

Mindful Games at the Piano

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Abstract

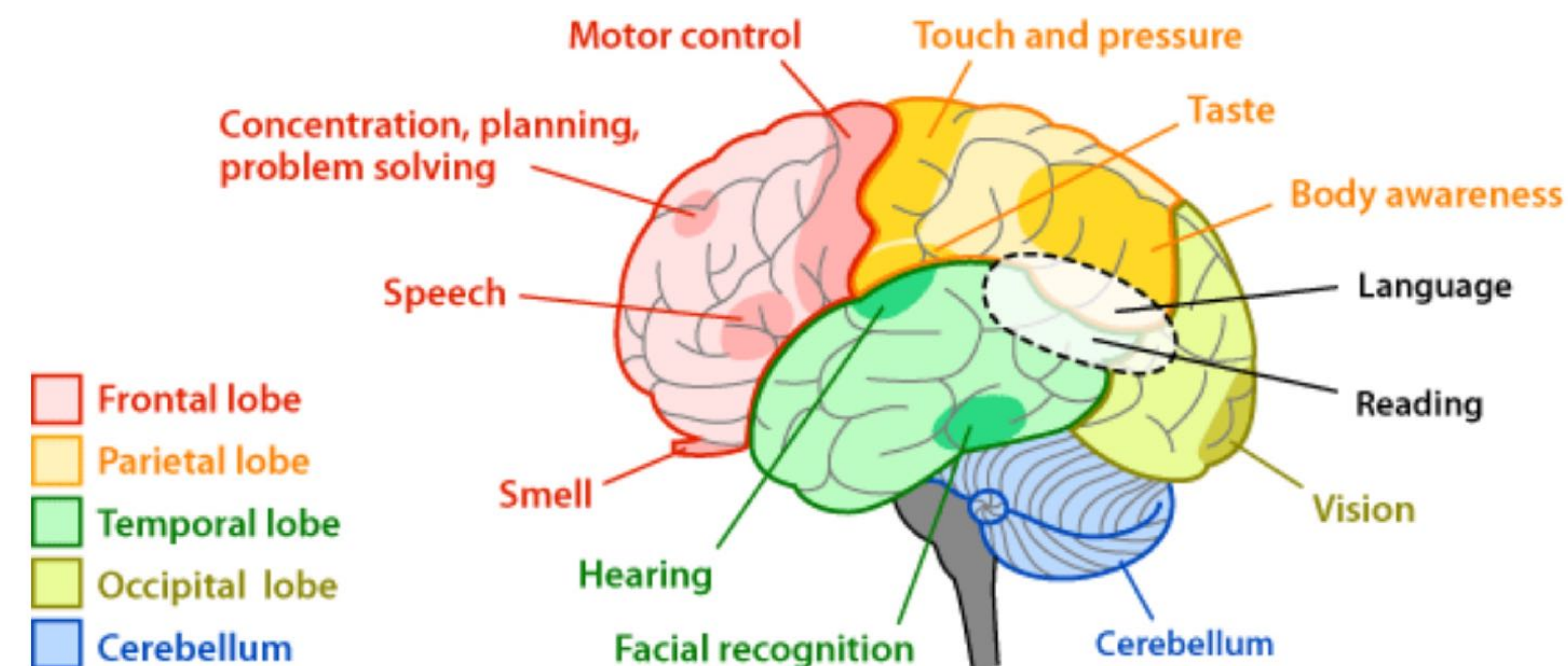
Working with children of different ages and backgrounds, any teacher can relate to the challenges of teaching students who are tired, stressed out or simply having difficulty focusing. How many times have you found yourselves asking a student to focus? This presentation aims to provide you with various solutions in the form of adaptations of mindful games tailored to piano. These games are divided in four distinctive categories: aleatoric, contest, mimicry and ilinx. The categories here exposed provide a framework for the use of these games in piano lessons.

Why Mindful?

According to Jon Kabat-Zinn, mindfulness is "awareness that arises through paying attention, on purpose, in the present moment, non-judgementally in the service of self-understanding and wisdom." As we can see, the apparently simple concept of mindfulness has multiple traits that would be positive in the context of a piano lesson. To exemplify the use of these traits, awareness of the body is a vital resource to prevent injury. Awareness of the nuances in sound is the main mark of mastery in music making. It is also vital for a performer the capacity to create from a nonjudgmental place within. But, in teaching kids, can we ask them to have these traits on purpose?

Brain development

Purpose relates strongly to self control, planning and decision making, all three capacities being largely dependent on the prefrontal cortex. Yet, this is the last parts of the brain to mature, continuing to change after adolescence. This does not mean that children lack purpose or that their abilities are completely determined by their age but rather that, as adults, we need to be prepared to meet them at their stage of development. In meeting them, games are a valuable resource to have and understand.



Play explored

Since play happens in nature, according to Dutch historian Johan Huizinga, play is older than culture and supra rational. Insofar playing is voluntary, play is freedom because it is separated from ordinary experience through rules and boundaries. In "Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience", Csikszentmihalyi points out certain basic attributes conducive to 'flow experiences' such as: confronting manageable tasks, having clearly defined goals and having immediate feedback, among other attributes. Through his argument it becomes transparent that games are maps and recipes for flow experiences, where enjoyment and learning goes hand in hand. In his book he offers four categories for these experiences: aleatoric, competitive, mimicry, and interaction of the senses, which will be explored in the next section.

Four type of games

In **aleatoric games** certain elements are left to chance, and they can be used throughout a piano lesson to vary the pace, bringing into the lesson a sense of excitement for the unexpected. As an example, the student may be invited to decide the order of the lesson, or perhaps the pages for sight-reading. As mundane as it may sound, little changes like this can maintain students' interest and invite them to be more present.

Competitive games allows us to improve together when we reinforce this positive side of competition. In private lessons the student can be asked to compete with himself. For example, the teacher might ask the student to challenge themselves by correctly identifying as many flashcards as possible in the span of one minute. Through different forms of competition, his attention can become more focused.

Mimicry as a game category has to do with role playing or wearing masks. In a broader context it is also the use of created narratives with a purpose. As an example of this category, teacher and student can create a story for a piano piece or impersonate characters to express a specific mood of the piece.

Playing with the senses can illuminate many aspects of music by narrowing our attention at a determined moment. Two fun and engaging techniques are: playing without looking, and ghost playing.

Selected bibliography and resources

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