



What's In Your Toolbox?

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By Lynne Jackson



Each week I find myself in the classroom with beginning instrumentalists, junior high band students, high school musicians, undergraduate music education majors and current teachers seeking a masters degree in music education. Among the many things all these individuals have in common is that each is seeking to fill their own “toolbox” with knowledge, skills, concepts, ideas and inspirations. As teachers, it is our responsibility to best provide our students with that which they need in order to be successful. I am often asked, “what book do you use?” I reply, “The one my student needs and I may have to create it myself.” My response reflects my sincere belief that I must “do the work” for every student I teach, and, because “one size does not fit all”, there is no one book for all students. The answers we are seeking are not always in a particular book or a lip slur or an exercise. Certainly we use method books and materials as tools, but we must also have other appropriate tools on hand so our curriculum can conform to meet the individual needs of each student we teach.

TOOLS FOR THE TEACHER

How do we do this? To start, I believe all teachers should have a set of tools for themselves. These tools are meant to provide clarity, consistency, accountability and comfort. Here are a few of my tools.

1. Good or bad, whatever is happening in my classroom, I am somehow giving permission for it.
2. I must “wrap my brain” around teaching. There is no method or formula that will work with every student or every class. One size does not fit all.
3. Teaching is hard but totally worth it!

As teachers in charge, we must take responsibility for the state of our classroom. When results are not what we would like, we have to first ask ourselves, “How am I giving permission for this?” “Am I giving these students what they need?” Generally, in classrooms that are not succeeding, the answer is “No!” We must remember all classes are not the same and one size does not fit all. Strive to teach the individual in the classroom setting. Embrace the challenges presented to you. By conscientiously and creatively wrapping your brain around teaching, the tools you attain will allow you to become a more effective and comfortable teacher.



4. I must “do the work” for every student I teach.

Don't misunderstand this statement. I certainly do not mean to exclude the responsibility of the student in the learning process. For a moment, think about a beginning instrumentalist. Imagine this

beginner is going to play the bassoon and the bassoon will be provided by the school. It's our responsibility to ensure that the instrument works properly, has the correct bore and has an appropriate case. It is our responsibility to be sure that the student knows how care for the instrument and how to obtain and maintain quality reeds. Furthermore, it is our responsibility to know how to teach the bassoon to that

beginning student and provide the tools for success. This requires a huge commitment on our part and more often than not, I see many teachers who take this responsibility far too lightly. A breakdown in the learning process occurs not only when a student fails to do their work, but when a teacher fails to do the work for this student: the work only the teacher can provide to ensure the student's ultimate success.

5. I must teach my students to use the information they have.

Skills and information are of no value to our students

unless they know when and how to reach for the right tools in their toolboxes. Our role includes the responsibility to show our students how to independently use acquired tools.

FILLING OUR STUDENTS' TOOLBOXES

Vocabulary/Music Reading

I feel vocabulary is an understated aspect of our curriculum. Your students must ultimately possess and be able to utilize the same vocabulary as you. Young musicians must be able to recognize and to verbally identify musical symbols, terms, intervals and chord structures. Some do not learn to read music in the early years of study. I have found that most students who cannot read music lack the ability to readily recognize and identify musical symbols and terms. Build a vocabulary with your students. Teach your students to use their voices. Expect them to be able to express themselves verbally in musical ways. This is an important part of music study and stimulates musical growth and understanding. The teacher should set a good example by behaving as a musician and teaching music as fine art. Use proper words for musical terms. "Caesura" is such a beautiful word compared to "railroad tracks!"

Understanding the body: the gateway to personal awareness

Teaching self-awareness to young musicians begins the very day that body balance/posture is introduced. We use our body in four equally important ways; for balance, resonance, breathing and interfacing with the instrument. Understanding the significance of body balance, breathing and sound production is most certainly a developmental process for all musicians. For a moment think about your own personal journey as a musician in regard to your body's relationship to your instrument. You will quickly realize "enlightenment" did not happen overnight! Throughout the arduous process of learning body balance we must remain vigilant. I tell my beginner trumpets that I am going "to build me some trumpet players." We start each day from the ground up with the feet, spine, chest, shoulders, head and hands. It is essential for your students to "look right" from the beginning.

