

The Re-Imagination of Guitar Pedagogy

Introduction

My intention in this article is not to present “how-to” steps to good teaching. I won't be writing about ways of moving the fingers, approaching rhythm, interpretation, the importance of sight-reading, or how to get your students to practice. I am not writing about pedagogy in the traditional sense, the “what” you tell students to do. I want to explore the relationship between teacher and student in a way that will be helpful to teachers regardless of the specific content of their pedagogy. I want to offer teachers a way of re-imagining their work—a way that may help them and their students achieve their full artistic potential. That is the way of the true virtuoso teacher.

Virtuoso teaching is more about helping students move towards conscious change than it is about getting them to do certain things. This advice is true for a teacher's development too. The best way to use this material is to read it over occasionally but not to try to “do” certain things. Rather, let the material sit with you, think about it, and one day an opportunity will present itself for you to respond to your students in a different way and for you to take a step forward into the unknown with them.

I once had a student who studied at a conservatory in Asia as a boy. During our work together I learned that his teacher would beat him whenever he made a mistake. The result was an adult who beat himself verbally whenever he erred. This created incredible tension within him, which only increased the chances that he would err and ensured that this cycle would never be broken.

Years later, while living in Switzerland, I met a retired Anglican priest. He told me that he enjoyed playing the piano but that he couldn't read music. I learned that he did have lessons as a youth, but every time he missed a note while reading music, his teacher would swat his hands with a ruler. The result was that he became “blind” to written music.

Students will learn through violence but what they learn is *never* what their teachers intend. Pedagogical violence is more than physical abuse. Pedagogical violence ranges from physical abuse through manipulation, arrogance, rudeness, to the inability to really see or know the student—in short, any act that treats the student as an object. Anat Baniel, a well-known teacher of the Feldenkrais Method, states that “...violence distorts functioning in some way.”¹

¹ Frank R. Wilson, *The Hand*, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1998), 252.

I would add that students are usually unaware that their functioning has been distorted.

If these teachers could have known the destructive results of their pedagogy, would they have persisted? The likelihood is that the damage they caused would have been invisible to them. Either it would not manifest itself until years later, or the teacher would attribute its presence to the student's lack of talent or industry.

It is hard for me to imagine anyone teaching this way today. But I must ask, are there things we might be doing now that will have effects on our students we can neither imagine nor see? Are they learning hidden lessons from the *way* we are teaching them? And if so, what can we do to understand our own teaching and how can we change it for the better?

We need to carry within us a model for good teaching. How can we approach the teacher/student relationship so that it will flourish? Some of us may have had the wonderful fortune to work with a teacher who taught us with compassion, respect, high standards, who could see what we had to offer, what we needed, and how we could best learn. But others among us most likely had teachers who were gifted in some areas and blind in others.

While musicians spend thousands of hours studying and practicing their instrument, their teaching skills are neglected and left to develop haphazardly. Mastery of an instrument or voice does not automatically make one a good teacher. Yet almost all musicians will find themselves teaching others in a one-on-one setting. It is disturbing to see creative and intelligent artists approach their teaching without the creativity, intellectual integrity, compassion, insight, and flexibility they often bring to their performances.

The private lesson is a unique phenomenon in education. The relationships teachers have with their students are long term, close, and intense. While some students will be trusting and vulnerable and others headstrong and defiant, they all are trying to learn something of paramount importance to their lives. But it often seems as if the students who succeed do so in spite of the way they are taught. Despite good intentions on behalf of teachers and players, their efforts at improving their work will be limited if they cannot better understand the process of teaching and learning, and the medium in which these things occur: the private lesson.

If the process remains invisible, it is immune to contemplation and change. Yet change is the means whereby we improve: if a thing cannot change, it cannot get better. How can our teaching change so that we are able to see beyond the confining walls of our own experiences as artist, teacher, and student?

How can we develop healthier and more positive relationships with our students so that the act of teaching does not interfere with act of learning? A healthy student/teacher relationship will increase the possibility of joyous learning and the teacher bears most of the responsibility for the health of this relationship. The following are offered as suggestions to serve as catalysts to your own imagination so that the lessons you give may emerge as works of art, as finely shaped as any piece you might perform. This is the way of true virtuoso teachers. I hope that you and your students will flourish in your studio and that you can help them become independent and creative learners.

Your Relationship With Students

Know your students. Talking to your students is one way to begin the lengthy, rewarding and necessary process of learning to know them. They will surprise you if you let them. Ask them questions. Listen to them. Why are they here? Find out what they think about what they're doing. They may be working under some false assumption that is creating a problem. Find out their goals, how they think they can best reach them, and what they perceive to be their problems and their strengths. How do they best learn? Some will be able to respond to your suggestions instantly. Others will need more time to process and absorb the material. Do they seem to be convergent or divergent thinkers? (A convergent thinker tends to be able to generate or focus on only one solution to a problem while a divergent thinker can generate many possible solutions and then chose among them.) Is a student more verbal, aural, visual or kinesthetic? Some will flourish by hearing things. Others may prefer detailed explanations. Still others may learn more through a demonstration. Dominance in one area has little to do with their level of musical talent, only the way in which they learn best. Even if they are inarticulate about their work you will have learned something about them.

