



# ORCHESTRA

## The Power of Positive Relationships with Orchestra Students

by Dan Mollick

Who is the teacher you remember the most from when you were in school? What teacher had the most impact on your learning? My guess is that he or she was the teacher who connected with you on a personal level. This was probably a teacher who knew your name and showed that they cared about you.

One of my biggest priorities in the classroom has been to get to know my students. Honestly, this ranks up there with proper technique, bow holds and key signatures. When I first started teaching, I would start the school year by having orchestra students fill out a get-to-know you form. I'd ask questions like, "What's your favorite music outside school?" or "What's your favorite food?" The students would fill out the form and, after collecting them, I'd have 250-300 of them to look over. Inevitably, the school year would get away from me and I would barely scratch the surface of the information I had collected. After multiple years of reducing and editing my form, I realized that this wasn't working for me. I couldn't get to know students through a form during the busiest time of the year. Instead, I began to think of ways that I could get to know the students authentically through my own habits, teaching strategies and classroom activities.

In the study, *A Teacher Who Knows Me: The Academic Benefits of Repeat Student-Teacher Relationships* in the June 2018 issue of *Economics of Education Review*, the authors found "new empirical evidence that increased student-teacher familiarity improves academic achievement" and that "the effects are largest for minorities." As orchestra teachers, we see our students multiple years in a row and we can harness this power to develop deep, positive relationships with our students.

Here are 12 powerful strategies that have helped me build positive relationships with my orchestra students:

### 1. Use tuning time to connect with students.

As orchestra teachers, we have built-in time to "roam the room" for the first three

minutes or so and make light conversation with our students as they set up. I find that asking very specific questions works best (for example, avoiding yes/no answers). Ask about students' families, what they had for dinner last night, or what class they have before/after orchestra. You might also comment on a book they bring to class, or ask about stickers on their laptop, etc.

### 2. Be present.

I'm guilty of getting caught up in email and lesson planning between classes. Reminding myself to step away from the computer as students are coming into class is incredibly important. Many of us complain about students being glued to their devices but what model of behavior are we showing as teachers if we are staring at our screens when they enter our classroom?

### 3. Make yourself a valuable and visible staff member to other students in the school.

Many of us travel in our jobs and can barely get our classroom set up before it's time to leave and drive to the next building. Whatever you can do to make yourself a visible staff member in the school—do it! Say hi to students in the halls—even the ones you don't know. An example might be, "Hey, I don't know you: are you in a music class?" Take a moment to introduce yourself and ask them if they have any friends in orchestra class.

### 4. Embed rehearsal activities that help you get to know your students.

For example, when doing a scale as a canon I might say, "Those of you who were out of bed before 6 A.M. are the first group, those that woke up at 6:01 and after you are the second group." Think of 5-10 ideas you can use throughout the year and keep the list in your rehearsal folder so you can use them on the fly. Other ideas that have worked from me: favorite season, birthdays (divided into first part of the year, or in 3 groups, or in four groups), number of pets (none, one, and more than one—younger siblings don't

count), taste preference (sweet, salty, sour, spicy), messy room/clean room, love snow/hate snow, etc.

### 5. Ask around.

Having trouble getting to know one of your students? I recently realized that I knew absolutely NOTHING about one of my students. He didn't like to share much and avoided eye contact with me. I emailed some of his teachers and found out he loves playing baseball. We now have a great relationship when I talk about how in awe I am that he plays shortstop.

### 6. Review your seating charts.

Challenge yourself to look at your seating charts or rosters on a weekly basis and find 1-2 kids you haven't connected with. I need to remind myself that the kids that get all of the attention are the eager ones always raising their hands and the naughty kids constantly getting reprimanded. What about the quiet kids that come in but don't say a thing?

### 7. Use humor.

Kids love humor and as a teacher of middle school kids, I couldn't survive my day without a little humor. Humor, if used appropriately, can help break down walls and build trust. The stranger the better! Personally, my "go to" is to tell stories about how I have messed up things. One story I love to tell is how "I went to check the mail one morning, looked in the mailbox, and shut the mailbox on my nose because I forgot to remove my face before closing the mailbox." Students love to see a real person in front of them and will open up more when they feel less risk about "messing up."

### 8. Identify the strengths of students and use those strengths.

Email the art teacher a list of your students and ask who might be the best at designing a concert program cover or poster. Find out who loves public speaking and could announce a piece of music before you play it. Who are the computer gurus in the

class who can help out with editing the concert video? Who are the students who love to organize and can help out with filing music?

### **9. Teacher-led interviews.**

Take three minutes during rehearsal and interview a few random students about what they did or are going to do this weekend. Then give a group “pop quiz” to the class about what they learned.

### **10. Student-led interviews.**

Have students interview each other using three questions; I like to put these on the board. Ask both students to stand—and

this is key—the other student shares what they learned about their partner.

### **11. Ask, don’t tell.**

“Telling” can feel bossy and negative to some students. Instead of telling students what mistakes they made, ask them what mistakes they made. A great way to phrase this is, “If I told you one of those notes was wrong, can you tell me what note it was?”

### **12. Be yourself.**

Students love it when we are real people. I love to tell stories about a recent trip or what book I’m reading or what it was like when I was in middle school.

Taking the time to build relationships with students is key to academic success for students. Students who know that we care about them will trust us, work hard, and want to continue to be a part of our ensembles. What strategies have worked for you?

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