

# Teaching Sustainable Practice Skills to Undergraduate Percussion Students

By Jason Baker, Teddy Hall, and Aaron Ragsdale

**S**kills such as time management, work ethic, and goal-setting can be challenging for any undergraduate college student. The multiple instrument and ensemble workload encountered by percussion students can be especially daunting, and there is clearly no “one size fits all” approach that works for every student in every school. College percussion teachers Sarah Burke (Blinn College), Gene Fambrough (University of Alabama at Birmingham), Pedro Orey (Bethune Cookman University), and Lisa Rogers (Texas Tech University) have provided answers to several questions pertaining to this topic. As a variety of institutional sizes and models are represented by these teachers, it is intended that this article will provide fresh ideas, perspectives, and material for discussion between both college percussion faculty and students.

*Please describe what makes your student body or institutional mission unique and the most common challenges you encounter in helping students establish and maintain sustainable practice habits. What tactics have you used with the most success in addressing this? What have you tried in the past that has not worked?*

**Burke:** Blinn College is a two-year/junior college, thus making our mission a complicated one. We service a very diverse student population. Our typical students come to us for one of several reasons: a deficiency in their performance skills that prevented them from successfully auditioning into a four-year program, a lack of funds (often times these are extremely talented students who could not afford a four-year school), and students who want or need a stepping stone, either because they want a more personalized setting, or because they require more one-on-one assistance with academics.

Because each of our students tends to be from a unique situation, a one-size-fits-all approach does not work well. The biggest challenge is adjusting students to the pace of a collegiate music program. Students are accustomed to learning one piece a semester, or perhaps a handful of all-region/all state etudes, and this is what they assume the work load will be. Teaching these students how to effectively utilize their time and to set up strategies for success is the biggest challenge. I have attempted several required activities such as practice journals, online assignments, and other written

activities, but find that it is typically a combination of things that works best. I have also learned that what works best for me may not be the answer for a student, and vice versa.

**Fambrough:** The type of student who attends UAB has changed drastically over the 18 years I’ve been teaching, due to several main factors: 1. stricter academic admission requirements, 2. establishment of an audition process to enroll as a music major (we are a very young department, and initially we only offered a Bachelor of Arts degree to which anyone could claim as a major, regardless of experience), and 3. the gradual transition from a “commuter” school to more of a traditional college campus.

The biggest challenge our students face is the sudden onset of freedom in their daily schedule, and being able to manage that time successfully. At the beginning of the semester, I help them create their own “week-at-a-glance” schedule, using mine as an example, and I urge them to schedule their own practice time every day. Seeing those practice sessions as required class time is the most important step, though, and this is where most students don’t succeed. I’ve tried the “daily practice log” in the past, and I didn’t feel as though

it worked as well as it should. Students would either forget to use them, or worse, not fill them out truthfully. It would be painfully obvious when the amount listed on the log was not reflected in the progress shown in the lesson. I've been thinking about revisiting this idea lately, but modifying it to include a "self-analysis" grade they will give themselves—both to reflect their week of practice and the actual lesson itself.

**Orey:** Bethune Cookman University is a small institution with a population of approximately 3,500 students, which affords the students smaller class sizes than the major universities. Our mission is focused on serving a diverse student body, which includes diversity in ethnicity, economics, and academic preparation. The students are faced with the challenge of multitasking with their participation in band (marching/concert, in which they receive scholarships), percussion ensemble/marimba ensemble, and applied lessons. It is a challenge sometimes communicating to students that participating in the band program is only a small part of being a "music major" and that "band practice" does not equate to individual practice and preparation for the applied percussion lesson. Although the department is small and the percussion area has a designated rehearsal room, we face challenges with individual practice space/rooms that can accommodate the percussion instruments (timpani, marimba, drum set, etc.). Because of the limited facility, students must utilize other parts of the building when the percussion rehearsal area is occupied, which includes the band room, hallway, or outside the building. Unfortunately, the section of the music building where the percussion room is located is a main traffic area for the department and institution. Therefore, it can become a social hangout area, which diminishes the productivity of the student practicing.

