

Reinhard Blum

*Mozarteum University, Austria*

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0411-8968>

## Piano Practice in Music Teacher Education: A Cyclical Stage Learning Model

**ABSTRACT:** The aim of this article is to present and to discuss a specific model of self-similar cyclical practical piano learning in music teacher education. For this purpose, a spiral, hierarchical development model based on Bruner (1960/1977) and Kraler & Schratz (2012), didactically specified in Blum (2019), is implemented in the field of piano pedagogy. The findings will be used to infer measures for the teaching of practical piano in the context of initial music teacher education. From this, innovative longer-term perspectives are derived for the specific role and function of the “practical piano” within the framework of the further development and professionalisation of music teacher training.

**KEYWORDS:** piano pedagogy, practical piano, professionalisation, music teachers training

Kontakt:	Reinhard Blum reinhard.blum@moz.ac.at
Jak cytować:	Blum, R. (2022). Piano Practice in Music Teacher Education: A Cyclical Stage Learning Model . <i>Forum Oświatowe</i> , 34(1), 137–151. <a href="https://doi.org/10.34862/fo.2022.10">https://doi.org/10.34862/fo.2022.10</a>
How to cite:	Blum, R. (2022). Piano Practice in Music Teacher Education: A Cyclical Stage Learning Model . <i>Forum Oświatowe</i> , 34(1), 137–151. <a href="https://doi.org/10.34862/fo.2022.10">https://doi.org/10.34862/fo.2022.10</a>

## INTRODUCTION

The process of learning to play the piano is quite well understood, from traditional pianistic to current instrumental pedagogical aspects (Varró, 1958; Martienssen, 1987; Ernst, 2012; Mahlert, 2011). Nowadays, music teachers need specific skills deviating from what is usually learned in the context of traditional (and foremost classic-oriented) piano curricula. They have to accompany pupils in singing, with popular songs usually substituting chords, rhythm, solos, and patterns, for example. As confirmed by multiple feedback from schools, these specific educational objectives cannot be achieved sufficiently within the existing music teacher education programme. The reason is that the students are not able to acquire sufficient theoretical, auditive, and pianistic/technical skills by combining the respective individual courses on their own. Consequently, graduates often lack corresponding performance skills, which causes dissatisfaction and lower performance in their job as music teachers. A successful education, focusing on school-related stylistic or artistic performative aspects, has to guarantee a holistic methodical-didactical integration of all skills required. New approaches to overcome the historically grown mindset in content-related separate subjects are desperately needed.

This article shows and discusses the methodological and conceptual bases of a learning model (Blum, 2019) for sustainable professionalisation in piano practice. Here, the core is formed systematically by profession-specific learning and development processes in the area of practical piano playing in schools, arranged in a learning-side teaching concept (Schratz et al., 2018) for action-oriented varying attention. In addition to a detailed characterisation of the relevant fields of learning, the specific learning processes within it will be systematically described, based on the most current concepts of learning, with special consideration of educational science and subject didactic aspects.

The raw data of an ongoing study but also student feedback already confirm essential aspects or assumptions of the model. Thus, it becomes apparent that the focus on self-accompanied singing (on the piano) is initially perceived as a great challenge but soon is a fairly easily manageable and motivating measure oriented towards the professional field. The continuous reflection and networking of auditory, music theory, and pianistic aspects also result in significant improvements within a few months, both in the quick development and the performative realisation on the piano. The

focus on the model-specific practice and learning processes is usually perceived as unfamiliar or even irritating at first, but soon leads to a change of perspective and subsequently to an increase in the students' self-confidence in relation to the professional field.

