vs. Belief in yourself vs. Self-awareness – Pros, Cons and a happy medium.

A quick search on "*challenges*" in google images will reveal a myriad of quotes with inspiring images exhorting us to *believe in ourselves*. However, if that was all it took, the world would be a very different place.

Belief in yourself is generally vague, it is based on hope rather than a learning method; a student's belief in self without a plan is transient. Yet at certain points it is invaluable.

What about a teacher believing in the student more than they believe in themselves? This is noble, but tiring and there are risks. Mainly, that the student feels the need to mask perceived inadequacies. It seems more relevant, long-term, to help the student manage and nurture the belief they have in themselves.

What about self-awareness? We learn best when we know ourselves, so self-awareness is essential. But where does self-awareness end and realism begin?

This matters because harsh realism can sap all optimism, and with it, unrevealed potential. I aim to inspire students, not limit them, so the *realism* side of self-awareness requires careful handling. However, we need a small dose of realism to allow us to accurately weigh up a challenge.

Only once we have done this can we decide what learning criteria and practice time to put in place to achieve our target.

My response to Reflection 2:

Self-awareness with a dash of realism and heaps of belief in yourself = an open ended and supportive internal dialogue.

Here's a personal example of how a blend of self-awareness, realism and belief in self provides a sound solution.

Realism – I am learning Schubert D960. The odds of ever playing it as well as a full-time professional performer are against me. Realistically, I haven't maintained the years of rigour, both in the practice room and on the concert platform, that they have. Some might feel that this fact is a good enough reason not to bother starting, but I have other skills and I choose to use this fact to motivate me to find extra time for this challenge. I feel optimistic enough about my plan to agree to modestly leave the ending open...*let's work and see.*

Self-awareness – I will hit some obstacles while learning the piece. I anticipate that I will feel discouraged at times, but I will also open myself to a whole world of learning opportunities, as well as the huge opportunity to watch how I deal with the challenge. I will learn things I can share with my students, my choir, my children and anyone else who will listen! This is my present motivation. I don't need the weight of a performance hanging over me in the learning period. I will focus on gathering experience, skill and knowledge.

Belief in yourself – I don't know where this project will take me, but I know the process will be beneficial. I know I will carve out time every day for this project and I will make sure I bounce back from any setbacks. Also, I will not let the final outcome tarnish past or future successes. Nor, indeed, the pure enjoyment the project has given me so far.

Next time a student comes to me with a goal I will be able to offer support by guiding them in *when* and *how* to apply realism and belief in self to their developing self-awareness.

Reflection 3

Know what you need from your teacher.

If we are going to teach students to reflect then we need to give some consideration to their reflections.

My response to Reflection 3:

This term I will spend a little more time consciously asking my students “what” questions.

- What do you need from me?
- What can you do for yourself?
- What needs to change?
- What should stay the same?
- What will help?
- In what way can we view this differently?

My reflections will continue in a follow up post covering tips on enhancing Learning, Corrections and Practice. The reason for the title of this blog will also be made clear.

For now, I leave you with this...

“By three methods we may learn wisdom: First, by reflection, which is noblest; Second, by imitation, which is easiest; and third by experience, which is the bitterest.”

Confucius, cited in Karen Hinnett: *Developing Reflective Practice in Legal Education*
(Warwick: Warwick Printing Press, 2002).

Roberta Wolff

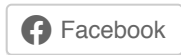
Roberta Wolff is a pianist, teacher, and author.

For further information:

www.musicmepiano.co.uk

www.robertawolff.co.uk

PLEASE SHARE THIS...



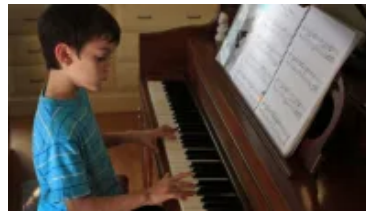
[Customize buttons](#)

RELATED:



16 Attributes of a Good Teacher

In "Pathways for Living"



My Practice Palette

In "Guest Authors"



It's Time To Stop Practising & Start...?

In "Guest Authors"

PUBLISHED BY



Andrew Eales

Andrew Eales is a pianist, writer and teacher based in Milton Keynes UK, where he runs Keyquest Music - his successful independent music education business, private teaching practice and creative outlet. [View all posts by Andrew Eales](#) →

📅 October 4, 2017 👤 Andrew Eales 📁 Guest Authors, Pathways for Teaching ✦ Experiential Learning, Piano Teaching, Reflective Practice, Roberta Wolff

2 thoughts on “Musical Afterthoughts”



Mary Hawn

October 5, 2017 at 2:42 pm

Thanks for this article, Roberta, and thanks for sharing it, Andrew. The article really gives a lot of food for thought. Just the kind of nourishment needed for a lifetime of piano-teaching wellness. Best wishes from a Canadian piano and qigong teacher.

★ Liked by you



Roberta Wolff

October 30, 2017 at 1:53 pm

Thank you, Mary, I am glad you enjoyed it.

★ Like

This site uses Akismet to reduce spam. [Learn how your comment data is processed.](#)

Website Powered by [WordPress.com](#).