

Practice Made Perfect: The Key to Turning Music into a Literate Activity

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In this article, Sam Kelly describes his perfect method for practicing music by thinking about practicing as part of a literate activity system. Throughout the article, he notes different elements of activity systems through his and others' personal experiences to show the complex activities involved in becoming more proficient at playing music (or writing).

Like many other activities, playing music can often be rather challenging. There are so many rules, regulations, and standards in place that it can be difficult to even know where to begin. For the last four years of my music career (also known as the first four years of my music career), I have been plagued by the issue of being unable to find an efficient means of practicing (as there is no one correct way). It wasn't until I enrolled in English 101 in the Illinois State University Writing Program and paired it with my marimba lessons that I found the most clear-cut and effective way to practice by turning it into a literate activity. Throughout this article, I will be sharing with you the steps I try to take when practicing any sort of new music—essentially creating a literate activity—and how my experience could help you get started with any activity you choose.

Step #1: Score Study

Before starting the first step in the learning process, you must be aware of what a literate activity is. If you are currently enrolled in a course in the



Figure 1: You can read Brianna Zangara's article about learning to cook by scanning this QR code.



Figure 2: You can read Charley Koenig's article about learning to play chess by scanning this QR code.

ISU Writing Program, you may already know the components of literate activity. But for those unaware, a **literate activity** is any activity that can use writing or language to document and analyze the different systems, people, events, tools, objects, or places that make up an activity. For example, although fixing a car may not be a literate activity on its own, in Kevin Roozen's *Grassroots* article "Unraveling 'Writing': Interweaving Maverick Literacies Throughout a Literate Life," Dan (a mechanic) used receipts and pictures from the purchasing of car parts to create a record of the different interactions and tools someone would need to repair one. This, in turn, created a new literate activity out of fixing up a car. Just to reiterate, documenting a literate activity can be done with all sorts of activities, especially things that are complex, like learning to cook (Figure 1), or that require a lot of learning and remembering, like learning to play chess (Figure 2). It can be as simple as writing down how you feel about a subject to writing a 2000-page thesis and analysis of your activity! Additionally, when learning a new activity, you slowly build up your "literacies" over time, as Charley Koenig did with learning chess. She used various tools, people, texts, and strategies to build her knowledge.

Now that we understand the exciting and complex process of a literate activity—documenting the how, why, and where of our learning—it's time we dive headfirst into my learning documentation of how I study and learn new music for performance. Now there are many different reasons for an individual to want to learn music. Most of my efforts are placed into learning a variety of the percussion instruments, such as the keyboards (Figure 3), drums, and auxiliaries, needed to become a well-rounded percussionist.



Figure 3: This is a marimba, one of the keyboard percussion instruments I spend most of my time with. It is the largest of the keyboards and uses wooden bars with notes laid out similar to a piano that sounds when struck by a mallet.

However, the type of literate activity I will discuss here is the general process of practicing a piece of music that will eventually be performed. The first step is studying the score and following along while listening to the music. This step is mainly about gaining all of the preliminary information you can about the piece of music. If you need help with things to look for, try researching questions such as: Why did the composer write this piece? What emotions do they want the audience to feel? Are they painting a picture? Are they telling a story? Who/what else was involved in the creation of this piece? And so on . . . These are some of the questions that Kayla Connett asked herself in her *Grassroots* article, “Exploring Music,” as she analyzed a piece of choral music. Kayla notes throughout her work how important it is to use activity systems, specifically music’s socialization, to connect the audience to the performer. An **activity system** is any group of people who work together, combining history, communication, and the ability to evolve and change over time to achieve a specific goal (ISU Writing Program). In Kayla’s specific case and mine, the activity systems revolve around the performers and the audience for whom the band or choir is performing. To pull this off, though, all parties in the system must have historical knowledge of the activity, which may include doing research.