### TRADITIONAL AND PRACTICAL ASPECTS OF PLAYING THE PIANO

Central aspects of current instrumental education programmes are based on the concept of virtuosity that emerged at the beginning of the 19th century, whereby the resulting methodological-didactic and formal-institutional developments and changes were and are viewed critically in some quarters (Gellrich, 1993; Kruse-Weber, 2005; Vom Stein, 2019). As an effect of growing artistic and instrumental requirements and the resulting teaching necessities, differentiation in terms of content and form or specialisation in instrumental training towards new subdisciplines took place in the 19th century, e.g., music theory, ear training, composition, later early music, new music (Blum, 2019). Instead of all-encompassing music lessons by a teacher, formal or institutional training gradually emerged with learning structures based on the division of labour, carried out by differently qualified specialists. In this context, the development and establishment of piano practice must be seen as a subject field that is independent in terms of content and form. Until then, it was assumed that the acquisition of professionally relevant artistic and practical skills could be sufficiently achieved through the acquisition of certain knowledge in piano, organ, or singing.

The prevalence of jazz and popular music, just as the increasing demand for people-oriented music to be taken into account in music lessons, gradually drifted apart of professional field requirements and training goals from the 1960s onwards. In the 1970s, this favoured the emergence and establishment of new, specific teaching forms, such as piano practice or practical piano (Bialek, 2012, p. 12). Initially characterised by traditional content, such as cadence playing, figured bass playing, sight-reading, or transposing, a new orientation towards jazz-pop took shape so that piano practice (at school) is now predominantly taught by teachers with an artistic jazz-pop background.

Even if there is an improvement in terms of content to be stated, the basic methodical access continues to persist in traditional collaborative approaches. Accordingly, traditional piano lessons are formally regarded as self-contained training sections, just like music theory or ear training. At the same time, it is expected that practical aspects of piano playing, such as sight-reading, transposition, or song accompaniment, now focusing on popular music, can be learned easily and quickly in specially created course forms.

### METHODICAL AND DIDACTIC BASIC MODEL IN PIANO PRACTICE

The starting point for the considerations made here is the observation among students and frequent feedback from school practice that teachers do not have suffi-

cient skills in accompanying school music, especially popular music. Deficits in this area often lead to reduced self-confidence and a certain professional dissatisfaction. A closer look shows that a sustainable professionalisation of this core competence can only be achieved through the profound acquisition of the prerequisite (partial) skills. Therefore, as a central artistic-practical competence and a prerequisite for self-confident musical action in the classroom, singing accompanied by the piano was placed at the centre of teaching. The introduction to arranging the song material independently, using relevant software, and a public concert at the end of each semester have proven to be further model-defining teaching measures. In this way, the students can already gain experience in the first semester, with a view to their future part as the artistic-pedagogically authentic role models in the practical field of schools.

The special features resulting from this lesson design are brought together below in a multi-level methodological-didactic model. In addition to imparting adequate practical piano skills, the aim is a holistic artistic and pedagogical personality development of the students. The methodological and conceptual structure of the model under discussion, in particular the learning processes operating in it, is largely based on “cyclical learning approaches” (Whitehead, 1929/1967), “passive vs. fundamental ideas” (Bruner, 1960/1977), and “The Magical Number Seven, Plus or Minus Two” (Miller, 1956).

### **Structural and content reference framework**

The implementation of the model presented here takes place at the Department of Music Education of the Mozarteum University in Innsbruck as part of the “practical piano” course (one-to-one artistic lesson, one hour in the first and second semester), embedded into the compulsory module “artistic-practical piano” of the bachelor’s degree in music education (Mitteilungsblatt Nr. 48/2021). Different requirements in the major piano, compulsory piano, or major jazz-pop piano as well as heterogeneous musical and technical prior knowledge and dispositions of the students (Steiner, 2012, pp. 181–182) are the decisive teaching-condition factors.

The following central fields of action and learning objectives are derived from this:

#### *Self-accompanied singing as a core area in terms of content and method*

In order to sensitise and deepen the auditory and theoretical skills, songs are usually worked on without notes. Right from the start, pianistic and artistic-performing aspects are brought together in terms of learning methods with a view to the training goals.

#### *The appropriation of popular music as a model-establishing factor*

Popular music proves to be particularly suitable in terms of content and method for practical implementation. Clear musical structures (stanzas, memorable melo-

dies, mostly simple harmonics), chord symbols, and improvisational components create an ideal learning environment for conveying auditory and structural comprehension and implementation, as well as phrasing and touch or playing technique.

