Effective Strategies to Motivate Musical Students to Practice

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Abstract

Practice is an important element in music studying as it contributes to the development of basic music skills and music expertise (Barry, 1992). However, it is difficult for students to sustain the hours of practice required to develop performance ability, especially in the current learning-teaching environment where school teaching is with a demanding, directive and controlling nature (Creech and Gaunt, 2013). Existing literatures have offered explanations for students learning behaviors and have suggested many approaches teachers can use to motivate students to practice effectively; students' belief, task value, the level of challenges and practice strategies are found to be closely related to practice motivations, results, or both. This research, therefore, aims to provide a continuous study on motivations in music learning, with a particular emphasis on how to motivate students to practice effectively. To achieve this aim, this portfolio adopts the method of case study to examine these approaches. This study intends to contribute to the literature in music education by confirming the effectiveness of various strategies proposed in previous research in motivating students to practice, and by suggesting alternative strategies that may be helpful to teachers. Results show that students' belief, task value, level of challenges and practice strategies can affect students' motivation, while practice strategies are more related to the learning results. Although both intrinsic and extrinsic motivations are important in practice, intrinsic motivations are more likely to result in higher frequencies and longer hours of practicing.

Keywords: Motivation Theories, Music Learning, Music Teaching

Introduction

Practice is an important element in music studying as it contributes to the development of basic music skills and music expertise (Barry, 1992). However, it is at the same time difficult for students to maintain constant hours of practicing required for such development, especially within the current learning-teaching environment where school education is with a demanding, directive and controlling nature (Creech and Gaunt, 2013). It's been suggested that such form of school settings have limited students' autonomy in music learning to a great extent, leading to a lower level of students' engagement, in-depth learning, and creativity (Niemiec and Ryan, 2009; Su and Reeve, 2010). Also, Evans et al. (2013) argue that only very few students claim they have received a satisfying music learning experience. Therefore, it is essentially important for teachers to effectively motivate students both in terms of learning and practice, which might encourage more people to take further studies in music. According to McPherson and Zimmerman (2002), students are usually left alone to decide on the duration, frequency and intensity of practice, and the way as well as the extent to which they can motivate themselves have significant impacts on learning effectiveness. Besides the importance of motivation to practice, Evans and Bonneville-Roussy (2016) also suggest its importance in forming key characters of musicians such as psychological wellbeing, personal identity, and sense of self, among others. Thus, this research is a continuous study on motivations in music learning, emphasising on how to motivate music students to practice.

Motivation has been researched and explained from various roots including behavioral, cognitive, and humanist aspects in different domains (Madariaga, 1988). A recent review by Sanz and Orbea (2014) summarizes five motivational models used in music education: 1) intrinsic/extrinsic motivation, 2) achievement motivation, 3) goals, attributions, and cognitive self-regulation, 4) learning with sense, and 5) situated motivation, where the first model concerns behavioral aspects, the following two are cognitive oriented and the last two focus on the influences of social environment. Based on these models, this portfolio focuses on two theories: self-determination theory and interest theory, since they provide theoretical foundations for these models and are widely used in music educational literatures to explain young students' motivation to practice.

Self-determination theory (SDT) explains motivation with consideration to the social circumstances and further elaborates the intrinsic/extrinsic motivation model. According to Evans and Bonneville-Roussy (2016), intrinsic motivation is doing an activity for its own sake and because it is enjoyable, while extrinsic motivation is doing an activity for any reason other than the activity itself. Rather than simply define motivation as intrinsic or extrinsic, SDT elaborated the intrinsic/extrinsic motivation model with four regulatory types, from relatively external to the self to relatively internal with the self (Ryan and Deci, 2000). External regulations are characterized by external rewards and punishments, while some regulations involve conscious valuing of an activity or an object which, are not intrinsically motivating, are accepted as personally important (Renwick and McPherson, 2002). This is more appropriate to be applied in the domain of music, since students' behaviors are not always motivated intrinsically or extrinsically, for instance, the teenage guitarist's determination to pick up a favorite pop song by ear (Mackworth-Young, 1990).