Your ability to know your students has everything to do with your openness and willingness to observe individual differences. You wouldn't necessarily force all of your students to move their hands the same way, or expect them to shape a phrase the same way, yet many teachers unknowingly require all of their students to learn in the same way, usually the way the teacher learned.

Unless you know your students, you will not be able to meet them where they are.

Meet your students where they are. Your work with your students needs to begin where the student is, not where you'd like them to be, where you might assume they are, or where some real or imagined syllabus says they should be. This means you must have cultivated the ability to discover and understand the root of problems and work to restore those roots to healthy function. It is the teacher who must discover and define the starting point of this work. The accuracy and integrity of this starting point has everything to do with the future of the student/teacher relationship. Unless you know where to meet your students, you will not be able to lead them into the unknown.

Lead them into the unknown. Your job is to meet your students where they are and then lead them forward into the unknown. It is not to stand on the shore with them and say, "Swim across, by yourself, to that distant shore." Nor is it to perch yourself on that shore

and say, “You must swim to where I am.” Although these approaches often pass for good pedagogy, what they really do is relieve the teacher of the responsibility of guiding students over confusing, difficult, or even elementary terrain. There will be ample opportunity for your students to be on their own as they become more advanced. When it does become appropriate for students to become more independent and to take more responsibility for their learning, their success will depend on having acquired the necessary tools and direction.

Protect their passions. Students often lack insight into their work, or the depth that comes from experience, or a sense of artistic taste, or a sense of the connection between different areas. But one thing many of them do have is passion. This passion is precious and must be protected by teachers. It provides the energy that will help students through difficult times in their work. Off-handed dismissals of their ideas, likes and dislikes, are ways of extinguishing these passions.

Help the student learn to know about you. This means leading the student to an understanding of the language you use to teach. What terms do you use? What is important to you? How do you communicate? Bringing the student to an understanding of how you work is an important step, but remember, the lessons are not about you—they are about the student.

Remember that the lessons are about the student, not the teacher. Your job is to help your students learn, grow, and develop. It is not simply to present what you would do . . . they are not you. This does not mean that your experiences will not be relevant to them. They might be, especially your struggles and discoveries, but it helps to realize that you, as teacher and artist, exist with an entirely different sense of physical, intellectual, emotional, and spiritual sensitivities that have already been developed to a certain level.

Part of your job is to help your students refine and deepen the sensitivity and integrity of their abilities to respond to music on a physical, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual level and then to express those responses through performance in a way that is authentic and creative, rather than mannered, derivative, or manipulative. Expecting the student to be able to duplicate your positions, movements, sounds, phrases, musical ideas, or artistry, will only frustrate you both. Self-centered ability often forgets the paths that must be traversed.

Watch their faces. Students may not always be articulate about the impact your work is having on them, but you can almost always know by watching their faces. Your ability to do this is in inverse proportion to your own level of self-absorption.

Let students have their own experiences. Avoid setting up self-fulfilling prophecies for your students. This can happen, for example, when you present a new technique or concept prefaced by, “This is very difficult. It will take you years to master.” If a student does express difficulty with an area of study, there is nothing wrong with letting him or her know that others have had the same experiences. Similarly, beware of saying something is easy. At times this will be helpful to students, especially when you can present new material in ways in which its simplicity reveals itself and can be grasped quickly by the student. If students experience overwhelming difficulty, however, their first response will be to assume that something is wrong with them. Sometimes it may be necessary to say that something is difficult or easy, but in these cases it is essential to explain why.

Understand the relationship between the student’s experiences and your teaching. If your pacing is good, and your explanations clear and creative, students will have a better opportunity to learn with ease. If you move too fast and your explanations are confusing, the student will experience difficulties.

The more rigid and inflexible teachers are, the more alienated from the relationship students become. When a teacher is inflexible, or teaches a system and loses the ability to respond to individual students, that teacher’s effectiveness in causing positive change is diminished. Inflexible here simply means predictable and unchanging in response—whatever the situation. A consistent response of “Do what feels right” to problems, while clothed in the language of flexibility, becomes inflexible by nature of its unchangeability, its lack of direction, and the degree to which it is unable to address the real problem.

If the way you present information (tone, phrasing ideas, technical ideas) is always the same and does not take into account the context of where a student is, you may be doing the same thing with bits of information that unmusical students do with the notes, that is, to teach (or “play”) them without regard to their context, deeper meaning, or how they relate to other “notes.” This is not virtuosic pedagogy.

Cultivate a vision that explores the best of your student’s potential. After I had been teaching for several years, I noticed that I would form within me an image, or impression, that contained the best of the student’s potential. This image included information about

repertoire, technique, musicianship, even performance. I began to notice that as their studies progressed, my students would have grown into that image. Since I did not tell them about it, I concluded that I was psychic. But that was not it. It was not until later I realized that my willingness and ability to hold the student's potential within me helped us both come closer to realizing it. You will be amazed at your students' abilities to grow into your vision of them, whether that vision is positive or negative. If you make assumptions that reduce a student, that student will find him or herself less able to develop freely. Your measuring of them fixes them and makes it more difficult for them to change.