### *Note-based appropriation of traditional piano literature as a model-complementing factor*

Also in the service of holistic music learning is music reading – based on traditional piano literature.

In summary, the methodological fields of action are basically touching on the following areas:

- » structure and development of an adequate playing technique (especially with “Piano Minor”)
- » increase and deepening of auditory skills
- » conveying a note-based understanding of theory in an auditory setting

In this context, piano practice stands for a curricular and content-related deepening and networking within the music teacher education in several ways:

- » piano practice as a content-methodical platform for piano-related courses
- » piano practice as a content-methodical application and consolidation field of music-theory-related courses
- » piano practice as an introduction to or field of application for dealing with technical and electronic aids
- » piano practice as a basis for developing a music-pedagogical personality

### **Areas of learning for piano practice**

Before the central learning processes in piano practice are described in detail, it is necessary to examine what is actually to be learned. This requires precise knowledge of the relevant learning material or the teaching content, particularly from the learner’s point of view. A more accurate description of the learning object has so far been achieved by identifying and defining the corresponding learning fields (Fig. 1):

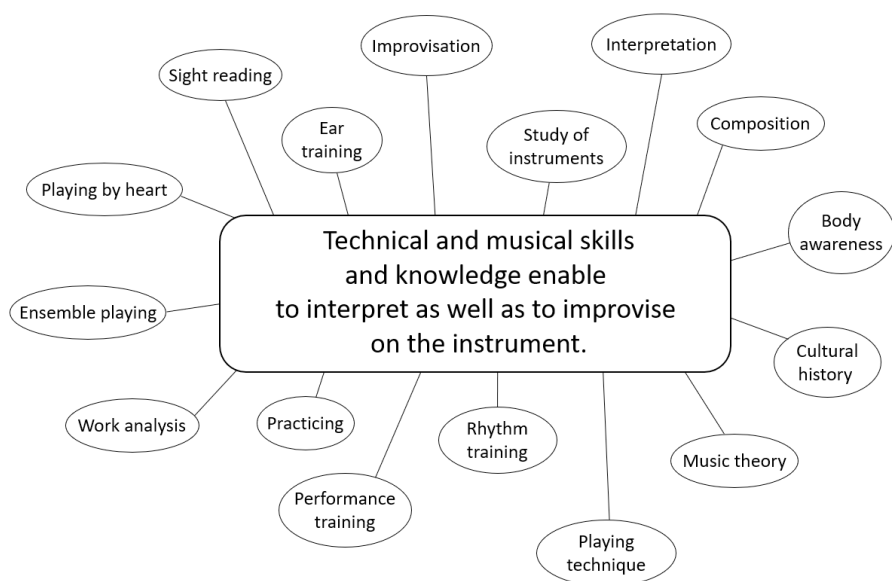


Figure 1. Instrumental playing as a central learning domain and associated learning areas (Busch & Metzger, 2016, p. 233)

The aim of this presentation is to show all the musical skills and knowledge that are necessary to make music successfully. But there is no indication of how the multitude of learning fields can or should interact in terms of learning methods. It is also evident that necessary content additions to curricula usually occur in new, specially designed course formats, accompanied by a further specialisation of the respective teachers. Accordingly, there are some, also historically grown, titular congruences between course formats and learning fields presented (e.g., music theory, ear training, improvisation). However, this has led to an increase in content and complexity in music pedagogical teacher training, which students often perceive as hardly manageable.

In a first step, therefore, a reduction of complexity is undertaken by condensing all learning fields relevant to the learning object into three fundamental learning field areas. Unlike the traditional learning fields, which tend to describe teaching/learning content, the learning field areas are also defined by a fundamental methodological-didactic function:

#### *Hearing (auditory competence building)*

Learning to play a musical instrument (singing) is closely linked to acquiring the necessary auditory skills. In addition to the formalised mediation (in special courses,

such as ear training), a practical deepening and expansion of auditory skills on the piano (or instrument, singing) are necessary and desirable.