To develop an expertise in playing a musical instrument, both intrinsic and extrinsic motivations are important in long and repeated practices (Ericsson et al., 1993). SDT argues the existence of extrinsic motivations is dependent on the level of autonomy. For example, in the context of motivation to practice, relatively external regulations could be teachers'

requirements of hours to be practiced and the possibility to achieve good scores in an examine, etc., which are less autonomous forms of motivations. While relatively internal regulations could be the understanding of how important the practice is and hoping to achieve other goals through practice. Effective practice that leads to good learning results is motivated by relatively intrinsic regulations (Benware and Deci, 1984) or extrinsic regulations in more autonomous forms (Grolnick and Ryan, 1987).

Interest theory reveals the relationship between a person and an object. Interests may arise due to internal and situational reasons. According to Renwick and McPherson (2002), individual interest is an orientation toward an activity such as learning an instrument, which is more stable and enduring. According to McPherson (2001), children with a long-term commitment tend to practice more and achieve more positive learning results. While situational interest arises because of environmental reasons, such as surprise, complexity, and ambiguity (Renwick and Mcpherson, 2002). Studies exploring the influences of environments on students' musical learning have got similar results: students perform better when they are from a supportive home environment and study with teachers they like (Davidson and Burland, 2006). Both types of interests can co-exist, and higher level of interests usually leads to students' focused attention, increased persistence, and higher level of involvement in learning activities including practice (Hidi, 2000). Also, interests have been found to have impacts on the learning results. McPherson and McCormick (1999) find that higher level of interest results in more effective learning strategies and controlling of knowledges.

Students' choices can help teachers to identify their interests, as Greco (1997) argues that students tend to choose learning materials that they have more interests. As a result, offering students choices enables students to learn their interested materials (although choices are limited in the learning scope) and thus enhance their motivations in learning and practice. A rich documentation of empirical research has confirmed the important role of interests and choices in instrumental music learning, including practices and learning results. For instance, Renwick and McPherson (2002) have found providing students choices on learning materials lead to increased intrinsic motivations. Similarly, Reynolds and Symons (2001) also confirm that choices are strongly related to improved learning results.

Both theories have indicated the importance of students' autonomy that is more inspired by intrinsic motivations. Meanwhile, they also have highlighted the importance of teachers' interruptions (teaching strategies) in motivating students to practice. However, it is important to note the differences among students of different expertise. Hallam et al. (2012) indicate that enjoyment of practice decreases when students become more skilled. Also, students have displayed differences in their strategies deployed in practice. More skilled students are more able to identify their errors and correct them through repeating sections, while less skilled students tend to return to the beginning section (Hallam et al., 2012; Renwick and McPherson, 2002; Williamon and Valentine, 2000). As a result, less skilled students tend to deploy less effective practice strategies, which requires more teachers' instructions in this area.

Conclusion

This research generally confirms previous research findings that both external and internal motivations are important in practice, and practice strategies are important in determining students' learning results. Therefore, it is important for teachers to find proper ways to motivate their students to practice. Effective strategies that can be used to increase students' external motivations include exams, performance shows and other tasks that are viewed valuable by

students. However, individual difference needs to be noted, since it suggests that one strategy does not fit all students, like the case in this research where the performance show meant different for different participants. Unlike other disciplines, music's contents are more procedural, and closely related to individual preferences and expressions of emotions and experiences, which makes it more complex to study (Sanz and Orbea, 2014). Thus, teaching methods and strategies need to be orientated to reflect students' different preferences, experiences, and abilities, using different class organization, and allowing for different forms of participation, based on these differences.

Moreover, the research supports findings of previous literatures that effective practice is motivated by relatively intrinsic regulations (Benware and Deci, 1984) or extrinsic regulations in more autonomous forms (Grolnick and Ryan, 1987), and highlight the key role of intrinsic motivations and students' autonomy in music education. As intrinsic motivations can lead to more frequent practice and longer practice hours, finding ways to increase students' intrinsic motivations be- comes important for teachers. Unfortunately, it can be quite difficult. This research has suggested two effective way that may be helpful in enhancing students' intrinsic motivations to practice.

