

A Model for Student Initiated Practice Aaron Kandlik

Students do not often know how to reinforce skills learned in a lesson. Students not only need to learn what to practice, but they will also need to learn *how* to practice. Students can effectively lead their own learning experiences if taught a method or structure of self-guided practice. Left on their own, students may spend all their training time bouting or waste otherwise valuable time waiting for the coach to tell them what to do. In most cases, the students do not need to know the skills to work on, but the best way to work on those skills on their own.

One of my first coaches proposed such a model for practice early in my fencing career. She classified practice into three basic “types” and labeled them: drilling, sparring and bouting. She applied a much narrower definition than is in general use for these words; in truth, you are free to use any terms to describe these forms of practice, so long as you apply them consistently. The intent of her definitions was mainly to illustrate the difference between structure that comes from a coach, one that is self-imposed, and free-play.

Her model for practice, which was greatly self-imposed by the students, was one of the ideas that had a profound impact on my early fencing education, and continues to impose itself on my coaching career.

The methods presented below are based on my coach’s original model:

Drilling

In the context of this model, drilling refers to practice between two fencers where:

1. All skills or rolls performed by each fencer are known to both
2. The fencers skills are performed almost as a “closed” skill
3. The most important aspect of performance is technical execution
4. The purpose of drilling is to acquire, affix or perfect a technique or movement pattern.

Drilling can be “cooperative” or “competitive”, the difference between the two is who is benefiting from the drill and the relative percentage of successful repetitions. To construct a drill:

1. **Students must be able to accomplish the skill.** In other words if the drill is to practice a parry-riposte, and the partner begins making attacks that are impossible to parry effectively, the drill is not effective. In a cooperative drill the student should be about 80% successful with each repetition. If the drill is competitive, this means that two fencers are working on complimentary skills: one fencer drilling their circular parry while another fencer drills a straight attack with a fleche. Competitive drills should be constructed so that each fencer has an equal number of opportunities to be successful. The percentage of successful actions should still be 80%, but each fencer should only have half the opportunities to execute their action than they did in a cooperative drill.

2. **If the drill presents difficulties, go back one step.** If a fencer is working on a counter-riposte with a partner and having problems for some reason, remove the last tempo of the phrase. Go back one step to work on the partner's parry-riposte. If a fencer is having a problem with a feint-deceive, go back one step; the fencer will make a straight attack and get parried. Make sure that the partner is doing their job correctly. If there is still a problem, go back another step to the original action, the attack. Many problems when drilling complex actions arise not because the fencer is making an error, but because the partner is not performing their action correctly.

3. **The fencers must avoid making an action incorrectly- too big, too small, moving too fast or too slow.** Though a complex skill may be performed at a slower rate of speed than a simple skill, the skill should be performed at the same size and speed as it would be performed in competition. A general rule is that if a fencer can work on a skill on their own, i.e. without a coach, they don't need to "dumb down" the action.

4. **Behave realistically.** If a fencer is drilling a parry-riposte, the partner must make a real attack, even though they know they are getting parried. Likewise, even in a cooperative riposte drill, the fencer who gets parried should attempt to parry the riposte, albeit at a speed that will cause the riposte to fail only 20% of the time. Drills should not force a student to make an error that is unrealistic: opening up to get hit by a riposte, remaining motionless after getting parried, attacking from a distance the fencer knows they cannot hit, etc.

5. **Wear all the proper gear.** It should go without saying that fencers need to be outfitted with all of the required articles of protective equipment whenever working with a weapon in hand. In addition to the basic uniform, it may be necessary to outfit the fencers with additional protective gear. If the drilling fencer is worried about causing injury or discomfort to their partner, they may not fully perform a skill without hurting their own performance. Though a properly worn mask, glove and uniform should protect a fencer in a normal fencing situation, it may not be enough in the practice environment with a high volume of repetitions performed with intensity.