Therefore, *hearing* (development of listening skills) as a cross-cutting subject is consistent with all teaching measures. The decisive factor here is the consistent reflection of analytical and structure-related aspects of listening based on the main teaching fields of action (exercises, songs, piano pieces). By this means, the process of immediate, aesthetic-musical listening is given a structural embedding and deepening. In addition, auditory control and steering mechanisms involved in musical playing and learning processes are identified and expanded as further qualitative components of listening. Consequently, the purely auditory appropriation of songs has a central methodological-conceptual implementation function.

#### *Movement (physiological foundation)*

Profound practical piano playing requires a proper pianistic foundation. Traditionally, certain previous knowledge must be proven in an artistic entrance examination to be deepened during the course (piano minor). Based on that, the practical piano lessons are intended to impart more or less exclusively school-specific skills.

Good piano technique is generally equated with fast scales or powerful chord progressions. At the same time, the performance of slow movements is seen as a greater musical challenge, despite supposedly or actually lower technical requirements. In addition, timbre, touch, or the musically successful execution of slow passages are generally regarded as artistic attributes of pianistic excellence.

On the other hand, successful practical piano playing in music lessons is also measured against artistic-performative criteria, which contain different stylistic content but are fundamentally based on the same pianistic principles.

Therefore, the successful teaching of practical piano playing is basically to be equated with the goal of a comprehensive pianistic-technical foundation. The technical requirements of the school-relevant content, which are simple compared to the traditional repertoire, also favour a comprehensive focus of the teaching/learning processes on the fundamental teaching of the basic pianistic aspects. For this purpose, the smallest musical units are systematically identified, prepared on the learning side, and conveyed with the perspective of developing a comprehensive pianistic understanding on the part of the students. In addition to technical and physical aspects, this includes in particular musical and performative-related objectives of (practical) piano playing. Thus, in the broadest sense, *movement* also stands for successful, self-assured artistic-pedagogical performance in music lessons.

#### *Understanding (structural foundation)*

To recognise and comprehend musical structures based on their inherent laws is a basic prerequisite for successful performing, not only in the field of piano practice.

Today, the acquisition of music-theoretical skills takes place in specially designed courses (music theory). The idea is to make music theory knowledge available to be called upon or used elsewhere, especially in practical piano lessons. However, it has

been shown that the students' theoretical knowledge required is often insufficient or at least cannot be adequately applied in the specific learning situation. But it is precisely musical learning or playing processes such as sight-reading, memorisation, auditory perception, or improvisation that require deeper knowledge of music theory.

Furthermore, *understanding* does mean not only the acquisition of a comprehensive understanding of theory but also the constant reflection on one's own actions or the examination of the various aspects of musical learning on the part of teachers and learners. For this purpose, the methodological-didactic implications of the particular learning matter are identified or reflected in the specific musical contents (exercises, songs, piano pieces) so that all facets of musical learning can be deepened on the learning side.

This also includes the reflection of the three focused learning field areas, i.e., *hearing*, *understanding*, and *movement*, in their content-related and methodological network so that *understanding* also has a connecting or coordinating function within the focused learning field areas – on the meta-level.

Below, the traditional learning fields are conceptually embedded with regard to the goals of piano practice education (Fig. 2):

