Practice Before Theory: An Alternative Approach to Piano Pedagogy

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This paper investigates whether or not there is a difference in learning the mechanics of piano playing between students exposed to "theory before practice" (traditional) and the "practice before theory" (new) approaches. The study was done within one semester where the performances of eight participants who were of probationary status divided into two groups were rated after a semester by their piano teacher, her teaching assistant, sixteen faculty jurors and three junior piano pedagogy students. The results suggest that the 'practice before theory' approach to teaching produced a considerable difference in the technical areas of piano study as compared to the older approach, 'theory before practice.' Moreover, musical backgrounds and attitudes towards learning of the participants are factors that affected learning. It is recommended that music departments adapt the "practice before theory" approach when teaching entrants who are *On Probation* and to further monitor the difference in the learning of these students exposed to different piano pedagogy. It further recommends the use of the 'practice before theory' approach for other performing disciplines in music such as vocal, instrumental, dance, speech, and theatre; for other learning disciplines in nursing and medicine when learning 'procedure'; and in different subjects on other learning levels such as early childhood, elementary and high school.

KEYWORDS: piano, theory, practice, pedagogy, traditional approach, alternative approach, piano students, *On Probation*

"Read nothing; discover everything; prove all things."
Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi
(Choksy, 1986)

INTRODUCTION

Traditionally, up to a decade or two ago, the optimum beginning age for piano study was considered to be seven or nine (Skaggs 1981, p. 247). This idea is supported by psychologist Jean Piaget's Stage Theory when he says that "children at this age and stage of development (concrete operational) have a greater capacity to perform complex actions" (Abeles, Hoffer & Klottman, 1994, p. 198). Madeline Carabo-Cone, music educator and pedagogue based her teaching method on Jean Paget's views on stages of development, a sensorimotor method where the teacher determines the readiness for formal piano study. Cone's method of readiness to learn music for pre-schoolers includes singing and enjoying listening to music, going to the piano to pick out little tunes previously heard, or improvise, shows an interest in learning and knows how to learn, and concentrates long enough on the piano for about ten minutes at a time (Skaggs.1981, p. 251).

The adult piano beginner would generally be ready to learn this skill based on the criteria of readiness that Carabo-Cone used for pre-schoolers. The adult, based on Kolb's Learning Cycle, learns through experiencing, processing, generalizing and then applying (Ortigas 1999, p. 34). Hadassah Sahr (1981), a piano pedagogue in the 20th century says,

> for many students, playing the piano and reading music are two separate activities. The muscular skills involved in playing the piano are distinct from the intellectual understanding necessary to read music. Often a student must concentrate on reaching some degree of muscular control before turning his attention to various aspects of reading skill. This often causes considerable frustration, since the adult student is usually capable of understanding much more about music more quickly than he or she can develop the skills necessary to produce it. (p. 255)

Chappell (2000) in her article on developing the complete pianist through giving importance to the whole-brain approach to piano teaching says that the modern trend of piano lessons tend to lean on an over emphasis on learning notation, and neglects the nurturing need for developing the creative spirit and sensitive ears that lead to

expressive music making. Studies point to the need for using multiple approaches in learning musical skills that engage both sides of the brain in order to develop the analytical and the intuitive skills for students to master all aspects of playing (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Piano_pedagogy).

Furthermore, Burrows (2011) explains a music method called Rote Teaching. This method involves initially presenting music without notation and listening to what is being played without the distraction of notation. Singing, thinking in tones, is of primary importance for musicianship (http://pianoeducation.org/pnotroti.html). With this method, the student becomes familiar with the keyboard before reading from the staff. The student's call for concentration is in his/her hearing, thinking, seeing intervals and harmony on the keyboard and noting phrasing. This gives the student an easier and better start (Burrows & Ahearn, 2011).

This paper shares the findings of a quasi experimental multiple case study that tests an alternative approach to teaching piano (practice before theory) to the already existing approach (theory before practice). The former approach gives the learner first shot at "reaching some degree of muscular control before turning his/her attention to various aspects of reading skills" (Sahr, 1981, p. 255) in contrast to the latter where the learner's first shot is at reading musical notation.

CONTEXT OF THE STUDY

The College of Performing and Visual Arts (COPVA) at Silliman University houses a Music Department that offers several programs for Bachelor of Music degree. Aside from the degree in piano performance all other majors require piano as a minor instrument. This is because the piano is an able assistant to the musician in all kinds of musical activities like teaching songs, assisting in academically related ceremonies, worship services and accompanying singing and dancing regardless of whether they are teachers, choral trainers, church conductors, or accompanists.

Students at the grassroots level of music literacy are accepted at COPVA. The College accepts entrants who audition with no background in music theory or piano playing. These entrants are accepted into the music program on a probationary (*On Probation* or OP) status where they are prepared to reach the acceptable level of

the piano minor or Music 11. Lessons include theory, technique, and musicianship. The aspect of theory includes reading musical notation on a prescribed standard repertoire level. Technique includes posture, hand position, finger facility, touch, and articulation. Musicianship includes the understanding of the style of a piece and the ability of the player to play a piece of music in its specific style. These three aspects are integral to musical performance and in this case, for piano playing performance.