**Rogers:** I believe our challenges at Texas Tech University (TTU) are unique, as our overall number of music majors has grown in the last 10 years from roughly 450 to 600 majors in a building and facility that was built to comfortably house 275 majors. Furthermore, as we've grown in the number of students and then the number of ensemble and class offerings, our ability to have enough practical space for meaningful rehearsals, classes, and performances is compromised. As one TTU faculty member said, "We are rats in a maze." I'm always trying to reconfigure the space we have for the percussion inventory while still meeting the students' needs. We've tried to expand practice space by allowing percussion students to practice on marimbas in the hallways of our building. However, this measure did not work, as students didn't experience focused "solid" practice, and the hallways became social hangs. Therefore, we've had to redirect students to find early morning times in our practice rooms to practice.

*What would you identify as the key/initial skill that students must establish first when they arrive on your program? What is the building block of their practice program?*

**Burke:** Just like getting off the couch to hit the gym, I think the hardest part for our students is getting themselves into the practice room. For most of these students this is the very first time in their lives that they are responsible for determining larger portions of their day-to-day schedule. This newfound freedom can lead to a squandering of time staying up late, playing video games, hanging out, etc. So, the very first thing I do with students who seem to be struggling with getting in the time, is to have them schedule their practice time like they do their classes. I have them bring in a grid with all their class and work schedules written out—old school

pencil and paper only! Then we talk about strategies for when and how they should schedule their practice blocks.

**Fambrough:** Other than the time management skill addressed previously, I find that many students don't know how to actually practice, other than just playing the same passage over and over again. This includes everything from warm-ups and technique building, to the nuts and bolts of learning a piece. I'll take a studio class and walk them through my warm-up routine, but explaining what I'm doing



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and what I'm listening for during each step. As tedious as it sounds, showing the steps of taking a permutation or arpeggio exercise through all 12 keys is important for them to see and hear in person, rather than me just telling them to do it.

Something I've picked up on lately is understanding different "modes" of practice, especially on keyboard instruments. This expands the idea of having goals in your practice sessions by entering a specific frame of mind before you start. The three modes are: 1. note-learning (very slow, tedious, and time-consuming for some), 2. continuity (getting from measure to measure, section to section, or the entire piece without stopping), and 3. cleaning (right notes, consistent sound, meaningful approach to interpretation). I've found that many peo-

ple just start at the beginning and see what happens without any strategy beyond simply "I hope it goes well." There's also a difference between shifting modes on purpose and doing it without knowing; i.e., what may start out as a run-through for continuity suddenly becomes cleaning, or note-learning may shift to continuity before transitions are completely worked out.

**Orey:** The main skill the students must master is time management. We have a very active band program, and the students must learn how to divide their time accordingly so that they can be productive and matriculate with success. Furthermore, we highly encourage our percussion students to create a daily practice routine that will enable them to develop skill sets on various percussion instruments (snare drum, mallets, timpani, drum set) in a concise yet methodical manner.

**Rogers:** For the first time, everything is about music in these students' lives—study and focus. Therefore, time management and the word "no" needs to become part of their vocabularies. It is important that each student sets up a schedule to follow including everything from classes, ensemble rehearsals, and practice time to even eating, sleeping, exercising, working a part-time job, and socializing. Everything has to be planned, and each student needs to follow his or her specific plan.