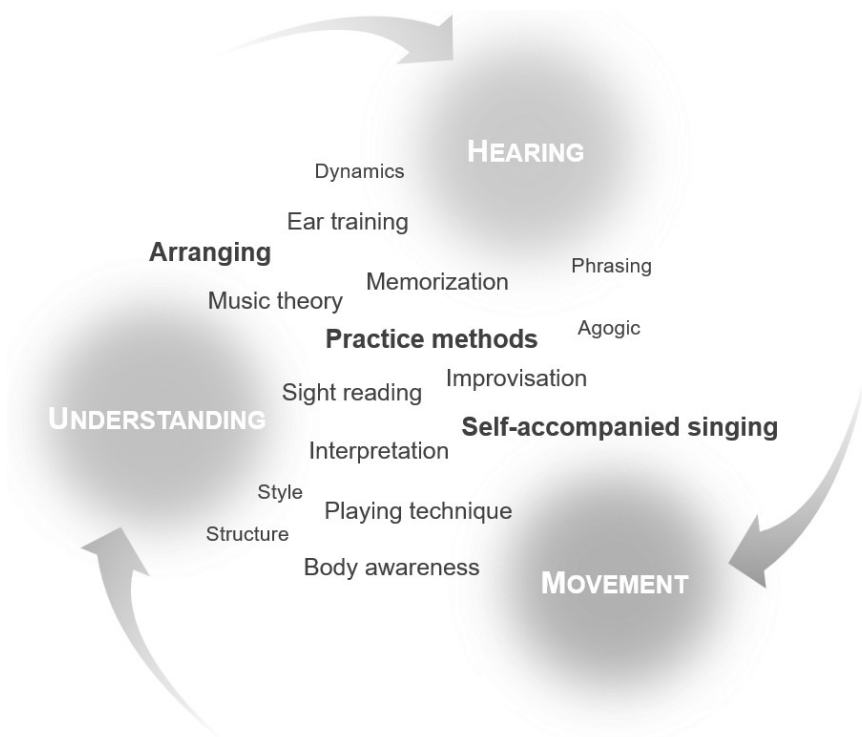


Figure 2. Focused learning field areas (Blum, 2019)



Instead of a purely content-based or taxonomic arrangement of the relevant content (Fig. 1), all musical learning fields basically enter into a methodical-didactic relationship with each other. The aim is the basic assignment of all learning content to the main learning field areas. At the same time, the learning field areas that emerge from this are continuously consolidated and expanded, in a holistic manner, following Bruner's concept of fundamental ideas (1960/1977).

In the following, based on the methodological-didactic understanding of the learning object characterised here, the learning/teaching processes taking place in it are described in more detail.

## CYCLICALLY VARIABLE LEARNING PROCESSES IN PIANO PRACTICE

On the basis of the triad *exercises*, *songs*, and *piano pieces*, the acquisition of the occupation-specific competences in the area of practical school piano playing takes place by means of self-similar, cyclically variable learning processes (Fig. 3).

