

Guide to Practicing: Have Your Cake and Eat It Too

by Dennis Winge

There is a lot of information going around nowadays about “interleaved” practicing where you switch things up between several different areas of focus relatively rapidly as opposed to traditional “block” practicing where you work on 1 thing at a time over and over.

“Block” practicing is by far the more common approach and has been used for hundreds of years, but modern researchers such as Robert Bjork report that studies show that mixing it up or “interleaving” different elements of a subject you’re learning helps engage the brain more and actually improves learning.

To me the most fascinating part of this is that even in studies where people’s performance drastically improved by using “interleaving” processes, most of them still reported that they thought they learned best when the processes were in “blocks.” This is because the student has more time to engage in each element, and thus feels like they are making progress. Coaches of sports teams use this approach because it actually looks like the team is making great progress in 1 area at a time. However, the “interleaving” advocates show that under the traditional model, much of what is learned one day is lost the next.

Speaking from my own experience as a pro studio guitarist and teacher for over 15 years, I think there are 2 things going with the apparent quandary above. First, as a student of music you have probably experienced the inconsistency that “block” practicing produces. You’re great at something at the end of long session one day, and then 3 days later you can barely do it. Second, if you are a performing musician, you may have noticed how sometimes there is huge gap between where you’re at in your practice routine and what you are able to implement on a gig.

My experience says: yes, mixing things up and bouncing from one thing to another keeps the brain fresh and helps you learn different music techniques, ideas, approaches, and phrases faster. Mixing things up also helps simulate a performance environment, during which, especially in improvised sections, there is literally no time to transition between different techniques and approaches – you have to do them instantaneously.

And as a long-time teacher, I also agree that this approach is highly under-utilized in 99% of teaching methods. I constantly remind my students that the approach we use in their lessons is the “geometric” approach, which is very unlike the classical approach of learning Musical Piece Number 1 and only when you master it will you be given Musical Piece Number 2. I also remind students that the process looks a lot messier, but in the end it’s way faster. It’s not as ‘perfect’ as a linear approach, but do we really learn ‘perfectly’ in life? Do children learn to walk first and then talk second? No, they naturally do both.

However, techniques on a musical instrument require muscle memory. Typically, it takes a lot longer for the muscles to ‘remember’ how to do something than for the brain to learn it. That’s why as a teacher we limit the amount of new information that students get. Sure, their brains can learn more, but will their fingers be able to keep up? Even Joe Montana, in his book “Winning Spirit,” suggests maximizing “time by avoiding working on too many areas. Have a focus for each week.” Surely, his massive success in the NFL was not at all hampered by a lack of “interleaving” in his practice time.

So, is it possible that both schools of thought have something to teach us? My suggestion is do both. Spend a long period of time on 1 thing. Do it over and over. So what if your brain isn’t engaged. In many respects it may be to your advantage when you can play a scale and have a

conversation at the same time. Or simply keep on increasing your tempo on a drill or exercise, which is not an intellectual process at all. When you go to the gym to work out do you really care about whether your brain is engaged? That's not what you go there for.

In addition, have a portion of your routine where you "interleave" as well. Either bounce from each area you're working every 2 or 3 minutes, or deliberately try to integrate 2 different things back and forth for a more extended period of time. Doing this will greatly enhance the efficiency of your practice time because it simulates what it's like on the bandstand. However, when you bounce back and forth, takes notes afterwards on which techniques/ approaches/ etc. you had a harder time doing on the fly and come back to them in a "block" of time another day.

Above all, have a plan. Decide in advance what you're going to work on. Decide how long to spend on each item separately, and decide how long you will spend on "interleaving" different things you're working on. Stick to your plan and allow some fun time at the end, where you just play whatever you want to play. Keep track of your progress. Have some kind of organized Practice Tracker or log book.

Experiment and let me know how you make out. Best wishes for your efficient and fun practice routine, and make great music!