

Inside The Private Lesson

by Paul Buyer

While the private lesson often is considered the focal point of instrumental music programs, it remains flexible and ambiguous in terms of curriculum and instructional approaches. One constant has always been the relationship between teacher and student, which parallels that of player and coach. Students often decide what school to attend and who they want to “play for,” or study with, based on this relationship. Although many teaching philosophies exist in the applied studio, most seasoned profes-

sionals agree experience is the key to becoming an effective teacher, and the cumulative influence of our mentors is what forms our own personal teaching style.

Helping future music educators develop an effective approach to teaching private lessons is imperative. What are the tricks of the trade? How do we know what buttons to push, and what is our job during that weekly hour of one-on-one instruction?

Nine key areas—trust, goals, lesson assignments, practicing, lesson pacing, experiential learning, triple-channel learning, pushing the right buttons and the big picture—are integral to a successful applied music program.

lesson provides an opportunity to go beyond music studies and serves as a safety net for many students.

Competency and character are indispensable teacher qualities and lay the foundation for trust over the long term. Competency determines how much confidence students have in their teachers’ abilities. The greater the competency, the greater the trust, and the more it will grow. Character determines how much confidence students have in their teacher as a person. The stronger the character, the stronger the leadership, and the greater the trust.

We must keep in mind that each student is an individual, and developing trust may take longer with some students than with others. Trust also is earned by knowing when to talk and when to listen and through mutual respect.

Trust

“If a leader demonstrates genuine concern for others, competency and admirable character, people will follow.”

—T. Richard Chase

The first step toward earning a student’s trust is simply taking a genuine interest in the student as a person. Helping our students mature and develop in life, as well as in music, is one of our most challenging and important jobs as teachers. The private

Goals

Setting challenging, attainable goals is critical to a student’s success in a music program. Many students will have this in hand when they begin lessons, while others will need swift guidance in goal setting, as

Paul Buyer is assistant professor of music and director of percussion at Clemson University in South Carolina. He received D.M.A. and M.M. degrees from the University of Arizona in Tucson and a B.S. degree from Ball State University in Muncie, Indiana.



well as in time management and organization. Goals should be written down and discussed with the teacher, then followed up. A "goal sheet," containing daily, weekly, short-term, mid-term and long-term goals, can help the student identify and assess specific goals.

Lesson Assignments

Lesson assignments reflect the student's weekly goals and always should be written down. This helps the teacher as well as the student remember and retain key concepts covered in the previous lesson. Inexperienced students often have difficulty knowing how and what to practice; therefore, the lesson assignment sheet should be as specific as possible regarding musical material to be covered, specific page numbers to be practiced, techniques, tempos and so on.

Practicing

Assessing how much a student has practiced for his or her lesson can be challenging. In most cases, the student's confidence level and the accomplishments of the lesson assignment will help provide accurate feedback for the teacher. After working with a student for a short time, it will become clear if he or she is putting in the necessary practice time. Some students may require very specific practice guidelines, such as setting a goal to practice a certain number of hours a day or documenting practice sessions in a practice log. Students who have not developed a strong work ethic for practicing may need to be graded on their lesson each week based on their preparation.

One of the most important aspects of the private lesson is teaching students how to practice. For example, it is critical that students develop the ability to practice slowly. Careful, focused and conscientious practice ultimately will yield the best results when learning a new piece or developing a new technique. Utilizing mirrors and audio/video recording also are strongly recommended, as well as setting specific goals for each practice session. This is

extremely important for percussionists, who must organize their practice time to cover a variety of instruments.

Many students may need to be introduced to effective practice methods such as repetition, playing with a metronome, woodshedding and visualization. Additionally, teachers always should emphasize quality practice over quantity. Although nothing can replace the countless hours in the practice room, far too many students fail to develop a work ethic that yields a "performance" mentality. The practice room can be a very lonely place if one is not focused on accomplishing some serious work.

Practicing is an area in which sports and music have a lot in common. As in sports, there are no shortcuts to success, and there is no substitute for hard work. The best players are often the hardest workers, and they practice the same way they perform. To them, it is the only way they know how to work, and they believe anything worth doing is worth doing well.

Lesson Pacing

Effective teachers are excellent time managers, possessing the ability to balance each lesson between performance and feedback of the previously assigned material with the introduction of new material for the next lesson. It must be the student's responsibility to warm up and set up prior to the lesson, and teachers should schedule lessons accordingly. Variables such as starting late, phone calls, instrument set-up or other interruptions should be eliminated, as they affect lesson pace. Teachers also should pace an individual student's progress in preparation for master classes, recitals and other performance opportunities.

