

The Growth-Minded Practice Ghost

by Dennis Winge

Fixed-Mindset Stress

Recently my 11-year old son was having a meltdown because he couldn't play a passage on violin as fast as he thought he should be able to. This is not at all uncommon for him. I told him that if I had a nickel for every time I asked a student to slow something down, I'd be a rich man, EVEN IF I had to put a dollar in every time I asked a student to speed something up. (This should be a whole article onto itself.)

Having recently read "Mindset" by Carol Dweck, which my son was actually familiar with as well from his school, I told him that expecting perfection during practice was indicative of a fixed mindset. I am not surprised that he has this, because both of his parents do (or at least did for much of his formative years).

Practice to your Weaknesses

I also told him that once I was dating a woman whose dad came to one of my gigs, and he complimented me saying "you sound way better than you did in my basement." Although I appreciated the compliment, I was a bit mortified because I didn't know he was listening that day in the basement. I thought to myself "of course I sound better; in the basement I was only practicing."

What I mean is, I was practicing to my weaknesses. Practice time is an opportunity to learn and grow, not to sound great. If you happen to be practicing getting a good tone or some specific technique, you may strive for it to "sound good." But I only practice one thing at a time, and I tell my students to do that as well. (Again, that topic should be another article onto itself). Even if you are practicing the integration of 2 or 3 things, then you should only be practicing the integration so that still counts as 1 thing. If, for example, one of those 2 things you are trying to integrate is weaker than the other and that is what is causing problems, then only work on the weaker thing by itself.

The "one thing at a time" guideline automatically implies is that the other aspects of the material you are working on have to go on hold. For example, if you are working out the pitches in a passage of music, you most likely will have to put the rhythm on hold. Or the reverse could be true: you're practicing a new strum and you simply don't play any chords with the right hand and just play open strings.

The point of all this is that it certainly won't sound good to a fly on the wall (or anyone else who happens to be in or near your 'woodshed' (practice space). When you perform, you should play to your strengths; when you practice, you should address your weaknesses first.

Imagine your Ghost is Your Growth-Minded Best Friend

My suspicion that my son has a fixed mindset was confirmed when he said “When I practice I feel like there’s some kind of presence in the room that is judging me and I don’t want to sound bad in front of it.” I invited him, as I invite you now, to imagine that there IS a presence in the room, and that Presence is the most Expansive Love you have ever felt. It is so expansive that it doesn’t want you to just bask in your past successes; it truly wants you to grow and embrace challenges. But it also understands that growth means mistakes, and that effort is more important than result. It simply loves you, massively, for giving good, solid, genuine effort & concentration.

Work without Stress

My son said “But Dad, if I don’t focus on sounding good how will I get better?” My answer is in the dissecting of the various parts of what you are trying to do, working on them one at a time, and going as slow as you need to go in order to get there, all of which has been stated above.

Sure, there is a thing called “inspirational dissatisfaction” which drives you forward because you are dissatisfied with the result, but if your attitude is more on the dissatisfaction (as it was in his case) and not on the inspiration (i.e. focusing on what you can do to improve), then practicing is way too stressful and chances are you won’t make long-term progress.

And yes, it is always good to “begin with the end in mind” as Stephen Covey says, but that doesn’t mean there can’t be a period of time when the pieces are scattered all over the floor and it certainly won’t look like you’re building anything to anyone walking by. And why should you care anyway?

To sum up: Is it possible you can learn to adopt a growth mindset during your practice time? Is it possible you can learn to “enjoy the drills that improve your skills” as Joe Montana says? Is it possible you can learn and grow during practice AND THEN enjoy the fruits of your labor during performance?

I hope you will find ‘yes’ answers here and best of luck to you.