



Running a Positive Teaching Studio

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Full time, permanent playing positions are these days very hard to find, so most music graduates find themselves needing to earn a supplementary income in some other way. Many decide that teaching those skills they have spent so long acquiring is a good use of all that training.

However, just being able to play your instrument well doesn't necessarily equip you for teaching it to children and teenagers. Acquiring some understanding of pedagogical and educational principles will be of enormous assistance in ensuring a successful career as an instrumental teacher.

Any study of education will involve some aspects of psychology, and I find this a particularly interesting side of my teaching practice. Fortunately the days of classroom teachers teaching with the cane, and piano teachers who used rulers on fingers that made mistakes are long gone! These days positive reinforcement is standard practice in classrooms around the country and should also be used in all music studios too.

Positive Reinforcement is not always easy to give during the average music lesson. So often what a student has practised is incorrect, or not of a high enough standard. Dynamics are missing, notes and rhythms are incorrect, bowing is all tangled up, intonation is poor, and often very little practise has been done. How do teachers manage to find anything to positively reinforce in lessons like this?

Another factor that makes positive reinforcement difficult to produce in every lesson, is students who come into the lesson overwhelmed with worries about their studies, their friends and families, which combine to give them a sense of low self-esteem.

Instrumental teachers often have to work very hard to find tiny positives to complement their students with, in order to encourage their students to feel positive enough to start getting things right. Once a positive atmosphere is established students seem to make much faster progress, which becomes self-motivating.

The old adage 'Look after the pennies and the pounds look after themselves' is a most appropriate analogy for practice. Work on the small sections and before long most of the piece is learnt. When students are feeling positive about even small amounts of progress, they practise much more effectively and achieve greater goals sooner.

Fortunately there are many strategies that can be used to create a positive atmosphere in the private music studio and classroom.

Never Accept Negative Statements from students about their playing or any other issue. Always help them to find a more positive way of expressing themselves.

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Marks Out of Ten Barry Green's wonderful idea of asking students to mark themselves out of ten for what they have just played enables the student to learn to listen to what they play and impartially assess various aspects of their work (Gallwey 1986). By doing this over days, weeks and months they gain a solid sense of their own achievements, which enables them to feel positive and motivated about their practice and performances. They learn to mark individual aspects of their playing like intonation, bow usage, vibrato, phrasing, or holistically for the whole piece.

Small Rewards Do you know anyone who doesn't appreciate recognition of achievement?

Small stickers are great rewards for all sorts of achievement. Students love to see them adorning their lesson notebook, recording the success of completing a piece, or for mastering some aspect of technique.

I also reward extra-curricular achievements like sporting wins and great marks in assessments, to let the student know that I share their joy in any of their successes. A useful bonus from taking an interest in their other activities is that it can offer you ideas for analogies that they will understand when you are trying to explain some new concept to the student (Stambor 2006).

Developing Performance Skills Learning to perform is another indispensable part of a musical education. Students only learn these skills by performing regularly and by observing other students performances too. They quickly come to the realisation that focused practise is necessary and also the very grounding understanding that complete perfection is not possible. They learn the extra skills required to play with an accompanist, the great importance of reliable intonation and rhythm, and the importance of tone production and phrasing in order to be heard over the accompaniment and to engage the audience. Most importantly they learn the invaluable, lifelong skills of managing performance anxiety. Learning to get 'into the zone' at will is a tremendously useful skill which can be used in many aspects of life outside of musical performance.

I run student concerts, complete with yummy afternoon tea, at the end of every term. Students then have a focus for their practise, develop confidence when performing, and also have a party to celebrate their success, or to console them if their performance isn't up to their own PB.

Personal Development

Learning to play an instrument well is a very long term business. Over all those years a teacher can develop a deep understanding of each student and their families, and often the music teacher is one of the few adults outside their family, that the student has a close relationship with. If the study of that instrument has been a positive experience for the student, then a sense of trust develops between the student and the teacher.

In the teen years life is often quite turbulent for students, with great highs and lows, stresses from many sources, and often a lack of confidence and self-esteem. If a sense of trust has been developed between the student and their teacher, then the teacher can support the student through many of these rough patches, and the confidence they have

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acquired though playing their instrument can be more easily transferred into other situations. For example, presenting a speech or doing an exam is just like giving a performance, doing assignments is often very much like learning a new piece of music – work at it in small sections until it gradually comes together.

Being able to play an instrument also offers teenagers a valuable outlet for all those emotions. How wonderful it is to be able to play that tragically sad piece when you are feeling sad, or that bubbly effervescent piece when you are riding on high. It feels especially satisfying to play those wonderful turbulent pieces when life isn't going your way too!

Laughter

Laughter and humour are powerful tools to use in any teaching situation. I have long felt that the best lessons always contain a laugh or giggle (2016). Many scientific studies of laughter have demonstrated that laughter defuses anxiety, decreases stress hormones such as serum cortisol, increases the sense of social cohesion between participants and activates the Dopamine Reward System (Stambor 2006, Henderson 2015). Of course the humour has to be at an appropriate level for the student, never sarcastic or derogatory, and appropriate to the situation (Stambor 2006).

It is also very helpful to let the student see how much you are enjoying interacting with them in their lesson.

'When you show students that you are having a blast while teaching, students are much more likely to feed their own passion and excitement into the class.' - Jonathon Branfman (Branfman 2018)

Post Cards and Fridge Magnets

These days there are countless positive sayings available to anyone who seeks them. I have postcards of these all around my studio, and my students enjoy them and find them helpful.

If you think you can, you can, if you think you can't, you're right. *Henry Ford*

Shoot for the moon. Even if you miss, you'll land among the stars... *Unknown*

Whatever you are, be a good one. *Abraham Lincoln*

When nothing goes right, go left! *Hallmark*

Stop wishing, start doing! *Wordsup!*

Always wear your invisible crown. *M.I.L.K.*

Be a voice. Not an Echo! *Wordsup!*

Happiness isn't having the best, it is making the best of everything. *Hallmark*

Keep Calm and Carry On! *Bluebell33*

I CAN I WILL I DID! *Laurie Lawrence Australian Olympic Swimming Coach*

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