

## Pianodao

The Way of Piano

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## The Musician's Tool Bag

Guest Post by Roberta Wolff

In my previous post, which you can read [here](#), I considered the importance of reflecting, both in teaching and learning. As such, it was a thoughtful and 'serious' article. However, that is not necessarily the best way to approach teaching reflection to our students. Nothing engages the student and gets the message across like a bit of creativity and fun.

*This article, therefore, is focused on incorporating reflection as part of the lesson and practice process.*

The trouble with reflection is that it often seems long-winded. All the amazing advice along the lines of *think 10 times play once* is actually very hard to carry out. Whereas, it is very easy to get locked into a cycle of *thinking with your fingers* – at least then it sounds like something is happening!

In teaching students to incorporate reflection, unconscious learning with the support of *tools* to interrupt the spell of *trial and error practice* is immensely productive and enjoyable.

*The Musician's tool bag, The Box and the Language of Reflection are all ways to unconsciously build in reflection time.*

### **What's Inside A Musician's Tool Bag?**

Musicians are very much like painters or craftspeople. A painter carries a bag of supplies: paints; brushes of every size and shape to achieve the stroke required; mixing palette; the list goes on.



Musicians also have tools for their craft: music; instruments, etc. but not all tools are tangible. We also have a variety of methods to train our fingers and brain to do things they were really not designed to do. These learning strategies or practice techniques are what go into a musician's tool bag.

As with any craft you need the right tool for the job. If the tool being used is not giving results it is not long before it is thrown back into the bag in favour of another. This is the same for musicians, or at least it should be. So, the musician's tool bag comes with a rule that if,

after 5 minutes, you are not seeing the results you would like from the learning strategy you are using, put it back in the bag and choose another.

*This image of choosing the right tool for the job is very powerful. It teaches students to think about:*

- what they want to achieve
- how they need to go about achieving it
- whether it is working well enough to continue being useful
- what to use instead

In short, they are considering everything we would want without even really knowing.

## Creating Your Own Musician's Tool Bag

*If you think the abstract nature of this is a challenge, then here's how to create a physical Musician's tool bag.*

I used some cheap, matt, pre-cut, blank business cards and a mini version of an old-style suitcase. You could use any sort of card or paper cut into a similar size and whatever container you have to hand.

Every time you coach your student successfully through a tricky section, or suggest a practice technique that reaps greater results in 5 minutes than an entire week of practice then you know you have found something for the bag. Ask the student to write the learning strategy on a card, sign it and put it in the (container) *tool bag*. It worked once, it will work again. (I keep a master box, and students copy cards for their boxes.)

*Before long you will have a collection of practice suggestions for students to pick from. Next, you start the process whereby students look for a different suggestion if things are not working out.*

## Shared Knowledge

Asking students to sign the card reinforces the idea that we are all still learning.

Very often a practice suggestion will work as well at grade 3 as it will at grade 8, and that grade 3 player who looks up to the grade 8 is delighted and inspired when they discover

themselves using the same method as their role model; there is an element of demystifying involved.

*The signature also shows it works! No small point when you consider that our mindset has huge sway over our success or failure in any given situation.*

Here are a couple of quotes from my students' Musician's tool bag:

*Move from a point of comfort – Sam*

*Talk to your fingers, vocalise finger movements – this works, and it will also make your teacher very happy – Jenny*



## **The Box**

The box was featured in [my previous post](#) and is back by popular demand, with more detail.



*The box is a selection of teaching props and resources. It is also where I send students to “choose something to help” when they are struggling.*

- This reinforces the message that if one method is not working there are always others.
- It also creates a positive mindset. The student believes that what they get will help.
- In choosing what to get the student is unconsciously thinking about what they need.

Be sure to ask the student how they think the item will help before you rush in with your own ideas, but have your own ideas on standby. I very much enjoy the creative impact this has.

