

Better Musicians, Better Performers, or Better People? All of the above!

Jeremy Little – Spring 2011 IL-ACDA “Podium”

“What do I want my students to be like after performing this piece?” Have you ever asked yourself this question when repertoire planning? Our time with students in daily rehearsals is a precious commodity, and while it may not always feel like it, goes by in the blink of an eye. I recently was on Facebook with some former students and we were discussing past concerts and experiences in choir. It made me reflect on the fleeting time I have with students. Often times, I’ve thought after a concert was over, “I wish I would have done that differently.”

As a new father of now two kids (a two year old and two month old), I’ve been “blessed” with the opportunity to be up late at night, walking around the house trying to get my daughter to sleep. Recently, my thoughts have turned to thinking about the kind of person I want my children to be when they’re older.

- What dispositions do I want them to have?
- When they encounter something difficult, how will they react?
- How will they treat their friends and teachers?
- Will they be good stewards of the gifts given to them, or will they squander them?
- Will they have the ability to recognize opportunities and have the internal motivation to seize the moment?
- Will they be inquisitive, asking questions of their surroundings: the mysteries of nature, the complexities of being an adolescent, the wonder of the unknown?
- Will they be creative problem solvers and inventors of new things/ideas, or will they be content to be a passive, consumer of current culture, thought, and attitude?
- Will they be courteous and respectful when they disagree with people? Will they cogently form an argument, bringing passion to their research and defense while simultaneously listening to the other side of the debate?
- Will they strive to mold consensus, to lead others by example and think/act for themselves, or will they essentially be followers, a rudderless ship taken by the prevailing wind of popular thought?
- After asking these questions, I begin to reflect on my own parenting and my own teaching as well. While I only have 2 years parenting compared to 8 years teaching, and my students are high school students, I naturally began to question how I teach what I teach.

Music Selection

Is the music I select of substance, worthy of spending our precious time learning its depths? Does each piece have sufficient intrigue, surprises, or dramatic pull toward a climax? Or is the music I choose fully predictable, peddled by a big name publisher in slick packaging, whose sole reason for existence is to make others money (not necessarily to make those performing it better!)?

Analysis

When I encounter a piece I want to teach, do I take the time to truly study it, to find its richness and hidden secrets, to discover its meaning and find a way to help convey these discoveries in rehearsal so my students can share in the joy and wonder of this great piece? Or am I usually thinking, “This is a good piece to teach long phrases and mixed meter”? My fantastic colleague Randy Swiggum has said, “Great art does not exist to teach technical skills and no composer ever wrote a great work whose purpose was “to teach breath support.” We often choose music and teach it as if technique were the point of the music. [Technique is] a means, not an end.”

Outcomes

Before a lesson even starts, do I know exactly what goal or outcome I want for my students to achieve? Do I have a destination in mind for our musical journey, or will we just “make it up as we go”? Is my outcome generally the same for each song: get each piece “off the ground” and concert ready and if there’s time add dynamics and tell them what it’s about? When I’m thinking about outcomes, do I think only of what the kids should be able to do (eg. sing a phrase in tune) or know (eg. what imitative entrances are and how they’re used)? Or, do I intentionally plan to reach the affective domain of my singers? Do I plan outcomes such as: “Students will explore the various definitions of community and their individual roles in their different communities,” or “students will explore how music can be political or used to shape opinion”?

Strategies

In the middle of a lesson, are the kids bored? Am I varying my teaching strategies enough? Do the lessons and activities I present point toward my desired outcome? Is what we do in everyday rehearsal tied to a larger goal, or am I using a “spaghetti on the wall” approach (throw it on the wall and see what sticks)?

Assessment

After the bell rings, how do I know that my students have learned anything (beyond their own vocal line)? Am I content to say, “They sound good, they must have learned something?” Or will I be tenacious in actually collecting evidence so I know? Am I sharing this evidence with students on a regular basis with each individual student so he/she knows how things are going and how he/she is progressing toward the stated outcome? If any of this sounds familiar (positive or negative), then GOOD! Many of us analyze our music thoroughly, plan wonderful outcomes for our students, and tie great teaching strategies and assessments to these outcomes. All of this is done using music of the utmost quality and artistic merit. What many of us don’t do, however, is combine each of these aspects together to form a cohesive plan of instruction. Maybe we choose one of these points (say, using great music) but then fail to analyze it thoroughly, or to create diverse outcomes, strategies, and/or assessments to bring this great music fully to life. The more we as music educators can weave these aspects of great teaching and learning together into a comprehensive plan, the better we can intentionally lead our students toward being better, performers, musicians, and human beings.

Resources:

- Here is a teaching plan to the “Kyrie” from “Mass in C Major” by Beethoven www.vhscougars.org/choir - there is a link on the homepage
- If you want to read a whole book about teaching this way, try *Shaping Sound Musicians*, by Patricia O’Toole, GIA Publications 2003, ISBN: 1-57999-211-0.
- For an immersion experience in teaching this way, attend the CMP (Comprehensive Musicianship through Performance) Workshop, now in its 31st year, at UW-Eau Claire, June 20-24, 2011. www.wmea.com/CMP
- Jeremy Little teaches at Vernon Hills H.S. and is currently working on bringing the CMP workshop to Illinois. If you’re interested in attending this summer, please contact him at jeremy.little@d128.org.