Become aware of projection. Teachers and students regularly project elements of themselves or their past relationships with others onto one another. For example, a student may project onto his teacher aspects of his relationship with a parent. How the student relates to his teacher will then depend, in part, upon the dynamics of this parental relationship. Reactions based on projection can take many forms, positive and negative. The student may react to his teacher with rebellion, unquestioned acquiescence or fear of authority. Or he may respond to his teacher with unearned respect, or an unquestioned and unproved assumption that the teacher's motivations have his best interests at heart, or that the teacher is wise.

Teachers also project things onto their students. A teacher who has disowned the role of his intuition in music making may respond negatively to a student with a highly developed intuitive side. Another teacher who has grown to believe that "thinking too much about things" will hinder her creativity may not be able to see clearly the gifts of a student who can and needs to think about what he is doing.

Teachers also project onto their students elements of their past selves, when they were students. Projection assures that the teacher will not be able to respond to the student as an individual.

Projection causes students and teachers to relate to one another with the weight of their respective pasts. It requires skill and psychological sophistication for teachers to understand this. Teachers must learn to recognize when a student's response to them has more to do with the student's past experiences than the present. If you do not allow yourself to be drawn into a relationship with the student's past and you can respond to your students with an understanding of this phenomenon, your students will find less and less in you upon which they can project.

Even without your awareness, the effects of projection will eventually wear off, but with varying results. Teachers and students may become disappointed with each other as

their idealized images of the other slip away. Or they can begin even more meaningful work as they learn to relate to one another as individuals.

Love your students. There is much to love in students: their openness and willingness to learn, their struggles to become unstuck, their trying, their inability to try at times, their passion, their fears. Understand, though, that this doesn't mean you need to have a relationship with them outside the studio, but if you are not able to love them, your ability to teach them will be mechanical.

Teaching And The Teacher's Role

Teach through positive movement. Students at all levels need to succeed. If you really know your students, you will be able to provide them challenges that will be stimulating, while at the same time provide them with ways of successfully meeting those challenges. This is teaching through positive movement. If you do not know your students, you run the risk of giving them assignments that will teach them frustration and confusion. You can see this through your results. Over time, have your students progressed towards greater technical and artistic liberation, have they become more inhibited, or is there little perceptible change?

Don't confuse the types of teaching needed when you are presenting facts with when you are responding to the student's grasp of the facts. When it is necessary to present material for the first time, present it as an independent part of the lesson rather than as a response to the student—even if the need to go into the new material has arisen from the student's work. For example, when it becomes necessary to introduce a new technique, give some basic direction and advice (the facts) that can lead the student to its successful mastery. Later, after the student has had a chance to work with the material, you can respond in terms of his or her grasp of the facts.

If you ask students to do something for which they are not prepared and then respond to what they are *not* doing, you are teaching through negative movement. You can know the degree to which you do this by observing the number of statements you make to students that begin with the words "Do not . . ."

This does not mean that you must pretend that everything is fine. It does mean that you must provide the student clearly defined means to achieve a clearly defined end. This is teaching through positive movement.

Good teaching means helping your students change the way they think rather than simply telling them what to do. While teaching may often consist of telling students what to do, it almost always involves helping them change the way they think. While it is folly to *tell* them what to think, you must provide them experiences and challenges that help their consciousness expand its current boundaries.

If you're not happy with the results you're getting, then maybe what you're doing needs to change. There is a time when a preoccupation with results is appropriate. But when there are important problems to be solved, it can be equally appropriate to examine the process and how it may need to change.

Albert Einstein once pointed out that it is impossible to solve a problem unless one can move to a higher level of consciousness from that at which the problem was created. This means that it is our *perception* of the problem and how we are attempting to solve it that need to change in order for us to be able to discover a solution. This calls for creative thinking. Problems are rarely solved without this fundamental change of insight. This change of insight allows us to change our process.

A change of consciousness rarely comes about through focusing exclusively on a desired result. It does come about by creatively exploring connections between different elements of the problem, or between things that do not initially appear to be connected. For example, suppose a student is not producing a good sound. Good teachers will quickly be able to discern whether the problem is that the student has not developed a concept of a good sound or that he simply cannot reproduce what he hears in his inner ear. But beyond this, creative thinking may reveal the real problem to be one of hand position, inhibited physical sensitivity, or even seating. Problems usually have simple solutions once one is willing to let their level of consciousness shift.

Know when to use the language of the means, and when to use the language of the ends. This is an especially divisive issue amongst artist-teachers. It comes down to knowing the difference between training and coaching, recognizing when one is needed and one is not, *and* being able to function in the space where the two overlap.

It is important to cultivate a series of fluid and creative responses based on where the student is and what he or she needs. In order for the student to become adept at recognizing the true cause of problems and then solve them, they must, over time, develop an understanding of the relationship between the means and the end. It is your ability to do this that will serve as a model.

