Cello

Lessons Lived Through Teaching

by David Holmes

Someone said the "unexamined life isn't worth living," and that axiom, I imagine, applies to our teaching as well. So, what *have* I learned about cello teaching over the past 25 years? On some days I feel like I do about my middle-aged life in general, that although I know more than I ever have about a number of subjects (cello teaching maybe being one of them) there is a futility from realizing that in a cosmic sense, I know very little and that I'll go to the grave that way. Oddly, I know a lot less now than I did when I was so certain of things in my youth. What's up with that? Anyway, here are some "lessons" that have been important to me as I've become more experienced as a teacher. I'll present these in first person since they are my personal epiphanies that may not apply to you, although I hope will provide food for thought.

Lesson No. 1:

I need to maintain a written record of each student's lesson, complete with what we covered and what was assigned. This is essential for me and I always regret when I fail to make notes during a child's lesson, because if I don't record what happened one week, I'll pay for it the next week, at which time I'll try unsuccessfully to search the dregs of my memory for what took place a week ago at this time. A lot of students have come before me since last week, and that causes a lot of memory interference. I could ask the student what their assignment was, since they or their parents take notes, but I feel I am served best as a teacher by having my own past thoughts in my hands at the time of their lesson. Sometimes I've written a note that makes it clear I should keep addressing a point with the student, perhaps in a different way than I did in one lesson. I will observe if some idea really helped a certain student. Sometimes I note that I did not hear any scales and that I should make sure I attend to that next time. A few written lines can jog the memory and serve as a beacon that illuminates the way forward for the student and for myself.

Lesson No. 2:

When I want a student to practice something, I need to hear the assignment in a lesson. If I assign a scale but fail to follow up in her lessons, I doubt she'll continue to do the scale, or at least not exactly as I had wanted it. This accountability on my part helps create clear expectations for the student. If I don't follow through on an assignment I gave, how can I expect the student to practice what I don't seem to take seriously enough to hear in their lesson? Lesson No. 1 really helps with my staying on top of Lesson No. 2.

Lesson No. 3:

Students all have a terminal relationship with me; our lessons together will end at some point in the unknowable future. Some past students have left me and future ones will as well. This break happens to all studio teachers and it can be quite welcome or very painful. I invest much time and energy in my students and can become quite attached to them (and their parents) over our years together, so when the end of our time together comes, some relationship discomfort is inevitable. It is my goal to accept the unpleasant changes with more grace, maturity, and dignity than I have sometimes exhibited in the past. May I have the constraint to avoid sending off a hot-blooded e-mail that just makes a bad situation worse, and may I please keep my mouth mostly shut and choose my words wisely when angry at a student or parent.

Lesson No. 4:

It is ok to fire chronic under-achieving students. My relationship with my students is a two-way street, with both sides having legitimate needs. Divorce, though not easy, is sometimes the healthiest choice for all involved. I make my expectations as a cello teacher clear to new and continuing families in my studio, but there are times when a student does not make an acceptable level of progress for an extended period of time. Often, marginal students of this sort will quit on their own, since they recognize that lessons are unrewarding and unpleasant. Some other students, though, continue to take lessons, unaware (or unconcerned) about how little progress is occurring and doggedly oblivious to the situation. Am I helping non-practicing students by continuing to teach them? Maybe these kids will "turn the corner" at some future point and take ownership of their practice, although in my experience, that's very rare. I probably cut some slack to the students I've had for years, and who at one time—perhaps when their parents exerted more influence in their lives—practiced consistently and made progress. Is it my job to be miserable during lessons for years in the hope that a student who is treading water will some day see the light? One cello teacher I admire said that she ends lessons with a student when it's "no longer any fun," which though it sounds a bit trite, I thought was as good a barometer as any I'd heard.

Lesson No. 5:

Keep yearning alive through learning. By May of each year I feel I am running on fumes as a cello teacher. Vacations can help with this. Strangely, some of my best teaching comes after I've been away from it for a while. Another is to enroll in a summer teaching institute, of which there are many. There is nothing better than seeing other fine teachers work with students. One of the best benefits of being a Suzuki teacher is the many summer institutes that we as teachers can partake in, although there are many opportunities for traditional teachers as well. I love to perform, so having a concert to look forward to and prepare for can be a shot in the arm as a teacher. I feel strongly that my teaching and playing are inextricably linked and practicing helps reinforce this aspect. Consulting any of my cello and string teaching books can really prove a breath of fresh air to my teaching: I never fail to be uplifted from the fun and the depth that Phyllis Young shares in her pedagogy books.

Originally published in MNSOTA's *String Notes* — Winter 2009/2010 (Vol. 12, No. 2)

David Holmes is currently a faculty member at the Augsburg College Suzuki Program and has been a guest clinician at Suzuki institutes in 9 states. An active performer and free lance cellist in the Twin Cities, David performs in the Northern Lights String Quartet, is an artist member of Thursday Musical. 𝄽

Originally published in MNSOTA's *String Notes* — Winter 2009/2010 (Vol. 12, No. 2)