

All-State: Connecting with Students; Teaching Rote First; Having Fun!

presented by Dr. Samuel Tsugawa — reported by Cassandra Herold

Our main presenter, Dr. Samuel Tsugawa, did an amazing job of keeping us engaged with a little playing and a little presenting. Taking a step back, I really feel that he had a few big themes: connecting with students in a variety of ways; teaching the skill by rote first (always, regardless of level); and have fun. I really get the strong impression that he truly loved being in the classroom, and had a deep enjoyment for what his work with students. He is no longer in a public school classroom, but still seems to have strong ties to that teaching piece.

I do a lot of rote teaching with my students. I found that our students struggle more with note reading than they did when I was first teaching. It seems that fewer families are taking on piano lessons, and I rarely have students coming into the program who have previous playing experience. Perhaps this is just what is happening currently in Stillwater, but the musical background that our students bring in means that we are adjusting our teaching to match. Learning skills by rote definitely helps my students focus less on interpreting the dots on the page, and perhaps more on their instrument posture and the sound that they are creating. Our students no longer receive a weekly lesson at elementary, so I am finding ways to make sure that they have the playing skills, but will maybe need more support when they enter middle school to develop the reading skills. We have discussed this as a staff, and it seems to make the most sense—attempting to cram the reading skills in results in deterioration in other areas, which is also no idea!

Establishing a routine culture of call and response in the classroom seems to be a good place to start. I have done this with scales and note patterns to practice moving the left hand fingers. I loved a little improvisation exercises that we did which involved the teacher playing eight open D string notes, the group echoed for a few rounds. Then, we were instructed that we could use both D and E, but that he was still going to do the “call” with open D. Right now, we (as the students) are improvising, and the environment is definitely low risk! He then added a variety of other little pieces: F♯, G, sniffs (rests), make up whatever rhythm,

use those notes but in the rhythm that he played, etc. What a fun way to get students improvising on their own—and they might not even know they are doing it, which decreases the worry level quite a bit!

For me, this kind of game also practices moving fingers, landing them in the correct place, and really helps students attach the note name to the finger that they are playing. I really want them all to not even have to think about how many fingers ‘G’ is when they want to play it. I have done call and response teaching for *Bile ’em Cabbage Down* and *Cripple Creek* regularly in the past, and I do find that it really solidifies those finger-note connections.

Dr. Tsugawa uses a variety of apps to help create some tracks for students to play along with, and he walked us through a few that he uses more frequently. Garage Band is able to create a variety of beatbox and drumbeats, as well as compose custom tracks with defined grooves or chord changes. This is a program generally found on all Apple computers, so should be easily accessible by a lot of teachers. AnyTune Pro+ can be used to “rip” songs from your iTunes library. You can then change the key and the tempo—this is great if you want to change the key of a song that students already know—perhaps you want to play *Twinkle* in a new key to establish new finger patterns. The third app that he suggested was iReal Pro. This app has hundreds of preset standard chord changes. You can also compose your own custom chord change, change keys tempos and styles. There is a cost for these second two apps, but if you plan to use these regularly in your teaching, it would be well worth the cost to purchase one or both of them.

The iReal Pro app would be very useful in teaching harmony for the fiddle tunes. He had an awesome way of doing this. Students first really need to know the tune well—they sing it first, he chunks it up for teaching and they eventually have the entire tune down well. Then, the teacher needs a little theory knowledge to know what the primary chords in the song are. Let’s say the song starts in D. Play this note, and assign it a “1.” Then play the other root note of the chord, maybe an E — play this note, and

call it “2.” The labels have nothing to do with the theory knowledge, they are there only to help the students know when to switch—you can hold up finger numbers! You teach and play the arpeggios for the D and the E chords, and then you have students select a note from each arpeggio, and alternate between the arpeggios. They can hear some harmonic changes, but may not at this point understand what this all “means.”

He then had a slide with three different chord progressions on the board. We played all three (with the arpeggio notes that we had picked), while he played the fiddle tune. We were asked to select the progression that sounded the worst—he crossed that one off. Then, we played each progression again, with Dr. Tsugawa on melody—and he asked us to vote for which we liked better. He did not ever say who was right, but did let us know which line had the most votes. It was such a neat way to get students to listen to the harmonic progressions, and how important those progressions are in the fiddle tune. I will be on the lookout for ways that I can incorporate that type of listening into the student experience this year, because it really broke it down into a simple and very understandable form—even for young students.

I really loved the first presentation about teaching folk music—what a neat way to reach students and support them as human beings. Students were able to select their orchestra instrument, or he had students who learned ukulele, guitar, mandolin—so neat to see that students could pursue other passions. He had some fantastic singers! I likely cannot apply some of the more intense folk music options at the 5th grade level, but I definitely think that if I continue to incorporate call and response, but add in the harmonic listening and some easy improvisation, my colleagues at the middle level would be able to take the next steps to draw students even more into this great body of music.

Cassandra Herold teaches in the Stillwater School District and serves MNSOTA as President-Elect. ‡