Conducting research prior to learning is crucial to understanding the piece of music and how you will begin to practice. For instance, Shannon Harman uses the P-CHAT model in her *Grassroots* article “Scales, Saussure, and Socialization: Applying CHAT and Linguistic Theory to Music Notation” to note the differences in musical notation between guitar tablature and the traditional sheet music that most people think of with regard to “reading music.” Shannon notes that cultural history has pushed sheet music to the forefront of the genre. Even though both tab and sheet music notate the same idea, sheet music covers a broader range of instruments while also implementing the use of many different symbols that take time to learn. However, because sheet music requires learning a whole language of symbols and a wide range of instrumentations, those who read tabs are not commonly seen as being able to read music because they only have to look at a number correlated to the fret on any string. In fact, tabs won’t even tell you the name of the note you are playing, only where to play it. Yet, if you are working on learning to play a particular instrument, many of them have specific types of notations that are specialized for those instruments. For example, a clarinet player would not be able to use snare drum notation to have meaningful practice as the notes do not change, and the rhythms and techniques used are vastly different from what a clarinet could produce. And it would be the same if you purchased clarinet music for the snare drum. Without a bit of score study before you practice or even before you purchase the music, you

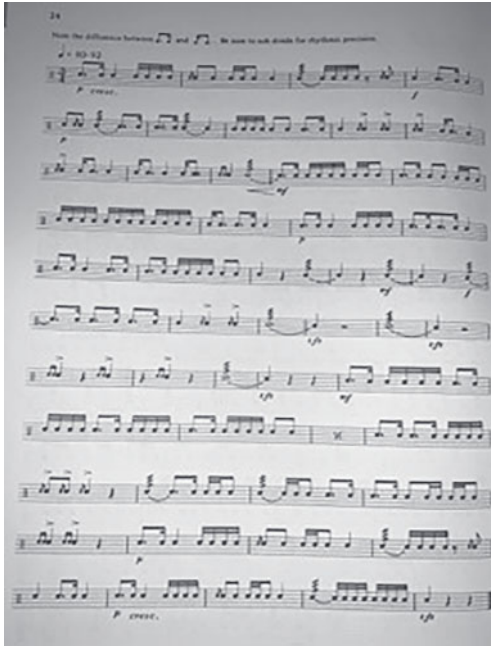


Figure 4: A moderately difficult piece for snare drum that would not go over well (but might be quite funny) if played on the clarinet.

may find that the new sheet music you are excited to learn is impossible to play with your skill set or instrument (see Figure 4).

Step #2: Chunking the Music

After you have done the research and plotted out your tactics and goals with the musical piece, it's time to start playing your instrument. However, learning the whole piece in one sitting can be daunting. Even if a first read-through to the end may be helpful (depending on the difficulty of the music or time constraints), I find that it is always more beneficial to break the music into chunks and learn it slowly until you finally bring them all back together (Figure 5). Many musicians despise this slow learning

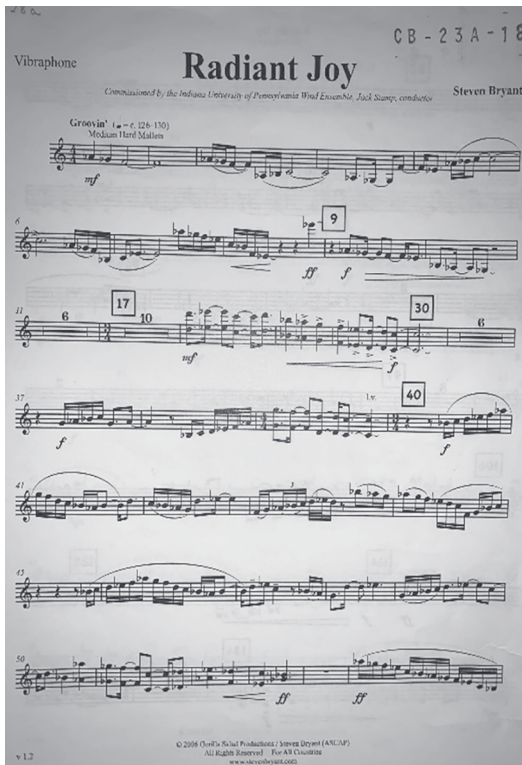


Figure 5: This is one of the pieces for vibraphone (a metal keyboard instrument that can be sustained with a pedal) that I am currently working on. It definitely needed to be chunked and practiced with a lot of repetitions in order to learn the notes and the stickings (the decision to use your right- or left-hand mallet to play a note).

