

CLINIC: NURTURING INDEPENDENCE IN STUDENT LEARNING

E + E = E!

by Nancy Lokken

At the end of a rehearsal or lesson, have you ever just felt drained, like everything you had to give had just been sucked right out of you?! I think we have all had that happen, but when it does, it should be one of those red flags for us to stop and reflect on what just happened.

William Starr was a well-known string pedagogue who taught at the University of Knoxville, TN for several years and then at then continued at the University of CO in Boulder. I am reminded of a story I heard him tell years ago. He was practicing with his son, Michael. Michael's assignment was to practice his "straight bow" 100 times. After several of these "straight bows," Michael asked his Dad if he could go and get a drink of water. Before Bill could say yes, Michael was off! Suddenly Bill realized he was holding the violin (by the scroll) and had the bow in his other hand. This was one of those light bulb moments! Now who was doing the practicing, Michael or his father?

The title of this session is *Nurturing Independence in Student Learning*. How can we get students involved in what we are teaching them? How can we help them take ownership of their instrument and their music?

If you were asked what your top 3 priorities were in your teaching, what would they be? I remember two teachers I had in junior high and senior high. The first one was extraordinary! He taught us the music, prepared us extremely well, was organized and commanded respect. Everything he did was done with quality. The next orchestra teacher I had seemed to be tiring out. He liked to talk to me when I came into the orchestra room, and the theme of our conversations was always how frustrating it was for him because those F naturals were never low enough. The environment was not joyful. He had that "burned out" look. There was a lack of energy to really develop the students who were ready to learn!

In past years I have really thought about these situations. In the first experience, I realized that it was the standard, quality, and respect that were so powerful to me. In the second experience, I just kept wonder-

ing why he just didn't teach where the F natural lived!

I know that if my job was to keep getting that F natural in the right place, or a finger bent on the bow, I would not be teaching. But it is because I have seen teaching as the means to develop the whole person, that I have been able to devote myself to this goal. Therefore my goal in teaching is first to understand the student.



If there isn't respect, how can we teach them the instrument? If there isn't focus or concentration, how can we establish a work ethic or the ability to persevere? If there isn't discipline how can we develop or even master tools that make the difference? If there isn't an openness to learning, why would you want to give them an instrument? Students definitely don't all come with these characteristics. But I do know that I can't develop their instrumental skills until they are ready to receive them.

The end product is in developing fine young people through their study of music.

You know it is not difficult to play a stringed instrument! You could walk down the halls and pick out 20 students and give them a violin and bow and every one of them could pull the bow across the strings. However, if you wanted them to play with skills that would allow them to be successful and have choices when they grow up, there are other habits to be learned that would be

more beneficial. And as a result they would feel more successful.

Everything students do eventually become habits. We want to guide their learning so they can develop habits that are beneficial, and not limiting.

How can we help them? We teach them to be aware of the potential of their instrument. We give them the tools to reach the instrument's capabilities. We offer encouragement for efforts and perseverance. We break down challenges so they can experience success. We involve them in the process. This all sounds great, but how can we do this more easily?

(E + E = E) This is the equation!

The first E stands for Effective. Effective training starts at the beginning, no matter what age a student begins. Everything a student does is usually a result of their training. We either train a student that putting in 20% effort is OK, and satisfactory, or we help them pursue a different plan.

For example, when one of my students went off to college a few years ago, she wasn't planning on getting a degree in music, but definitely planned on being in the orchestra and taking lessons. The college she attended is well known for its music programs, and she was eager to continue her studies and love of music. (I did not hear about this story until I ran into her well after her graduation.) She came to her first lesson, and after it was over, she bowed to the teacher, as we often did. It was simply a system we always used as a means of respect, and that marked the end of each lesson. We also used it to keep the skills of stage presence in performance comfortable and natural. The college teacher was really surprised and said to her with a chuckle, "I have never seen that done before!" Though this teacher wasn't comfortable with this tradition nor intended to continue it, which was totally fine, she didn't recognize it as a sign of respect or a system to inquire about. If she had, she would have found out a little more about this student. At the second lesson the student came in and played her assignment by memory. The teacher said,

“Oh you don’t have to do that. You can use the music.” Needless to say, when the expectations stopped, so did the level of preparation and study from then on.

Once started, Effective teaching should never stop. This is what sets up habits. Not every student comes into the studio simply knowing what to do. Because parenting styles are so varied, more so now than ever before it seems, you have to decide what works for you in your studio or rehearsal space.

To be effective, a teacher needs to be prepared, have some organization, and acquire these three tools in the process.

Vision

The book *Free Play: Improvisation in Life and Art* by Stephen Nachmanovitch tells this story, “... there is the famous ... Michelangelo’s theory of sculpture: The statue is already in the stone, has been in the stone since the beginning of time, and the sculptor’s job is to see it and release it by carefully scraping away the excess material.” Isn’t that what a child is...someone waiting for his potential to be released. However there need to be guides, coaches, teachers to shape this and allow it to happen.

Before springing into action, a teacher must have a vision of where they are going technically and musically. For example, if you are going to teach Brahms *Waltz*, know the style and sound that you want the student to internalize. If you are going to teach vibrato, know the product you want the student to have.

Plan

Have a plan of how to get there. Break down each area into a sequence of building blocks. There is an art in timing, and pacing, and definitely in how to break down a challenge into easy steps. To be effective a teachers needs to give instructions very clearly and using vocabulary in a way the student understands.

