Cultivating independent learners

Helen Reid

Introduction

In this resource I'll explore how teachers can cultivate independence in students both during and outside their lessons. I'll examine a range of different theories that we can employ in order to understand and improve our teaching practice.

As our pupils progress through their studies, we hope that they gradually need us less. In what ways can we foster this independence? In addition, students spend the majority of their time practising independently. Practice is a lifelong skill that teachers must foster from the very beginning of learning.

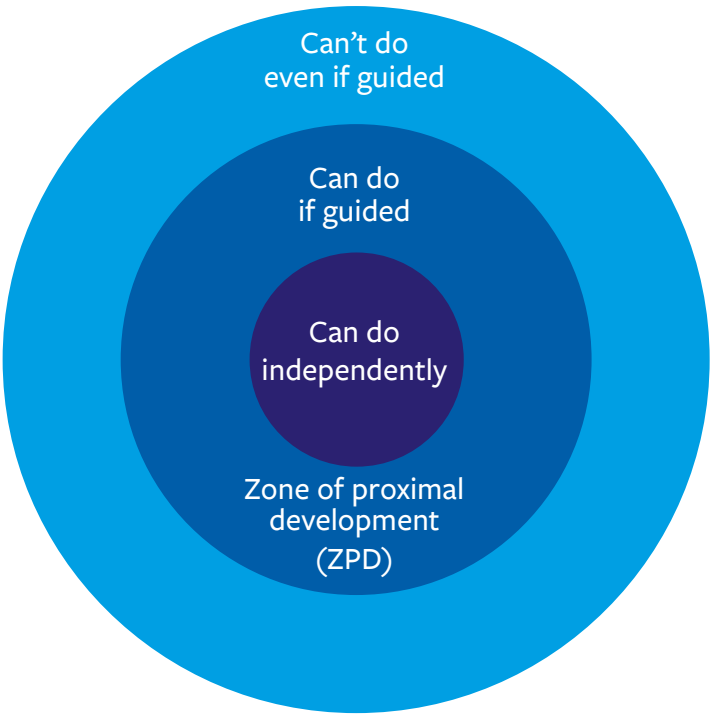
The zone of proximal development

At any one time, there are:

- certain things that a student can do on their own
- certain things they can do with guidance
- and things that they cannot do at all.

We could use the example of a four-year-old child at school. They may be able to read letters on their own; they made need the help of an outline to write the letters; and they cannot yet read whole words.

We could also refer to a beginner piano student. They might be able to find middle C on the piano on their own; they can read and play C and D with some help; they are not yet able to play 'Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star'. The diagram below demonstrates these different zones:



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The Zone of proximal development, or ZPD, describes those things that the student can currently do with guidance: the child who can start to draw letters, with the help of the outline; or the beginner pianist who can read and play C and D, in our examples above. The help of the teacher in these instances is often referred to as 'scaffolding'. I imagine that all teachers who are reading this recognise scaffolding as part of their practice, but we should dig a little deeper into the most effective way in which we can use scaffolding in our lessons and lesson planning.

The key to successful scaffolding, or the amount of help and guidance you give to your students, stems from the teacher's awareness of the student's current Zone of proximal development. Offering too much help can lead to more dependent, or possibly bored, learners. Not offering enough scaffolding can leave a student feeling confused, and lead to a lack of confidence.

In addition, without enough scaffolding, a student is unlikely to be able to practise in a productive manner. It's worth mentioning here that, as teachers who often work with individuals or small groups, we're in the privileged position of being able to work at the exact level that the student needs. This is something that's much harder for teachers with a class of 30 children, and one of the many reasons that learning an instrument is so valuable.

Therefore, establishing the current ZPD of your student for a certain activity is crucial in terms of determining the amount of scaffolding they need to progress and feel confident in their learning. This will then lead to an independent understanding of that activity, and finally the ability to carry out the activity independently (this is explored further through Bloom's Taxonomy below).

Of course, the ZPD is just one factor in the student's learning and our support as teachers, but it's a very helpful concept to keep in mind when planning and delivering lessons. Coming back to the practical example of the student who wants to play 'Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star', we can work in all three areas of the circle diagram above in order to achieve this aim:

- We can first cover what we expect the student to already know ('Can you find middle C for me on the piano?'), which builds confidence and ensures that we know what they have understood and what they're able to do independently at this point in their learning.
- Now we might check their reading of C and D. If this is a little less confident, then this is where our ZPD lies, and this is where we begin our scaffolding and learning.
- If this feels very confident, then we can begin to introduce the new note E, and our next step will be to work around this, with help. By the end of the lesson, the student can recognise and play the note E with help, and they will be able to practise it at home.

