

# Talk Less and Teach More

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Teaching the millennial generation (or for those of you teaching at the middle or elementary level where the new buzz term is the iGen or Gen Z) comes with it some real challenges. There has never been a time when more activities are competing for their time. If the activities are not enough to contend with, we have technology, and more specifically, smartphones. Various studies suggest the average teenager texts over 100 times per day. This does not begin to take into account how much time is spent on social media or online gaming.

I point this out because I am convinced that our students are more

visually conscious than ever. The fact they are spending so much time texting and playing games on their phones indicates they are getting more and more of their information visually. In other words, students may not be listening to what you are saying, but they are sure watching every move you make.

So, with an emphasis on talking less while we teach, here are 10 things you can easily incorporate into your teaching that will aid in increasing your effectiveness.

1. Record your rehearsals and do a time analysis of how you spend your time. Have a stopwatch and log

the amount of time you play and the amount of time you stop. Indicate the length of each segment (playing or talking). Indicate if your talking was instructional, disciplinary or other. At the end of class, total up the number of segments for each and total up the amount of time spent playing vs. talking. Then review it carefully. Did you play for 15 seconds and talk for two minutes? At the end of your class, hopefully you will have played a minimum of 70 to 75 % of the allotted instructional time. Remember, it is time *on* task and not time *at* task.

2. Start and end your class on time. We are musicians, and we expect beat

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one of the music to occur on beat one. Make sure you are ready to begin class immediately. Be prepared, have everything ready to go. Order of rehearsal on the board or projector. Define rehearsal goals. At the end of class be sure to allow students ample time to put their instruments and equipment away in order to get to their next class or activity on time.

3. Condition your student to respond to your arm motions from day one. There is no need to snap your fingers or worse yet, beat your baton on your music stand. It may take a few attempts to get them to follow you, but it will be well worth the investment.

4. Be specific when giving instructions. Be clear and logical. Begin with the instrument or section. Next, identify the nearest rehearsal letter or measure number and direct them to the measure(s) of concern. Identify the note(s), rhythm(s), dynamic, articulation, etc. that are in question. Tell them what you heard and let them know verbally or by modeling how you want the area performed.

5. Tell them exactly what to write in their music. Circling something only calls attention to the spot. Having students write in a sharp or flat before the note, placing an “X” through an existing dynamic and marking a new one, or placing an up or down arrow to remind them of intonation tendencies gives them specific information.

6. Do not change your mind. If you find that you indicate you want to start at letter C but really wanted to start at letter B, don’t change your mind. Start at letter C, play a bit and then stop and take it back to letter B. Changing your mind can be confusing to players.

7. Do not talk too long with your hands in set position. We get the students ready to start and then ask the trumpets if they have their mutes ready. We ask, “Who is playing cymbals?” We remind the saxophones to watch this time. The list goes on and on. Soon the instruments fall from the set or playing position, When you do finally start, you will find that there were many missed entrances or bad attacks. We have conditioned our student to ignore our set position.

Think of a track sprinter getting ready to get in the blocks to run the 100-meter dash. The starter calls “Runners to your mark.” Here the director stands on the podium, gives final instruction or reminder with hands to side. Students get ready, instruments in approximate playing position. “Set.” Director raises hands up to set position. Track starters do not keep runners in the set position for too long, or their muscles tighten up or cramp. Same for musicians. Smooth muscles around the shoulders begin to tire and hurt. One to two seconds is sufficient. “Go.” Director breathes while giving the prep beat and the music starts. You may have to try this a couple of times to get everyone on board, but once it becomes the norm, you will be amazed at the results.

8. Look at your musicians by keeping your head out of the score. Know your music well enough that you do not need to constantly look at it. Maintaining eye contact with your students keeps them accountable and on task.

9. Use whiteboards or other visuals to explain or clarify information. A picture is worth a thousand words.

10. Have an occasional non-verbal rehearsal. Nobody speaks, and all instructions are mimed with minimal amounts of information presented on the whiteboard or projected. You don’t even have to let them know it is going to happen. Just don’t speak or let them know that you have lost your voice. The intensity in the room will be high, and the students will have a great time.

Keeping your speech to a minimum in your rehearsals will help maximize efficiency and lead to increased enjoyment in the music making process for your students.

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