

Becoming Your Own Best Teacher

Philosophical and Practical Strategies for Success

Nicole Esposito
Associate Professor of Flute
University of Iowa School of Music

1. Honesty and Trust

In every good relationship, honesty and trust are essential. When practicing, you are nurturing your connection with the flute and the music, as in a relationship.

Practice Strategy: Start every practice session with complete honesty in terms of where you are and where you want to be. Address areas for improvement head-on and avoid sweeping issues under the rug. Learn to recognize the things that you do well and build upon your strengths. Thoughtful and honest practice establishes trust between you and your instrument, which removes barriers between you and the music.

2. Self-Awareness

Do you know yourself? Are you aware of your strengths and weaknesses? What are the life experiences that have helped to shape you into the person you are today? What are the natural and learned behaviors that benefit or hinder your ability to communicate as an artist? How do you communicate in your every day life? How are you perceived? Are your intentions clearly understood? What makes you happy? What motivates you? What do you fear?

Practice Strategy: Get to know yourself!

3. Goals and Organization

Goals are essential for progress. It is best to have a balance of both short and long-term goals. Whether you are using a pencil and paper or an iPad, learn to develop the system that is best for you in terms of tracking and achieving your goals.

Practice Strategy: Use various methods to stay on task including practice schedules, notebooks, charts, exercise rotations, audio and video recording tools, etc.

4. Quality vs. Quantity

Quality of practice is always more important than quantity, but dedicating the necessary time to your practice sessions establishes importance and priority. Set a standard of excellence for yourself with every detail, even if you do only have a short amount of time to practice. Make sure that even your technical work is full of musical intention and direction. Do not only practice the things you do well and like to do. You can often learn a great deal from the things you fear or dislike.

Practice Strategy: Balance your practice sessions with daily exercises, etudes, repertoire and ensemble music, applying your daily goals. Take short breaks to help stay focused in longer practice sessions, but keep your attention on the task at hand. Avoid too much “test” practicing, where you simply play through a passage or a piece to see if you can do it right one more time.

5. Curiosity

Question everything! Constantly ask questions about yourself, your skills and the music. Learn to know the “why” behind the “how”. Be curious about your own craft. Develop a sense of imagination and adventure!

Practice Strategy : Practice time includes both time with and away from the instrument. Learn foreign musical terms, look into the background of a composer, familiarize yourself with special fingerings, extended techniques or baroque performance practice. Learn about others in the profession and investigate things old and new. Immerse yourself in the language of music by listening to great singers, pianists, string players and music from the Renaissance to the 21st century. Go to museums or read great literature. Infuse your life with inspiration!

6. Efficiency

Most things you need to know to play the flute well, you probably already know, but you may not realize it. Do not reinvent the wheel with every exercise or new piece of music. Use experience, intuition and common sense in your approach to new challenges. While you are on the path to discovery, you will often be surprised that you know more than you think.

Practice Strategy: While you are working on technical aspects, ask yourself what you would be doing in a similar situation, without the flute. For example, “How do I stand when I walk?” or “what is my tongue doing when I speak words that begin with T or D?” If your body has spent years developing natural, necessary and efficient habits, avoid working against what is natural with your flute playing.

7. Flexibility

Challenge yourself to be the best you can be at your most basic level. Perfecting what seems to be the simplest of tasks can often be the true challenge. Set the bar high for yourself, but avoid meaningless challenges that are clearly out of your reach. Bad habits may set in. Spend the time working on your most basic skills, so that they will always be available to you regardless of the musical circumstance or challenge.

Practice Strategy: Make sure to do things in every practice session that get you out of your comfort zone. Whether it is trying a new fingering, working for a faster tempo, taking less breaths in long phrase, singing a passage, working on endurance by adding extra repeats, practicing with distractions, or in an unfamiliar space, learn to be flexible. Flexibility is essential for being a great musician.

8. Understanding

There can often be a gap between the ideas of “expression” and “musicality”. In an attempt to make things interesting we often ignore what the music is already telling us, and our individual expression gets in the way of the music instead of enhancing it. While it is impossible to know for sure exactly what a composer intends we can make a well-informed estimation. Be expressive, however aim to understand what the music *is* doing, not only what you can do to the music.

Practice Strategy: Study the piano score, do a structural or harmonic analysis, simplify to find the basic skeleton or hidden melody of a passage, find the high and low points of a phrase, look for patterns or chromatic cells. Plan your breathing not only for necessity, but also for phrasing. Choreograph your articulation, vibrato and color changes to support the style of the piece and harmonic motion of the music, or accompanying line.

9. Perspective

A broadened perspective can often aid in solving many problems. In your practice session, solving musical or technical problems with a variety of strategies not only keeps you interested and engaged but will yield more results as well. Approach challenges from a variety of different angles. A different vantage point or way of looking at an issue can often be eye opening.

Practice Strategy: Use practice methods such as simplification, chunking, transposition, playing a passage with a neutral rhythm, various rhythms, or on a single pitch. Know if your technical issue is truly a problem of technique or if it is an error of computation.

10. Reflection

It is important to reflect upon your work with honesty. Did you approach your practice with quality? Did you accomplish what you set out to do? What were the things you did best and what still needs attention and improvement? After you have thought everything completely through, learn to let go and throw it all out the window! Most likely you have established good habits and you may not need to try so hard. Knowledge is powerful, but we are not aiming to be scientists, but rather artists. Above all, let your flute playing be a reflection of the joy in your heart for making music.

Practice Strategy: At least one or two days a week, try starting your practice session with very little warm up. This will help to more accurately demonstrate your flexibility, endurance, and the strength of your basic skills. Play through an entire piece or set of pieces without pause. Afterward, reflect upon any issues that you may have had, and *then* work on tone, technique, articulation, vibrato exercises, etc., with this understanding and purpose.