

A Teaching Philosophy

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The very fields of pedagogy or teacher education are, too often, significantly devalued in many quarters of the academy. Yet, the best implications taken from these fields have much to offer all who teach, or who wish to communicate with an audience. Master teachers do not simply emerge; they hone and refine their practice over time. Improved teaching at the collegiate and graduate school level is especially important as the proportion of students entering tertiary education continues to broaden, and as students come from a wider variety of prior educational experiences.

The work of a master teacher might be best compared to a skilled musical improvisation. Many outside the music profession view improvisation as an act largely devoid of preparation, rooted in the heat of the moment and the nebulous concepts of “inspiration” or “talent”. While both improvisation and good teaching are (hopefully) inspired, may reflect some amount of innate skill, and can certainly appear spontaneous, there is much more, often invisible to the casual observer, to both of these processes.

An experienced improviser creates a seemingly spontaneous performance by drawing, consciously and unconsciously, on a deep knowledge of the conventions, standards, practices, and giants of at least one musical practice, along with the embodied knowledge (skills) which comes from many hours practicing improvisation. Spontaneity is enabled through inculturation and hours of preparation. Even doing something revolutionary requires a thorough knowledge of that against which you revolt.

Similarly, a skilled teacher has planned carefully, but perceives what is happening in the classroom, quickly adjusting their actions in response to students’ needs, struggles, interests, or concerns. One of my own teachers, the music education philosopher David Elliott, describes this ability, which he calls “educatorship”, well. He defines it as “the flexible, situated knowledge that allows one to think-in-action....Music teachers....are reflective practitioners who can think-in-action and know-in-action in relation to highly complex and fluid teaching-learning situations.” (Elliott 1995, p. 252). This ability requires deep content knowledge, a sophisticated understanding of how human beings learn, and knowledge about the teacher’s students—all factors which require the teacher to learn and grow on an ongoing basis. The wider your repertoire, the more flexible you are.

For me, substantial advance planning is vital. As I begin planning a course, I invest a great deal of time attempting to articulate my expectations. What skills and knowledge will my students learn, what experiences will allow them to construct this knowledge or develop these skills, and, most importantly, why should they care about this content? Of what use will it be to them? What will “stick?” What has the potential to transform them, as musicians, as educators, as humans? I tend to write very detailed syllabi, fully understanding that they will often change substantially according to the needs of my students; sometimes, I issue two or even three revised schedules of classes and assignments, or scrap the schedule altogether. Yet, the advance planning is still valuable, even if much of it is discarded.

Planning is only one side of the equation; knowledge of, and relationships with, your students are as invaluable. Changes in the class, whether small, large, instinctual or premeditated, and whether executed on a moment’s notice or after careful premeditation, are informed by my sense of

my students' identities and needs. I have been fortunate, in my career thus far, to work largely within institutions that understand the importance of building trusting and authentic student–teacher relationships, and to teach relatively small classes. This process of getting to know students is always valuable, and it is vital in the urban public schools I served for almost a decade. This process begins on the first day of class, and occurs through informal conversations, class discussion, and, at times, a written questionnaire. This process requires that I establish a safe and supportive environment, and that I exhibit a certain degree of vulnerability, just as I am asking my students to do. I believe that truly satisfying music making must take place in an authentic and healthy community, and I hope that my classroom can serve as one such community. In 2020, we have all seen how important connection and relationships are, as we have tried to create a satisfying educational experience for our students amid the opportunities and barriers presented by videoconferencing technology. Even the finest online instruction is a poor substitute for the classroom community all of us miss. Such connections are even more important if we seek to diversify our student body; research from PreK-12 education tells us that school-dependent PreK-12 students require a positive relationship with the teacher as a prerequisite for effective learning. Connection and care is not optional.

Choice of teaching method carries powerful implications for student learning, and often carries ideological baggage. While I find overreliance on lecture or textbook reading problematic, and reject the flawed “banking” model of education described by Friere (1970), I take a positive but skeptical approach to the dogmas of progressive education. For me, teaching well does not require unquestioned reliance on, or avoidance of, any single teaching method: lecture, discussion, demonstration, practicum, projects, cooperative groups—I employ some, any, or all of these tools, depending on the needs of the students and the nature of the material being taught. In my experience, students are hungry for ownership, autonomy and choice, but also hungry for structure, guidance, and direction. Balancing these two impulses is one of the central challenges I face as a teacher. This balance partially depends on students' current skill and knowledge level, since cognitive psychology shows us that novices in a domain learn quite differently from experts. I must not abdicate my responsibility to help students obtain or further develop their knowledge and skills, but, in order to accomplish that goal, I must know when I need to lead, when I need to follow, and when I need to get out of the way.

I believe that music students and pre-service music educators must be trained to be more flexible, broad-minded, and innovative than they were in the past, and I hope to produce autonomous, adult musicians who have the desire, drive, integrity, work ethic, and skills to make their way in music throughout their lives. The unexamined assumptions that lie behind conservatory culture must be examined and some of our cherished traditions must be recast for a new age. Achieving this outcome, as a teacher, depends on my having the thorough preparation and extreme flexibility that characterizes both master teachers and master improvisers.