It often is necessary and beneficial for applied teachers to prepare themselves prior to teaching lessons. This preparation might include score study, getting acquainted with a method book, researching a topic, listening to a recording, warming up or learning part of a piece a student is working on.

Experiential Learning

In his book, *The Inner Game of Golf*, Timothy Gallwey defines education as a process of "leading out" and indicates "the potential intelligence sought already exists within us and needs to be drawn out. This drawing out by a teacher, a system or an environment is the primary function of true education." In other words, a true educator is not one who feeds information to students, but one who acts as a facilitator of learning. In this respect, a teacher's primary job is to guide the student's awareness to what is happening and then provide feedback. According to Gallwey, just as children learn how to walk and balance themselves on a bicycle, "Experience itself is the primary teacher, and each individual must learn to learn directly from his or her own personal experience." This is contrary to what most students expect from a teacher, as most students "feel cheated if the instructor doesn't tell them what they're doing wrong and what they should be doing."

Triple-Channel Learning

One of our goals as teachers is to develop in our students the ability to teach themselves. According to C.P. Bedford, "You can teach a student for that day, but if you can teach him to learn by creative curiosity, he will continue the learning process as long as he lives." As educators, our primary job within the private lesson is to make the student realize what is happening. How do we do this? By providing visual, auditory and kinesthetic (VAK) cues, students will automatically become aware of what is happening when they play. Once a student becomes cognizant of these "channels," he or she then can continue to notice and pay attention to them when practicing alone. Many students who have yet to develop this ability become dependent on the teacher and often progress at a slower rate. Students can accomplish a great deal on their own if they know what to look, listen and feel for when they are playing.

A good example of how to use triple-channel learning in applied percussion can

Quotes to Live By

The following list of inspirational quotes can help teachers motivate students in the right situation:

"Don't think you can make up for [taking it easy in practice] by working twice as hard tomorrow. If you have it within your power to work twice as hard, why aren't you doing it now?"

"Failing to prepare is preparing to fail."

—John Wooden

"Ask yourself if what you're doing today is getting you closer to where you want to be tomorrow."

—Anonymous

"You can't make a great play until you first do it in practice."

—Chuck Knoll

"In order to do great things, you must deserve them."

—Rick Pitino

"Obstacles are what you see when you take your eyes off your goal."

—Anonymous

"The greatest accomplishment is not in never falling, but rising after you fall."

—Vince Lombardi

"Motivation gets you going—habits get you there."

—John Maxwell

"You cannot push anyone up the ladder unless he is willing to climb a little."

—Andrew Carnegie

"Are you here for something to do, or are you here to do something?"

—Jeff Janssen

"Excellence is not a singular act. You are what you repeatedly do."

—Shaquille O'Neal

be demonstrated in basic snare drum stroke development. Assuming the student is using a proper snare drum grip, the most fundamental approach to learning is simply by imitation. This "monkey-see, monkey-do" approach works well for many students and requires very little effort. Simply have the student imitate the teacher's strokes on the snare drum, first with the right hand and then with the left. Without any mention of concepts such as rebound, relaxation or wrist pronation, many students will be able to execute this physical skill. For the students who have not developed a good full stroke, the next step is to venture into the world of triple-channel learning.

To tap into the visual learning channel, use a mirror. The student's visual goal is to have both sticks look the same when playing. Visual cues occur when both sticks are played at the same height and both wrists are moving in the same manner—matched grip. The teacher's instructions may be something along this line: "Watch your sticks. Notice how high your right stick is compared to your left. What do you see?" As the student watches his sticks in the mirror, he will respond to the visual feedback and adjust his stick height until it is even. Playing strokes with both hands simultaneously will provide excellent feedback. In addition, stick height also will determine volume, which transfers to a student's awareness of auditory learning.

To tap into the auditory learning channel, play on a drum, a table, the floor or a timpano. Although it is possible to hear differences on a practice pad, some students may need stronger auditory feedback. The auditory goal is to have both hands sound the same when playing. The teacher may say, "[Close your eyes.] Listen to the sound of your right hand compared to your left. What do you hear?" It is important the student has a concept of the sound he or she is trying to produce; this can be demonstrated by the teacher. As the student strives to produce the desired sound, he or she will alter grip tension and degree of rebound. Having the student explore several different grip tensions while

listening to the resulting sounds also will provide excellent auditory feedback and transfer to a student's awareness of kinesthetic learning.