process and become very impatient and try to learn as quickly as possible. However, this is a perfect example of them not using their **antecedent knowledge** (the Writing Program's fancy term for any prior experience or knowledge on a subject). For me, this has been realizing that the slow process of learning notes yields more significant results in the long term. I also have to use my antecedent knowledge to know what notes and rhythms are found in the music. If I began looking at a piece of music and had no idea how to identify the notes correctly, this whole process would be utterly useless. Antecedent knowledge connects everything and drives the need and want to gain more understanding to add to your library of information in order to have a higher skill set when facing a similar task in the future.

Step #3: Practice, Practice, Practice . . .

After all the chunking has been completed and the notes in the piece have been studied, the grueling process of daily scheduled practice begins. This step is the most difficult for many musicians as creating a schedule and sticking to it is not an easy task, especially if you often get distracted like me. However, like writing, the need to consistently practice is vital to improving, or else feelings of inadequacy and loss of skill will eventually creep in and take over. Trust me when I say that no one likes that (especially not the author of this article). I experienced that feeling of inadequacy when I came to ISU. Using my antecedent knowledge from my high school AP English class, I knew that if I constantly wrote over the summer, then English 101 would be a piece of cake for me. However, I did not listen to myself and decided I needed a break from formal writing, which was a mistake. Taking a break put me through the wringer when college classes started. Although, as I wrote more and more throughout the semester, I noticed that it became easier to hit higher word counts than I could in high school.

As you progress in your skill and practice of any activity, making it as enjoyable as possible for your audience and yourself should be a high priority. This can be done in music by adding phrasing or dynamics (how loud or soft a particular note is played) depending on how you want to shape the message for the audience. These additions can be a tricky skill to master, but the perfect way to see if you are making your unique statement is to simply record yourself during practice and use writing to analyze the recording. This method may sound simple, yet not only will you learn how to assess your playing, but you will also increase your ability to judge and assess the playing of future students if you plan to become a music educator. Taking an outsider's view of your playing will open many opportunities, but to achieve

this, you must use writing and create a new writing identity. As I assess myself within music and continue to build my new writer identity, I have increased my skill and ability to conjure up words to describe what could be improved in my musicality. I would take the bet with 100% odds that being able to assess yourself and come up with the right words to describe your assessment will allow you to be that much better of a teacher or a learner, as you will soon realize that you too have faults that require improvement.

Step #4: The First Rehearsal *Gasp*

Some musicians apply their antecedent knowledge, new knowledge, and practice without recognizing others. As a result, they never feel the need to combine their efforts with other musicians. But if, for instance, you are a marimba or tuba player, or your dream has always been to be the lead guitarist in a heavy metal band, then you, my friend, might consider moving on to the next step: rehearsal with the band. Although rehearsal is another form of practice and there is no real danger, there is always the fear that you might mess up in front of your peers and they may make fun of you, or worse yet, you may feel that you are not good at this mutually beloved activity. Of course, no matter what, don't put yourself down because everyone makes mistakes. Secondly, (and this is coming from personal experience), even if you get embarrassed, that still counts toward the socialization portion of your new activity system. Once again, harking back to the Illinois State University Writing Program, an activity system analyzes the cooperative (that's key) interactions through psychological and social processes that make up an activity that must constantly evolve socially from its original historical context. An activity system does not belong to one person but instead sees an entire collective working for one or more unified goals, and such is the case for a full musical ensemble rehearsal. This is where every musician collectively gathers to use their instruments in a social context to evolve their music into a form that the audience can enjoy. The ensemble represents just one small part of the activity system. Other components found within the same space of a single activity system include the makers of the instruments, construction workers for the building, parents and teachers of the students, and all the instruments themselves (which are tools).

Step #5: Bringing History into Your Playing

While on the subject of a band's activity system, I will briefly explain the rich historical activity that wind bands in schools have to offer for that system.

