



Teaching Bowing Skills - Pirates to Bicycles!

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Fun Ideas for Teaching Flexible Bowing Skills from Beginners to Higher Grade Players

Using games and real life visual analogies when teaching keeps your lessons entertaining and enables the students to easily remember what they worked on during their lessons. Having a store of multiple analogies for each technique maximizes your chances of finding one to suit all of your students, whatever their experience or interests.

Captain Bent-Thumb's Pirate Bow Hold Games – See my Poster – Captain Bent-Thumb's Pirate Bow Hold

Establishes a well-balanced bow hand right from the start.

Hold the bow with a soft pencil grip attached near the balance point while the student establishes the placement of the fingers on the bow. Gradually move the pencil grip back towards the frog as the student's hand becomes more comfortable and secure. (Some small student bows are so heavy that I leave the hand and pencil grip slightly forward of the frog. This enables them to maintain their lovely balanced hand, complete with the bent thumb they had developed further up the bow).

Up-Bow Staccato, Down-Bow Staccato, Portato and Hook Stroke

Squeeze and release the stick like putting small dabs of toothpaste onto your toothbrush.

Pinch and lean on the bow repeatedly and let it spring back.

Wiggle fingers and thumb like a beetle's legs – 'Bertie Beetle'

Tonal Development - Riding a Bicycle

Riding a bicycle is an activity which almost everyone has done, and which has surprising similarities with using a cello bow really well.

Your natural weight is on the seat = use natural arm weight when bowing

The seat is not too low = elbow is not too low or shoulders slumped

The bicycle is pointing straight ahead – the bow is straight on the string

Hold the handle bars loosely in order to be able to move fingers to operate the gears, brakes and bell = hold the bow gently so that fingers can move for articulation and smooth bow and string changes.

Suspension forks smooth out the bumps in the path = fingers remain flexible.

Arms are loose and free to move, in order to steer the bike and even just keep it going in a straight line = arm needs to be loose and free in order to keep the bow straight and use the whole bow.

Body weight shifts from side to side for cornering, and moves forward and backward when tackling hills = body weight moves from side to side when bowing, torso rotates when changing from high to low strings, weight moves forward when using upper half of the bow on the higher strings.

Riding a bike can be lots of fun = Playing the cello should be lots of fun too!

Relax and enjoy!

Other useful analogies include:-

Waterfall – from the top of the shoulder to the fingers should be a continuous falling line, like a waterfall. The weight needs to be able to travel right down the arm to the stick, unimpeded by an elbow or wrist that is too low. You don't want the weight to stop at the wrist or a low elbow, it won't make it down to the stick!

When the waterfall is working well it is much easier to maintain a flexible bent thumb. The biomechanics of the arm, wrist and hand dictate that it is extremely hard to bend the thumb if the wrist or elbow are lower than the hand when using the upper half of the bow. An elbow that is slightly higher than the wrist when playing in the upper half of the bow also enables the player to attain a much bigger sound.

Demonstrate the posture you want, and then copy the posture of the student. Ask the student to look at you and tell you where the weight is? Then ask them to correct your posture/arm/hand? Get the student to try it both ways and when they have it right ask them how it feels. They almost always say it feels more comfortable! Well then, why do it the uncomfortable way?

Sit Up Tall, Feet Flat! – The term 'Sit up straight' usually produces a very military posture which is not helpful when playing a cello. 'Sit up tall' produces the lengthened seated posture which works well for playing the cello. It gets the shoulders up and back into a useful ergonomic position from where the bow can be freely used, and the left arm and shoulder are free to move also. The torso is also not locked and is therefore free to move and rotate as needed.

See-Saw – Hold the bow at the balance point (or hold a pen) using the thumb and 2nd and 3rd fingers as the pivot point or fulcrum. Then apply weight with either the 1st or 4th fingers to make it move, like a see-saw. This simple game demonstrates the way the weight transfers across the hand when travelling from the heel to the point and back.

Paintbrush Technique – A new paintbrush and an old stiff one illustrate this style of bow hand use perfectly!

Bags of Flour & Rockets to the Moon – These two wonderful games were created by Sheila Nelson [1].

Bags of Flour is for developing a sense of weight into the bow through flexible fingers with Down Bow strokes.

Rockets to the Moon is used for Up Bow strokes. It also demonstrates the see-saw idea brilliantly.

The Supermarket Trolley – Irene Sharp [2] had a great analogy of a supermarket trolley with one dead wheel being just as difficult to use as having one stiff joint when trying to use a bow.

She also had a saying which I have never found an exception to -

Move Well

To

Play Well

Get to Know your Student

Those short conversations we all have with students at the beginnings and ends of lessons can be a very useful source of information about the student. Use this knowledge of your students to create appropriate, inspiring and entertaining analogies for the new techniques they will need to learn, so that they can become the expressive players they aspire to be.

References

[1] Sheila Nelson – Austa String Workshop, 23rd-24th March 1997, Hobart

[2] Irene Sharp – Austa National Conference 1993, Canberra