It might be a useful exercise to think of a particular student of your own, and to jot down where they are in each of the three zones of learning, with the help of the diagram above.

Setting intentions and effective planning

This leads further on to the aims and plans we make with our students. As teachers, we generally have an overview of long-term aims, and we know where the students need to be at any point in the year, to pass the exam or give the performance. It's important to share this with our students, as it can also foster independence and lead to more productive practice and progress.

For example, I had a student earlier this year who was very keen to take Grade 5. His mother was also very keen for him to take the exam. Working backwards from the exam period, I explained to him where he would need to have got to by each point in the year to achieve this, and we wrote it down together in his practice book. I would give him the tools and clear instruction on how to get to each point, and felt he was capable of reaching each point, but it would be his responsibility to put in the practice time to meet each target. In addition, we looked together at the practice commitment we felt it would take and how that might fit in with his other commitments in school and outside school. This gave him ownership over wanting to take the exam or not, and what it meant in terms of practice commitment. In addition, it also provided a bit of a contract between myself and the student, which meant that if certain progress that had been agreed had not been met, then my choosing not to enter him for the exam would be easily justified and understood.

Although the overall aim of this exercise is to give ownership to the student of their own progress, and to foster independence, it does also make it easier for teachers who may be under pressure to enter children for exams, as it sets clear targets at an early point in the process.

The different roles of the teacher

In this section, we'll consider how the role we take as a teacher can impact the independence of our students.

As demonstrated above, the role of the teacher can be flexible. It's important for students to understand what we take responsibility for as teachers, and what they are expected to take responsibility for as students. I can give a couple of examples of this from my own teaching. At the university where I teach, the final recitals are in June. I would consider my role to be to make sure that the repertoire the students are playing is at an appropriate level for the student and for the expected level of the university. I challenge the student to come up with their own suggestions for repertoire at this stage, and we create a balanced programme together. (In fact, asking a student at any level to suggest pieces they might enjoy learning can encourage independence.) I would also consider how their repertoire choice fits in with the piano canon as a whole and previous pieces they have studied, and guide them towards styles or techniques they may not have encountered or covered previously. I take responsibility for guiding the students in the milestones they need to meet at each stage of the year in order to be well prepared for their recital. We discuss a realistic practice strategy together. It is then the responsibility of the students to fulfil the practice expectations we set. In terms of encouraging independence, it feels healthy to enable students to understand their responsibility and role in their own development. In addition, they understand the support that I can provide. I think there's often a tacit understanding or belief about these roles, and I have found it very helpful to openly discuss this.

In this context, I'd also recommend a 2005 article by Gerald Jones, entitled 'Gatekeepers, Midwives and Fellow Travellers: Learning Alignments and Pedagogy in Adult Education' (published by the Mary Ward Centre). Although the title talks about adult education, the content feels very relevant to teaching at all levels. Jones identifies three roles in his article. The Gatekeeper approach describes the teacher having ownership of the material being learnt and transmitting it to the student. The Midwife approach is described as the learner having ownership of the material and the teacher helping them to decipher it through appropriate scaffolding. The teacher who is taking on the Fellow traveller role is exploring new material alongside the learner.

Let's explore these roles in the context of instrumental and vocal teaching, and encouraging independence. When and why might we want to use these different roles? I'd suggest that we're constantly moving between them in our lessons. However, having an awareness of our teaching roles, and a tool with which to analyse them, further enables us to develop as practitioners. We may find we are sitting in one role more than we would like to be, for example, with certain students or as a general modus operandi.

Let's look at a practical example. While teaching scales, we probably inhabit the Gatekeeper role more. We have the information that we need to share with the student – the facts about fingering and execution. We can, however, encourage independent thinking in this technical work by asking the students to look for patterns within the different scales they're playing, thus moving more into the role of Midwife. Finally, we could create an improvisation together based on the new scales that have been learnt or based on exploring the keys more broadly. If we do that, we're Fellow travellers, creating something new together.

Structuring lessons in a way that encourages independence

The way in which lessons are structured can have a significant impact on the student's understanding, confidence, and ability to practise independently. There are many ways to successfully structure a lesson, but the following points are worth consideration:

- **Planning before the lessons:** the reality of delivering many instrumental or vocal lessons each week means that planning every individual lesson in advance is not always practical. However, some planning can be incorporated as part of your lesson each week. Just a quick note at the end of the lesson in the student's notebook on those things you've covered and an outline of what you want to cover in the next lesson is be a useful conclusion to the lesson for yourself and the student.