6. **Motivation (keep it fun).** A fencer's motivation is one of the most important factors in their technical performance. The speed of execution can directly influence the level focus or frustration of a fencer. If the fencer is drilling a simple skill, they may become bored if it is executed too slowly. If a fencer is drilling a complex skill, they can become frustrated if the skill is executed too quickly. It is important for the drilling fencers to move at a speed that keeps them engaged in the activity as well as provides a challenge. The bottom line is that the fencers will not engage in quality practice if they don't enjoy it and are not challenged by it.

Drilling Example: (Foil)

1. **Cooperative drill:** One fencer is going to make a straight attack or a feint-deceive from a static on-guard position. The drill partner will make a parry at the last second to facilitate the fencer making a fast direct-attack, or a correctly timed

compound-attack. The emphasis here would be cooperative because the drilling fencer is practicing the technical skills: rapid arm extension and coordinated tip movement of a feint-deceive.

2. **Competitive drill:** One fencer will execute either a simple attack or a feint-deceive while lunging. The drill partner will execute a lateral-parry and riposte or a counter-attack by extension. The purpose of the drill here would be: The fencer is working on the skill technical of a compound attack and the ability to make their feint look real; the drill partner is working on the ability to determine a real attack from a feint and their parry-riposte. The simple attack is made to test the drill partner to see if they are guessing rather than spotting the feint; a simple attack should always be parried in this drill. The counter-attack is made to punish the drilling fencer whose feints are obvious. The drill provides opportunities so that each fencer may work on skills simultaneously rather than one partner being a practice target.

Sparring

Sparring practice is different from drilling practice in that:

1. The fencer's partner may or may not know the fencer is "sparring"
 2. The skill should be performed as an "open" skill
 3. Both fencers are allowed to act on their own initiative
 4. Sparring should always be mobile, some drills may be performed statically
- Sparring is similar to an activity described as an "assault" in the USFA rulebook-with the exception of self-imposed limitations or goals.
5. The purpose of sparring is to acquire, affix or perfect the tactics, timing, preparations and continuations of a fencing action.

More simply, a skill that has been drilled by a fencer from a static position, under controlled conditions is now put into a more "realistic" setting.

To construct a practice session around sparring keep in mind the following:

1. **All of the same rules of drilling apply.** Fencers should resist their opponent, though skills should still be accomplished about 80% of the time, fencers may need to work backwards to solve problems, both fencers need to behave as they would in a competition, execute their skills properly, wear all the proper equipment, and maintain their motivation by adjusting the speed according to the complexity of the skill.
2. Although the environment is "open", **limit the work to a single skill or a very small range of skills.** The more skills a fencer has access to the closer "sparring" gets to "free bouting" (see below). Generally it is best to work one thing at a time.
3. In sparring, **scoring touches do not matter, the number of attempted actions do.** The number of actions is more important than the number of touches because sparring is focusing on the quality of each individual touch, and making a larger volume of quality actions.

4. **Spar for a set duration such as five or ten minutes.** The time limit is for a running clock rather than for fencing time. The time limit would allow a large group to spar at the same time, and alternate partners equally. Different groups may perform a different number of repetitions in the same time frame, though that does not mean they are getting less out of their practice time.

5. **If a partner makes a skill impossible, find a way to make it work or move on to another skill.** If, for example, a partner allows their hand to drift toward the inside line, preventing a straight attack to the chest the fencer might:

A. Move closer to the sideline of the strip in order to “open” the inside line to attack.

B. Make attacks on the blade, feints or other preparations toward the outside line to get the opponent to move their hand back to a position where the inside line is open to attack.

C. Maneuver the opponent such that an attack to the inside line is possible by surprise, basically by moving closer distance and lulling them into a false sense of safety.

D. If all else fails change the skill to an indirect attack to the outside line, a feint-deceive, a counter-riposte or remise depending on the tactical situation. There may be a point later in the sparring session that the sparring partner would allow for the original skill to succeed, until that time work on a new skill until the partner makes it possible to execute the old one.

