

All-State: Middle School Teaching Techniques that Work: Twenty-Five Strategies Designed to Engage Your Students

by Stephen Benham

ASTA President Stephen Benham was the featured presenter at the 2016 MNSOTA All-State Workshop, leading sessions on teaching rhythm, strategies for student engagement, bowing artistry, assessment and more. This is the handout provided for one of his sessions.

Concept: Music educators often live in silos where they have little chance to interact with general education teachers. Typically, the music education student's program is filled with pedagogy, repertoire, musician-ship, and performance, while the general education major is less specialized. When we get in the field, we don't always know where to turn for more ideas in engaging students. So, the purposes of this session are:

- Evaluate and determine the types of strategies and teaching devices used by general educators that can be adapted for use in the music classroom.
- Learn how to adapt those strategies to the music classroom setting.

Ideas from this session are taken from Lemov, Culver, Bergonzi, Gillespie, others I probably should acknowledge but can't remember, plus many of my own.

No Opt Out

"A sequence that begins with a student unable to answer a question should end with the student answering that question as often as possible. ...Reluctant students quickly come to recognize that 'I don't know' is the Rosetta stone of work avoidance."

- Format 1: You provide the answer; the student repeats the answer.
- Format 2: Another student provides the answer; the initial student repeats the answer.
- Format 3: You provide a cue; your student uses it to find the answer.
- Format 4: Another student provides a cue; the initial student uses it to find the answer.

Right is Right

"Right Is Right is about the difference between partially right and all-the-way right—between pretty good and 100 percent. The job of the teacher is to set a high standard for correctness: 100 percent."

- Hold out for all the way.
- Answer the question.

- Right answer, right time.
- Use technical vocabulary.

Cold Call

"The idea is that you want everybody to pay attention and develop a system that ensures that all students think it's possible that they are about to be called on, regardless of whether they have raised their hand, and therefore think they must therefore prepare to answer. You need a system that ensures that instead of one student answering each of your questions, all of your students answer all of your questions in their minds, with you merely choosing one student to speak the answer out loud. Cold Call is that system."

Key Idea: In order to make engaged participation the expectation, call on students regardless of whether they have raised their hands.

- Cold Call is predictable.
- Cold Call is systematic.
- Cold Call is positive.
- Cold Call is scaffolded.

Play or Sing Your Answer

A picture is worth a thousand words. Modeling is the most efficient and effective form of teaching. Since students demonstrate "knowing" by "doing," you teach "what" to do by demonstration rather than description. Nonverbal teaching should be the norm.

Play or Sing Your Question

Because Musical knowledge is procedural knowledge, students demonstrate they "know" something by showing "how" (performing through singing, playing, moving). This is different than "knowing that." Use musical tasks as a means of teaching content.

Same and Different

Playing with good intonation is based both on a student's ability to listen to and adjust their own pitch, but also to adjust to others within the group. Matching individual pitches does not solve intonation problems, because intonation is contextual. However, matching pitches helps students to deter-

mine "same" and "different." The same thing works for rhythm.

Student Detective (aka, Find the Clunker)

The teacher plants an error in the orchestra, requiring the students to determine who is making the mistake and what the fix is. "Detective"—Problem: those F-naturals are still being missed by the 2nd violins and you've torn your hair out telling the students again and again that it's Low-2. Solution: have somebody else find the problem!

Students close their eyes and the teacher walks around the room choosing at least one (if not two or three) students to be the "mystery" player. The task, in this case, is for this student to play f-sharp when it's supposed to be f-natural. The rest of the students have to figure out whom you tapped. If they're right, that's great (you can reward them if you want). If students don't catch it the first time (and they often don't as they're learning how to listen within the ensemble), you may have to ask the person/people to play the mistake louder. Often what happens is that students who are the ones making the mistakes will self-correct quickly. Sometimes students will point out somebody who wasn't chosen, but still made the mistake. Oops! Finally, you'll often see students miss the person right next to them while they're looking for someone else in another section. This activity is a lot of fun! You can do the same thing for articulation, blend, balance, and so on.

Hide the Sound

Problem: so often we'll see that students sitting right next to each other are playing with completely different sense of pitch, intonation, or timbre. Why don't they hear it? Solution: they don't hear it because they aren't required to listen to it! Have two students play a single note until they sound exactly alike. One student serves as the model the other person has to adjust; then reverse the procedure. Have the whole section do the same thing. Eventually, you can include the whole orchestra. You can also

have the whole group evaluate whether or not the two players are actually matching. You'll discover who has good aural skills and who doesn't! The answers may surprise you!

Listen Backwards

Problem: the first chairs develop good leadership skills, but often tend to pay little or no attention to the players behind them. **Solution:** have the last stand in each section practice leading the group entrances or serve as the model for tone, color, interpretation, articulation, etc.