On Probation (OP) students in the past have qualified for entrance into Music 11 level but have been found to be lacking in the technical area of performance. This lack is attributed to observations that during the process of learning, the technical requirements for playing the piano take a back seat to the students' effort to read and count (theoretical part of learning). Thus forms the rationale for doing this research that aimed to find out whether there is a difference between piano performance results among students taught by two different approaches, the "practice before theory" approach and the "theory before practice" approach. The idea that the entrance of knowledge (approach) as initially presented to the learner is crucial in its effects on learning how to play the piano was tested.

PROBLEM

This study states that initial approach to learning the basic mechanics of piano playing is of great importance to the overall performance of an *On Probation* music degree entrant on the tertiary level. The study tested the learning sequence of two teaching approaches called the 'theory before practice' approach (traditional) against the 'practice before theory' approach (new). The problem is guided by the following questions:

1. What teaching approaches were tested?
   - A. Theory before practice approach (traditional/ old)
   - B. Practice before theory approach (new)

2. What areas of piano playing mechanics were tested?
   - A. Theory
     - 2.A.1 Sight reading
     - 2.A.2 Scale knowledge
     - 2.A.3 Rhythm knowledge

2.A.4 Memorization
2.A.5 Level of Piece

B. Technique
2.B.1 Posture
2.B.2 Hand position
2.B.3 Finger facility
2.B.4 Articulation
2.B.5 Performance Execution

C. Musicianship
2.C.1 Understanding style
2.C.2 Fidelity to style

D. Attitude
2.D.1 Punctuality
2.D.2 Willingly listens to instruction.
2.D.3 Willingly follows instruction.
2.D.4 Practices after piano lesson.
2.D.5 Seems to enjoy lesson learning.

3. What learning sequence did the 'theory before practice' approach use?
3.A.1 Theory
3.A.2 Technique
3.A.3 Musicianship
3.A.4 Attitude

4. What learning sequence did the 'practice before theory' approach use?
4.a.1 Technique
4.a.2 Theory
4.a.3 Musicianship
4.a.4 Attitude

5. What possible recommendations can be made?
A. Use of the 'practice before theory' approach for *On Probation* music degree entrants at the College of Performing and Visual Arts.

B. Use of the 'practice before theory' approach for other performing disciplines in music:
5.B.1 Vocal
5.B.2 Instrumental

5.B.3 Dance
5.B.4 Speech
5.B.5 Theatre

C. Use of the 'practice before theory' approach in other learning disciplines:
5.C.1 Nursing procedures
5.C.2 Medical procedures

D. Use of practice before theory' approach in teaching different subjects across learning levels:
5.D.1 Early childhood
5.D.2 Elementary
5.D.3 High school

6. A longer time for testing might bring in even more conclusive results.

THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The discussion in this paper is anchored on Jean Piaget's theory that the developing child builds cognitive structures or mental maps, schemes, or networked concepts for understanding and responding to physical experiences within his or her environment (http://www.funderstanding.com/content/piaget/). It identifies the developmental stages by which children progress through them. Piaget's theory lends insight to this research as it impacts learning through both curriculum and instruction. Educators must plan a developmentally appropriate curriculum that enhances their students' logical and conceptual growth. The kind of instruction they provide must emphasize the critical role that experiences or interactions with surrounding environment play in student learning. This means that knowing the developmental stages can aid in properly categorizing appropriate learning material and activities.

What's more, Albert Bandura, a leading proponent of the Social Learning Theory says that learning occurs within a social context. It considers that people learn from one another, including such concepts as observational learning, imitation, and modeling (Ormrod, 1999).

This paper also benefits from David Kolb's model theory of experiential adult learning or the four stage cycle as theoretical

support of this study (Ortigas, 1999, p. 35). The four stages include the concrete experience stage, the reflective observation stage, the abstract conceptualization stage, and the active experimentation stage. These stages lend insight to the manner by which learning occurred among the participants of this research. Kolb defines the learning styles as diverging, assimilating, converging and accommodating.

There are volumes of literature on piano pedagogy, pedagogical methods and the different approaches of music educators who advocate for this approach to education. The integration of as many aspects of music-making as possible would result in more effective piano teaching. One of the important education reformers is Swiss born Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi. In the 1900's he rejected the school practices of memorization and recitation that were common, and substituted them with observation, experimentation, and reasoning. He was the first to attempt to link the educational process to the natural development of the child. His dictum was "read nothing; discover everything; prove all things." He believed in the "harmonious development of all the faculties of the child, the whole child: mentally, physically and morally." He believed in "training the head, hand and heart." Education, according to Pestalozzi, should be so sequenced and structured that each stage should grow naturally out of the preceding and into the succeeding stage (Choksy, Abramson, Gillespie, & Woods 1986, p.5-6).

Another important educator Hungarian Zoltan Kodaly developed the Kodaly Method around the 1940's and 1950's. Kodaly combined the goals, philosophy and principles of the Italian *solfa*, the *tonic solfa*, from England, rhythm and syllables from Cheve in France, *solfa* techniques from Dalcroze, hand signing from John Curwen's approach in England and the teaching process was Pestalozzian. The uniqueness of his approach is in the uniting of all these separate techniques into a unified philosophy of music education (Choksy, et al., 1986, p. 70). Kodaly believed that only music of the highest artistic value, both folk and composed, should be used in teaching. He says, "Children, open minded and impressionable learn first by imitation and example. If music offered to them has intrinsic value, if it is from the heritage of good music, they will learn to value good music." His theoretical contribution to music education supports this research when he says that learning occurs first by "imitation and example" (Choksy et al., 1986, p.71).