*How do you recommend students divide their practice time between various instruments on a daily or weekly basis? How can they best balance this with academic work?*

**Burke:** I typically suggest students experiment with goal-based practice versus time-based practice. While some students seem to work best when told they should be practicing "X" hours a day, it has been my experience that younger students tend to progress faster when they work toward meeting daily goals. These goals are de-

signed to help them achieve a larger weekly lesson goal. Sometimes it's as simple as learning two or three lines of an etude a day, or a goal may be to play technical exercises or etudes for a set amount of time each day. When students first enter the studio, I may help them define and set these goals; however, older students are expected to create these strategies for themselves. Because I mostly work with younger collegiate students, we are primarily concerned with developing skill and musicianship on the "Big 3": snare drum, timpani, and mallet instruments. I encourage students to diversify their practice time, and make sure that the bulk of their time is spent with the instruments on which they are the weakest. Most of our students are from drumline-centered programs and are weaker on mallet percussion, so it is fairly common for our students to practice mallet percussion every day and alternate snare drum and timpani daily, so Monday might be snare drum and marimba, and Tuesday would be timpani and marimba. I also encourage those who struggle with time management to schedule blocks of time for homework.

**Fambrough:** I suggest a general goal of dividing each hour as follows: 5 minutes for sight-reading, 10 minutes for technique, and 45 minutes for literature. This will change for everyone based on individual needs and ability, but I feel it's a good place to start. As obvious as it is to us sometimes, students often don't understand the correlation between cause and effect—i.e., the more you do something, the better at it you'll get:

*Student: I don't feel like my sight-reading is very good.*

*Teacher: How much do you practice sight-reading?*

*Student: I don't.*

*Teacher: Well, maybe you should sight-read more often.*

Balancing practice with academics is tricky, but the students need to



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understand that in music it is one and the same. I do compare practice with studying, though, in that the more often you review the material for an upcoming test, the less you'll have to cram the night before and the deeper you'll understand the material. Same thing goes for practicing; 30 minutes each day is much better than waiting until a three-hour cram session the night before your lesson.

**Orey:** I recommend that the students develop a practice log or goal log for their daily and weekly practice. It must be noted that the length of time the students outline can be adjusted as they progress through their practice, as they may need more or less time to reach their individual goals. The idea with the goal log is to keep the students focused on the goal(s) to be attained so they don't spend all their time on one instrument during their practice session when they plan to practice on several instruments. The practice/goal log has been successful with some students, but others have found it to be challenging to maintain. However, it has proven to give the students a perspective on how to manage their time. Students who are successful with balancing academic work, rehearsal preparation, and individual skill development have indirectly created a log by being consistent in their daily preparation for class and practice.

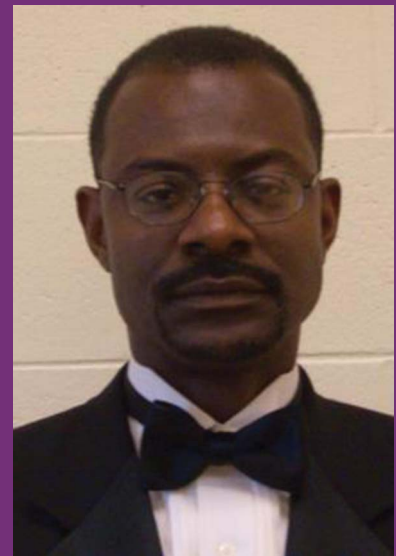
**Rogers:** Fellow TTU Percussion Professor Alan Shinn and I tell the students that to be successful in life and music, they need to practice a minimum of two hours a day on their applied lessons materials. This does not include time for ensemble preparation. Ensemble preparation would be in addition to practicing for lessons. Typically, most of our students are studying two to three areas of percussion each semester with a suggested split of one hour of drumming and one hour of keyboard percussion preparation a day. Again, everything

must be scheduled, including time to study, and must be followed.

