

How do you view what you do?

Jeremy Little – Fall 2013 IL-ACDA “Podium”

One of the benefits of an ever-widening circle of Facebook friends is becoming closer personal friends with my professional colleagues. This past month, my friends’ status updates have ranged from sentimental (photos at the Magic Kingdom) to disgusting (how to clean up vomit out of a car seat) and every glorious moment of life in between. I began to think about the future for my two children and the children of my music teacher friends; what kind of people do we want them to grow up to be? What kinds of experiences do we wish them to have that will help shape who they are?

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I began to reflect on how I use the time in front of my students at school. What did I actually spend time teaching on a day-to-day basis:

- ✓ Vocal technique
- ✓ Learning notes and rhythms
- ✓ Music theory
- ✓ Classroom minutiae (announcements, attendance, reminders, etc.)

At one point in my career, I’d have said, “Excellent! Show me how to do all of that. What tips and tricks do you have for _____?” (you fill in the blank)

However, as I continually picture my two children in a future music class, (and my colleagues’ children possibly in my class) that checklist suddenly begins to feel somewhat inadequate.

“So what?” if they master all of the notes? “So what?” if their tone quality is clear and properly focused? Ten years after high school, “who cares?” what *maestoso* meant, or that notes high in the *passaggio* usually require more concentration, or that a pencil is needed in class everyday? While these concepts are indeed necessary—I do focus on them often—they do not feel sufficient for a thorough music education, one that will inspire interdependent thinking, music making, and concert-going among my students after our time together.

I want my own children (and indeed all of my students):

- ✓ to experience not only the joy of making music, but the wonder of delving into another world (a piece, a people, or a period)
- ✓ to continually endeavor to develop their beliefs and talents
- ✓ to experience the camaraderie of learning from and with and for their classmates
- ✓ to find to immense joy in being able to understand their world, their relationships, and themselves through great works of art
- ✓ to experience the lifelong paradox of great art – the satisfaction it creates and curiosity it engenders – that I have been blessed to discover

I suspect that many of my colleagues feel the same as well.

So, how do you view what you do?

In his address to the Fall IL-ACDA Convention this past October, Randy Swiggum eloquently and succinctly said, “My job is to connect kids with ideas that change them.” The more I teach and learn about teaching, the more I have begun to walk in the shoes of that idea. Swiggum went on to ask, “What is a piece of music?”

- ✓ a Puzzle
- ✓ a To-Do-List

- ✓ a Math Problem
- ✓ an expression of human experience in sound

Of course, when framed that way, we all know what we're *supposed* to say. But on a day-to-day basis, how much time do I emphasize the first three points over the fourth?

Parker Palmer, in his classic *The Courage to Teach*, explains a way of viewing our subject (music) that allows for this “expression of human experience in sound” to be taught. Parker argues for “a classroom in which teacher and students alike are focused on a great thing, a classroom in which the best features of teacher- and student-centered classrooms are merged and transcended by putting not the teacher, not the student, but subject at the center of our attention.” (p.119)

How do we view this “great thing” called music? On Facebook, I often enjoy reading and responding to posts about teaching, learning, and performing music. The wisdom of my colleagues sparks discussions that ignite my own growth and exploration. This passion for teaching music “propels that subject, not the teacher, into the center of the learning circle—and when a great thing is in their midst, students have direct access to the energy of learning and life.” (Palmer, p.122)

In the harried, back-to-school commotion, it's easy to focus on practical, day-to-day tasks; indeed everyone does in August and September. However, if this survival-mode type planning is all we know (or have grown accustomed to) the larger, wider questions seldom get asked. In recent years, I have made a commitment as Fall rolls around to constantly ask, “How best can I teach people about life using music? How can I learn about my own self and relationships with those around me through music?” When I allow students to wrestle with ambiguity in life and art using Beethoven's “*Kyrie* from the Mass in C” or when I'm able to open up a meaningful discussion about life after death using “Hark I Hear the Harps Eternal,” I can help students connect this great art directly to their own life experience. More and more, it is the preparation for these moments that fuel my passion for teaching kids great music.

In *The Sense of Wonder*, Rachel Carson says

If I had influence with the good fairy who is supposed to preside over the christening of all children, I should ask her gift to each child in the world be a sense of wonder so indestructible that it would last throughout life, as an unfailing antidote against the boredom and disenchantments of later years, the sterile preoccupation with things that are artificial, the alienation from the sources of our strength. If a child is to keep alive his inborn sense of wonder without any such gift from the fairies, he needs the companionship of at least one adult who can share it, rediscovering with him the joy, excitement, and mystery of the world we live in.

It is our job, our calling, and our privilege to be that companion; to share with our students our wonder and passion for teaching, learning, performing, and living great music.