



CELLO

Rejuvenating Our Teaching

Will and Teresa Richardson

During the cold, gray winter, it becomes easy to slip into a comfortable routine day in and day out. Perhaps we have grown weary of hearing our own voice endlessly droning the same instruction to a student. The long-anticipated arrival of spring with its promise of renewal can inspire us to rejuvenate our teaching. Constant rejuvenation of our ideas and routine is essential to maintaining a high standard of pedagogy and finding enjoyment and fulfillment in our work.

Conference or Institute

Attending an ASTA or SAA conference, Suzuki Institute, or workshop is a great way to be exposed to a wide variety of teaching techniques in a condensed time span. It is an opportunity to network with colleagues and is also a sounding board for teachers who wish to present on various topics. Giving a presentation or lecture causes one to further examine and refine ideas.

Maintain and Develop Your Own Playing

Regular practice challenges us and develops our technique so that we may demonstrate well for our students. It reconnects us to the learning process. Sharing our ongoing personal experience with practice, including both struggles and successes, can serve as an inspiration to our students. The process of our own practice enables us to better relate to the expectations we have of our students.

Learning new repertoire forces us to examine our technique and musicality, exposes us to new musical ideas, and presents us with challenges. Discovering new pieces of music can take us out of our comfort zone, stretch our minds, and is highly enjoyable. An addition to our performance repertoire then becomes an addition to our teaching repertoire.

Playing for another musician puts us back in the “student seat.” Being open to receiving suggestions humbles us and keeps us open-minded to ideas that may differ from our own preconceptions.

Giving a recital or performance forces us to prepare under pressure of a deadline.

Practicing with the goal of performing usually produces more focused practice due to having clearer goals and a strong desire to represent ourselves well. Performing regularly is essential for acclimating ourselves to the effects of adrenaline and anxiety. Accepting our natural reactions to performance under pressure is a skill to be developed with frequent repetition like any other facet of music learning.

Reading sessions are a wonderful way to socialize with colleagues and explore repertoire that may be used later in performance or in the teaching studio. Another benefit to attending a reading session is that it provides an opportunity to strengthen our sight-reading skills.

Connect with Colleagues

Lesson observation is a great way to obtain fresh teaching perspectives while getting to know colleagues and their teaching styles. Additionally, observing others fosters self-examination and gives us further insight into the merits and deficiencies of our own teaching.

Cultivating friendships and maintaining social connections with your colleagues is beneficial both pedagogically and socially. Strengthening our sense of community can be inspirational in itself since teaching is often an isolated pursuit. It can be both fun and interesting to team up with another teacher for a joint studio activity or recital.

Master classes are classic sources of inspiration from experienced teachers. It can be especially revelatory to observe your own students being taught by another teacher. It can feel validating for someone else to confirm our instruction’s effectiveness, while it also can be tremendously helpful in highlighting areas that still need attention or items with which we have become complacent.

Listen and Watch

Attending performances, listening to recordings, and watching videos of the greats remind us of what is possible in music-making. Observing an incredible artist performing at an extremely high level

without hindrance of limitations rekindles our passion to continue the pursuit of performing and teaching.

Read and Write

Writing an article involves in-depth examination of a topic of interest and is an impetus to organize and share thoughts. It is a method of self-enlightenment and can be a challenge and motivator.

Read a book, biography of a musician or composer, publication or journal.

Be Good to Yourself

Being an inspired and effective teacher begins with maintaining your own mental and physical well-being. Teaching requires an enormous amount of focus, energy and patience, and we cannot do our best work if we are lethargic or frazzled and stressed. Flight attendants remind us that we must don our own oxygen mask before helping others with theirs. We cannot adequately help others if we cannot help ourselves. In addition to getting enough sleep, regular exercise and a healthful diet, we sometimes need to give ourselves a complete vacation from teaching to explore other interests.

Knowledge can be gleaned from unexpected sources. We can learn from the study of pedagogical techniques of non-musical subjects like athletics, academics and art. The learning process of identifying a new technique, breaking it down into smaller, manageable tasks, and improving it through analysis and repetition, is universal among many disciplines. As perpetual students of life, we can learn from all of our interactions and experiences, discover inspiration, and be rejuvenated even when we least expect it.

Will Richardson is a freelance cellist in the Twin Cities. He is an instructor at St. Joseph’s School of Music in St. Paul and has also taught at the College of St. Benedict.

Teresa Richardson, cellist, is on the faculty at St. Joseph’s School of Music and MacPhail Center for Music, and has taught at University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire. ‡