

Attitude Development: An Idea Whose Time Has Come

Dr. Tim Lautzenheiser

What life means to us is determined not so much by what life brings to us as by the attitude we bring to life; not so much by what happens to us as by our reaction to what happens. —Lewis Dunning

The word “attitude” often has a negative connotation. When we say a student “has an attitude” it is generally interpreted as a description of a less-than-favorable disposition displayed by the individual-in-question. In truth, everyone has an “attitude,” perhaps the key is to identify it with a descriptive adjective; a healthy attitude, a positive attitude, an agreeable attitude, etc.

We all want our students to display a healthy, positive, and agreeable attitude. Teacher stress (even teacher burn-out) is closely related to dealing with attitude problems. In most cases we are properly prepared to teach the curricular information, but regrettably an inordinate amount of time is spent dealing with other facets of the teaching agenda; student discipline, group focus, behavior problems, and classroom management. In essence we are always working to upgrade the group dynamics by dealing with students’ attitudes. Developing the students’ skills and talents required to achieve excellence (in any facet of learning) is a result of creating a climate that reflects a safe, challenging, and encouraging atmosphere.

So how do we go about making this happen? What are key ingredients needed to establish a positive learning climate? What can each of us do to contribute to attaining this educational goal?

Many people think the answers are a reflection of the systemic template; shifting the schedule, the classroom, the curriculum, the expectations, and so forth. While all of these certainly might play an

important role in establishing the ideal learning conditions, there is one area we know will have an immediate impact on the classroom/rehearsal room setting; it is the attitude of the teacher.

In the words of noted author, educator,

philosopher Haim Ginnot: “I have come to the frightening conclusion that I am the decisive element in the classroom. It is my personal approach that creates the climate. It is my daily mood that makes the weather. As a teacher I possess a tremendous power to make a tool of torture or an instrument of inspiration. I can

humiliate or humor, hurt or heal. In all situations, it is my response that decides whether a crisis will be escalated or de-escalated and a child humanized or de-humanized.”

The collective attitude of the students is, according to Mr. Ginnot, a reflection of the attitude of the teacher; that being the case we can alter the classroom atmosphere by shifting our own approach, our demeanor, and our ATTITUDE.

A master teacher once shared this bit of wisdom with me; it came at a particularly dismal time in a seemingly endless semester. I was fussing about the students, the administration, the parents, and even my colleagues. In my desperate plea for his guidance and help, this wise mentor asked me, “Do you want me to tell you what you want to hear, or do you want me to tell you the truth?” Of course I opted for the truth, not knowing what a painful yet powerful wake-up call he was above to deliver. He smiled and replied, “If you truly want to make a positive impact on the lives of your students, you constantly ask yourself, ‘If everyone in the class is just like me,

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what kind of group will it be?” The sting of his honesty jolted and bruised my ego, but it also offered a clear and concise solution to my self-inflicted plight. In other words we cannot always control the various aspects of the educational system, but we do have control of our attitude; to that end, we have a tremendous influence on our students.

While there is no quick answer to maintaining a positive attitude we can certainly integrate the following action-plan to bolster our own approach to our teaching agenda.

- ***Develop a pro-active response by embracing the notion of change.***

It is human nature to be skeptical (even cynical) about anything requiring a shift in habits. Avoid the pattern of instant reaction (often negative) by substituting a perspective of pro-action. Ask yourself, “What benefits can we garner by embracing the suggested changes.” The exercise of re-focusing your mind on the growth possibilities will avoid the defensive reaction

associated with any kind of change.

- ***Avoid conversations/ environments dwelling on the problems and shortcomings of the school environment.***

This is not to suggest we ignore some of the unpleasantness of the profession, however we can sidestep the conversations where the focal point is a negative commentary. Become solution-oriented rather than problem-oriented. Use problems as an opportunity to generate a creative solution. Choose to affiliate with the colleagues who are excited and passionate about their life’s mission.

- ***Acknowledge those who are contributing in a productive fashion.***

It is easy to become consumed with identifying what is wrong; if we do not balance this practice by equally addressing what is right, our entire day can be spent surrounded by wrong. Unfortunately we often let one or two personal rejections override a host of several positive experiences. Maintain a healthy

perspective by balancing the good with the not-so-good.

Many students, fellow teachers, parents, etc., are eager to express their enthusiasm and gratitude; be willing to graciously accept their gift-of-thanks and savor the moment; put these appreciative folks at the center of your mental spotlight.

The key to developing a positive teacher attitude is not an easy task, for it requires a high level of personal discipline. It is far easier to simply point the finger-of-blame and conclude nothing can be done. However such logic will be an idle servant for the teacher who truly cares for the welfare of his/her students.

As Victor Hugo said, “There is one thing stronger than all the armies in the world, and that is an idea whose time has come.”

Let us pledge ourselves to the idea of a creating an affirmative teaching atmosphere supported by a realistically positive approach to every aspect of our personal and professional lives; it is an idea whose time has come!

Dr. Tim Lautzenheiser is a well-known name in the music education world as a teacher, clinician, author, composer, consultant, adjudicator, and above all, a trusted friend to anyone interested in working with young people in developing a desire for excellence. His own career involves ten years of successful college band directing at Northern Michigan University, the University of Missouri, and New Mexico State University. Following three years in the music industry, he created Attitude Concepts for Today, an organization that manages workshops, seminars, and convention speaking engagements focusing on the pathway-to-excellence. Tim presently holds the Earl Dunn Distinguished Lecturer position at Ball State University. Tim is the Executive Director of Education for Conn-Selmer, Inc., and he serves as the national spokesperson for MENC’s “Make a Difference with Music” program. His books The Art of Successful Teaching, The Joy of Inspired Teaching, Music Advocacy and Student Leadership, and Everyday Wisdom for Inspired Teaching are best sellers. He is co-author of Hal Leonard’s popular band method Essential Elements - 2000.