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# Piano Pedagogy: Ear, Body, Eye, and Intellect

ARLENE STEFFEN

I did not want to be a piano teacher. I had delusions of grandeur in the world of high school choral music. But while working on an undergraduate degree, I landed in the piano studio of a nationally known teacher. He talked me into taking the course Introduction to Piano Pedagogy. This involved many hours every week: two hours of lecture, one hour of group observation, 30 minutes of private lesson observation, and preparing and teaching two 30-minute private lessons. There was also reading, written assignments, journals, and exams, all for two units of credit. After teaching the first lesson, I was hooked. In the years since, I have earned a graduate degree, developed significant experience in the piano teaching profession, and become a teacher of teachers. Becoming independent forced me to develop unique ideas and processes; teaching someone else how to teach made me reflect on my own learning processes and increased my awareness of how I do what I do during each piano lesson. I also evaluate the successes and failures of my work. This is quite humbling: just when you think you know just about every way there is to do something, a new problem presents itself and you have to reach deep down to analyze and troubleshoot. As Mad Eye Moody of Harry Potter lore says, “Constant vigilance!”

I consider the most important part of pedagogy to be the students, not the subject matter. I try to be aware that I am not just teaching piano, or even teaching music; I am teaching people, people who have feelings and myriad ways of processing information. A teacher must be able to figure out how each student’s mind works; how that student’s perception and experience play together. A teacher must engage students where they are and take them forward. Often there are things other than the task at hand that need attention—personal, spiritual, or intellectual. Pedagogy starts with understanding yourself as a teacher, thereby providing a frame of reference for guiding students.

Student teachers develop this understanding in several ways. First, they must experience good teaching models, starting with their own piano lessons.

Second, student teachers must observe additional examples of excellence in

teaching. My approach is one path; other teachers have different styles and methods. When students observe other teachers in action, it provides incredible material for discussion about the “how” and “why” of any given lesson. Students start thinking about process, they learn about interpersonal communication, they become familiar with a wide variety of teaching materials, and they see what does or does not work. They also see how a teacher adapts to what the student has prepared and how problems are approached.

Third, students themselves must teach; they must have this experience. Role playing in the classroom only gets you so far. Real life lessons involve thoughtful planning. Interaction with children makes student teachers think on their feet and get their heads out of the theoretical and into the practical. I learned the importance of this with my very first student. Not only was the student developmentally delayed, but her mother was terminally ill and died during our third month of lessons. I quickly learned that piano lessons were not always about learning how to play the keyboard, and sometimes it did not even matter how much I knew; rather how much I listened. This student also taught me the importance of patience. During her first year and a half of lessons it seemed like we were constantly starting from scratch. It turned out to be a real-life demonstration of child development on the far end of the scale.

Fourth, students must reflect on the successes and failures of both the lessons they observe and the lessons they teach. If there is no evaluation, there can be no plan for moving forward. It is just as important for students to note successes as mistakes. My own teacher often said success breeds success, and that it was important to constantly look for ways to acknowledge the accomplishments of our students. Evaluation must not, however, come only from the teacher; students must learn to evaluate their own teaching.

One of the most valuable assignments in the pedagogy class is the creation of a plan for a student’s first lesson. Students re-do the assignment every week for at least four weeks before they actually teach the lesson. It is quite difficult the first time around. Most students have never thought about what a pupil should be able to do or how to prepare them to work on an assignment, for the most part independently, at home. This is a daunting task. I still find it so after 27 years! Young

teachers, for example, tend to talk too much. They think that teaching is about imparting information but it is really more about leading students through their own personal discovery of the musical language.

Lessons revolve around the experiences of those being taught. What experiences must a student have to learn and retain the new music language they are learning? For example, a child does not need to know—at the first lesson—that a quarter note looks like a big black dot with a stick attached to its side and that it gets one beat. The child must first experience the steady beat through singing, moving, clapping, imitating, game-playing. Creating a frame of reference through the ear and the body is a crucial first step. Only after a child can consistently produce a steady beat in song and movement is he or she ready to understand a visual representation of it (the note's symbol) and its name (quarter note). We give it a name simply so we have a way to talk to each other about it. In music learning, the process involves hearing, doing, seeing, and naming: ear/body/eye/intellect.

This process can identify the student's strengths and weaknesses. Some children have a better ear for music than others; some are better coordinated, some grasp picture patterns more easily, and yet others have quick minds. All of these are necessary skills and none can be ignored. When student teachers learn to follow the process of ear/body/eye/intellect, they can define the student's learning style as well as their own.

When teaching others to teach, I consistently re-work the process, giving students a way to use what they know as a framework for planning and evaluation. When they have a framework, they can be more creative. The structure acts as a foundation upon which they can adapt activities and assignments to suit the needs and strengths of each of their own students. This is true in all academic areas: a flexible structure allows a teacher to use many different methods of delivery (lecture, discussion, activities, visual aids) to reach individual students.

This process is also useful as a means of studying various curricula. It makes it easier to track the development of concepts and to spot inconsistencies. In my classes, students become thoroughly acquainted with one curriculum and then study others for comparison. They learn how to make decisions about concept flow, musical interest, graphic impact, physical requirements, and general appeal,

all things that require them to consider the children they will teach and how much extra work they might have to do to achieve success.

Teaching others to teach is an important responsibility. As I reflect on my own experiences as a student teacher, I am grateful for the efforts and sheer volume of time professors invested in me. They taught by example and they blazed a trail. Those are big shoes to fill. My former teacher, upon receiving a lifetime achievement award, cited two lessons he learned from his parents: work hard, and give to others. That is what teaching requires.

I continue to look for ways to expand and enhance my pedagogical skills. Most often change is precipitated by my own students. To teach is to learn.