

Mistakes – Careless and Human

“We learn from our mistakes.” How true. So why is it that when our students make mistakes they cringe and wince? Shouldn’t mistakes be looked forward to as opportunities for learning?

Careless Mistakes can be the ugly ones, especially those that are practiced to perfection! They are caused by inattention, and, if casually rehearsed, result in the automation of faulty mechanics or technique. (Automatic functions, such as finger flexion- are learned in the cerebellum, that part of the brain that controls walking, scratching an itch, etc. Changing these things can be ghastly difficult. Try to change the way you blink, for instance.) The student will need a mature patience, set their ego aside, and take a step back in order to move several steps forward.

Inevitably, the less mature student will say something such as, “Why must I change if I can play the passage perfectly fine?” Your answer is “You have taken that technique to its most usefulness, but, in order to confidently perform more challenging material, you will need better mechanics. This is a good time to introduce them.” These mistakes are often, and unfortunately, drilled during segment practice, or are acquired through previously learned “street technique”. Careless mistakes suppress the learning process. Creating a different response to the old cues simply takes time.

Honest “Human” Mistakes should delight us all. They tell us we have deficiencies in our mechanical/technical applicability, and likely in our teaching. For the most part, honest mistakes are found in performance practice, often with a metronome. These mistakes happen even when the student is paying attention. If the student stumbles, diagnose the problem and suggest a drill, other mechanics, or techniques. These are usually the “quick fix” type. You use statements such as “Oh, you should really try a left-hand supination instead of a pronation for that diminished triad.” The teacher may need to cultivate an attitude of self-honesty and mindfulness with the student to allow this exciting “Aha, I get it!” discovery type of learning.

In *The Perfect Wrong Note*, William Westney brilliantly writes about how to use mistakes as opportunities for learning. He quotes Walter Geiseking on page 60, from a piano method;

“Faults acquired through incorrect practicing, can be eradicated only by great effort.” [True-we are strongly programmed by the actions we perform,-Westney].

And at the bottom of the page, Westney writes...

“For a pupil, therefore, who wishes to make quick progress, it is of the greatest importance to avoid careless mistakes, from the very beginning.”

Practice does not make perfect, practice makes permanent (Glise). Careless practice makes for a haphazard core mechanism, which makes for erratic performance. An honest mistake gives us a chance to diagnose faulty applications of mechanics or techniques, and suggest solutions to our students.