*Often the choice of a seemingly random item gets great results...*

## Anecdotes

My Box currently contains:

- A conductor's stick
- A peek-a-boo toy
- Flash cards
- Dice
- Music Alley Characters dice
- Princess
- Bear
- Bean bags
- Clown with stress ball
- Scale wand
- Ant toy
- Egg with a terrified face
- Rhythm sticks
- Props to identify note names



**The Small Bear** rescued a young lad from the frustrations of rotation technique when it was picked from the box to help. I tucked the bear into the cuff of the boy's school jersey and explained that it was tired and please could the boy rock it to sleep. This worked wonders and the smile that went with it was delightful.

**The Music Alley Characters Dice** – I used the box to break the ice during the first lesson with a 9-year-old. I told her we were starting with a music game and invited her to choose something from the box. She chose the character dice. I told her the story about the char-

acters on the dice; they all work together to make music. Then, she rolled the dice and I played music omitting the character she rolled.

- without Rita there was no rhythm
- without Si there was no expression
- without Dot there was no/or incorrect pitch
- without Molly no/poor technique
- without Pip no sense of performance
- without Aldo no sense of background knowledge (this was a challenge to reproduce)

She left her first lesson with a really clear, fun overview of the things that are important when learning music. This brought to mind Andrew's article [ABRSM Teacher Conference '17](#), in which he wrote:

*"I was also struck by Anthony's reminder that in the exam marking scheme there are five assessment areas: Pitch, Time, Tone, Shape and Performance".*

By making the elements of music into characters children can identify with them and are far less likely to be pitch centric in their learning. The characters are also fun.

Character dice can be obtained [here](#).

**Flash cards** – This was fun! I cautiously invited a 15-year-old girl to choose something from the box. She was reticent and came back with my giant *Do Re Kodály* flash cards. I thought she was expecting something predictable, so I decided to ask her to play the beautiful music on these cards. She complied in a somewhat bemused fashion, but it was not particularly musical. We made this into a harmonising and expressive exercise getting the most out of those two notes by adding wonderful chords and making a beautiful minimalist melody. We improvised a very expressive duet and she continued her lesson thinking about the importance of EVERY note.

**The Peek-a-boo toy** has brought humour to many a lesson. It is often chosen because it is cute. The worm has been known to pop his head out when it spots an unhelpful technique, dodgy hand position, suspicious rhythm (it is also very good at pulse work) or whatever else you wish to discourage. The wonder of it is that it sparks a giggle. This is invaluable, especially in teaching freedom of movement where the focus of concentration can often have the opposite effect to what we are trying to achieve.

**Bean bags** have been used to teach upbeats, as felt in the backwards movement preceding a throwing action, pulse, and they can help by being placed on the keyboard.

*The box is so much enjoyed that students now ask to dig in it as part of their lesson.*

This works as a good transition into music time and to help maintain concentration. Most importantly, it encourages students to think about what they are working on and what means they might use to support their achievement.

## Language to develop the skills of Reflection

**What not Why** questions – as Laura Berman Fortgang explains,

*“What questions force you to be specific in your query and being specific leads to solution and awareness; on the other hand, asking Why? leaves you with only the question.”*

Student: “It went better at home”

Teacher: “Now that you have observed that, **what** can you do in the coming week to overcome it?”