The Music Learning Theory called Skill Learning Sequence by Edwin Gordon, researcher and theoretician, is a helpful contribution

to this study. Music Learning Theory has many characteristics in common with rote-first methods such as those developed by Suzuki, Dalcroze, Kodaly, and Orff. Students build a foundation of aural and performing skills through singing, rhythmic movement, and tonal and rhythm pattern instruction before being introduced to notation and music theory. Music Learning Theory uses three basic learning sequences, skill learning, tonal content, and rhythm content. As a method of instruction, the learning sequences are combined in various learning sequence activities which, in turn, can be combined with classroom activities. In this method a skill level cannot be achieved except in combination with a tonal or rhythm content level (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gordon_Music_Learning_Theory).

Both Kodaly and Gordon use sequencing as a tool for musical learning and both begin with the experience of listening and singing to begin the process of learning. Meanwhile, Shin'ichi Suzuki, a Japanese music educator like Kodaly and Gordon begins music learning through listening and singing in teaching one to play the violin. The Suzuki Method or the mother Tongue Method is based on the principle that all children possess ability and this ability can be developed and enhanced through a nurturing environment. Suzuki called the whole system of pedagogy Talent Education (http://internationalsuzuki.org/method.htm).

Piano pedagogy in the professional field of music education pertains to the teaching of music in school classrooms or group settings focusing on the teaching of musical skills to piano students on the level of the individual. An author of books on piano method warns that "competent instruction is not always assured by the number of years one has taken lessons" (Bastien, 1988). Inasmuch as focus is given to skills of the student, the piano teacher must be given importance as a major player in the teaching-learning forum. Bastien continues to say that the "factors that affect the professional quality of a piano teacher include the following : one's competence in musical performance, knowledge of musical genres, history, and piano repertoire, experience in teaching, ability to adapt one's teaching method to students of different personalities and learning styles, education level, and so on" (Bastien, 1988).

In the book *Teaching Piano: A Comprehensive Guide and Reference Book for the Instructor*, Margit Varro states, "Music is here so people may enjoy it. Performers and teachers are called upon to transmit this joy. The pedagogue who forgets this aim, or worse–lets his student forget it, has failed in the proper exercise of his calling" (cited in Agay

1991, p. 5).

All teaching methods involve compromises. Not every method works well for every student. Zeigler and Ostromencki (2011) state that one should evaluate these methods in light of one's own needs and choose a teacher whose personal choice of a method or methods is consistent with one's needs, wishes, and the way in which one learns most efficiently. Ziegler and Ostromencki go on to say that:

> One of the approaches to teaching piano is called the Rote Teaching Method which is done where the student becomes familiar with the keyboard before reading from the staff. Hearing, thinking, seeing intervals and harmony on the keyboard and noting phrasing gives the student an easier and better start. Concentrating on the keyboard opens up more opportunities for improvising and composing, and, ultimately, easier sight reading with a better understanding of music.

Meanwhile, piano pedagogue Bryanskaya (2007) believes that the first important task for piano teachers at the onset of a students' time of study is to introduce a habit of listening to quality performances of "descriptive and strikingly expressive music," as a means for "sensitizing (the student) to the meaning of music." She further explains that good piano playing technique involves the simultaneous understanding in both the mind and the body of the relationships between the elements of music theory, recognition of musical patterns in notation and at the fingertips, the physical landscape of the entire range of the keyboard, finger dexterity and independence, and a wide range of touch and tone production for a variety of emotional expressions. Skills in all these areas, she says, should always be nurtured and developed for the sake of expressing oneself more effectively and naturally through the sound of the piano, so that the elements of technique would sound alive with musicality.

There are quite a number of existing Piano Method Books, mostly for children, in the market today. One of these books is the *Alfred Basic Piano Method Book*. Piano is taught gradually, including important musical issues like expression, dynamics which are just as important as plain notes reading. Its concentration is moving through different hand positions. This means that all the melodies contain five notes in the grasp of your hand. The big advantage of this is that the student will slowly learn to tell the difference between the different intervals and recognize the intervallic relationship between the notes (http://www.piano-play-it.com/piano-method-books.html).

Another book, *Bastien Piano Method Book for Children*, encourages the student and the piano teacher to focus on technique. "One of the