If the only teaching you can offer a student is to evaluate his or her playing in terms of an end not yet reached, then you are like a doctor who can treat symptoms but not causes. Or if the only teaching you can offer is to define or demonstrate an end (a beautiful sound or melodic phrasing, for example), even if you present it with extraordinary eloquence and artistry, the student in need of training can only interpret and absorb your vision as process or means, which is what he or she needs. This is one of the main causes of the frustration and failure students experience. Conversely, if you have devoted your time to discovering more efficient ways of teaching the means but have lost a vision of the end, you run the risk of involving the student in some meaningless mechanical activity.

A single-minded preoccupation with the end may cause teachers not to hear or be able to respond accurately to a student's questions or problems. Suppose someone asks, "How can I get to Venice?" and you respond with a description of Venice's beauty or show them pictures. You may have further inspired them to go, but you have not answered their question. Or suppose you say, "Venice is in Italy." You have given them some information but you still have not answered the question. Your answer can only lead them back to their original question: "Where in Italy is Venice and, again, how do I get there?" If you say, "Look at a map," or "You must find your own way," you have effectively devalued your role as teacher. Finally, suppose your answer is simply, "Go to Venice." Once again, you may think you've told them what to do, but you still have not really helped them. A more appropriate response might be "Where are you now?" or, "Oh, I see that you are in Berlin now," and then to explore ways of traveling from Berlin to Venice.

Each of these examples has its corollary in the world of music teaching. Good teaching does not offer students the *what* to do without the *how*. Good teaching is not circular and will never lead a student back to their original questions or problems. The path offered by master teachers will contain the seeds of the destination, *but information about the destination alone will only reveal knowledge of how to get there to those who have already been there*. Virtuoso teachers understand the implications of this statement. Those who are less fluent will be left wondering why their efforts and good intentions are not getting the results they expect. Your high standards mean nothing unless you can help a student get there.

The essential difference between training and coaching is that during training (or re-training), whatever area is under consideration must first be presented using a language that is primarily relevant to, or grows out of, the thing itself. For example, if you see the need to recommend a change in a student's positions or movements, either because what the student is currently doing is mechanically disadvantageous or damaging, or because you believe that a change will enhance certain musical qualities, you must cultivate a language that grows out of the thing to be changed, *not the result*. If you say something like, "You must hold the instrument in a way that's comfortable," or "You must move your fingers in a way that gives you a beautiful sound," you are saying things that are certainly true, but you have said *nothing* about how the student is to get there. It will be better to have cultivated the ability to discuss posture and movement on their own terms. Madeline Bruser writes in *The Art of Practicing*, "Every musician needs a working knowledge of the body mechanics involved in using his or her instrument. Posture and movement have

enormous impact on one's ability to control an instrument and on how music sounds.² This is good training.

Later it will be right to discuss the relationship between positioning and movement to sound, or the relationship between an increased sensitivity to physical tension to an increased freedom of phrasing. This is being able to function in the space where training and coaching overlap.

Finally, when it is time to focus exclusively on musical and performance concerns, teachers must ensure that their students can respond freely and effortlessly to suggestions and demonstrations. This is good coaching.

Understand the difference between mysteries that need to be solved, and other deeper mysteries that are not meant to be solved, but are meant to be lived in. Art is mysterious. There are some mysteries that are not meant to be solved, but are meant to be lived in, worked in, expressed, and tasted. But these mysteries can only be reached through other mysteries—mysteries that must be solved if we are to progress. While master artists may only work within the former mysteries and mistake the latter for the former, virtuoso teachers understand the differences between the two.

Technique from music or music from technique? For advanced artists there is a seamless integration between technique and music: a musical thought is inseparable from its execution. Students, on the other hand, often have the perception of technique and music as separate entities that then grow towards one another over time. If you focus only on the music (the desired result) expecting technique to take care of itself, you will have split music off from technique as much as if you spoke only of technique. If you believe that “technique comes from the music” is an inexorable truth that applies to students at all levels, does that mean that seating or hand position can be explained in terms of phrasing? The unstated corollary here is that technical problems are the result of faulty or undeveloped musical ideas. In reality, the reverse is more likely true. During training, if technique is not working well, how can teachers know whether musical problems are the result of undeveloped musicianship, undeveloped technique, or a combination of the two? Madeline Bruser writes, “Regardless of talent, musical imagination, and exhortations from teachers to play with a more velvet or penetrating tone, if the body isn't working

² Madeline Bruser, *The Art of Practicing*, (New York: Bell Tower, 1998), 64.

efficiently, the music that comes out will be only a fraction of what lives inside the person.”³

It is possible to have developed a technique that is not physically sensitive to the minute variations of force, pressure, or movement that are necessary to express musical refinements, regardless of what one’s musical intentions are. A host of effective pedagogical tools, as well as solutions to problems, will remain hidden unless you have cultivated the ability to understand the difference between the means and the ends.