The kinesthetic channel may be the most valuable in instrumental music because of its physical nature. Most instrumentalists, especially percussionists, learn to play kinesthetically, also known as "muscle memory." The kinesthetic goal in developing the stroke is to have both hands feel the same when playing. Rebound will be the primary feedback when focusing on the stroke kinesthetically, as well as to what extent the arm, wrist and fingers are incorporated. The teacher may say, "[Close your eyes.] See if you can feel the rebound of the stick as it comes off the head. On a scale of one to five with five being the highest, to what degree are your wrists moving?" As the student strives to produce the desired sensations, he or she also will notice the differences in sound, as well as stick height. In triple-channel learning, all three channels eventually work together.

Each individual has a dominant way of learning, whether visual, auditory or kinesthetic, and may use the other two channels to a varied extent. For applied lessons to be productive, the teacher must discover which channel is most dominant in each student.

Pushing the Right Buttons

Regis Philbin, host of television's "Who Wants to be a Millionaire," is a master at pushing the right buttons with his contestants. While the show's environment, rules, time-span and context remain the same each night, Regis treats each "hot seat" contestant differently and personalizes each million-dollar round. How does he do this? He gets to know his contestants, asks them questions, calls them by name, develops a rapport, talks to them about their jobs and families, encourages and assures them, and appeals to their strengths and areas of interest.

He connects with new people many times a week, in a very short time period,

and with people he may never see again. Regis never lets the repetitive nature of hosting the show affect his positive attitude and unparalleled enthusiasm.

Pushing the right buttons is about getting people to respond. If Regis can do it with virtual strangers, applied teachers can do it with their students. Three approaches work well in a private lesson: Call students by name; ask them directed questions; and look them straight in the eye when speaking to them. Knowing which buttons to push involves instilling confidence, communicating clearly, providing positive feedback, support and encouragement, being patient, honest and direct, and, if necessary, throwing down the hammer.

For years, sports has featured myriad personalities, motivational philosophies and button-pushing methods from the fear and intimidation of Bobby Knight, Bill Parcells and Woody Hayes, to the nurturing, father-like approaches of Joe Torre, John Wooden and Tom Osborne. Whatever the approach, the infectious enthusiasm of a dynamic and passionate leader will motivate everyone around.

The Big Picture

The job market in any field can be extremely competitive, especially upon graduation. In his book, *Values of the Game*, Bill Bradley states, "If you're not practicing, just remember—someone, somewhere, is practicing, and when you two meet, given roughly equal ability, he will win." It is important for our students to stay focused on the big picture throughout their music education. In other words, students must prepare themselves to compete for auditions, scholarships, graduate assistantships and jobs with students from across the country—not just from their own music school. They must learn to look beyond that which is taking place within their own environment and evaluate how they stack up. Looking outside one's own program requires maturity and perspective and is an important part of seeing the big picture.

Becoming involved in professional

music organizations on both state and national levels also is part of this broad perspective. These organizations bring the music profession together through journals, newsletters, conventions and Internet resources. Finally, being well versed in all music, not just one's primary area, is important. Inspiring our students to become musicians and not just percussionists, violinists and clarinetists will help our art form continue to flourish in the years to come.

The instrumental music profession is a community of friends, colleagues, teachers and students sharing a common bond. Our art form continues to reach new heights, and the caliber of our students, teachers and composers, not to mention our industry and pedagogy, has grown tremendously. To continue to evolve in music education, we must teach, train, prepare and nurture our students with a purpose. Many of these "values of the game" are instilled behind closed doors, inside the private lesson.

AMT

RESOURCES

1. Bradley, Bill. *Values of the Game*. New York: Broadway Books, 1998.
2. Finkel, Leonard; quote by C.P. Bedford. *The Secrets of the Game of Golf and Life*. Successories, Inc. 1997.
3. Gallwey, Timothy. *The Inner Game of Golf, Revised Edition*. New York: Random House, 1998.
4. Hetzel, George; quote by Chuck Knoll. *The Coaches' Little Playbook*. Nashville, Tennessee: Cumberland House, 1996.
5. Lombardi, Vince. *Winning is a Habit*. New York: HarperCollins Books, 1997.
6. Maxwell, John C.; quotes by T. Richard Chase and Andrew Carnegie. *Leadership 101*. Tulsa, Oklahoma: Honor Books, 1997.
7. Torre, Joe. *Joe Torre's Ground Rules For Winners*. New York: Hyperion, 1999.
8. Wooden, John and Steve Jamison. *Wooden*. Lincolnwood, Illinois: Contemporary Books, 1997.