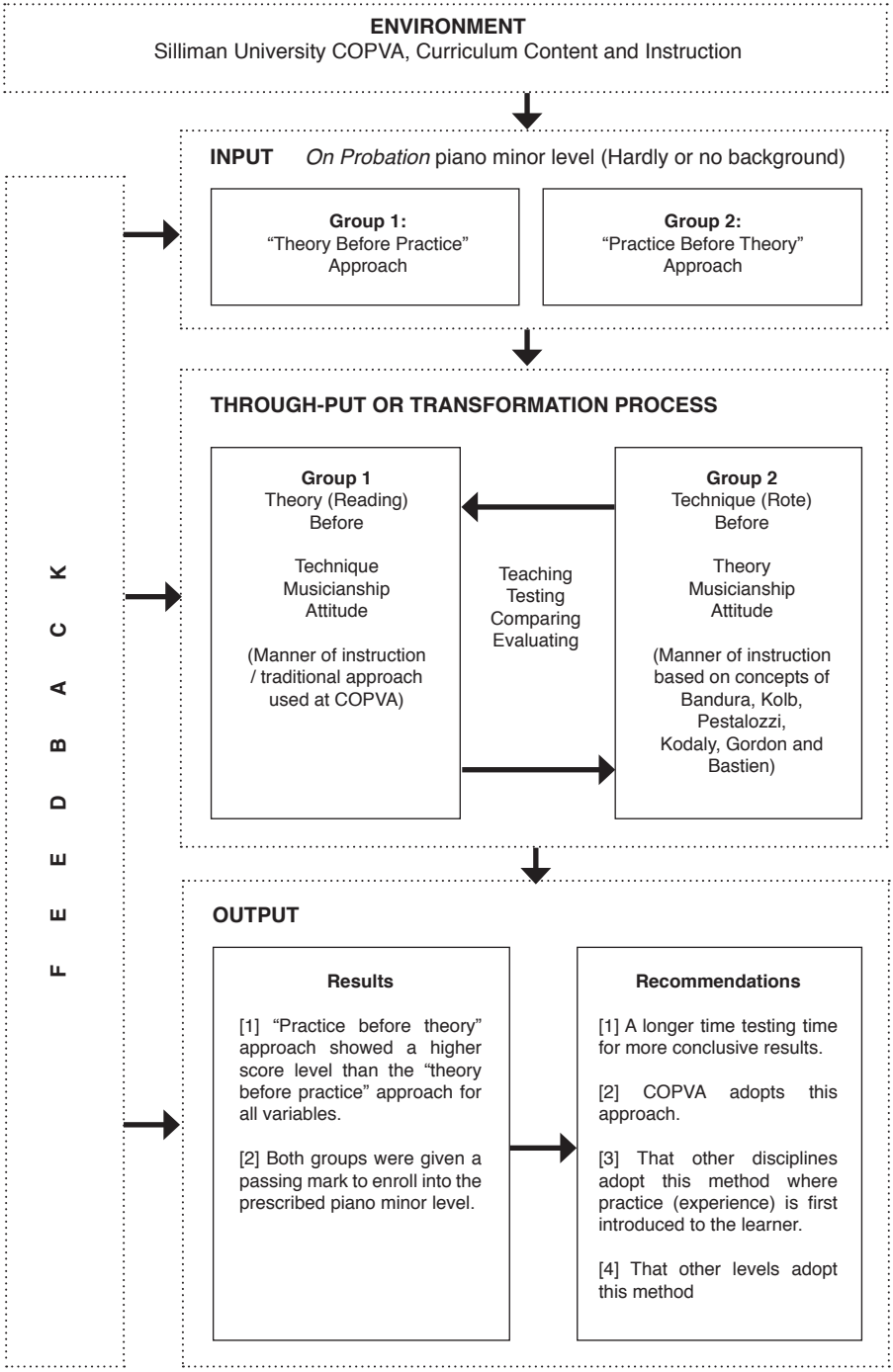

Figure 1. **Conceptual Framework**

first subjects to be dealt with is how to place your hand properly on the piano and by that I mean that I show my students how to keep the first knuckle of the finger round and the arch high when dropping to the key instead of pushing" (Bastien cited in http://www.piano-play-it.com/piano-method-books.html). The *Thompson Piano Method Book* contains simplified arrangements of the standard classical repertoire (http://www.piano-play-it.com/piano-method-books.html).

Peter Senge's System's Model (Figure 1) is the basis for the research flow. This model includes the environment, the input, through-put, output and feedback boxes. Perforated lines are used to show movement in a reciprocal manner.

The **Environment** includes the Silliman University College of Performing and Visual Arts (COPVA), the place where the research is undertaken; *curriculum content* includes piano playing assigned as a minor instrument, with *instruction* as the area of testing.

The **Input** introduces the two approaches to be tested against each other with entrants who were accepted with hardly or no piano background. Group 1 uses the usual mode of instruction at the COPVA called "Theory before practice" approach, and Group 2, the approach to be tested called "Practice before theory" approach on *On Probation* piano minors with hardly or no background in piano playing.

The **Through-put or Transformation** process shows the division of groups exposed to the different approaches. Group 1: 'Theory before practice approach' is where the theoretical instruction takes precedence over technical instruction, musicianship and attitude where students are first taught to read musical notation and this knowledge applied to playing the piano.

Group 2: "Practice before theory" approach begins instruction of technique before theory, musicianship and attitude. This approach bases itself on the concepts of "rote" playing where the student is allowed to get to know the instrument (piano) before actual "note reading" (theory) is taught. This approach gives the learner first shot at "reaching some degree of muscular control before turning his/her attention to various aspects of reading skills" (Sahr, 1981, p. 255). The "practice before theory" approach is constructed on the theories and methods of Bandura, Kolb, Pestalozzi, Kodaly, Gordon and Bastien. There are arrows between the two approaches that undergo teaching, testing, comparing and evaluating.

The **Output** presents the results and recommendations for an alternative approach 'practice before theory' to piano instruction. Results show that both groups that were tested were given marks

acceptable for the first year required piano level. The "practice before theory" approach showed a higher score level than the "theory before practice" approach on all areas of testing. Recommendations include the adoption of this approach to other disciplines in the performing field for vocal, instrumental, speech, theater and dance. It could be done in nursing or other medical procedures and in different subjects across grade levels as early childhood, elementary and high school.

The **Feedback** illustrates a relationship between the environment, the input, the through-put and the output where communication is made open throughout the process. The boxes are perforated to signify constant movement between them.