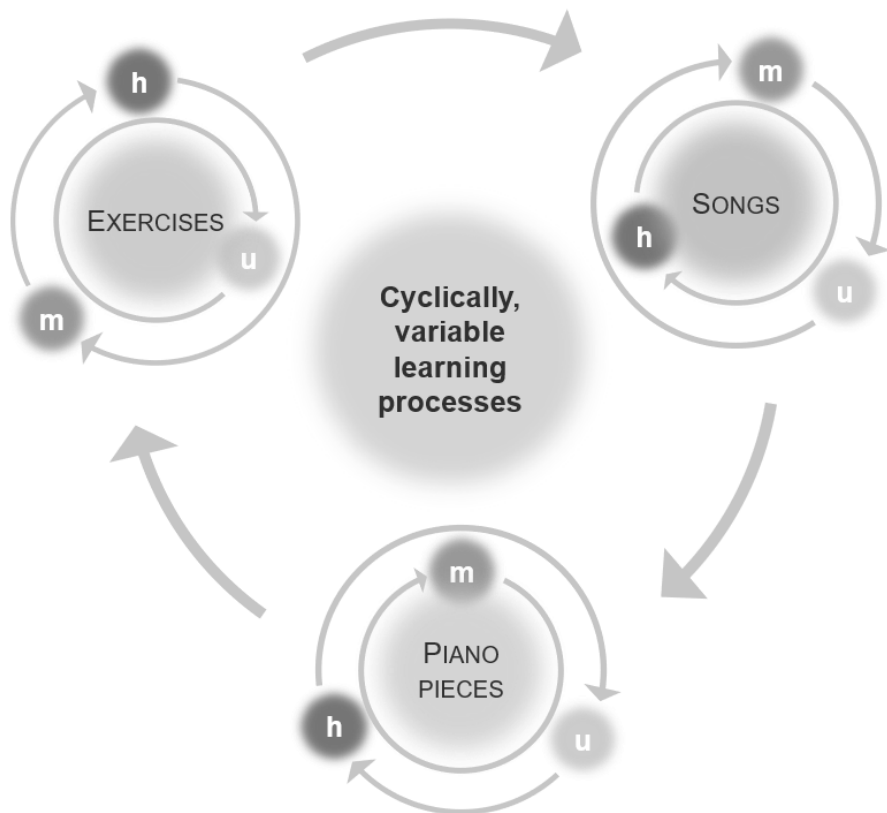


Figure 3. Cyclical variation model for the learning process in the practical piano (Blum, 2019)

With special attention to the three focused learning field areas of *listening* (h), *movement* (m), and *understanding* (u), musical or pianistic skills are defined, expanded, and developed holistically according to artistic, aesthetic, and technical criteria in the context of auditory and theoretical competences. Considering the heterogeneous musical prerequisites and dispositions of the students, the practical implementation takes place through special exercises and practice-relevant song material. The focus of the lessons is on the individually oriented, continuous networking of all practice and learning fields, whereby all playing and practice processes are carried out without sheet music. In addition, selected piano pieces are worked out according to sheet music, whereby the focus is on the learning-methodical networking with the auditory and theoretical aspects in the sense of the focused learning field areas.

The awareness and deepening of the basic auditory, music-theoretical and technical skills in their methodical interrelationship are based on three specially developed core exercises (cadence exercise, chord exercise, and blues exercise). Here, the music theory reflection, but also phrasing or musical design, take on a high priority right from the start.

With special consideration of stylistic aspects, the auditory development is primarily initiated and methodologically founded through the acquisition of songs selected by the students. The introduction to self-accompanied singing or mastering the necessary coordinative requirements determines the methodical action. The focus of the acquisition of the songs, which mostly come from the area of popular music, is the establishment of analytically and music-theoretically reflected listening strategies. Special attention is also paid to touch, phrasing, as well as mental aspects, and body awareness. The development of selected piano pieces on the basis of structural and pianistic reflection, including aspects of memorising, rounds off the content-related methodical spectrum.

Students are motivated to use digital technologies (arranging software). Based on the competence to perform confidently, they prepare individually to perform at a public semester concert ("voice & piano"). Thus, they get early self-reflective feedback on their school-practical skills. The contextual frame of reference for piano practice in an advanced learning stage is presented below (Fig. 4):