When a student is trying to learn a new technique, he or she must consider changes in positioning and movement, and possess a desire to make those changes habitual. This process may often be accompanied by an increased awareness of musical values. But when new habits are being formed, the brain is working under what is known as “conscious control,” a learning stage where changes must be consciously monitored and corrected. This is its purpose: to allow us the opportunity to develop proper positioning and movements before habits are developed. When the cerebellum, which is responsible for habitual movement, finally does take over, a different system of control is in place: we no longer have to think consciously about what we are doing. If habits are efficient (and remember, the cerebellum can make ineffective or counter-productive technique a habit as easily as it can good technique) we can come closer to musical freedom.⁴

When a musical phrase is played with artistry, technique must be habitual and transparent. The belief in musicality as a panacea for technical problems leads one to the faulty expectation that musical vision can magically establish good habits.

That advanced players constantly make adjustments and refinements to their technique according to their musical ideas often leads them to assume that this process is valid for students in need of training or re-training. This assumption creates what is in effect a pedagogical hoax in serious music teaching, or at the very least, leads to bad teaching.

If you ask a student to give up something, you must replace it with something better, even if that something can only be a promise right now. During re-training it may be necessary for students to stop playing music for a period so they can focus on developing a more effective and responsive technique. Or they may need to work on easier pieces while they learn a new way of studying or approaching interpretation. Although it may be

³ Bruser, 64

⁴ For further discussion of habits and the role of the central nervous system in practicing, see Christopher Berg, *Mastering Guitar Technique: Process and Essence*, (Pacific, MO: Mel Bay Publications, Inc. 1997), 18-23.

pedagogically responsible to ask the students to give up their old way of doing things, it can be difficult and disorienting for the student. This makes it imperative for you to use all of your artistry, eloquence, and patience to explain to the student why changes are needed and how these changes can lead them to a higher level of musicianship.

Understand the nature of improvement. How does one actually improve? How does the process of improvement work? And if we understand it better, can we improve at a faster rate?

- Improvement means change. A repetition of what we are already doing offers no opportunity for improvement. Change occurs through choices we make based on our increased sensitivity to movement, tension, our awareness of proper use, and how these relate to sound.
- Change is more effective when it occurs at those points of greatest leverage. This is where the art of good teaching resides. Good teachers have the sensitivity, openness, insight, and humility to discover those places in a student's musical understanding, technique, practice habits, or attitude that are blocking the development of future abilities.
- The points of greatest leverage usually rest within a student's faulty grasp of the fundamentals or the student's default assumptions. A default assumption is one that is so deeply rooted in the student's psyche that it defies identification. These seemingly basic and elementary assumptions remain unchallenged or unquestioned. Habits and beliefs based upon those assumptions stubbornly resist change.

Understand the difference between mindful repetition and rote learning. While repetition is important—movements must be executed thousands of times before a player can attain competence—rote learning teaches the student to use one mindless response. Harvard psychologist Ellen J. Langer writes, “. . . when people overlearn a task so that they can perform it by rote, the individual steps that make up the skill come together in larger and larger units. As a consequence, the smaller components of the activity are essentially lost, yet it is by adjusting and varying these pieces that we can improve our performance.”

The subtle details of a movement become consumed by the larger movement and are thus unavailable for change. If flexibility and mindfulness are learned from the beginning, it will be much easier for a student to make both small and large scale changes in their

playing. This flexibility and mindfulness often pass for talent by teachers who believe that talent cannot be taught.

The more mindful a student's practice, the more he or she will be able to trust that they have assimilated the details, and that during performance they can focus on musical values and release technical concerns. Students who have learned only by rote, often have the unsettling experience of becoming hyper-aware of what they are doing on stage. This is usually because things are not working and they are trying to make adjustments *during* the performance. This throws them back into the conscious control part of the brain, which functions more slowly than cerebellum. Performance then becomes erratic and the experience unpleasant for the student.

Understand the difference between information, knowledge, and wisdom. All good teachers must have in their possession a superior set of facts. This is information that has the potential to become transformed into knowledge through the student's experiences. Outstanding teachers provide their students with the means for this alchemy. Without these facts and guidance in their use, a student's movement towards knowledge will be impossible.

Wisdom comes more slowly—if it comes at all—usually after years of working with and developing knowledge. Virtuoso teachers understand that the most elegant expression of their acquired artistic wisdom and creativity can only appear as difficult or obscure information to students. A student's attempt to mimic the outward appearance of this wisdom will be mannered, contrived, unsatisfying, inauthentic, and probably meaningless.

Learn to recognize when it is time to teach a student on a different level. As a student's mastery of facts grows and deepens, it will be necessary to begin to respond to their work on different levels. ("Facts" can be any basic information: how to use the body, the notes of a piece, a concept of phrasing or sound, or an understanding of the form and structure of a piece.) In initial work it may be important just to recognize and respond to the student's understanding of the facts. Later, as the student works with the facts, these facts may become transformed into knowledge—something of intrinsic value and deep meaning the student feels he or she has discovered. At this point, the way you communicate with your students will need to change, but you are the one who needs to recognize this. As students work more with the knowledge they have earned, they may begin to transfer their knowledge and understanding of one area to another. Without this important step of transference, students will be able neither to solve problems on their own nor make important independent discoveries. As students become more fluent with the process of

transference, their work can become more independent, creative, and eventually, an expression of artistic wisdom. Your ability to communicate with your students in a language that reflects where they are, while expressing where they need to go, will help them in this process.