METHODS

Study Participants

The participants in this study are those who auditioned into the music program at the College of Performing and Visual Arts in June of school year 2011-2012. They were auditioned on piano level skills and music reading abilities to reach Level 1 or Music 11. There were eight who did not reach Level 1 and were put on an *On Probation* status. These OP students became the participants of this study. They were randomly grouped into two. The first group or Group I with four members were taught using the traditional "theory before practice" approach while Group 2, also with four members, was taught using "practice before theory" as an alternative.

Each group met on separate days, once a week for one hour. All the participants were interviewed and asked specific questions regarding age, interest in music, and musical background to establish their profile when classes began. They were also required to write a short essay about themselves and why they wished to take music. Both groups were taught by one piano teacher and a teaching assistant. Each of the participants' progress was recorded.

The overall requirement for the participants included playing two pieces by memory, one for recital and one for practical examination. On the practical examinations, scale knowledge was checked.

The activities of each group differed only on the first meeting day. Group 1 was first introduced to music theory and note reading while Group 2 was introduced to the piano, its mechanism and touch.

Group 1 'Theory Before Practice' Approach

The *first day sequence* of activities include [1] introducing the student to musical signs and symbols; [2] teaching students how to sit, how to touch, how to use the fingers; [3] teaching finger number piano placement; [4] teaching the notation and hand placements on the piano; [5] teaching students to read and play the first three pages of the book with correct finger placement and counts; [6] assigning two pieces of music each so that they may practice reading on their own; and [7] letting students memorize assigned pieces, if possible.

On the *second* day and succeeding meetings, assignments were checked, hand positions corrected, reading and memorization skills tested. Upon readiness, a higher level piece was given, taught, and assigned for practice until the next lesson. The major scales were taught by rote (or practice before theory) to meet the practical examination deadline. This sequence continued until the end of the semester. Recital pieces and practical examination pieces were assigned within that given period of time. The recital piece was assigned before the middle of the first semester and the practical examination piece, after the recital.

Group 2 'Practice Before Theory' Approach

The *first day sequence* of activities include [1] introducing the students to the piano by allowing them to sit at it, make it sound by pressing whole hands on the keyboard, then individual fingers, one at a time; [2] teaching them how to play the C Major Scale by imitation; [3] assigning finger patterns on the right hand; [4] asking the students to imitate the teacher by playing the scale using the right hand; [5] asking the students to imitate the sound of C Major scale with the left hand with finger numbers using their listening skills and memory of the sound of the scale as a guide; [6] asking the students to play G Major Scale; [7] when students have difficulty, asking them to sing the scale while finding the notes on the piano; and [8] assigning the students to play other scales beginning with the tonic on the white keys for practice after the lesson.

It is on the *second* day that the students begin music theory and note reading. Before they are taught to read, assignments of the first day are checked. They then follow the process of Group 1's first day with the additional assignment of continuing to practice the major scales on the white keys. On the third day onward, the students follow the sequence of day two activities of Group 1.

The participants were primarily evaluated on two performances. The first evaluation was a recital done in August of SY 2011-12 (mid-semester). The recital is a public performance, a time where the students play one memorized piece on a stage. They were graded by a jury composed of 18 faculty members including the teacher and the teaching assistant. The participants were rated according to the following skill-based criteria which equaled 100%: 5% posture, 5% hand position, 10% finger facility, 10% articulation, 5% level of piece, 10% understanding of style, 15% fidelity to style, 20% memorization and 20% execution. The jury then made a rating of Pass (P) or Fail (F) based on the criteria.

The second evaluation was a practical examination (closed door examination) that was held at the end of the term. Three groups of evaluators rated the participants on this day, consisting of a jury of 16 faculty members, the piano teacher, and the assistant teacher. On the week after practical examinations, they were evaluated by three pedagogy students. All these evaluators rated the participants using the same instrument with criteria equaling 100%: 5% posture, 5% hand position, 10% finger facility, 10% articulation, 5% level of piece, 5% sight reading, 5% scale knowledge, 5% rhythmic knowledge, 10% understanding of style, 10% fidelity to style, 10% memorization, 10% execution and 10% other skills (rated by the teacher based on profiles).

The participants were also evaluated by their teacher and the assistant teacher on their attitudes to learning and rated Good (G) or Needs Improvement (NI) based on the following instrument with questions that read as follows:

1. Does the student come to class on time?
2. Does the student willingly listen to instruction?
3. Does the student follow instruction?
4. Does the student find time to practice after piano lesson?
5. Does the student seem to enjoy lesson learning?

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Profile and Music Background of Participants

The eight participants of age range 16 to 26 years old come from the Luzon, Visayas and Mindanao regions of the Philippines. The specific places are Panabo City in Davao del Norte, Maasin City,

Southern Leyte, Lamitan in Basilan, Puerto Princesa City in Palawan, Cagayan de Oro City, and Bayawan and Dumaguete City in Negros Oriental. All of them had zero or very little reading ability in music notation. They were able to follow rhythms and sing by rote. Some could play the piano by ear but could not play the piano by reading musical notation. Each of their exposures to the piano differed in the way that some have never touched a piano in their lifetime as others have taught singing, and accompanied themselves as they sang even without the reading abilities.

Theory Before Practice Group

One participant in Group 1 was enrolled in Music Education. She said that she belongs to a musical family but could read very little notes. She began to learn how to play the piano two weeks prior to the audition date in June, 2011. She liked music because making music, she says, allows her to express her feelings and it is a way to worship God.