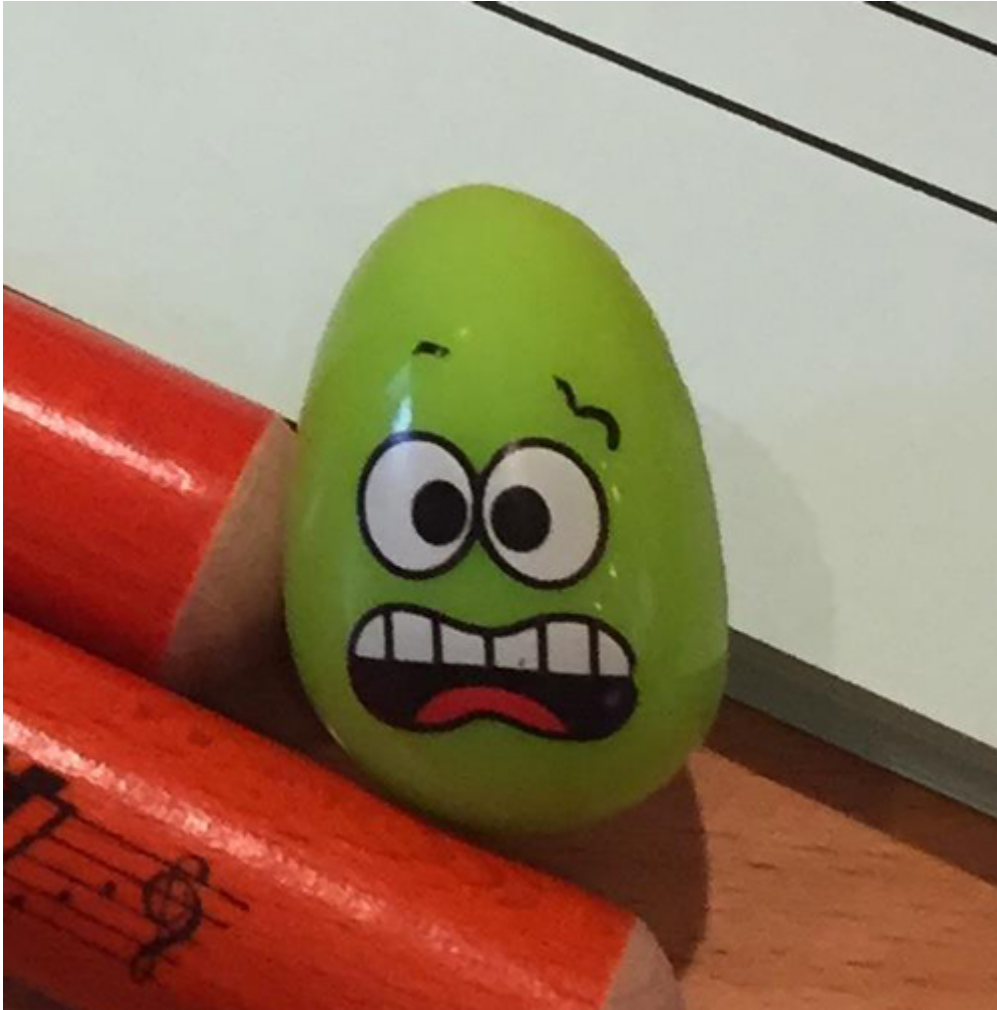
**That not that** – next time a student plays something wrong, goes back and immediately plays it again correctly, almost on auto pilot, tell them they just did a *that not that* correction. Explain that their fingers are none the wiser, they have no idea which way is right, no idea exactly how they achieved each possibility, nor what to do next time and there are no reminders on the score for tomorrow.

Now ask the pianist to be more detailed in their corrections. A comprehensive correction includes:

- Verbalising – read the score and fingering out loud
- Looking for patterns – theory or fingering related or anything else
- Marking out hand positions on the keyboard – practise placing hands and fingers correctly without actually playing notes
- Leaving a helpful reminder on the score
- Practising the section forwards and backwards from the corrected area

**You can't think with your fingers**, or your fingers don't have brains – Similar to the point above, in stating this, teachers are reminding students that playing a variety of pitch options before getting to those written on the score is not an efficient form of practice. Share the power of Plan Prepare Play, discussed in more detail [here](#). For younger students, ask them

to pretend that they are the teacher and their fingers are the students. Next, they can explain to their fingers what needs to happen.



**Stopping Points** – Stopping points allow time to regularly process what has just happened. They also improve connection to the score. Setting conservative stopping points and keeping to them is vital if we hope for students to mirror this at home during practice. The temptation is to edge on if things are going well, to forget to stop until a few notes later, or worst of all, be unsure as to exactly which note is the stopping point, all of these are telling and point to the need for stop points in the learning stage.

