Violin

Building Rapport with Shy or Unresponsive Students

by Katie Gustafson

Many teachers agree that building positive relationships with their students can be one of the most gratifying parts of working with kids. But beyond making teaching enjoyable, building rapport with students can be highly beneficial to their learning. Students who feel comfortable with their teachers are more likely to ask questions, request help and want to please you with good work.

However, building good relationships with students can sometimes be difficult. Sometimes students have poor social skills, poor work ethic or difficult parents, and all of these things can affect your relationships with them. I would like to address the particular issue of students being shy or unresponsive.

I recently had an interesting conversation with a colleague who was telling me about a particular student he has been working with. He described her as being a kind girl with promising talent, but who was terribly shy and difficult to connect with. He expressed frustration that they had been working together all semester, and that she still would barely say two words to him in a lesson. He found it difficult to work in what felt like such one-sided interactions. We discussed her situation at length, and the conversation called to mind similar issues I have had with my own students.

I would like to use a few of my students as examples of some of the reasons behind unresponsiveness. This is certainly not a complete list, but it represents the variety of students that I have encountered.

The first student, named "Sarah," is extremely shy. She has such strong social anxiety that she was diagnosed with selective mutism—meaning that in some school and social situations, her anxiety would cause her to stop talking altogether. The second student, "Daniel," is about 14 years old, and appears passive and indifferent. I like to call him my "I'd rather be playing video games, but I guess violin is OK, too" student. And finally we have "Lexi," who has a big chip on her shoulder. Her passivity seems distant and a little bit hostile, like she is ready to be defensive at any moment. After a great deal of trial-and-error with these students I began to learn some useful things.

1. Students are more likely to open up once they feel safe.

Virtually all students worry about looking stupid, so they will hold back from asking questions or requesting help. Encourage students to ask questions—even stupid ones. If they should already know the answer, answer it again anyway. The reason is fairly primitive: they need to know that asking questions will result in feeling good rather than feeling stupid. If you teach in a classroom setting, proactively teach your students how to use encouraging words toward each other. One of my favorite phrases is, "Just try it. If you mess up, I promise I will still like you." This strategy applies to all students, but is particularly necessary for insecure students like Sarah (the shy one) and Lexi (the defensive one). Establishing trust is step one.

2. Engage them on subjects other than music.

Everyone likes to talk about things they are good at. Does your student participate in sports? Do they have a favorite class in school, or maybe a hobby? Did they do anything fun this weekend? Younger children might have a favorite color, or game, or flavor of ice cream. It may feel silly at first to "break the ice," but if the student decides early on that you are friendly toward them and interested in their lives, they will be more likely to warm up to you. Daniel (the video-game lover), has learned over time that I will always ask him if he "did anything fun this weekend," and that if he doesn't have a good answer for me, I will expect him to invent something that will entertain me. This kind of whimsy may not be your style, but almost any question will work. It has taken four months with Daniel, but he has finally begun talking more casually about things going on in his life, and if I am sneaky and move the subject to musical things, he might talk with me about those, too.

3. Insist on active participation.

This should be enforced gently, and can be tailored to fit the student. I am a personal fan of the Socratic method, meaning I often probe a student with questions to determine their level of understanding. I also favor guiding them to an answer with leading questions rather than telling them an answer outright. However, this method is tricky if your student has selective mutism. With Sarah, I consulted with her Special Education caseworker to establish some strategies. We decided that in her first few lessons, I should avoid questioning her too much. After a short while, I began using questions, but restricted myself to yes or no questions so that she could nod or shake her head to respond. Eventually I expanded to questions that require simple verbal answers, and here is where I had to insist. She would sometimes take a long time to think about the question and form an answer. We might sit in silence for a full minute while I waited for her to respond. Was she slow in processing the question? Was she hoping I would get tired of waiting and supply the answer for her the way people often do? I do not know. What I do know is that as teachers we can be too quick to jump in and rescue students from those difficult moments. Resist the urge to do this. If you do, they will remain passive, knowing that you will always give them the answers. If you force them to be actively involved in the learning process, you are helping them take a huge step in personal growth, and it will train them to be mentally engaged in all of your future lessons.

If this strategy feels cold to you, there are ways of being supportive without rescuing them from answering your question. You can ease the tension by saying, "Take your time and think about it." You may also want to establish that "I don't know" is an acceptable answer. These reinforce the concept of a safe learning environment.

Many students will adjust to this process much more quickly than Sarah did.

Originally published in MNSOTA's *String Notes* — Spring 2015 (Vol. 17, No. 3)

Daniel is rather less sensitive than Sarah, and he caught on rather quickly, as most students do.

You may have noticed that I have commented less about Lexi than the other students, and there is a reason for this. Our rapport did improve over time, and it did help her learning, but I am not entirely sure why. All I can do is share a few anecdotes that may have been behind the improvement. Lexi strikes me as being a survivor, and my suspicion is that she has dealt with some difficult relationships in her personal life. One thing that seemed to ease her hostility is when I invited her opinion. ("Do you like this song? This other song would also be a good choice—what do you think about that one? Why do you prefer that one?")

Another time that sticks in my memory is a time when the phrase "shame on you" was called into question. I sometimes use the phrase playfully, as in, "shame on you for having fun!" or "shame on you for not being perfect all the time!" Then on one occasion, she made a comment about feeling shamed, and I couldn't tell if she was joking or not. So I pulled her aside and told her, "Lexi, I was a little worried when you said that. You know that I would never actually want you to feel ashamed, right? Do you believe me?" She said that she did, and that was another occasion when her guarded expression lessened.

By the time she moved on to another orchestra, I felt that we had developed an understanding, but I still felt as though I barely knew her. This will probably always be the case with some students, especially the ones that are quiet, or unresponsive, or otherwise difficult to reach. I encourage you to continue trying to reach those students, because they are often the ones who most need your persistence.

Katie Gustafson teaches elementary orchestra in the Eden Prairie School district.

Originally published in MNSOTA's *String Notes* — Spring 2015 (Vol. 17, No. 3)