

Individual and Peer Assessment in the Instrumental Music Classroom

Dr. Mary Ellen Cavitt

We all want our music students to become thoughtful, discriminating listeners. We hope that they learn to hear subtle nuances and make musical choices as they refine performance skills. In addition to teacher assessments, it is important that our students learn to assess. One of the tenets of the National Standards for Arts Education (1994) and the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (1998) is that students learn to evaluate music and music performances. This is our goal—to help our students become independent of us! If we decide to include student evaluation as a part of our curriculum, then how should we best teach students to make assessments? David Elliot (1995) stated that an obvious dilemma in terms of evaluation is that “...a student’s ability to perform music may be above or below her ability to talk about what she knows how to do, her listening ability may be above or below her ability to verbalize the results of what she knows how to do as a listener”.

Self and peer assessments are rarely taught systematically and even more infrequently are assessments of our students’ assessments made. Students need to have well-established models

of ideal aural and visual images of the music or musicians. Without this, they will not be able to make comparisons or discriminate in any meaningful way. This means we have to make musical decisions prior to our rehearsals and decide how we are going to provide the model. We need to have a well established idea of how the accomplished performer should look, play, and sound. For example, I recently had the opportunity to clinic a band where all of the horn players positioned their bells directly into their stomach while playing. The result was a muffled, muted horn section. They needed a visual image of the right leg position so that the bell vibrated freely. Students need very, very specific examples of everything—how the trombonist’s right wrist position works best or how the flutist’s right thumb comes into contact with the flute to best let the fingers move without stress.

Prior to class we can decide each component of performance: phrasing, style, dynamics, note length, articulation, balance etc. That’s not to say that we don’t also ask more experienced students opinion about these constituent parts of the music. While there are many acceptable styles and tones in the world of music, our students need us to take a position and have an informed opinion, especially at the beginning stages of performance.

Students also need to have observed us critique performances or give specific individualized feedback. Through this frequent feedback, with repeated paired associations of sounds or behaviors, students will learn to give meaningful feedback. One of the keys is that feedback must occur frequently.

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Sometimes, when we stop to work with an individual student, other students may become disengaged from the learning process or go off task. This can be so disconcerting that many teachers decide to avoid listening to individuals. One of the best ways to combat this problem is to engage the students in peer assessments. Peer assessment allows teachers to work with individuals while keeping the entire class involved and active. When this process is taught well, it helps to create a cooperative, safe learning environment in which students want to play individually and participate actively in the learning process. In addition to self-assessments, guided peer assessments shift the students' role from passive recipients to more self-directed, independent learners. Students become more aware of their individual performance responsibilities and behaviors. It may also help them to establish an ideal aural and visual image and build a repertoire of appropriate responses with which to make self and peer evaluations. Students become exposed to a wide range of answers to problems and this develops their critical appraisal skills.

To guide students through this process, offer them these suggestions prior to giving peer feedback:

1. Think and listen before speaking.

Sometimes, the students get so excited about giving feedback that they actually forget to listen! Try to

insert a little wait time after each performance to let everyone have time to reflect.

2. Make a comparison to an ideal image.

Perform for your students, listen to recordings and look at visual models of excellent performers. Repeatedly demonstrate ideal aural and visual images to students so that students have a clear model of how you expect them to sound and look.

3. Prioritize feedback.

Telling someone that they played "well" would be an example of generalized feedback. I suggest that students give both general and specific comments. Prioritizing specific feedback is sometimes difficult for younger students so you may want them to write down suggestions before saying anything aloud.

4. Anticipate how feedback will be perceived.

This step is key to creating a safe classroom environment. It is helpful to prompt students to think about how the feedback statements may be perceived by the other student.

5. Limit what and how much can be said to peers.

Without limits, younger or more immature students might seize the opportunity to be less than kind to each other. Eliminate personal or emotional comments and focus on specific/objective feedback to component performance skills. Again, demonstrate this for your students.

As you introduce peer assessment to your class, do so in a gradual way to build students' confidence.

In addition to self-assessments, guided peer assessments shift the students' role from passive recipients to more self-directed, independent learners. If individual and peer assessments are routine from the beginning, students learn that playing alone is normal, safe, and routine.

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Students must have sufficient experience observing you give meaningful assessments before they can do so successfully. One of the first ways to build student confidence is to ask students to give specific positive feedback to individuals about their performance. Later, let them give one positive feedback and one corrective statement. This way, everyone is getting the same amount and type of feedback regardless of the performance. Later, when everyone has more confidence, you can give students more freedom to say something meaningful that is contingent on the performance.

Introduce self-assessment prior to asking your students to make assessments about the group performance. Students will probably give more accurate feedback if they can focus on one instrument and person at a time. Often, we ask students to write comments about a full ensemble performance prior to them having ever given feedback to individuals. Assessing a full ensemble performance is a very complex process.

Assessment is a skill that needs to be practiced. The teacher can guide the student through the process by

simulating or demonstrating problems and letting students diagnose errors. This demonstration of errors allows students to problem solve while no one gets hurt, and most students love to correct the teacher! Teacher demonstration of performance errors allows students to practice assessments prior to giving peer feedback.

If individual and peer assessments are routine from the beginning, students learn that playing alone is normal, safe, and routine. If you have more advanced students who have already learned to be fearful, you can systematically create a safe environment in which to receive feedback by controlling the rate, quantity, and content of the feedback.

For better or worse, our students are a reflection of our teaching skills. The care and specificity with which we discuss music and assess performance is passed on to our students. We want our students to become independent musicians and listeners. Teaching students to talk and think about music and performances in a meaningful, confident manner may lead to significant shared musical experiences down the road.

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