The way in which you understand this process can either help your students move forward, or keep them stuck. Through their questions you can know if a student has begun to demonstrate mastery of a set of facts and seems ready to begin to transform them into knowledge. If you have mistakenly decided they still don't grasp them and insist on spending lesson time reviewing them repeatedly, you will hold your student back and frustrate him or her. Conversely, if a student's mastery of the facts is not good, or if they are trying to use inappropriate or erroneous facts, yet you insist they be able to work with them in a piece as if they were knowledge, you will be asking the student to do something for which he or she is not prepared. This most often occurs when students are assigned repertoire that is too difficult for them. It is a pedagogical non-sequitur for a student working on hand position or tone production to be assigned a difficult piece and for the teacher to respond to the student's problems with advanced musical coaching instead of appropriate training.

Know when it is necessary to change the facts. In their hunger for specific information, students and teachers will often cling to tired bromides about positioning, movement, or even interpretation. These irrelevant facts may have once been important but more thought and insight need to be applied to discover a new set of facts relevant and helpful to more advanced students.

For example, while training students it is important to give them clear guidelines about positioning and movement that are immediately relevant to them. There is no purpose in exploring all the numerous deviations and modifications to these guidelines right now—that would only confuse or overwhelm the student. But teachers often don't say later: "Remember when we talked about moving the fingers this way? Well, now you're ready for the next step and the rules have changed." This is one of the problems with method books: they present basic information that is usually relevant to beginners, but they never recognize the need to modify that information to accommodate the needs of students as they progress. If you look around at your fellow teachers you may notice that most of them are able to succeed best with one type of student. Your ability to recognize that changes are needed in the information you offer as students progress is the one skill that will allow you to successfully teach students at all levels.

Understand the difference between directives and principles. A directive is a simple statement such as “Keep your wrist straight.” A principle is the soil out of which these directives grow: “Muscles work best when aligned with their joints.” Directives are necessary and can help a student apply principles, but they are often presented in an inflexible or even capricious way. A deep knowledge of underlying principles will liberate students by helping them understand the *why* of your teaching, as well as provide them with a clear idea of what to return to on the many occasions when it is necessary to deviate from these principles.

Directives need to be fluid and may change from student to student. Principles are fixed. If you mistake a directive for a principle you may end up offering a student something that is inappropriate for them *and* you will not have given them the means to discover why.

Avoid tossing out negative directives (“Don’t bend your wrist.”) unless you have clearly explained the principles behind them.

Do not use “artistry” as an excuse for vagueness. If you consistently respond to students’ questions or problems by saying, “There are no answers,” or “You must find your own way,” or “If you think of the music, things will take care of themselves,” you are not offering any direction or guidance, even though these things may be true at some levels. Try to determine if this is a way for you to avoid the work of discovering and expressing a heretofore hidden truth. Vagueness, often masquerading as artistic intuition, can feel as rigid and unfair to students as inflexible pedantry.

Know when to get out of the way. When a student is working with a new technique, musical concept, or the relationship between the two, there is a period of gestation where new things are taken in, absorbed, and consolidated before they manifest themselves outwardly. Learn to recognize and honor this process. If you start to make corrections or add new material too soon, the student will become overwhelmed and may experience some internal crises and confusion. Your ability to “get out of the way” is a reflection of the measure of trust you have in your students.

Don’t forget that you are a student too. If you remain open, your students will have much to teach you. They probably will never be aware of their role as your teacher, but they will offer you many lessons that can help you grow as a teacher. Your ability to continue learning will have a profound impact on your ability to teach.

Practical Matters

Clearly define the direction of the lessons. Framing your lessons with an expression of direction will help students understand the context of your work together. It will help if you can say something like, “This is where you are, this is where we need to go, and this is how we are going to get there.” Understand, though, that this direction is always subject to change based on your increasing ability to know your students and to understand the real cause of problems.

When listening to the student perform his or her prepared work, listen attentively without interruption. This is the student’s time. Do not do (or even think of) other things while the student is playing. Let the student have the experience of your clear focus on his or her work. Listen creatively, not only with your ears but with your entire being. When it comes time to respond to the student’s work, be specific in the context of where the student is.

Be aware of the relationship between where the student is and the appropriate goals for that student. Lauren Sosniak, who has studied the backgrounds of successful concert pianists, found that “the pianists learned to work toward more difficult and distant goals as they learned to care about achieving those goals.”

The far-off goal of playing in Carnegie Hall *did not* serve as the stimulus for the day-to-day work of solving problems. Rather, it was the ability to succeed at the day-to-day goals that opened up the possibility of caring about and formulating longer-term goals. As a student’s facility, musical understanding, and ability to succeed expand, so will their goals.

When giving assignments, be specific. Say, “Memorize this piece and pay attention to the movement of the thumb as we discussed,” or “Study the phrasing of the first section and pay special attention to the melody and the way harmonic tension builds and resolves.” For advanced students, this may not be necessary—they will have enough experience and direction to know what to do. But students in need of training need specific guidance. They do not yet have the skills and experience needed to join the means with the ends. Avoid comments like “Look at this piece,” or worse, simply not giving an assignment under the assumption that your students will know what to do.