Flexibility

Have enough flexibility and creativity to carry out the plan with a diversity of students. These students may be unique in:

- a. their physical capabilities, which can include degrees of coordination, double joints, etc.
- b. their emotional stability.
- c. their developmental stages related to special needs, or age.
- d. their ability to analyze and think in

depth about what they are doing, which is sometimes related to their environment and educational background.

The teacher’s role is to try to remove the student’s limitations. Before a teacher can plunge in with a technical plan, he/she must first take time to understand the person that is being taught. If a teacher can begin the journey of teaching each unique student in a manner that builds self-esteem, then the teacher can easily develop the technical and musical awareness that helps the student develop into a player of high ability.

How does a teacher know what to do? Take time to get to know...and then teach... the person in front of you! My planning for the next lesson starts when I observe how the student enters the studio—are they happy, bouncy, tired, glum, anxious?

Use these guidelines:

- *Before you teach:* Analyze and Evaluate from the moment the student, and/or student and parent enter the room.
- *Plan:* Decide what point to work on based on what you hear and see. Some students need every step in your plan; others need a few more, and a few students don’t so many. The trick is to know how far to break down a challenge until a student can be successful. Then you build the spot back up again.
- *Activity/Action:* Decide how to go about it. The teacher needs to be clear in explanations and direct with words. A strategy for this is to draw an analogy to real life experiences. For example if a student needs to keep the bow on the highway, you could ask, “If your mother gets in the car and drives you to school and drives on the yellow line making the center of the road, what will happen.” (Crash or Get a Ticket.)
- *Reflection:* Ask yourself: Did the student learn/understand what you were working on? How do you know? A student needs to demonstrate what he understands.

Here is an example on tuning. The Vision is clear in what we want the instrument to sound like if it is in tune. What is the Plan? My plan for tuning starts like this:

1. Student can sing an A
2. Student understands where the A tuner is, and which way is higher and which

way is lower.

3. After listening to the metronome A or my instrument A and then playing their own for comparison, they have to have an opinion before starting to turn anything. After listening, they need to choose between four options: The A is too high, too low, just right, or “I don’t know.”

Involvement

Involvement by the student in the process is extremely important. We can talk about movement, build a basic technique, carefully choose repertoire, but if the student isn’t involved in the process we aren’t going to get very far.

When a teacher gives a direction or offers a suggested fingering or anything else, it is reasonable to expect it is taken seriously. Why? It saves rehearsal time the next day, and makes practicing more effective. How is a student going to remember? The use of a pencil is an amazing tool! But they don’t always know what to write or when to write. Again, we train them and help them learn. It is in this process we are teaching them how to become their own teachers.

A huge area of development in a student is learning how to be aware of what he or she is hearing or doing. If a student has no idea of what he is doing, how does he know what to work on in his practicing? A student must learn to listen to himself and respond to what he hears.

I often ask: “What did you hear?” Or after playing a scale, I might ask, “What did you learn?” After a lesson I might ask, “Can you tell me what your lesson was about?” This is about learning how to be involved in the process, so they can eventually become their own teacher.

When does this begin? This can begin from Lesson 1! A 3-year-old child can be asked questions that require some thought. They are very smart! An example might be: Does this music make you want to dance or sit with your mom and read a story?

Expression

When there is a student who has more difficulty playing with expression, I often ask them to tell me the story of their piece that fits with the character of the music. When they identify with a feeling, mood or character, it often makes a huge difference in their playing. To feel something one must care, get involved and have a passion.

At one lesson I said, “Can you tell me what these words mean?” I gave examples and received appropriate answers. Then

I asked the student to play a portion of a piece that gave an example of the word I said. I started with, "Frantic." The student played *Allegro* by Fiocco. "Melancholy." I heard *Meditation from Thais*. "Ecstatic." That example was done with a *Gigue* by Veracini. I was delighted!

(E + E = E) The second E is for EFFICIENT

One of the great opportunities for students is learning time management through their music study. How can you train them? Model it in their lessons. Model how you conduct the orchestra rehearsal. You clearly mark (or have them mark) the practice spots, the main issues. Use a practice chart. Have the student make up their own chart and bring it to you. That is very revealing. You can help revise it if that is needed. Maybe a checklist is helpful. Make a "practice pie" and draw out how to divide it.

(E + E = E) The last E is for EASY

We have been talking about nurturing inde-

pendence in students, teaching effectively and helping students be efficient with their practicing. When that is achieved it feels easy to play, fun to play, and there is freedom with the instrument. Habits of playing are in place. Performers are individualized in their movement and response to the music, and are free enough with the music, that they can really share the music with the listeners, and not just the notes. They are happy and having a good time.

Effective + Efficient = Easy

As teachers we are on a life long journey of development and growth. As we get more experienced, we get wiser and quicker to assess. In the process: recognize your strengths; expect that you will make mistakes. Mistakes become the means for growth and further learning. Solutions can be improved; errors can be repaired. Sometimes you have to have the courage to try something. You don't have to have all the right answers all the time. Give yourself

time to reflect, think, or call a colleague before the next lesson!

We aren't alone if we are willing to share together and support one another in this extraordinary profession!

Nancy Lokken directs Augsburg College Suzuki Talent Education in Minneapolis, where she also teaches Suzuki pedagogy as a registered Teacher Trainer with the Suzuki Association of the Americas. She studied with Dr. Suzuki in Japan and is an active Clinician and Teacher Trainer at institutes, festivals and workshops throughout the United States, Canada and Latin America. She is a founding member and first President of the Suzuki Association of Minnesota, and served on the board of MNSOTA. She was the Coordinator of the 30th Anniversary Conference of the Suzuki Association of the Americas (SAA) in 2002, has presented at several SAA and ASTA National Conferences. †