



GUITAR

A School of One: An IEP for Everyone

The Individualized Instruction and Learning Approach for Students of Music

by Grant Wilcox

Why is it that some students in our schools receive an individualized education program and others are almost invisible? We offer more money and time to programs for students who cannot help themselves. Why is that? I think the most basic answer is that these IEP students learn at a different rate and need the individualized help and without this individualized approach they would have much less opportunity to succeed. This makes sense to me and I believe the thinking, in fact the life-blood of educational thinking is that, "All students can learn but at different rates." I have over 180 music students each semester and no two of them learn at the same rate or are ready for the same material at the same time. It would be crazy to think that a class of 30 or more of them should learn the same material together at the same rate.

Teaching and Learning:

Which came first?

For over a thousand years wise elders have made the claim that when the student is ready the teacher will appear. For me, the answer to the basic question about which must come first is simple: learning has to take place first. Often a negative situation will arise if the teacher teaches before the student is ready. On a one-on-one basis if the student is not ready and the teacher teaches anyway each party wastes time and energy. In a normal classroom setting when the teacher is ready, one third of the class may already have the target learning, one third is simply not ready or interested and the middle, if the teacher is lucky, may be at a perfect readiness for the day's lesson. In this class, the teacher, if connecting with the entire middle of the class, will be having a 33% rate of success. The top one third will be in a holding pattern but the bigger downside is for the third of the students who were not interested or ready. In the last case, history has shown the teacher may become frustrated, angry and in many cases blame the student, parents or former teachers for

failed efforts. In the worst case scenario the student is labeled as being incapable of learning.

Learning is more important than teaching

Learning is the most important aspect of the teaching process. It is what brought us all off of our knees when we were children and later caused many of us to become teachers. Learning after all is the only authentic way to judge our success as teachers. As we place the learner first in the evaluation of our teaching we have to take into account where the student is, how much they have improved and the student's comfort level as to pace. In this process our evaluation of the learning progress will take on a different look and our success as a "teacher" will be evident to each of our students, ourselves, as well as our community.

The tougher the subject the harder and faster they fall.

We use more of our brain reading music while playing a musical instrument than we do in any other activity.

Music class can be taught like a driver education class where every one must move together much like we want people to drive in common practice with a uniform set of rules of the road. Driving is a skill much like riding a bike once you learn it... Classical music however, may in fact be one of the most difficult fields of study requiring the most discipline in skill mastery. I have a dear friend who is a physician by profession and a musician as an avocation; my friend Jim would say, "The study of music theory is as tough as medical school." My only point here is that difficult tasks require extra efforts and preparation. If no two people learn at the same rate or level what can that mean for a difficult class? The connection between reading music on an instrument and reading language is profound. To develop fluency in reading aloud the student must decode notation

and practice in real time reading ahead while speaking the words that were read moments ago in a language we have used since early childhood. On an instrument add to those tasks an external voice, a new language, tone production, intonation in real time that has to be so correct that one can copy others and be copied by others. To put this in perspective how many programs have we devised and gone through in the teaching of reading? How many millions of dollars have we spent on "Why Johnny Can't Read"? And it turns out that "Johnny Can Read;" he just has to read at his own rate and cannot go on until he shows signs of readiness to continue. Learning to read and perform on an instrument is harder, less understood and much less funded than language programs.

Signs of Readiness

So if it is true that the teacher will appear when the student is ready. What is the case when the teacher is ready and the student does not seem to have appeared? The teacher can try to coax interest to accelerate signs of life within a student who appears to lack readiness while the others simply wait, or the teacher can work from the real starting point where each student is at, and at a rate that is comfortable and unique to each student. This is not teaching to the silent middle of our educational system; it is not leaving the accelerated kid on their own or worse yet forgetting those at the bottom who seem to be clueless.

Teaching to readiness means taking the student at level; after all they are not at the same place on the continuum of skill or knowledge base. I am not advocating more funding for music education without more student enrollment nor am I suggesting we think more highly of music. Quality teaching is all about the approach. Putting the student first and having the learning rate determined by the students' readiness is the cornerstone of success in learning. It is a process based on rapport and success—

that of teaching to each student as though they have an IEP. Or... having each of our students going to a school of one.

Grant Wilcox teaches orchestral music at Brainerd High School. This past year he

offered: An Early Bird String Quartet class, Chamber Orchestra, three sections of Classical Guitar I, one section of Classical Guitar II, one section of Classical Guitar Ensemble, First Orchestra and Sinfonia Orchestra. His guitar ensemble performs between orchestras

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