Tone Production

A "face" that works is the greatest gift you can give your student. I believe that I can teach every student to "look right" and make a great sound. I believe you can too.



One of my tools to help build faces is the acronym **CHAT**:

C The corners of the mouth must be either in their natural place or inward depending upon the instrument: never stretched outward.

H The head must be balanced, feel weightless and positioned to allow the air to flow freely, without obstruction.

A The angle of the instrument must comply with the placement of the head to create proper air direction. This can be slightly different for each student and requires critically close attention.

T The tongue is relaxed and forward. (Sorry clarinets, not you. Your tongue is raised in the back.) More often than not, tension in the tongue creates tension in the jaw and ultimately affects the sound quality produced. Also, bear in mind that the corners of the mouth and tongue work in tandem. Remember, all mouths and tongues are not the same! Assisting each student, find the balanced relationship between the corners and the tongue resulting in an effortlessly produced tone quality.

Our music programs are made up of all kinds of kids at all different levels. Some are ready to "fly" the moment they open the case. Others take longer. I have seen many students who get to high school and "take-off," surpassing those who were the "stars" in middle school. Whether an early bloomer or late bloomer, we must assure that in their toolbox our students have a "face" that works; the one we helped them build.

Tone Concepts

When teaching tone concepts do not confuse volume with resonance. When you ask your students to “blow more air” or “blow faster” does that mean that a more resonant sound will be produced? My answer is most always “No.” Forced air does not create resonance. The body, the breath, the embouchure and the instrument efficiently unite to create a rich, beautiful, sonorous sound.

Articulation

Having the embouchure well in place is the prerequisite to teaching articulation. If the embouchure is correct articulation should come easily. Keep in mind that articulation does not “kick start” the tone, but rather decorates the inception of the sound with varying levels of strength. Use modeling when teaching tonguing. Have students listen to a correctly demonstrated articulation and through “self discovery”, and assistance from you, learn to duplicate that same sound.

Pulse and Rhythm

Sometimes, I think we confuse pulse with rhythm. I like to think that pulse has its own special compartment in our toolbox. Children first develop a sense of the downbeat pulse through activities that include kinesthetic repetition, such as jumping rope, dancing, clapping or stomping. Most beginning instrumentalists come to us with a good sense of the downbeat pulse. We must take it to the next level by turning our student’s attention to the division of the pulse; using counting, singing, saying, clapping, and tapping to develop the ability to coordinate the upbeat pulse.

I teach the “math” of rhythmic truths. No matter what time signature, there are always eight eighth notes in a whole note, always four eighths in a half note and so on. A quarter note is not always one count, however, it is eternally equal to two eighth notes. I encourage you to wrap your brain around teaching pulse and rhythm. First of all, it is fun! Find creative ways to engage your class and learn to “feel” the “math” of rhythm!

MUSIC, LOVE and A STATE OF READINESS

As teachers, we must never impart a self-fulfilling prophecy upon our students. It is not up to us to determine the fate of our students, but rather to prepare them for a state of readiness.

I am passionate about these statements on a very personal level. This is my story. You may recognize it yourself. I was not one of those students who opened the case and was ready to “fly.” It took me three long years to find my way. Many times I wanted to give up, but there was always someone there nudging me along; mostly my mother and my beloved band teachers, Russ Reed and Dixie Detgen. My mother and my teachers did not judge me. They provided me with the necessary tools. When I was ready to fly it was glorious! My teachers had essentially handed me the world. Thank you!

We can and we must strive to prepare every student we teach for a state of readiness. We must do the work for our students and never impart a self fulfilling prophecy upon them. Through our own love of music and teaching we must freely and abundantly give our students necessary tools and keep shining the light, even for those students who seem to be faltering. Now, let’s get out there and hand our students the world today!



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