

Creativity in Teaching: Addressing Different Learning Styles

Dr. Christina Guenther

As applied teachers, we come into contact with students of all different learning styles. Some are aural learners and respond well to demonstration, others learn best through verbal instruction, and still others learn through experimentation or rote repetition. Most students seem to do well with different combinations of teaching methods, and it is our job to figure out what works best for each individual student.

It is always a fun challenge, when new freshmen and transfer students enter my studio, to figure out how each individual learns best. I experimented over the course of three weeks of lessons in my flute studio at Stephen F. Austin State University in Nacogdoches, Texas to find not only how students responded to specific learning styles, but also how effective I could be as their teacher in conveying information in only one way at a time. We called it “Experimental February.”

During the first week, there was no talking—only demonstrating. This meant that students had to carefully hone in on what it was I was demonstrating or playing back to them to help make the performance of their etudes, technique, and repertoire cleaner, better, and more musical. While

I generally demonstrate a lot in addition to verbal instruction, it was interesting to gauge their reaction when students could not immediately hear what it was I was trying to get them to address. The goal was to encourage stronger listening—to themselves as well as to me—to determine ways they could match their sound, articulation, and technique to mine without verbal instruction.

The second week consisted of no demonstration, only verbal instruction. This method’s challenge was conveying what I wanted students to do in terms of articulation, technique, and sound. This proved very interesting, because at times it is easier to demonstrate the sound of a desired tone quality. Through only verbalizing, there is the challenge of discussing what happens inside the mouth to get the wanted sound. The point was for students to discover things about themselves with only verbal instruction; unable to simply imitate a sound or style, they

needed to figure out how to do things more independently.

In the third and final week of our experiment, the first half of each lesson was spent by me watching how students practiced. Here was the opportunity to show if students put to use all the methods—the “hows”—of what we talk about in every lesson each week to practice effectively and efficiently. After their mini-practice session was over, we discussed what they did

well, and what they might work out differently. Examples include incorporating technical and tone exercises into repertoire practice, practicing more efficiently, and how to vent frustrations during practice sessions.

Following our three experimental weeks, students had to submit a writeup with their reaction to each week. Student responses to our three weeks were as follows:

Demonstration Week

Students found the demonstration week to be fun—it was

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like playing Charades. It forced them to really listen to what I was demonstrating and to figure out how they could replicate that. Some students found it very easy to mimic what it was they heard, but found it awkward to ask questions and not get a verbal answer; still, it made them use their ears more than they were used to in “normal” lessons. For some students, it was difficult to not have verbal instruction, especially when it came to how to execute certain contemporary techniques. Others found it extremely helpful when it came to concepts like feeling and tone color. One student mentioned she had to “listen in a new and heightened way,” expressing frustration when she simply yearned for verbal instruction. An advantage to constant demonstration was hearing exactly what they were supposed to sound like, but creating that sound without the verbal instruction of “how” was difficult. Another student mentioned that this week “forced [them] to listen more with [their] ears musically, rather than just hearing [my] voice.” Some students found this method of instruction more efficient, because they were only focused on playing without having to think about or getting distracted by verbalizing anything.

Verbal Week

Many students found the verbal teaching week to be easier. It was simple for them to understand my spoken instruction, but it forced both the student and me to really communicate well because there was no demonstrating. Students found this method of teaching good because it was less awkward than having no verbalizing, making them feel more at ease. It gave them good ideas of what to say to their future students and made them realize the importance of having multiple ways of explaining something. For students who were used to imitating, it was helpful during this week to hear certain trigger words, like “articulation,” to automatically adjust what needed to be fixed. One student noted that this week seemed

more challenging for me because I so love to be able to demonstrate during lessons. Another mentioned during this week that it “would have been helpful to actually hear [me] play the music.” For students who prefer demonstration, understanding what they were hearing me say was at times difficult. Nevertheless, they found this week useful for concepts that were reminders of what had previously been taught. Several students mentioned that they understood what it was I was saying, but they would have liked demonstration in addition to the verbal instruction. One student wrote that this week “solidified [her] theory that [she does] better after hearing it played as opposed to hearing the directions spoken to [her].” With students who came to lessons with collaborative pianists, it was challenging to adjust things in their playing, because they couldn’t hear it demonstrated.

Practicing Week

Many students found it awkward to practice in front of their teacher; this in itself was a useful experiment in learning how to practice better, because so often it seems students practice what they know well and not what they need to practice when they fear people outside the practice room might be listening. One student wrote that this was by far the most awkward week, and that it made her realize how personal a student’s practice time is. Nevertheless, she appreciated the discussion afterwards of utilizing concepts like practicing from back to front, slowing down, and subdividing. A lot of students did not enjoy this particular week, but found it insightful and the feedback helpful. One student found this to be the most beneficial week because she realized that what happens in her practice is directly reflected in her lessons and performances, and this lesson allowed her to adopt some new practice methods. Students who were already efficient in their practicing found this lesson to be less useful and had less patience with the

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idea of it; they found this type of observation would be more beneficial to less advanced students. One student mentioned that in her background as a band student, no one had ever addressed effective ways of practicing, and having someone hear a practice session and then discussing it was great. Some students found it very beneficial to have someone listening in on their practicing because it made them focus more, holding them more accountable to actually practicing effectively. One student came to the best conclusion at which one could arrive: by improving the way in which she practices, she can improve her practice in general, and ultimately become her own teacher.

In conclusion, I maintain that a combination of methods is the most effective way to teach. It was, however, an excellent challenge to

students' listening and perception skills, as well as to my teaching and communication skills, and a terrific challenge to focus on only one method at a time. This experiment increased awareness on both the student and teacher sides, and perhaps created a greater appreciation for the teaching and learning processes. Every student mentioned in their post "Experimental February" write-up that they think it important to combine teaching styles. One student wrote, "I now see how important communication is while teaching. When one part of teaching music is missing, the student does not get all the information and can easily get frustrated. When [a concept] is both explained and performed, the student is more likely to understand exactly what is needed."

With our experimental weeks behind us, I think every student was able to continue in our subsequent lessons with a heightened awareness and creativity how to listen, learn, communicate, and practice in a more effective and efficient manner.

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