

Learning From Each Other

Wallace Dierolf

The old saying that there is no better teacher than experience is very true.

A student teacher was asking my advice about job interviews. They asked me what they should say if they don't know the answer to a question. I suggested they give this response: "I don't know the answer to that question, but I'm sure looking forward to finding out." The young teacher smiled. "I like that. Thanks." I went on to explain that by giving that response they were demonstrating a few very important qualities that all good teachers practice: admitting when they don't know something and enthusiasm for continuing their own education. After all, master teachers are always learning; they are the consummate students.

There are many excellent resources available to band directors to help them improve their teaching skills and their knowledge of music. There are conventions filled with clinics, university classes, and volumes of books and articles. One very valuable resource often overlooked are the master teachers themselves, the many successful experienced band directors—both active and retired. We all know them. In our profession it becomes fairly obvious who has more answers than others. After all, we do teach a performing art.

In speaking with and working around retired band directors I have discovered that this group of master teachers are eager to help and learn from the next generation. They have vast amounts of experience and education they will gladly share with anyone who asks. Many, like myself, stay active in the music education profession in a variety of ways. The area that many of us enjoy the most is directly helping those current band directors who ask for our assistance. Often this assistance is in the simple form of advice over a cup of coffee, phone call or e-mail. The old saying that there is no better teacher than experience is very true.

Retired band directors who were very successful in the course of their careers are living all around our great state. Most still live in the same area where they spent their teaching careers, which means they can not only be of help in a general way but they also understand the local

situation. What better resource than someone who has taught band in the same region, area, and town or perhaps school district where you work? They know where you are coming from, they were there, and they did your job.

They understand the specific challenges you face every single day.

Master teachers, both active and retired all have certain traits in common. One of those is that they have and had mentors throughout their careers. A teacher's teacher, so to speak. Through the years a chain of valuable knowledge

Master teachers, both active and retired, ... have and had mentors throughout their careers. Through the years a chain of valuable knowledge is passed from one generation to the next creating an endless cycle of teaching excellence.

is passed from one generation to the next creating an endless cycle of teaching excellence. It is this process that creates truly outstanding teachers. It is this process that I deeply appreciate, respect and value, as do many of you reading this article. Our mentors, past and present, active and retired continue to enrich the field of music education.

While certainly each generation of teachers face slightly different

Learning From Each Other

challenges the basic task of teaching never really changes. I find it interesting that some band directors keep trying to find new methods to teach certain elements of instrumental music when there are so many proven techniques around that have worked very well for years. Why reinvent the wheel when the one in place already works? Don't misunderstand me.

Why not invite someone in to spend a day or two and look over your program? Just think how much you could learn from a more thorough evaluation rather than just a few clinics on three contest tunes or marching show. Those with years of experience can help you sort through what is and is not working for you and your students. What a terrible injustice that is to our students to stop learning.

We need to continue looking for better ways to teach and we must remain creative. My point is that if you try a new or different approach be sure it is actually working. Don't fix what isn't broken and don't keep using something that is not helping you or your students. Again those with years of experience can help you sort through what is and is not working for you and your students.

Often band directors will invite someone they hold in high regard to come in and clinic their band or bands.

Usually this is around contest time. While I certainly think that this is an excellent practice I often wonder why directors don't widen this opportunity. Why not invite someone in to spend a day or two and look over your program? Many retired band directors have the time to do this type of service. Just think how much you could learn from a more thorough evaluation rather than just a few clinics on three contest tunes or marching show. I have known band directors who have done this and found it very

rewarding. The real beneficial element of such an activity is that both parties come away with a true educational experience. We can learn so much from each other.

Allow me to share with you an example of how studying the past experience of others (and their organizations) helped me achieve an important

objective and move forward with confidence. In 1998 I was honored to open a brand new 5-A high school. I had the unique opportunity to blend students and parents from three successful band programs into one band. One of the very first things I did was to talk with band directors that had

successfully accomplished the mission I was now facing. I listened carefully, took notes and asked lots of questions. They helped me avoid mistakes that I am sure I may have made had it not been for their assistance. One interesting thing that I discovered that didn't really surprise me was that they had done the same thing I was doing. So, I was not just gaining from their experience but from the experience of others as well. This goes back to that cycle of knowledge I discussed earlier.

I would never have thought about "going it alone" or not educating myself for the specific challenges I was facing at that point in my career. I have always believed in being a good student in order to be a good teacher. I can't imagine what my teaching skills would become if I ever stopped learning and asking questions. What a terrible injustice that is to our students to stop learning. Let me put that another way. Would you go to a doctor who stopped studying medicine after they graduated from medical school?

Learning From Each Other

The educational process is only as good as the individual teacher standing in front of a group of students at any given moment in time. I encourage you to be the best you can be and to use the many resources available to continue your professional education. Remember that there are “people resources” with lots of experience that can help you with clinics, advice and even offer an educational analysis of your teaching skills and overall band program.

Wallace Dierolf earned his B.A. Degree from St. Mary's University, with honors, and his Masters degree from the University of Texas at San Antonio. While attending St. Mary's University he was inducted into Delta Epsilon Sigma, an international academic honor society for students attending private universities. Mr. Dierolf served the students of North Side ISD (San Antonio) for twenty-nine years as both a Middle School and High School Band Director. Band programs under his leadership received numerous TMEA and UIL awards. In 1998, Mr. Dierolf opened Sandra Day O'Connor High School in Helotes, Texas. The band program at O'Connor earned six consecutive Sweepstakes Awards and rapidly grew to become one of the largest 5A programs in Texas. While at O'Connor he also served as the Fine Arts Department head and was the school's first "Teacher of the Year."

Mr. Dierolf has also been blessed with many teaching honors including receiving the outstanding Alumnus award in the field of music from The University of Texas at San Antonio in 2003. Soon after announcing his retirement, the North Side ISD School Board voted unanimously to name the new band hall under construction at O'Connor the Wallace C. Dierolf Band Hall. Mr. Dierolf assists the music education department at Texas State University by serving as a Supervisor and Mentor for student teachers and remains very active as a clinician for marching, concert and jazz bands throughout the state of Texas. Many of his former students are currently professional players and teachers.

Excellent music education depends on the exchange of successful teaching techniques from teacher to teacher, generation to generation. We must discover the new, learn from the past and prepare for the future. We must ask the questions and look forward to finding out the answers.

Thank you for being a teacher.