



Dojo Digest: How Often Should You Learn a New Tune?

Ever wonder what separates the good bagpipers from really great bagpipers?

Hours of practice? Just getting enough reps in to really nail that repertoire?

It might surprise you to learn that it's not necessarily how much you practice – but how diverse that practice is.

Constantly varying the musical experiences you are exposed to – whether that's new exercises, tunes, or experiences – makes an enormous difference to your progress as a musician.

Why is variance important?

Imagine that you're illiterate and want to learn to read. You decide to pick seven books that you'll focus on this year. Maybe next year you'll be able to take on a few more, who knows! Each of these seven books are only 50 words long. And, because you got them secondhand from an old lady down the street, they're all about cats. Just cats.

Let's pretend that every single word in each book is different (highly unlikely, but I'm in a generous mood) – that would mean you learned roughly 350 new words during the year. The English language has around 171,000 words. Would this collection of books make you a fluent reader?

Of course not. The material is too limited, and doesn't challenge you with new words, combinations of existing words, or different scenarios.

It's the same with music – which is, after all, another language we're trying to learn.

A piper who can only play a few tunes flawlessly may be good, but a musician who tries a variety of pieces, even imperfectly, broadens their skills. Being influenced by different styles, knowing the groove of different idioms, and understanding musical techniques across different tunes will improve your overall musicianship, just like reading many books broadens your vocabulary and comprehension.

Applying this principle to bagpipes means not just honing one aspect but becoming fluent across the board. This includes working on unfamiliar tunes and styles and breaking out of rigid practice routines. Remember, your weaknesses lie at the margins of your comfort zone. Step outside it!

So, how do you apply constant variance to your practice routine? Here are some tips:

1. Learn a new tune weekly. This isn't about memorizing forever – just gaining exposure to new combinations of notes and embellishments, and different idioms, major and minor keys, time signatures, and grooves. You might return to it later with newfound insights.

2. Practice in different settings – indoors, outdoors, cold, hot. Mix up your tempos too. Don't always stick to the same tempo. Variability here helps you adjust to different playing conditions without stress.

3. Experiment with new tuning methods and equipment. Try different reeds, bags, and setups occasionally. It's about getting to know your instrument under various conditions and being prepared for anything.

Mastery isn't about perfection; it's about adaptability and continuous learning. So next time you pick up those pipes, challenge yourself, and look for opportunities for variance.

Best wishes,
Andrew Douglas
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