

## **The Musicians' Spiral of Learning**

In mainstream motor learning literature, learning is described in three stages or phases: the 'cognitive' phase, the 'associative' phase and the 'autonomous' phase. To summarise the mainstream view: the early phase requires cognitive declarative processes in order to understand the skill, and gradually through the learning process automaticity is achieved until it would be no longer necessary to control the movements consciously. In the light of recent research on implicit motor learning and on attentional focus, the stages of learning could be considered as a journey consisting of spirals of learning.

***The First Phase*** involves understanding the task by formulating intentions. Intentions can be formulated through making decisions about what is to be learned and what the desired results should sound and feel like as well as developing a sense of the meaning behind and the emotions connected with the piece (if one is learning repertoire). A piece of music would be played slowly or in small chunks. Strategies can then be designed for achieving the intended goal/s. The early stage can also involve organisation – taking care that everything that is needed is available and organised.

***The Second Phase*** is characterised by exploration. This stage involves creating and environment for exploration by choosing tools and methods that enhance getting to know the skill or piece better by developing sensory awareness and exploring musical intention – e.g. by using external focus tools or by improvisation. Important in this stage is also developing and using self-regulation and reflection. Sections of music would be gradually chained together.

***The Third Phase*** of learning is about finding the 'flow state'. When a piece or skill is learned, a musician needs to practice trust and the ability to focus on musical details as well as the larger picture by relying on using rich musical imagery and distal external focus during the whole piece. The goal of practice at this stage is on staying engaged (in focus) as well as practicing recovery (how to stay on track after an error or distraction).

***The Fourth Phase*** involves reflection and is an opportunity to assess not only the learning outcome (e.g. the performance) but also the entire cycle of the learning process. Assessment includes checking whether all three preceding phases were dealt with in an efficient and effective way: including the goals and intentions, learning strategies and methods, whether there was enough time and attention for each phase etc. In this way a performance is treated as a unique learning moment and even aspects that didn't go well can be seen as valuable information for the next cycle in the spiral of learning.

Learning can thus be experienced as a lifelong process – one which can be enjoyed and approached creatively and with a sense of agency.

## **PHASE ONE: Intention**

The process begins with understanding the task by formulating goals and intentions and developing strategies and plans.

### **Phase one involves:**

- Intention: making decisions about what is to be learned and what the desired result should sound and feel like
- Strategy: deciding on a strategy on how to achieve the intended goal/s
- Organisation: taking care that everything that is needed is available and organised

### **Questions for phase one:**

- What do I need to work on right now?
- Why? What will it bring me?
- What is the time frame?
- What are the challenges involved?
- What do I need in order to master the task?
- How will I know that it is finished (for now)?

### **Work forms for phase one:**

- Self-assessment
- Goals
- Mindset questionnaire
- Balance wheel

## **PHASE TWO: Exploration**

Practicing needs to be about having space to get to know the repertoire, instrument and self, and not about problem solving.

### **Phase two involves:**

- Creating an environment for exploration
- Finding and using explorative practice tools
- Being able to reflect on how it's going
- Developing sensory awareness and exploring musical intention

### **Questions for phase two:**

- Am I in the here and now?
- What can I hear/feel?
- What do I want to say?
- Can I imagine what I want to sound like?

### **Work forms for phase two:**

- Practice log book
- Practice cards

### **PHASE THREE: Finding flow**

Preparing the performance by practicing trust and building confidence.  
The real goal is achieving automaticity in order to experience flow during the performance.  
Knowing this at the outset will help steer the whole process.

#### **Phase three involves:**

- Learning and practicing trust
- Building confidence
- Experiencing mastery

#### **Questions for phase three:**

- What helps me/ allows me to let go?
- What hinders me to let go?
- What should I focus on during performance

#### **Work forms for phase three:**

- Affirmations
- Meditation – identity exercise
- Practicing-in-flow
- Performance preparation using mental training
- “Task focus” and external focus of attention

### **PHASE FOUR: Reflection**

Assessing how the learning process went – including not only the performance but also each stage of the process.

#### **Phase four involves:**

- Documenting the outcome of the learning cycle
- Being able to tell what went well and what didn't
- Being able to address and assess the entire process/cycle of learning
- Intrinsic and extrinsic feedback
- Gaging whether the intentions and goals were appropriate and met
- Assessing the efficacy of the methods and strategies used

#### **Questions for phase four:**

- What went well and what didn't go well in my performance?
- To what extent were my original goals met?
- Did I spend enough time on each phase?
- What helped me in my process?
- What hindered me in my process?
- What helped to motivate me during the process?
- Which aspects of my preparation could I have done differently?

#### **Work forms for phase four:**

- Performance log book
- Recording
- Critical response process