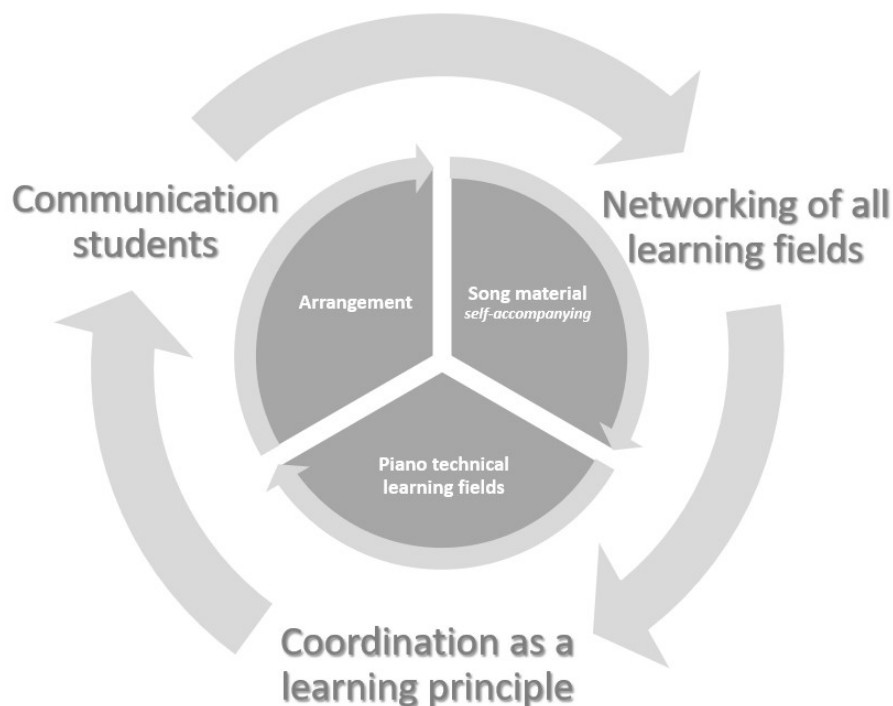


Figure 4. Content-related frame of reference – advanced level (Blum, 2019)

All learning processes are integrated, continuously adapted, and, if necessary, corrected with regard to the comprehensive requirements of school piano playing. Quality and process are determined by individual learning factors, which are recognised, internalised, and further developed through continuously pointing out cross-connections or multiple transfers between the learning areas (exercises, songs, piano pieces).

Successful piano playing is largely based on corresponding coordinative processes on the mental level, which is particularly evident in polyphonic music. In addition, chamber music, self-accompanied singing, as well as practicing or learning in general also require coordinative skills or constant preparation and organisation, starting with the individual learning step through to musical performance. Coordination thus not only stands for a partial aspect within the focused learning field areas but also takes on an action-guiding function within the model.

Practice and learning principles taught in this way establish a musical-didactic self-understanding that goes far beyond practical piano playing in school. The joint music-making of the students, exclusively on the basis of self-created arrangements, also has potential with a view to class music-making, but also in terms of peer review.

The implementation of the learning model outlined here depends directly on the shape and quality of the individual learning steps (Fig. 5).

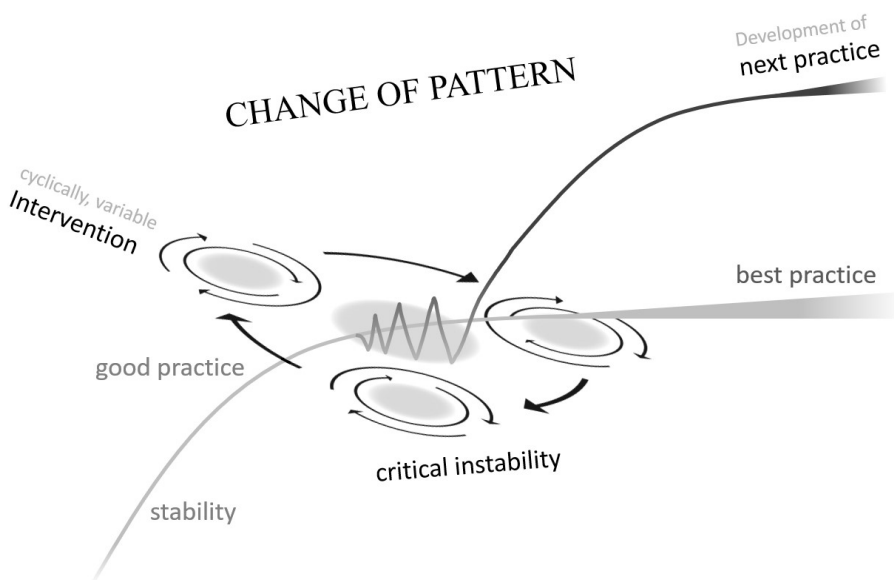


Figure 5. Change of pattern (Kraler & Schratz, 2012)

Based on the reduction of complexity outlined above, the individual learning steps and their methodical design move into the focus of teaching. The main concern here is to find suitable starting points for teaching measures. This is often accompanied by irritation or critical instability on the part of the students. Therefore, it is crucial to continue or deepen teaching-side interventions in a cyclical and variable way to subsequently enable a change of pattern on the students' side. For this purpose, musical-technical problems must be identified, analysed, and methodically-didactically classified according to the focused learning field areas. Further deepening is primarily done by means of variation and transfer. Here, the goal of a complete acquisition of the respective songs recedes into the background. The latter is primarily left to the students' own responsibility, in the sense of establishing and deepening an adequate self-concept in preparation for the later professional field.