The other Music Education enrollee in Group 1 says that her parents play the guitar and her mother sings. She cannot read notes but likes music. Because she is an only child, music has become her brother and sister at home. She says it gives her happiness and comforts her when she is sad.

The third participant in Group 1 is a Voice Major. None in his family has any musical talent. He has never played the piano but likes music because he loves to sing and in singing, he can express what he really feels. He says, this gives joy to his heart.

The last participant, in the group started to learn how to play the piano when he was 9 years old and was taught by his father to play chords. He could play one piece on the right hand entitled, "Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star." As a young child, he played the piano for at least two to three months before shifting to sports. He lost interest in playing the instrument because his fingers were too small to reach one octave. Later in his life, he learned to play the guitar by himself and played for bands around the city. Yes, his family is musical and No, he could not read notes upon entrance to the college. He says that he likes music because it makes him feel alive.

There are two in Group 1 who come from families with no music background and two who do come from a family with musical background. Those with musical backgrounds have an edge of learning music faster. They showed more interest and are not so

afraid of making mistakes.

The last participant in this group was elevated to a much higher level music piece towards the end of the semester because of his interest and motivation. The ones with no music background tried their very best to do their work but had difficulty at having to read and play despite the fact that they really enjoy music. This is what Sahr (1981, p. 255) means in the book *Teaching Piano*, when she says:

> For many students, playing the piano and reading music are two separate activities. The muscular skills involved in playing the piano are distinct from the intellectual understanding necessary to read music. A student must concentrate on reaching some degree of muscular control before turning his attention to various aspects of reading skill.

Practice Before Theory Group

The first participant in Group 2 was a Music Education student who chose music because her passion is in this course. She thought it was easy but was wrong and her being in it is a challenge. She does not belong to a musical family and came to the college not being able to read notes. She was able to have piano lessons for a short time when she was in elementary school but had forgotten how to read notes. She likes music because it is "food for the soul."

The second participant in Group 2 took up bandurria when she was in grade two. She loved playing in the rondalla. She also learned to play the xylophone and drums when she joined the school band. She liked to join competitions of bands in the high school against her parents' wishes. She says these events "stir up music within her and her music keeps getting better and better." Her love for music became more intense when she joined an international rondalla event. She was initially enrolled in civil engineering but when she failed two subjects, she enrolled in music. Her family is musical in that her grandfather plays string instruments and her father sings. She could read notes on the right hand a little bit upon entrance into the school. When asked, do you like music? Her answer was, "no words can really explain how much I like music other than the different emotions/ feelings I get every time I'm into making music."

The third participant has a handicap. She can barely see. Her major is in Voice performance. Music, she said, has always been a part of her life. She learned to sing on her own. Her mother, after discovering her desire to sing bought her a keyboard so she could accompany herself. She took piano lessons for a short time but could

play the melody with only one hand. She enrolled at COPVA to fulfill her dream of becoming a professional singer. She says her family is musical as her brother plays the guitar and the drums. When asked if she could read notes, she says, "not quite." She has been playing her keyboard since high school. When asked if she likes music she says, "Yes, because music can make me happy and it shows me different feelings and emotions that I can express myself as I am."

The last participant in this group has a Bachelor of Arts Degree and is an ex-seminarian. He is enrolled in Music Education. When he was a child, he used to lay on the floor listening to his mother while she played the guitar and sang to him. She used to tell him about the song "Baleleng." When he was a child, it was only this song that could stop him from crying. When he was 7 years old, he used to watch and listen to his mother and uncle play the keyboard and he tried to imitate them. He then played keyboard most of the time after school. Then he got "addicted" to playing the guitar. He also joined the choir in school. During college at seminary, he was assigned to play the *bajo de arco*. He taught other seminarians to play musical instruments. This is where his knowledge of music grew. After his seminary days, he played in bands and won in several competitions which earned him invitation to participate as the sound and music director and conductor during their graduation. His family is musical. He could read notes but very, very slowly. He has played the piano for 15 years solely by ear. When asked if he likes music, he says, "Yes, because music is part of my life. Music is where I can express my feelings."

In Group 2, three participants belonged to musical families and one did not. Those who belonged to musical families were seen to have a great interest in learning. It is the one who belongs to the family with no musical background that had more of a difficult time learning. This student had some absences and often did not come on time.

Performance ratings of participants. As previously indicated, there were several people who rated participants based on aforementioned criteria. Rating average was used to measure the quality of the performance of the participants according to the group they learned with (or the teaching approach they were exposed to). Ratings according to the raters are based accordingly on the performances of participants in recital and practical examination (see Table 1).

In general, the jury gave a rating of *passed* in the recital performance of all the participants of the study regardless of their exposure to the traditional or new approaches. This means that the participants were

doing well in all the criteria for the recital performances. Meanwhile the average ratings the participants earned from the jury in their practical examination show that those exposed to the new approach scored higher (72.1%) as compared to those under the traditional approach (70.3%). Based on the suggested differences on the scores given, the participants under the new approach were found by the jury to have performed a little better in posture, hand position, articulation, level of piece, scale knowledge, understanding of style, fidelity to style, memorization and other related styles.

Similarly, for practical examinations, the teacher gave a higher average score to the new approach (76.00%) in comparison to the traditional approach (67.25%) and also gave a *passing* mark to all the participants for recital (Table 1). The assistant teacher awarded the new approach (69.75%) higher rating than the old approach (66.25%). On the 'execution' criterion, both the teacher and the assistant teacher gave a higher score to the traditional approach which could be credited to the wide difference of individual scoring.