Students need to know five things as they work. It is the teacher’s responsibility to help their students:

- know *what* to do (their objective) for each task or assignment
- know *why* this is important .
- know *how* to best go about doing it.
- know how to *evaluate* what they're doing to see whether they have succeeded (the ability to apply objective criteria).
- know *what* to change and *how* to change if they see that they're not successful.

Ask students to reflect back to you important ideas and assignments to ensure they understand. Asking whether they understand may not be enough. Ask students to reflect back to you the main points of the lesson before they leave your studio. You can dispense with this once the student can do this consistently.

Honor questions and problems. This means more than just asking, “Do you have any questions?” although this is important too. The way in which you respond to students’ questions and problems has everything to do with creating an atmosphere conducive to or inhibiting to true learning. Do you always dismiss them with the same response (“It will work itself out.”) or have you cultivated an environment of creative exploration and discovery? Can you answer questions using a language that helps explore the real problem, or does your answer confuse more than clarify? At times it may be necessary to respond, “I don’t know, let’s see what we can find out,” or “That should be clear once we get to...”, but if these are your consistent responses, your students will eventually stop asking questions. Consider it a harbinger of the lack of trust your students have in you when they stop asking questions.

Remember that although a question can indicate confusion or frustration (and not always about the subject of the question), it may also indicate curiosity and creativity. Your students’ questions have the potential to be important lessons for you.

Beneath the veneer of myriad details that serve to distract us, there are only three causes of problems between student and teacher, at least when it comes to presenting information and learning how to use and process it. It is important not to get these mixed up:

- The student is not capable of understanding what you are offering at the moment. This usually means you have asked the student to do something for which he or she is not prepared. The solution may lie in the answer to the following, “What does this student need to know (or be able to do) to understand this and succeed?” (Where is the point of greatest leverage?) This could be anything from cultivating better study habits, to

working on producing a better sound, to studying harmony, or to working on some easier pieces.

- The student may not be able to get the results you want because he or she is doing what you're asking. Does your explanation *actually prevent* what it is you're looking for? This can happen when your explanation of *how* to get what you want is, in reality, not aligned with *what* you want. This happens when teachers do not have a clear idea of how to teach the means. The real problem is often invisible to teachers because they are the ones who have created it. For example, a student with a faulty technique may not be physically sensitive to the subtle movements required to execute certain technical refinements, such as a delicate chord voicing. A teacher who only connects this inability with the student's level of musical understanding will spend lesson time trying to solve the wrong problem (or trying to solve problems in the wrong sequence), which will only make matters worse.
- The student is not paying attention to what you have been offering, is distracted, or is unable to practice. There are numerous causes for these, ranging from events unrelated to the lesson (concerns about other classes, relationship problems, and many more) to causes that grow out of the lesson (frustration, demoralization, confusion, and more).

Avoid global judgments about the student's work. A global judgment is a general condemnation of the student's work. These comments do not offer students anything specific from which they can discern a direction for change.

If you make statements like, "That was chaotic," the student can be left with a vague feeling of disapproval and many questions: "What was chaotic? Every note? Was it my technique, my musical ideas? Was it because I was nervous? If I knew what to do differently, and how to do it, wouldn't I? What criteria render this chaotic? What and how do I need to change?"

Students will be more open to your message if you can phrase things in term of *your* responses and criteria you have already established. This direct and discerning approach will increase the possibility of meaningful learning: "This sounds chaotic to me. Here's why: the melody comes out clearly sometimes but then disappears. You draw my attention to the bass line and then it's gone. Let's work on these problems."

If you are in the habit of consistently responding to students' work with a judgmental attitude, you will only add to the power of the student's own internal negative and judgmental voice. What are needed are ways to express discerning and intelligent responses to the student's work that are honest, compassionate, respectful, and non-

threatening. If your students trust you, your honest responses to their work will always be meaningful.

Good teaching also means reflecting back to the student the good things: “I loved the way you built that phrase and then backed off. You really took me someplace,” or, “Your sound is great here!” When making a positive comment, keep the tone and do not qualify it by saying: “That was good *but*. . . .” Your good intentions will disappear into the conjunction “but.” Many teachers think good teaching is always letting the student know what’s wrong or where their performances fall short. It’s not. Help your students see what is good about their work.

Contemplate the purpose of perfection. A healthy attitude towards error and perfection is among the most valuable gifts you can give your students. If you convince your students that they are capable of flawlessness in their work in the hopes it will cultivate higher standards, you will end up with unhappy and frustrated students. Such an approach is often counter-productive. Frank R. Wilson, writing about juggling, says “Intuitively one might suppose that practice pays off by making movements more and more precise: you learn to toss the balls to exactly the same height all the time. That, however, turns out to be a terrible mistake, because this kind of practicing inevitably leads to serious limitations in a juggler’s development. An inflexible routine built on the expectation of a long sequence of perfect tosses would be extremely vulnerable to deviations in the behavior of the object being juggled.”