*Do you require practice journals or use technology as part of your grading system for documenting practice routines? If so, what requirements or format do you find the most effective?*

**Burke:** I rarely require practice journals. As a kid, I *hated* using a practice journal, so I am hesitant to force my students to use it. That being stated, I have required a few students to use one, and some of them really love it. One thing I have recently started utilizing is having students send me video clips of them practicing/performing a piece. I use this as an option for working at a faster pace, or if we just didn't make it to a particular piece during a lesson. I also use this when a student needs to reschedule a lesson, and we simply cannot make our schedules match up. This allows a student to get feedback more quickly, and often it leads them to really working hard on a problem spot because they do not want to send in a bad recording. I have also used video in larger ensemble settings to encourage being prepared. For example, in drumline, students are required to meet with their sub-sections once a week. This year we required each section to video their group performing a specific feature at tempo with a metronome prior to us rehearsing it as a full drumline. Once all the groups had submitted their videos, we rehearsed the work together. This made sure the students could all execute their parts individually, before we leapt in with the full group. It was an effective way of flipping the classroom. I also have requested the use of video/slow-mo, and play-along tracks—using popular music as a metronome, etc.—in practice sessions.

**Fambrough:** I'm going to revisit the practice journal with some minor changes. I've been using Microsoft OneNote as an effective way for the



**Pedro Orey:** “It is a challenge sometimes communicating to students that participating in the band program is only a small part of being a music major.”

students to keep up with assignments and for me to keep track of lesson progress through the semester. I've tried a few practice apps recently, but have never been really pleased with any of them. If anyone has discovered one they really like, please let me know! I think a huge part of successful practicing is for the student to learn to enjoy the process of getting better; this can be tedious and boring much of the time, but students need to be okay with that and be patient with their own progress. There may be days or weeks that you don't notice any improvement, but keep “chopping wood” and eventually the tree falls down.

**Orey:** I have required students to keep a practice log/goal log in which they should evaluate their progress at the end of the day or practice session to see if their goals were attainable or not, did they allow for enough time to reach their goal for each instrument, what adjustments did they make, etc. I will periodically ask to see their logs and discuss whether the success or non-success of their lesson was based on good or not-so-good preparation. I have not integrated technology as

part of my grading system.

**Rogers:** We currently don't use practice journals as part of our grading system; however, we do encourage students to use practice journals, both old school "pen and paper" (i.e., piano practice journals that Professor Shinn gifts especially first-year students) and/or the Practice Notes Music Journal & Practice Tools application, which has been very effective for some of my students. I've seen both the old school "pen and paper" method as well as technology work. We allow the students to make those choices for themselves.

students about taking side gigs with church or choir because it's something that will go on their resume as professionally-related experience and not another section of "line cook" or "golf course maintenance."

**Orey:** The answer to this question is as diverse as the student population that matriculates at the university. Because of the social economic backgrounds and musical experiences of the students, it is about 50/50. Most students' concentration or background in music is centered on the marching band with limited experiences in other ensembles, concert band, percussion ensemble, solo and ensemble competition, etc. Therefore, I spend a lot of time talking about stylistic approaches to music, expression, and so on. I continuously have discussion with students about their well-being and how they're doing in general. Some students have a lot of emotional challenges trying to balance school, a job, issues at home, and peer pressure. Sometimes they need someone to just listen to them and other times they need guidance about dealing with life. In all, I try to encourage them to do the best that they can in all their endeavors, and when they get knocked down, frustrated, or feel as though things are not progressing like they want them to, continue to push forward and remember what their ultimate goal is. Life will always throw you a curve ball but how you react to it makes the difference.

**Rogers:** I would say I spend 65% of my time on teaching musical strategies and 35% on non-musical "life skill" strategies, which is a slight change from 10 to 15 years ago. The percentage 10 to 15 years ago would have been 75% teaching musical strategies and 25% on non-musical "life skill" strategies.

*Do you use older students to serve as peer models to their fellow students to reinforce positive practice habits?*

*What percentage of time do you find yourself teaching musical strategies vs. working on non-musical "life skill" strategies?*

**Burke:** Initially, I would say it is almost 50/50. I feel like once students find a few strategies that work for them, we tend to have it shift to almost entirely musical discussion, but in the early stages, it can be tough for students to figure out what works best for them. I am still trying to remember to ask students what they feel like they did well in practicing and what simply did not help on a week-to-week basis during the early portions of the year. I also try to do this if students have a particularly successful week, and I encourage them to note what they did differently.