**Out of 10** – As part of encouraging reflection teachers can ask students to rate a section out of 10. Often students are much harsher on themselves than a teacher would be. This can be followed with *“what are you going to do to raise that by 2 marks?”*

**Pencil** – use this when students are working through a piece in lesson time (ie, not doing a performance practice or working towards a specified stopping point). To keep their feedback loop well-oiled and thus develop real-time reflection simply hand the pupil your pencil when something needs a score marking. This is a great way to help students develop the habit so that they may carry it out during home practice.



**Let it bubble on side** – there is a time delay between knowing what you are aiming for and incorporating it in your playing. It is good to have a strong musical aim and it is also ok to let that run through your thoughts while you are still learning the notes. Not everything can be actioned immediately but thinking about it is a sure way to make future inclusion easier.

**Just Observe** – sometimes we can be so busy judging we don't take time to just observe. Occasionally try playing a piece just to observe what you are doing.

**Find any means to remember that** – patterns discovered by the student are more valuable, to encourage this you can ask them to “*find any means to remember that*”.

**Move hesitations forward** – Moving a hesitation forward one beat is a little easier than contemplating eradicating hesitations all in one go. It feels like a mind game but really the student is just being given space to think in the moment.

**Today's Take Away** – Help students focus their work during the week by summarising the lesson and giving one thing that they will think of every time they sit down to practise. For example, connection to keyboard or key signatures.

**Fresh Eyes** – To save time and processing our eyes don't always show us what we are looking at. When taking in an everyday sight, like the face of a family member or music which is being worked on over some time, the brain simply recalls a copy or memory. I think all musicians should know this and also be aware that our first look at music does not necessarily take in all the detail.

Some ways to encourage a fresh eyes approach are:

- Playing from different editions
- Creating a copy of the music to cut up and present differently. For example, stick it to a sheet according to phrasing or sections.
- Starting mid bar
- Practising backwards from the last bar

**Check in with your ... shoulders/pulse** – this is a good phrase to use when making suggestions as it does not require anything be *done* or *changed* just checked on.

**Do what you need to** ... free your shoulders, work out that rhythm, find those notes – this a great phrase to use when you want to remove time pressure from a student, so you can watch the process they choose unfold in real time.

**Stay with it** – everyone will feel frustration at some point; I suspect many a practice session is ended by it. Students benefit early on from being taught how to deal with frustration. The reason they give in to frustration is because mastery seems so far off at that point. The

answer is not to aim for mastery but just to contain the frustration and work on the section for X more minutes. It is up to the teacher and student to decide what the *stay with it* time is. This time can also go up as practice time does. Imagine the extra practice time that would soon be clocked up if frustration were the catalyst for *more* practice rather than the sign to move on. Making these choices as opposed to reacting to feelings develops metacognition.

**Stop when you're proud** – “How do I know how much work or practice to do?” ... “Stop when you're proud.”

**Convince me** – Maybe not exactly reflection but a great way to consolidate.

**Constructive rest** – the brain will continue to process a practice session after it has ended. So, for some free extra benefit, take a short nap or constructive rest after a practice session. You don't need to do anything or think about anything in particular. The big catch? No devices.

Incorporating reflection in lessons can be fun, challenging and creative. I hope this article has sparked some of your own creative ideas!

*“Passion for your work is a little bit of discovery, followed by a lot of development, and then a lifetime of deepening.”* Angela Duckworth, Grit

Never be afraid of asking questions; obvious ones, seemingly silly ones, ones you think you already know the answer to and ones you don't know the answer to and can't imagine ever knowing.

Always encourage your students to **question everything**.

Once enough questions have been asked and stock piled, the answers tend to reveal themselves.

If you don't know the answer, then keep asking questions.

## **Roberta Wolff**

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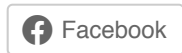
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