



## CELLO

### The Motivation Equation

by David Holmes

It all began innocently enough, around the faculty snacks table at the Oregon Suzuki Institute in June this summer. Over sweets, chips and a beer, the Dalcroze teacher, Jeremy Dittus, asked, “How do you motivate your students?” There was quite a bit of silence as we teachers went into deep thought mode. That topic again! So important but so baffling. Perhaps it is the *only* topic, one that perpetually recurs to teachers and parents alike, like a bad case of creeping Charlie. How do we turn the weeds of a student’s daily practice into a rose? Personally, when I have a highly intrinsically motivated student, I feel like I’ve won an awesome free prize, but how often does *that* happen? So, what do we do about the more “normal” student’s motivational issues?

But first, an aside... You know that phenomenon of thinking when you know the definition of a word but can’t quite verbalize it. Well, that was where I was with “motivate” and “motivation,” so I looked them up in the dictionary and thesaurus. Motivate means, “to provide with a motive; impel.” Motive, I read further, means, “something that causes a person to act.” Motivation is the “act or process of motivating.” The thesaurus provided various synonyms to motivate: “inspire, stimulate, encourage, spur on, excite, inspirit, incentivize, and **fire with enthusiasm**” (my personal favorite). To add some guilt to my conscience, the thesaurus gave this sentence by way of example: “It’s the teacher’s job to motivate the child.” (Ouch!) So, there is a *mental inducement to act* innate to the word motivation; it’s about what’s going on *between* the ears.

Ah, so we have a definition of motivation now, but we all know we would get so very rich if we put forth the final answer to the motivation conundrum, because, let’s face it, there isn’t one—not on this earth, anyway. There are only shape-shifting sands that we grab onto momentarily, only to be left empty handed and groping for some new answer to replace the old, now obsolete one. Kids change. We change. Variety is the essence of motivation in teaching. Every-

thing related to motivation is a moving target.

Now that I’ve depressed you and myself, let’s agree that the motivational Rubik’s cube is a good thing. It’s another chance to be creative, to keep forcing us to be fresh in our thinking, which after 25 years of teaching, can be quite a challenge at times. To stoke that creativity there are a lot of very intelligent and experienced teachers with many great motivational ideas. Since I taught at several Suzuki institutes this summer, I took the time to ask some of my colleagues this important but vexing problem. Below are some of their ideas.

#### **The Teacher, the Student, and the Parent: healthy relationships.**

Teachers I spoke with agreed it can be important for their students to like them as a piece of the motivation puzzle. We all know some very successful teachers who use fear to motivate students, but most teachers do not adhere to using the darker emotions as motivational tools, probably because they have an innate belief in the golden rule. A negative and intimidating approach can get “results” from students, but at what cost?

Students need to trust and respect their teachers too. Liking a teacher is not necessarily the same thing as respecting them. I’ve had many teachers in school that I thought were good people, but not very good teachers. This undermined my trust and respect for them, and, truthfully, made me like them less. The respect part happens when a student trusts that their teacher is an expert guiding them on a path to competency, enabling a student to give their best effort with no reservations. With trust and respect, a truly functional, thriving relationship can proceed.

Parents and children love each other with a profound depth that can’t begin to be (and shouldn’t be!) matched by the teacher. This gives parents a unique and powerful weapon to wield when conflicts over practicing break out at home. String teachers need to help support the parents and nurture them as allies in the education

of their kids, which means keeping in touch with parents on a regular basis about their child’s musical development, and praising them for their assistance. Just as it helps if the student likes their teacher, it also helps if the parent, who writes the checks, also likes and respects their kid’s teacher, too.

#### **Practical Suggestions to Enhance Motivation in Students**

*Teachers need to be lucid and straightforward in the lesson and in the lesson assignments.* Assignment clarity will help avoid confusion and consternation in students, parents, or both. We can reduce the probability of World War III breaking out at home by giving clear goals to students in lessons: how many times to practice something, how many minutes to practice something, etc. A written list for parents or kids to check off is so simple and helpful. I have found, though, that for me, presenting expectations clearly is much harder than I think it should be! I am not naturally good at seeing the “trees” of home practice; I am better at seeing the “forest,” so I try to work on that issue.

*String students need to be around their string-playing peers.* The importance of this basic truth can’t be overstated. This is why public school orchestras, youth orchestras, chamber music programs, Suzuki group classes, summer camps and institutes, competitions, master classes, workshops, recitals, and concerts can be so crucial to conveying the idea to a student that *playing a string instrument is a normal and enjoyable thing for a kid my age to do*. As teachers, we can encourage our students to get involved in activities where they will experience positive peer musical pressure. A looming solo recital is one of the best motivators; (ok, fear, on occasion, can be a positive).

*Create a student mentoring or “buddy” system.* I have not developed this idea extensively, but one of my advanced teenaged cello students did recently spend an hour with a book 1 student, to great success. The parents bonded while the kids made music; win-win.

*Studio practice charts.* Last year, I experi-

mented with a studio-wide chart based on a point system for four areas: practice time, listening to the compact disc, repetition of small sections, and review. This chart was very successful, but only for about five months. The students, the parents, and yes, even I, got tired of this idea after a while. External motivational ideas have a lifespan, but then they die and need to be replaced with newer, younger ideas. That's the sands shifting again.

*Short-term or long-term rewards.* People have directed me to the book *Punished by Rewards*, which I'm sure makes a great case for the annihilation of rewards. I have not read the book, but despite this, I will recklessly state that I think rewards are sometimes ok to use and won't likely lead to the destruction of a child's moral character. I conjured some up on occasion during the eight years I taught my own daughter (a chocolate reward was most effective—and no, she doesn't have an eating disorder now). Rewards can help get a music student and a bedraggled parent through some tough

times, but they are not panaceas to the practice/motivation equation, just temporary rays of hope. Games, dice throwing for various reasons (how many repetitions of *this* will you do?), picking pieces from a jar for review (or for any practice activity), “you get a penny if you do it right/I get a penny if you don't,” counting repetitions with beads, putting stickers on a chart when a task is done, having the student decide the order of practice, etc. All these, and so many more ideas, can provide temporary motivational muscle to the moment.

Tools or tricks for promoting home practice are a way to smooth bumps in the very long road of learning to play a stringed instrument, a road that we hope will end in a student's *internal motivation* taking over—like a teenager finally, excitedly, getting behind the wheel of the car. We teachers don't know when, or even if the intrinsic motivation will kick in with our students, since teaching is an act of faith, is it not? We put our best foot forward and believe in what we are doing, but we no more

know the eventual outcome than anyone knows the outcome when human beings are involved in the equation. That gray area though, is what makes teaching so exciting and opens the door for much creative thinking. This is a good thing!

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