Meanwhile, the pedagogy students who were asked to rate only the practical examination revealed a wide difference between the two groups. The participants under the traditional approach were given an average rating of 68.0% while those under the new approach enjoyed a higher rating of 75.3%, thereby reinforcing the observations of the other raters regarding the better performance of the latter group. The pedagogy students were impressed by the new approach commenting on the hand position and finger facility as 'amazing' in comparison to the traditional approach.

There is a marked difference in approaches as revealed by the scores. All the raters gave a higher score to the new approach with an average of 72.6% in comparison to the traditional 67.8%. The consistent higher ratings of the new approach show a considerable difference in approaches.

Comparing Attitudes of Participants

The evaluation on attitudes was done only by the piano teacher and her assistant teacher. They were the ones who had hands-on experience with each single participant. The comparison was done by summing up scores for each question by counting each student's rating by both evaluators. Participants who got Good (G) or Needs to Improve (NI) were tallied against each approach. In terms of good attitude towards learning, the new approach holds a slightly higher

Table 1

Summary of Performance Ratings

Criteria for Rating Performance	Juror		Teacher		Assistant Teacher		Pedagogy Students		Average of All Raters	
	Old	New	Old	New	Old	New	Old	New	Old	New
Posture (5%)	4.0	4.1	4.0	4.5	4.5	5.0	3.9	3.8	4.1	4.3
Hand position (5%)	3.7	4.0	3.25	4.0	4.0	4.25	3.3	3.9	3.5	4.0
Finger facility (10%)	6.9	6.9	6.25	7.5	5.75	6.0	7.3	7.3	6.5	6.9
Articulation (10%)	6.7	7.1	4.5	7.5	5.75	5.5	6.1	8.1	5.7	7.0
Level of piece (5%)	3.8	4.0	4.5	4.0	4.0	4.0	4.3	4.2	4.1	4.1
Sight reading (for teachers, 5%)	4.3	4.3	4.5	4.5	2.75	4.0	4.2	4.3	3.9	4.2
Scale knowledge (5%)	3.7	4.3	4.5	4.5	4.0	4.0	4.0	4.3	4.0	4.2
Rhythm knowledge (for teachers, 5%)	4.3	3.9	4.5	4.5	3.25	4.25	4.3	3.9	4.0	4.1
Understanding style (10%)	7.4	7.6	6.5	7.25	6.5	6.75	6.3	6.7	6.6	7.0
Fidelity to style (10%)	7.2	7.3	6.5	7.5	6.25	6.5	6.1	6.7	6.5	7.0
Memorization (10%)	7.5	7.6	7.5	8.0	8.75	8.0	6.6	9.0	7.5	8.1
Execution (10%)	7.0	7.0	7.25	7.0	8.0	7.0	7.3	8.1	7.3	7.2
Other skills (10%)	3.8	4.0	3.5	4.75	2.75	4.5	4.0	5.0	3.5	4.5
Total Rating	**70.3**	**72.1**	**67.25**	**76.0**	**66.25**	**69.75**	**67.7**	**75.3**	**68.0**	**72.6**

score but it is the traditional approach that comes to class on time. Each group shows a few who need to improve in each area but the difference is slight (Table 2).

Table 2.

Attitudes of Participants

Evaluation Criteria	Theory Before Practice Approach		Practice Before Theory Approach	
	Good	Needs Improvement	Good	Needs Improvement
Punctuality during class	6	2	5	3
Willingness to listen to instruction	7	1	7	1
Obedience to instruction given	7	1	8	0
Time management to practice	6	2	7	1
Enjoyment in learning piano	6	2	6	2

Observed Differences in Performance For Practical Examinations

Comments of the performances were recorded by the jury, teacher and assistant teacher and comparisons on approaches made. The comparisons were based on the following technical areas of study: posture, hand position, finger facility, articulation, level of piece, scale knowledge, and understanding of style. Other pertinent comments were included in the discussion to create a more holistic view of the observations.

There were more comments on 'good posture' for the new approach compared to the traditional (Table 3). New approach descriptions on posture include relaxed, and natural, in comparison to the participants in the traditional approach: tense, problems with thumb, fourth and fifth fingers need strengthening. Both approaches had more or less the same comments for finger facility and articulation, except that the new approach participants had a comment on having 'clear musical phrases.' This observation lends insight to the musicality of the participant and shows a potential that teachers can work with for improvement. Piano piece levels were more or less equal except there was one in each group that had a slightly higher level than the

Table 3.

Observations Based on Practical Examinations

Approach	'Theory Before Practice'	'Practice Before theory'	Difference
Posture	Needs to find where sit on the piano Looks stiff Erect but relaxed Does not look comfortable A straight back might aid in the thinking process Relaxed Sits too near the piano	Needs improvement Erect but tense Good Good posture for beginner	'Practice Before Theory' approach has more comments on "good" posture
Hand position	Fourth and fifth fingers need strengthening Needs improvement Has problem with left hand Thumb tense Wrist too high Elbows too close to body Needs to improve finger position Hinders finger facility	Fourth and fifth fingers can be a problem if not corrected immediately Impressive Relaxed Natural Fourth and fifth fingers too low Wrist a little stiff Wrist too high when turning on the third and fourth fingers Needs to improve level of wrists and arms	'Practice Before Theory' approach has more positive comments, like "relaxed" and "natural" than old approach

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able 3. (Continued...)