**Fambrough:** We spend so much of our time with students in a one-on-one basis that it's impossible not to address some non-musical things with them, so I would venture that upwards of half our time together is addressing issues outside of the lesson material. I often end my lessons asking how their classes are going, what they're doing over the summer, or how their jobs are treating them, and they usually end up with some story I tell them from when I was a student in the same types of situations. Just recently, I talked with two different



**Lisa Rogers:** "It is important that each student sets up a schedule to follow including everything from classes, ensemble rehearsals, and practice time to eating, sleeping, exercising, working a part-time job, and socializing."

**Burke:** Unfortunately, with a two-year program, our older students are still figuring out what works best for them. We do have a handful of excellent, organized leaders. However, they too are often still developing good strategies for success.

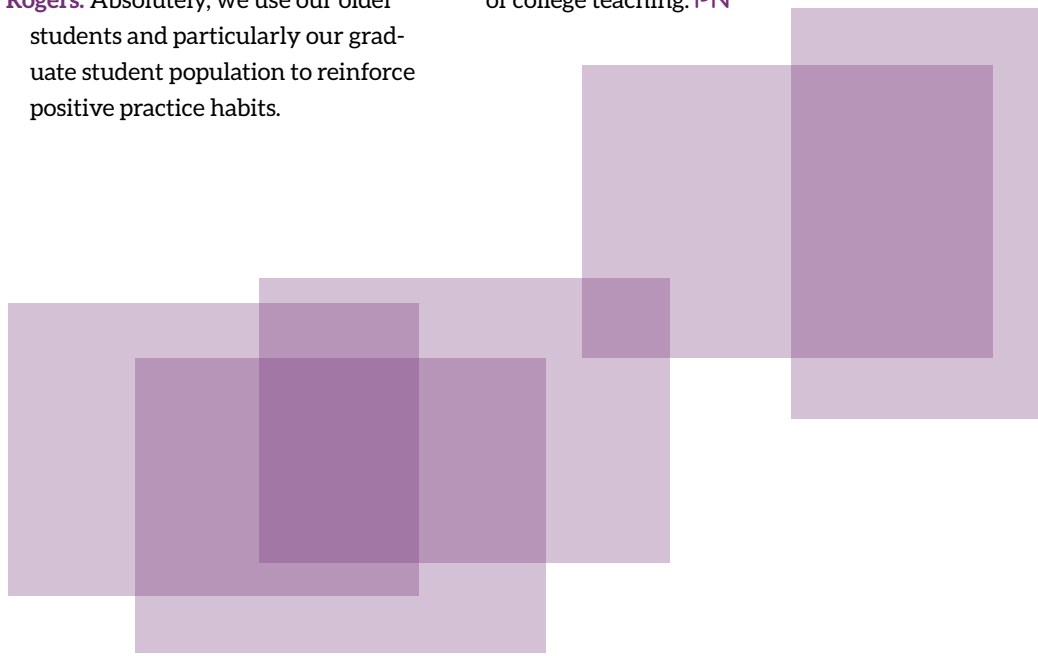
**Fambrough:** I have on occasion, with varying degrees of success. It really depends on the older student, though, and his or her desire to see this through. Sometimes, their own classes and practice load gets in the way, or their level of patience isn't necessarily up to the challenge. I do think peer motivation is a big factor, though, and ultimately you want to create an environment of healthy competition where the students encourage strong practice habits and support each other in their common goals.

**Orey:** Yes, the older students reinforce positive practice habits and time management. I have also assigned several students the same etude/solo to de-

velop a community to reinforce each other's progress and development, to stimulate healthy competition, and to help each other in their discovery of learning various techniques required in performing the piece.

**Rogers:** Absolutely, we use our older students and particularly our graduate student population to reinforce positive practice habits.

**Jason Baker, Teddy Hall, and Aaron Ragsdale** are members of the PAS University Pedagogy Committee, which promotes and enhances the exploration, improvement, elevation, and facilitation of the craft of percussion at every level of college teaching. [PN](#)



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