## CONCLUSION

Based on the model presented here, an empirical investigation will be conducted. All the first-year music teacher students (approx. 15) enrolled in the practical piano course will take part in the study. Data collection will take place over a one-year/two-semester period at the Department for Music Education in Innsbruck/Mozarteum University. The study is based on a mixed methods research strategy. The idea

is to collect data from three perspectives, the students' and the teachers' points of view as well as an "objective" perspective using videography. Every student starts the lesson with a *five-minute freewriting session* on the progress and challenges within the last week of practicing. The lesson ends with a *five-minute standardised interview* reflecting on the lesson, specific learning outcomes, and challenges. The lessons of five students will be *video recorded* over the whole period. Furthermore, the students write topic-focused diaries, reflecting on their skill development during the year, and complete a *semester questionnaire* at the end of each semester.

The lecturer (Reinhard Blum) writes *standardised postscripts* after every lecture, describing the progress from the teachers' point of view. The freewriting format, five-minute interview, videography, diary format, and semester questionnaire have been developed and piloted during the winter term of 2019/2020 in cooperation with Prof. Mag. Dr. Christian Kraler from the Department of Teacher Education and School Research at the University of Innsbruck.

All written data and interviews will be transferred to Word. Data analysis will take place using MaxQDA to process text and videos. Using a mixed method strategy, the texts will be analysed in a qualitative way based upon Grounded Theory (Strauss & Corbin, 2010). Pre-/post-scripts are based on Likert scales reflecting the model described above and can thus be processed statistically. The videos will be analysed using a mixed approach based on criteria (learning biography, musical socialization, practice time spent, specific musical content exercises, songs, piano pieces, arrangements, with associated competence levels and progress status) and the cyclical dimensions of the stage model.

Thus, a triple picture of the specific learning progress emerges:

- 1) The individual progress of 15 students based on their own and the teachers' reflections.
- 2) Five case studies adding in-depth video analysis of the students' progress.

These two approaches then serve as a basis for identifying general learning and competence development patterns on an interpersonal level within the described setting.

The aim is to identify and reconstruct the micro-dynamic learning sequences that contribute to unfolding the specific learning processes in detail with regard to the professionalisation processes in the field of piano practice. Specifically, it is to be investigated to what extent it makes sense to include music-theoretical and auditory contents in practical piano lessons as well as artistic or traditional pianistic aspects.

This could afford a new understanding of the role or cooperation of practical, artistic, and theoretic subjects within the curriculum – in a context of limited resources. The results will then be operationalised, elaborated, and conceptualised in the context of the music teacher training curriculum.

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**PRAKTYKA FORTEPIANOWA W KSZTAŁCENIU NAUCZYCIELI MUZYKI: MODEL CYKLICZNEGO ETAPOWEGO UCZENIA SIĘ**

**ABSTRAKT:** Celem niniejszego artykułu jest przedstawienie i omówienie specyficznego modelu samopodobieństwa cyklicznej praktycznej nauki gry na fortepianie w kształceniu nauczycieli muzyki. W tym celu do pedagogiki fortepianu wdrożono spiralny, hierarchiczny model rozwoju oparty na ujęciu Brunera (1960/1977) i Kraler & Schratz (2012) a dydaktycznie sprecyzowanego przez Bluma (2019). Wyniki badań

zostaną wykorzystane do opracowania środków dla nauczania praktycznego fortepianu w kontekście wstępnego kształcenia nauczycieli muzyki. Z tego wynikają innowacyjne, długoterminowe perspektywy dla specyficznej roli i funkcji „praktycznego fortepianu” w ramach dalszego rozwoju i profesjonalizacji kształcenia nauczycieli muzyki.

**SŁOWA KLUCZOWE:** pedagogika fortepianu, praktyka fortepianowa, profesjonalizacja, kształcenie nauczycieli muzyki