- **Connection between the elements of your lesson:** begin with a warm-up activity that relates to what you plan to explore in the lesson. This could be a technical issue that occurs in a piece the student is working on, or a particular jazz scale around which you're planning to construct an improvisation later. Give your warm-up activities a purpose for the student. Make them creative and inventive, and connect them to the rest of the lesson. Encourage students to make up their own warm-up activities.

- **Consider the ZPD diagram above when structuring the lesson:** spend time in every section! Allow the student to show you things they can confidently do; spend time working on things they currently need help with; and begin to show them some new things.

- **Ask open questions**, to ascertain the student's understanding more deeply. Closed questions, such as 'Did that make sense?', do not give much scope for development. Open questions might be, 'How did that feel to play?', 'Could you explain how you worked out that rhythm?', and very importantly 'How will you practise this when you are on your own?'

- **Practice strategy:** make time to discuss a practice strategy for the week. Students spend most of their time working on their own, and effective practice is an important skill that develops over years. Productive practice, outside the lessons, initially needs a great deal of scaffolding.

A rough outline of a half-hour lesson may look something like this:

- 3 mins: checking student's practice log. How did the practice go this week? Do they have any questions or things they found difficult that they'd like to cover during the lesson? Are there things they were really pleased with that they'd like to show you?
- 5 mins: warm-up activities and games, connected to the student's current work.
- 5 mins: recapping those areas where you expect the student is confident. Giving feedback on ways in which they can develop these areas.
- 12 mins: working in the ZPD, helping the student with things they have found/are still finding tricky, starting to learn some new things with help.
- 5 mins: discussing together what you've learnt, any questions the student might have, and setting up a practice strategy for the next week.

Effective practice techniques

Practice can also be a collaborative process. Aim to move away from the idea of the teacher setting the practice and the student fulfilling it. Forming realistic practice expectations is very important to avoid frustration on both sides.

First, discuss with your student what slots they might have available for practice during the week. This enables you to set realistic practice expectations. As a mother myself, I have experienced at first hand how easy it is for days to pass where practice is non-existent due to other clubs, playdates, and so on. In fact, unless it's timetabled into the weekly schedule, it's easy turn up to the next lesson with barely any practice having been completed. (How odd it is to hear myself being on the other side and saying those magic words 'Well, we haven't managed much practice this week, I'm afraid.') Practice is something that can easily be pushed to the bottom of priorities and left until tomorrow, so I'd encourage the timetabling of it into the student's weekly diary of work and events.

Once you have your timetabled practice sessions, whether they're 6 x 30 mins or 3 x 20 mins, they can be structured to gain the most productive results. Of course, it's worth mentioning at this point that practice time itself may also need a bit of a contract, when working towards an examination. If a student has 3 x 20 mins a week to practice, for example, then taking the Grade 8 examination is not really a good option!

Make sure every student has a practice book, in which you can write their practice strategy for the week. Write down together the times they're intending to practise, and what they hope to cover. Leave a space for the student to write down any questions that occurred to them during their practice session, anything they found particularly difficult, or anything that was successful, or that they were particularly proud of. This is an important point. Students are generally very quick to point out what they got wrong, but less conditioned to say what they really enjoyed about their playing and what went well. It's a crucial skill for students to be able to value those things that they're doing well, at the same time as working on those things they find challenging. This will stand them in good stead for the future – in many areas of their life!

One aspect not yet covered is the role of parents and carers in younger children's learning, and this is an important feature of instrumental and vocal development. Although this article is focused on developing independence, it has been shown that younger children benefit hugely from parental input in their practice. To this extent, it can be useful for the parent to sit in on the lesson. However, sometimes a child may be shyer with the parent there, or the parent may have a sibling to look after. For whatever reason, this may not feel like the best option. If this is the case, you could invite the parent in at the end of the lesson, in your five-minute summary, to involve them in the child's progress and practice strategy for the week. Parents of primary school children will inevitably have more of an overview of their child's 'spare' time to practice than the child might.

If you are teaching in a school, then you can write notes that address the parent/carer directly and ask for a little note from them in the practice book (as a class teacher might ask for in a Reading Record, for example). It's important to try and find a way in which you can involve them in a realistic manner in their children's learning.

See Music Teacher, October 2020, for a resource devoted entirely to practice techniques.