The first to offer students' choices on musical instruments and repertoires and allow them to choose their preferred ones. It can, on one hand, allow students to choose their interests, and on the other hand, decrease the negative influences of negative feeling toward practice along with the increase in expertise. Both can motivate students intrinsically through inducing positive feelings toward the music subject and the practice. Its effectiveness in motivating students to practice has been supported by findings of Hidi (2000). The other way is to help students develop confidence towards their musical careers, closely tie their abilities to challenges and make them believe they can achieve positive results with efforts. In this way, students may be able to develop strong belief towards musical career and their ability to success, both of which, as suggested by McPherson (2001) and McPherson and McCormick (1999), can contribute to students' instinct motivation to practice.

Additionally, practice strategies are found to have great impacts on students' perception of practice and their learning results. Ineffective strategies to deal with errors in practice can lead to du- plicate work, which further leads to students' resistance to practice (as the case of b) and ultimately results in poor learning results. However, this can be improved with teachers' interruptions, and teachers need to pay attention to their students' way of practice and help them to develop good practicing habits. Also, the use of technology such as smartphones in recording practice can help students to review their playing and identify mistakes, especially during practice times without teachers' tutoring. As indicated by Sanz and Orbea (2014), music, images, audio- visual production are increasingly common in modern lives, but the perception of using them in practice is rarely developed among students. Even the expert students only use basic technologies (i.e., recording). This has suggested the absence of involving new technologies resources in class in the domain of music education, which needs to be aware of and improved by teachers.

This case study is based on interviews of two participants, which may limit its ability to be generalized to other students due to small sample size. However, this may be common problems in the domain of music, as this subject is closely related to individual preferences and expressions of emotions and experience (Sanz and Orbea, 2014). Therefore, the findings are still valuable when considering this.

The influences of students' belief on their motivations have been studied in this research as well as in another previous research in this domain (i.e., Evans et al., 2013; McPherson, 2001; McPherson and McCormick, 1999). However, they all involve either child participants or adolescent participants, and very few of them have tried to study the changes in motivations and belief occurred during the transition period from child to adolescent, with consideration to the social and home environment. This may help to explain why both participants in this research had strong interests in piano and started to learn it early, but one dropped out later and picked up again.

Also, this research suggests that individual differences and personalities matter in music learning activities including motivation to practice. More research is needed to explore how and why these, especially students' personalities, can affect students' motivations, which can further help teachers to develop effective teaching strategies and improve students' learning results.

To conclude, this portfolio aims to study motivations in music learning, with a particular focus on how to motivate students to practice. Based on the self-determination theory and the interest theory, literatures have offered explanations for students learning behaviors and have suggested many approaches teachers can use to motivate students to practice effectively: students' belief, task value, the level of challenges and practice strategies are found to be closely related to practice motivations, results, or both. This portfolio uses the method of case study to examine these approaches and contributes to the literatures in music education by confirming effectiveness of some strategies indicated by previous research in motivating students to practice and by suggesting more strategies that may be helpful to teachers. Results show that students' belief, task value, level of challenges and practice strategies can affect students' motivation, while practice strategies are more related to the learning results. Although both intrinsic and extrinsic motivations are important in practice, intrinsic motivations are more likely to result in higher practice frequencies and longer frequencies hours. Therefore, teachers need to develop appropriate teaching methods and strategies to improve students' internal motivations, which can be achieved through the following two ways. The first is to offer students' choices on musical instruments and repertoires and allow them to choose their preferred ones. And the second is to help students develop confidence towards their musical careers, closely tie their abilities to challenges and make them believe they can achieve positive results with efforts. However, this research is based on a small sample size and both participants are adults. More research is still needed in exploring changes in motivations and belief occurred during the transition period from child to adolescent and adult. Additionally, whether how and why individual differences, especially students' different personalities, affect students' motivations in music learning activities are worthy of research since this can further help teachers to develop effective teaching strategies and improve students' learning results.

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