Cello

Teaching Themes from my Lesson Notes

by David Holmes

In searching for a topic for this article, I decided to examine the copious pages of lesson notes I keep for each of my students. This awakened dormant ideas from the past and resurrected material on a variety of topics. Here are some of the prominent pedagogical themes that keep occurring with my own cello students, along with solutions I have found helpful.

One habit that I have engaged in for a while is to draw a 💡 off to the side of my lesson notes when a student has had a breakthrough response to a specific teaching idea. This eye-catching symbol has helped keep track of useful cello tips and aided me in focusing on an important "tree" within the forest of my own notes. I also have written a number of times something similar to this: "Well, *that* idea didn't work!" What does and what doesn't work in lessons are important for me to notice.

Good posture is essential. I have written on the importance of posture before, and my lesson notes cite posture over and over. It could be argued (convincingly) that posture is *the* number one cello technique skill. I would go as far to say that bad posture makes elegant, fluid cello playing darn near impossible. The vexing issue, too, is that an excellent body/cello relationship can be quite subtle: a slight lean in the torso too far forward causes the hips and body to tighten muscles to keep from falling even more forward. A tiny pushing forward with the neck and chin ruins good body/head placement, which in turn causes other position problems. An ankle or toe lifted or curled while playing is a micro sign of tension. Watching the bow, an admirable endeavor at times, can cause the head to tilt forward and down, which starts the spiral of shoulders rolling forward and body slumping, creating interrupted flow to the bow and to the left hand. Thrusting the lower back forward is a central body tension inducer. Here are some quick fixes to posture issues:

1. Stand up, walk around and sit back down. Too much uninterrupted sitting can create body alignment problems. Change can awaken good posture again. Or, set the cello down, stand up and do some stretches, as is recommended for people who spend too much time at a computer screen.
2. From a sitting position, raise the bow with both hands (one at the frog, one at the tip) over your head, so that arms are even with ears. Lower the bow back to the string without changing one's body. This high bow lift sets head, neck, and chest back into alignment.
3. Put something (stuffed animal, etc.) on top of the head while playing. This creates stillness and a tall head and lengthened neck.
4. Take a deep breath. Totally filling lungs (abdomen and chest) with air initiates erect posture. If a full breath is impossible, make it possible by examining torso position.
5. When reading music, keep music on the stand at eye level, not lower. This is not always practical in orchestra and chamber music, I know, but can be done at home.

My lesson notes are full of this statement: "They aren't listening to the CD enough." As a Suzuki teacher, I have learned the importance of listening, which I never did growing up as a "traditional" cello student. The classic story I love to share is of a cello family of mine who week after week, when I asked if they had listened to the CD, replied, "Oh, gosh, oh shoot, we forgot to listen again…geez. Why can't we remember that? Yada yada…" (You know the drill!) In my exasperation, I finally did a spontaneous and humorous thing, which was to write on a post-it note, "Your listening grade is D-" which I handed to the Mom. I think this Mom had never made lower than an "A" in any class, so it totally freaked her out to get a D-, which was *great*, because they started listening like crazy after that. (Years later, she still has that post-it note!) I was amazed at how much that student's progress took off once they were truly on board with listening. It was an important lesson for me as well: we should be bold about encouraging listening. In addition, explaining what repeated and deep listening can do for students and parents is helpful. Unless parents are professional musicians, they and their children don't know until we help them understand the many layers of listening. Firstly, I tell them that active listening, or being engaged singularly with the music while listening, is *so much* better than having it in the background while doing other things. Here is a list of what listening teaches the brain via the ear:

1. The melody the cello is playing.
2. How a very good cellist sounds when they play a piece.
3. How the cello part fits with the piano.
4. How dynamics can be changed for musical effect.
5. About an excellent tone and its subtle variations.
6. How good vibrato sounds.
7. Style considerations, both for a period of music, and eventually, for a particular composer.
8. That music is a vibrant, living, and ever-changing.
9. That one can experience the beauty of music over and over, just by listening!!

My lesson notes spend a significant amount of time on sound, on bow arm weight, and on physical looseness. In an attempt to get students to give the bow priority, I often say that the bow is 90% of cello playing and the left hand is 10%. Here are some activities that can get quick and "sound" results.

1. Cello handshake. Student puts their curved right hand fingers over the fingers of teacher. The teacher carries the students arm weight in various directions: up, down, sideways, in and out. The student must learn to release the shoulder so the arm has that heavy, slack feel. This activity is about arm weight and freedom of arm movement.

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Reverse roles and have the student feel your heavy arm with your strong flexible fingers.

2. While teacher holds the bow horizontally in front of the student, have the student hang on the bow stick with each finger, one at a time and in groups. Student needs to be slack-armed at all times. Make sure the elbow is free and swinging while doing this. This is good for getting contact on the bow with all fingers by giving each finger an opportunity to feel arm weight. This can counteract the dreaded "terrible two": pushing down with the first finger while pushing up with the thumb.
3. Finger loosening exercises: make a fist, shake it out. Tap each finger to the thumb. Stretch fingers apart then relax the hand. Wiggle the thumb for joint flexibility. Parachute down to a bow hold with a loose, hanging hand. There is an infinite number of finger warm up and flexibility maneuvers that can inspire a softer bow hand that benefits the continuous flow of the arm to the bow.
4. Some students have a tendency to supinate, with their fingers and hand falling toward the pinky. Having this student hold the bow with only thumb, one, and three (lifting off fingers two and four) can quickly set a more balanced hand again.
5. For students who have any imbalance in the bow hand or problems with the parts of the bow arm working less than optimally together, having them bow in the air slightly above the string can create unity and balance quickly. Sometimes, alternating 4 notes in the air followed by 4 notes on the string gets quick results. This teaches how to move the bow with the whole arm as a unit. This "air bow" action using the whole length of the bow can also produce quick results when you want a student to use more bow than they presently are.

I noticed in my notes a few other "art of teaching" themes that I need to consistently be aware of:

1. There is a time to drop an idea in a lesson when a student isn't getting the point I want them to get. Persistence is an important element to teaching of anything. However, I sometimes get too much like a dog with a bone, causing frustration and general unpleasantness in a lesson. When the student isn't responding to my direction after a short amount of time, it can be very useful to go to another topic that is more palatable.
2. It is so obvious, but I need to remind myself frequently that praise should be doled out liberally but pointedly. Saying, "That was great!" is nice, but doesn't teach the student anything. Saying, "I loved your big tone and your excellent pitch!" is a more helpful comment. Sometimes, though, because I feel so much comfort with a student I forget to praise enough in general.
3. A teacher needs their interpersonal sensitivity to be active and alert with students so that the dance between teacher and student stays in sync. If I have been working diligently with a student, I need to be aware of when to relax the intensity by noticing how the student is responding at each given point in the lesson. Are they looking tired, uninterested, beaten down, or are they engaged and involved in the process right now?

Thanks to all you teachers who constantly strive to be better at the awesome and mysterious art of string instrument teaching.

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