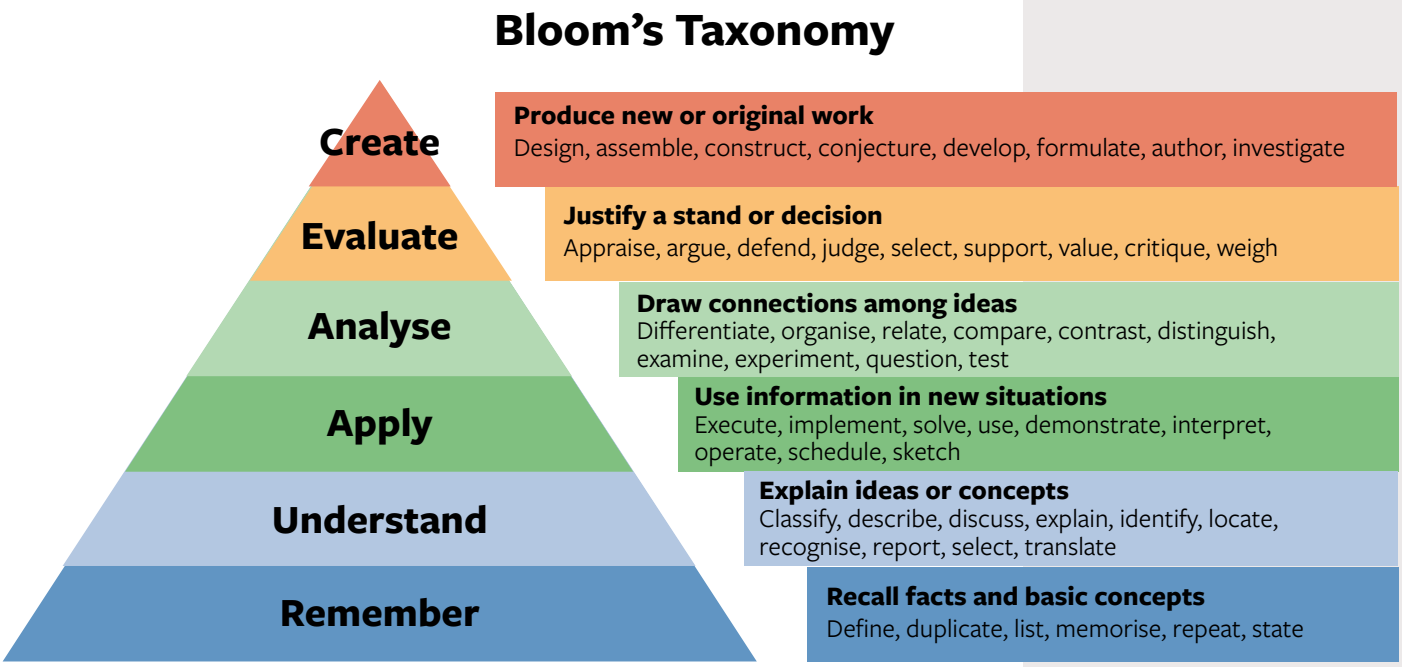
Bloom's Taxomony

Finally, I would like to explore one more useful theoretical model that we can employ, to understand more about our teaching and our students' progress as independent learners. Bloom's Taxonomy, as illustrated in the diagram below, shows the levels of understanding and application that students can achieve.

At the basic level, they're asked to remember what they have learnt. Where is middle C on the piano? Which is the E string on the violin? Which is the snare drum? As they move up the table, they begin to understand that if they know where middle C is on the piano, then they can find all the Cs on the piano, through looking for the same pattern of black notes (I prefer to start with D for this exercise as children love the idea of the Doggy in the Kennel of two black notes!).

As another example, a child might understand how to read crotchets and minims, but could they eventually create their own four-bar rhythm, in 4/4 time by using their own combination of crotchets and minims?

Moving on to the example of more advanced level students, we might introduce them to sonata form. We could ask them to remember the different sections, then to be able to identify the different themes, recapitulation, and so on, in a particular sonata they're working on. Working through to the higher levels of the diagram, we could expect the student to analyse a sonata by Beethoven, for example, and to identify those ways in which the structure deviates from the traditional sonata form. The ability to apply this knowledge to different pieces is a gateway to a greater depth of musical engagement and understanding, as well as encouraging an independent approach.



In this resource, I've explored some of the ways in which teachers can support students to achieve more independence in their learning. These include:

- Examining our own teaching style and practice, through theory and reflection.
- Deeply understanding our students' current ability and the place of music within their lives.
- Involving students in taking responsibility for their own learning.
- Teaching the art of independent practice as an integral part of our lessons.

Cultivating independence in our students allows them to progress more quickly between lessons, and to take ownership of their learning. This also has the potential to improve motivation and set in motion a lifelong skill.