It stems from the American colonies in which hymns would be taught to students to bring them closer to God and teach them music (“History of Music Education”). The music program stayed on that fairly steady track until John Philip Sousa gave rise and popularity to marching bands in the nineteenth century. Many people fell in love with the sound that the bands provided, and they wanted their kids to join an organization and learn how to play classics, such as Sousa, without the need for expensive string instruments. From that day on, the tools and socializations within the wind band have evolved and grown from that original historical context, making it inseparable from today’s musical groups.

Along with the band’s history in schools, we must, more importantly, take the time to look deeply into our histories. My experience with music in a more classical environment was very limited before high school. In fact, I never even considered joining a school band until my friends convinced me to try it during freshman orientation. However, I knew that I wanted to stay in the program as soon as I went to the first rehearsal for our marching band, and my director put me on the xylophone, which I instantly fell in love with playing. Being in a school band gave me such a thrill as I worked with my peers around me and made lifelong connections that can only be attributed to that activity system (see Figure 6). Even to this day (as a music major in college), I think back to the pure excitement and struggle of learning a new skill with my favorite group of people, and it helps me to push myself



Figure 6: My fellow percussionists and I taking a picture after having performed wonderfully at my first ISU Symphonic Winds concert in my freshman year after months of rigorous literature practice.

forward if I'm ever feeling discouraged. Besides my music history, it always helps to consider my other antecedent knowledge and life experiences to bring my emotions and story into the music I am trying to learn. That is how you create art out of music written on the page—which is why I find this step to be one of the most crucial in the list, because of your creativity and life being introduced and connected to someone else's creation. That is the activity system fully at work!

The Final Step . . . The Concert *DUN DUN DUUUN*

The culmination of all your hard work put into one night, one performance, is roughly nine levels above rehearsal on the stress scale. Only one shot shows the audience precisely what you have worked on for months in a heart-pounding, thrilling, and terrifying experience. In other words, it's just a concert (that's what you have to tell yourself). This night is full of socialization and production, allowing your audience to feel and hear the effects of all your hard work with research, chunking, practice, and rehearsal. The way I am describing these concerts is genuinely how they feel in the moment. It is very similar to giving about four or five different presentations all in one hour, each one more complex and stressful than the last. But this concert is where beautiful communication between the band and the audience happens, and we can also understand that interaction through literate activity. The writing in the program notes, the marking on the sheet music pages to let wind players know when to breathe, and the sticking that the drummer wants to use on their solo all contribute to the concert experience. Additionally, the audience's use of literate practices, such as texting a friend (better not be during the songs) about the performance, further transforms the concert into a collective experience. Through these various forms of writing, the activity systems of the show expand from just a few buds rocking in a garage into a large group of individuals enjoying their favorite activity.

Although you may have originally thought, "There is no way this music nerd can connect practicing music to a literate activity," I hope you're thinking now, "WOW, this music nerd just blew my mind! I can't wait to involve writing in all my activities more consciously, just like him!" And to that, I say, "Thank you! Thank you! You are all too kind!" However, with great seriousness and all jokes aside, I hope you can better understand the process of practicing writing to improve, and how that process involves more time and people and tools than you might first have imagined.

Bonus Step: Relax and Reflect

Now that the stressful concert has concluded and the audience has witnessed your hard work, you can finally relax and unwind. You know that you have developed repeatable skills that will allow you to maximize efficiency in future concerts and practice sessions. Whether your performance is submitting a paper or testing a car that you have fixed up, you can sleep soundly knowing that you have worked hard to create a literate activity and given it your all.

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Sam Kelly (middle) is a freshman music education major at Illinois State University. He loves all things related to band and music despite only being involved for the last four years, starting in his freshman year of high school. He comes from a small town known as Pontiac, IL, where his love for music began. Sam hopes to further his career in music by becoming a high school band director to inspire other kids to love music and each other. His love for God, his friends, and his family keeps him going throughout his everyday life, and he truly feels there is never a dull moment to be had with other people around.