Shift the Burden (aka, The Student Becomes the Master)

Make every rehearsal meaningful by involving students in the decision-making process. During rehearsals, shift the onus for error detection, problem-solving, and interpretation on to the students. Prepares students to practice without the teacher/conductor. Show what should be by using outstanding models (live, recorded examples). Develop musical independence by allowing students to be independent.

Take the Podium (variation of Shift the Burden)

Students who struggle to hear the whole group or feel a rhythmic pulse take the podium and practice conducting to feel and sense how the whole group works together.

Diagnose and Prescribe (aka, The Musical Doctor)

When stopping in a rehearsal, ask students to identify a problem, ask them to identify both the symptom and any potential underlying cause. Have them provide a "prescription" to remedy the "illness." Use the prioritization list to determine where the problem is.

Guessing isn't Good Enough—How Do You Know It's Right?

Students explain the wrong answer and provide (preferably show) the correct solution.

Do First Things First

Make your rehearsal decisions based on the following priorities (in order): Technical Foundations, Tone Production, Rhythm/Meter/Tempo, Tonality/Notes/Intonation, Speed/Style/Interpretation.

Take the Lead

Problem: Students in the rear of the section tend to get overlooked or feel as if

their contribution isn't as important. The rear of the section or orchestra is the most difficult place to play from. **Solution:** By having different students model or lead the section, you'll find that the orchestra develops a much more unified sound. The players in the rear of the section tend to play with greater confidence and the front players tend to play with greater sensitivity. You may also have different sections (e.g., 1st violin, 2nd violin, viola, etc.) serve as the model for the overall group. This avoids over-reliance on the 1st violins.

Small Group/Big Group

Problem: Students can easily hide in larger ensembles. In some cases, they do so because of a lack of preparation. In other cases, it's because of a lack of confidence. As a result, the orchestra develops unevenly and lacks depth. **Solution:** Instead of running sectionals by instrument (e.g., 1st violin, 2nd violin, etc.) break the orchestra up into small chamber groups, with one or two students on a part. This can be done for a whole rehearsal, or you may just choose to do it for a short demonstration during the rehearsal. This really increases accountability and also helps students become more independent musicians.

On-Time at All Costs

Problem: students tend to go on "auto-pilot" while performing and lose sense of their section and/or the whole ensemble. **Solution:** Focus attention by having the director or other students intentionally play out-of-rhythm or clap out of time to distract the students. Results are usually very positive as students recognize what it takes to truly play in time.

Make it Wrong, Make it Right

Problem: students have difficulty understanding the problem (such as tension in the shoulders or arms, rushing a rhythm, playing out of tune, etc.). By exaggerating the error (making it worse) students become aware of the issue and can correct.

Standing Strings

Problem: Low Energy, poor playing mechanics. Have students (violins, violas, basses) play while standing, focusing on motion, higher energy.

Mixed Ensembles

Problem: Students get used to sitting in their own sections, hiding behind others,

depending on the leadership of others. Mix the instrument sections on a given rehearsal day, placing cellos in the violin section, violas with the basses and so on. This engages students in musical independence and deeper listening skills.

Dissect and Stack/Sequence and Stack

Treat the right-hand and left-hand as different instruments. Simply trying things more slowly may not help unless specific technical problems are first isolated. Use a variety of strategies such as "dissect-and-stack," "sequence-and-stack," to...

- Correct fundamental hand position/format
- Change rhythms to "unlearn" kinesthetic habits
- Change bowings (do it backwards)/fingerings
- Isolate the right hand/left hand
- Use technical helps (like the Amazing Slow Downer)
- Recombine (put back into context)
- Play it correctly. Remember that your performance will be the average of your practice. In music, "peaking" is not something to rely on.

Bonus Section (from Lemov, but used by many others)

Lemov, Doug (2010-03-04). *Teach Like a Champion: 49 Techniques that Put Students on the Path to College* (p. 150). John Wiley and Sons. Kindle Edition.

The Five Principles of Classroom Cultures

"Building a classroom culture that sustains and drives excellence requires mastering skills in five aspects of your relationships with students. These five aspects, or principles, are often confused and conflated. Many educators fail to consider the difference between them; others use the names indiscriminately or interchangeably. However, since you must be sure to make the most of all five in your classroom, it's worth taking a moment to distinguish them."

1. Discipline
2. Management
3. Control
4. Influence
5. Engagement (Entry Routines; Do Now; Tight Transitions)

Stephen Benham Ph.D. is Associate Dean and Associate Professor of Music Education, Duquesne University and ASTA President. He was the All-State featured presenter. †