Sparring Example: (Epee)

1. Both fencers move at will. The fencers are limited to making the following actions:

A. Simple-attack to the thigh on their partner’s forward step. The attack may only be executed with a lunge.

B. Retreat out of distance of their partner’s attack

C. Counter-attack to the top of the arm on their partner’s attack

The fencers are sparring with the restrictions above for 5 minutes before switching sparring partners.

2. Both fencers move at will. The fencers are limited to the following actions:

Fencer A: Any kind of preparation + second-intention attack in opposition or by blade take

Fencer B: Will attempt to score by attack in preparation, but is allowed to make a yielding parry and riposte against a blade-take

The fencers will spar with the restrictions above for 2 minutes before switching rolls. After an additional 2 minutes, the fencers will switch sparring partners.

Bouting

Bouting for practice is different from “free-bouting”. I define free-bouting as fencing to a score, without restrictions on tactics, techniques or actions. Free-bouting does follow the rules and restrictions of a competition bout. The priority is on winning touches, and winning the bout rather than the learning process.

Though fencers may learn while free-bouting, it is left to chance, meaning the student experiences passive rather than active learning.

Bouting practice, on the other hand, is a practice that does involve limits such as score or time to study the impact of the rules, strategies, or psychological states on the performance of a fencer. The goals of bouting practice do not focus on an individual touch, but must be achieved over the course of play. An individual touch may be analyzed to determine its significance, but the quality of execution is secondary to its impact on the bout.

Bouting Practice:

1. **Both fencers should know all the rules or restrictions ahead of time.** If one fencer is acting as if they are “free-bouting” or sparring, that can impact the psychology of the partner such that they make different tactical or strategic choices. There can be an exception to this rule if referees or timekeepers are involved (See below). Example: if the purpose of the bouting session is to practice coming back from a 3-1 deficit in points, it will only work if both fencers are behaving as they would in a competition: one fencer working to equalize the score and the opponent trying to prevent the gap in points from decreasing.
2. **The fencers skills are not restricted unless they are simulating a particular opponent or style of play.** The goal of bouting practice is for the fencer to come up with a variety of tactical solutions to solve problems.
3. **Bouting practice may require a referee or a timekeeper in addition to the fencers.** If the practice session is focusing on bouting, referees or timekeepers can help enforce the restrictions of the training bout. Students working in groups of three can enlist an outside pair of eyes to provide additional feedback while fulfilling the roll of an official.

Example of Bouting Practice: (all weapons)

1. A foil fencer is learning to come up with tactical solutions and coping mechanisms to the following bouting situation: a referee always awards priority to the opponent whenever blades meet- regardless of whichever fencer makes an attack on the blade or parry. The rules for this bout can be known to both fencers and self-refereed. This bout can also be played out where only the referee knows the rules, which would make identifying the problem part of the fencer’s training.
2. An epee fencer practicing the tactics and strategies needed to win a bout when the score is 11-13 in their opponent’s favor and only 30 seconds of playing time remain. A third student acting as timekeeper would be helpful for this bout.
3. A saber fencer is training to build their defensive game by fencing bouts where they are not awarded points for any touches made by successfully attacking their opponent; in this example if the fencer touched their opponent with an attack, and the opponent counter-attacked, neither fencer would score a point. The training fencer must score by defensive means as per the rules: riposte, attack in preparation, or counter-attack without being hit by the opponent. A referee may be helpful, but is not necessary for this exercise. All the rules for this bout should be

known by both fencers beforehand as the exercise is about improving a known weakness rather than the ability to identify and solve a problem.

When my coach presented the idea that I had the ability use bouting time for purposes other than to poke holes in my classmates, it made me realize that my own fencing abilities were limited only by the time and effort I put into my own practice.

Students should already have skills to apply to a self-led practice, the idea that they can organize themselves to practice, and how to do it needs to come from the coach.