Observations Based on Practical Examinations

Approach	'Theory Before Practice'	'Practice Before theory'	Difference
Finger facility	Facility will greatly improve if hand position is checked Good coordination Good control but needs finger exercises Lacks strength, needs more exercises Well coordinated Less coordinated Needs to improve	Relaxed fingers Good coordination Well coordinated Stiff Credible Needs more exercise Needs more control when playing fast piece	Both approaches have more or less the same comments, except the new approach has a comment on "clear /musical"
Articulation facility	Finger facility and understanding of styles Needs to improve pedaling Clear in some places Faulty articulation	Credible Loosely articulated Clear articulation despite of handicap Messy A little heavy Knows where to accent	Both approaches show more or less the same comments
Piece level	Advanced	Higher than peers	Both approaches had at least one who had a higher level piece

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Table 3. (Continued...)

Observations Based on Practical Examinations

Approach	'Theory Before Practice'	'Practice Before theory'	Difference
Scale knowledge	Satisfactory	Good	Same results
Understanding style	Good	Good	Same results
Other comments	Needs to learn to sit correctly Work out strengthening fingers coordination of hand	Very impressive Needs to relax more Fingers are strong Conscious	'Practice Before Theory' approach performance is more impressive than old approach

others. Piece levels are important because it brings the student into the area of acceptability into the program. Both groups had satisfactory scale knowledge. This area of learning was taught by rote 'practice before theory' to all participants. All the participants showed an understanding of the musical styles of their assigned pieces. While the comments differ regardless of approach, the evaluation shows an agreement among evaluators that the new approach performance is more impressive than the traditional approach performance.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

This study investigated the piano performance of probationary students enrolled in the Music Department of the College of Performing and Visual Arts at Silliman University to find out if improvement on piano playing performance could be based on an alternative teaching approach. The alternative teaching approach, 'practice before theory' was tested against the more traditional teaching approach in current use 'theory before practice' to find observable differences in the technical areas of piano performance.

Technical criteria included posture, hand position, finger facility and articulation. The data was collected by testing an equal number of participants divided into two groups, each using a specific approach. The evaluation of the approaches was based on two performances, the recital and the practical examinations. Evaluations were done by the students' piano teacher, her teaching assistant, 16 faculty members who composed the jury, and, three junior-level pedagogy students. Demographic profiles, musical backgrounds and attitudes of the participants were examined to see whether these factors contributed to the differences in the learning processes.

The participants with musical background and those who had a chance to touch or play the piano in the past had an edge in learning the instrument than those with less or no musical background at all. Three out of these four participants were part of the new approach group, perhaps explaining why they had a better performance than those in the older approach.

Mid-semester recital evaluations proved to be very good for all regardless of what approach they used. It is at this time where the skill of memory and execution of an assigned piece are crucial. End-semester practical examinations showed the observable effects of the difference that the new approach had based on higher ratings earned in

comparison to the traditional approach. Points of evaluation included posture, hand position, articulation, level of piece, scale knowledge, understanding of style, and fidelity of style, memorization and other skills.

Both approaches have more or less the same results in terms of willingness to learn, and following instruction. The traditional 'theory before practice' approach participants were punctual in coming to class while the new 'practice before theory' approach participants were the ones who found time to practice after classes. That is why, in general, the 'practice before theory' approach showed a slightly higher attitude rating than the other. Attitudes towards learning are a part of improvement where the practice on the instrument and the eagerness to learn give more edge to performance.

The salient difference between the two approaches for posture, hand position, finger facility scale knowledge and understanding of style are that the 'practice before theory' approach performance is described to be "relaxed, and natural" while the 'theory before practice' approach performance included comments like 'needs to learn to sit correctly, needs to work out to strengthen fingers and coordination of hands."

In conclusion, the study has shown that there is an observable difference in the performance of the On Probation piano students who participated in the study and exposed to two different piano teaching approaches. Also, proper attitude plays an important part in the improvement of skills, especially the attitudes of practice after lessons and the willingness to do this task. When reviewing the musical backgrounds, those who were able to touch the piano (without theoretical know-how), in the past, were those who did not have as many problems with putting the skills of reading and playing as those who had never experienced touching the piano. This explains why the evaluators rated the "practice before theory" (new approach) higher in the technical areas of learning the art. Good attitude and musical backgrounds are important factors for improvement tested through the 'practice before theory' approach. This has shown positive results. This type of learning gives the participant a chance to be more comfortable with the use of their hands where concepts learned by heart and continued practice become essential to the mechanics of playing.

This non-discriminatory approach to learning has proven to be beneficial to the non-musically-literate students who wish to gain a music degree as it gives them an opportunity to begin a music career

from zero. It is only the College of Performing and Visual Arts that accepts these types of entrants. Further study could be done on piano students on a higher piano level to see whether there are observable differences in teaching approaches.

It is suggested that a longer time for testing might bring in even more conclusive results. While this paper strongly recommends that the College of Performing and Visual Arts adapt the "practice before theory" approach as an alternative to that of the "theory before practice" approach, both could be used simultaneously as is needed by the student. Studios of music used to the traditional way of piano pedagogy might benefit from giving the alternative approach a try. It further recommends other disciplines to adopt this method as well. These disciplines could include subjects in the performing field like voice, and other musical instruments, and in speech and theater arts. This approach could also be considered in learning nursing and other medical procedures and across grade levels where subjects for early childhood, elementary and high school can be learned.

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