All-State: It's What You don't Say: Non-verbal Teaching Strategies for the String Class and Private Studio

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You can see it in students' eyes. They are confused. They don't know what you want them to do. They can understand the words you are saying but they don't know how to relate the instruction they hear to their own bodies and instruments. Likewise they can see and hear what you are doing on your instrument but they don't know how to imitate you. This is when the application of non-verbal teaching techniques is the most beneficial. The principals of Manual Assistance and the Universal Contact Points are two such techniques.

The principal of Manual Assistance can be used as a non-verbal teaching technique. It is a kinesthetic approach to guiding string students' physical movements. The approach has three basic stages: the teacher controls the movement, the student and the teacher control the movement, and the student controls the movement. The purpose of the technique is to give the student the full experience from the beginning, guide them until they are able to do the skill themselves, and then allow them to do the skill themselves when they are ready. The goal is to get the student from stage two to three without the student even noticing the teacher is no longer assisting them.

The technique of using Universal Contact Points can also be used as a non-verbal teaching technique. The left hand and the right hand have contact points that connect to the instrument. There are different points between both hands because they connect to different objects. There are also different points between the different instruments because of their slightly differences in construction and playing position.

There are five contact points on the left hand for the violin and viola. If viewed with the palm facing up, the first point is located on the thumb on the far right center of the thumbs pad about an eighth of an inch away from the side of the nail. This contact point connects to the left side of the instruments neck. The contact point on the pointer, middle, ring, and pinkie fingers (or using other terminology, the first through fourth fingers) is located on the tips of the fingers, again about an eighth of an inch from the tip of the nail. These points connect to the fingerboard. They can be moved depending on the student, especially if the student's fingers curve inward. The line the string makes where the fingers press into the string should be below the points.

The cello and double bass left hand contact points are very similar to the violin and viola contact points but have a few differences. Again looking at the hand with the palm up, the thumbs contact point is located slightly right of the center of the thumb pad. The point connects to the back of the instruments neck and is usually behind the second or middle finger. The points on fingers one through four are located in the same places as those on the violin and viola.

James Kjelland demonstrates instrument setup.

There are fewer intentional contact points for the right hand than the left although the hand actually contacts the bow just as much as the left hand contacts the instrument. For the violin and viola, the first contact point of the right hand is on the thumb. Looking at the hand palm up the point is located on the pad of the thumb an eighth of an inch from the nail slightly left of center. This point connects to the under side of the stick between the frog and the leather of the bow's winding. The next point is on the pointer finger on the right side of the middle bone. This point connects to the stick. The next point is located on the ring finger on the far right side of the middle bone. This point doesn't connect directly to the stick, although the finger does physically touch the stick, but instead connects to the point on the thumb. The last contact point is on the tip of the pinkie finger. This point connects to the top of the stick.

For the cello and double bass right hand contact points, the thumb contact is the same as the violin and viola. The pointer finger point is located on the bottom right of the top bone. The pinkie finger point is located at the bottom of the top bone as well. Both the pointer and pinkie finger points connect to the stick creating a position that cradles the stick on the inside creases of the knuckles.

The goal of the right hand Universal Contact Points is to create a bow hold that supplies the correct angle of the hand and will provide the desired flexibility. However slight variations might occur according to the method of bowing technique desired.

With young beginning students, this technique could be especially useful when the dots are applied to their hands with pen or marker and their instruments are marked with stickers or other identifying marks. The process becomes like a game called "dots to spots" where students can apply their finger dots to the spots on their instrument. Older beginning students might not need the motivational spin of a game but would still benefit from the visual representation of the points identified on their fingers and on their instruments. Older students might even find useful a diagram of the Universal Contact Points as well as a written or verbal description of each point and where it connects to the instrument. Every student learns differently and providing these differing approaches to the same concept might ensure every student is able to achieve the hand positions desired.

Incorrect position habits could also be fixed using the Universal Contact Points. Non-beginning students could benefit from the same instruction as described with beginning students even though it is not their first experience holding the instrument and bow. If fact using this technique could point out exactly what the faults are in a student's hand position so they can better be able to fix that fault.

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