In other words, one purpose of practicing should be to develop the freedom to respond confidently when things *aren’t* going perfectly. Madeline Bruser writes about the hidden consequences of the expectation of perfection: “The fear of not being perfect drives musician to overpractice without joy.”

Your students will become much more relaxed, as both musicians and persons, if they can see that you have the courage to be imperfect. The true value of perfection lies in its ability to keep us humble.

When coaching technique or music, use a variety of approaches, and understand the benefits and limitations that inhere in each. Sometimes it is necessary to explain why you are asking your students to do something. Learn to explain the reasons behind your advice. This may be harmonic analysis, an explanation of muscle function, or a discussion of Baroque dance music. Sometimes simply sing the phrase in question, or ask the student to sing it. At other times it may be good to describe verbally what you want. And at other

times it may be good to demonstrate the phrase on the instrument. Sometimes it is helpful to present a non-verbal demonstration of a passage, followed by a verbal description, and then a return to the non-verbal demonstration. Try not to get locked into only one approach, this will help you more quickly discover what your students respond to.

For example, if the only way you can teach interpretation is to sing or play a phrase and then ask the student to duplicate it, you may be helping a student who has not yet learned to make musical decisions and who needs a model. But this approach may not work as well with a student who is a divergent thinker, that is, a student who is capable of and enjoys generating many possibilities and exploring them. In this case, verbally exploring the meaning of a phrase, or talking about what's important, will not limit the student to only one solution, yet will still provide direction. These students will usually do better when they are given choices and allowed and encouraged to make their own decisions. In this case, recognize your role in providing a framework within which their decisions need to be made. If a student then makes a decision that obscures rather than enhances the meaning of a piece, then there is the opportunity for deeper discussion and demonstration. The latter approach, however, may not be successful for students who are convergent thinkers or students who become paralyzed when confronted with too many options.

Be clear about the purpose of exercises. Once musicians reach a level of technical proficiency, the need to practice certain exercises may disappear. As a result, many teachers, thinking they have discovered a universal rather than a personal truth, fail to recognize the value of exercises for their students. A common explanation is, "Those patterns don't occur in music!" But that's not the point. The real value of exercises lies in the opportunity they provide students to solve problems by applying concepts and principles in a concentrated way. Once this has been done, some exercises may naturally lose relevance. Without an understanding of what ideas or principles need to be studied, exercises will not hold any value or benefit for a student.

Let students know both your expectations and their responsibilities. Students need to hear from you what you expect from them. Be clear about this. It is entirely appropriate for you to base a student's responsibility on where he or she is. Part of your work is to get them to the place where their responsibilities become broader and more inclusive. Again, this depends on your ability to truly know your students. If you do not let them know their responsibilities, your attempts to let them know that they are not doing their job will be disingenuous.

Make the consequences clear if students fail to meet their responsibilities. It is unfair for you to mete out consequences about which you have not informed the student. These consequences must never be stated as a threat, but simply as one action growing out of another: “In order for you to give your recital next semester, your program must be memorized by the end of this term.”

When students are not doing their job, let them know. Be direct about this. You need to let them know that they’re not living up to their part of the implied student/teacher contract. There may be a number of reasons for this, but if you have made assignments clear and confirmed their understanding, it is appropriate for you to have the expectation that they complete their work. Their failure to do so may be an indication that you’re not doing your job as well as you could, they’re not being honest with you, or that there is a deeper physical, technical, or personal problem.

The Integrity Of The Lesson

Rudeness is not the same as having high standards. Expressing yourself destructively through abusive, sarcastic, mean-spirited, or arrogant comments is not an expression of high standards, but merely an expression of your inability to understand the true causes of problems or to express yourself creatively. Teaching through positive movement does not mean ignoring problems or the student's responsibilities. It *does* mean that standards can be very high because they can be clearly defined. A student's failure to meet them can then be understood and addressed with precision.

Students usually have great respect for their teachers and are not likely to challenge or question behavior that would be unacceptable in other relationships. I see two reasons or causes for intimidating and unethical behavior. The first grows out of the teacher's inability to get his or her point across in a way that is meaningful to the student. The energy of this frustration is not directed towards change, but rather, towards a more emphatic re-statement of material. This cycle can be repeated endlessly and, much like raising your voice to a deaf person, it will never work. It is better to learn a new way of communication. The second cause of much disrespectful behavior is that it is the way the teacher was taught. Teachers will unconsciously pass this on to their students, in part so they can believe that the way they were taught wasn't so bad.

Good teaching is not manipulative. Manipulation is "tricking" students into doing something. Good teaching is helping them change so they can do things out of their own free will and creativity. Be sensitive to the spontaneous emergence of students' ideas rather than trying to control or manipulate their ideas.

Do not talk about other students in a negative way. This is an important ethical issue. If you are in the habit of complaining about current or former students to another student, it will erode that student's trust in you. Students will have no choice but to think, "I wonder what (s)he's saying about me when I'm not there?" Students need to have trust in the confidentiality of the student/teacher relationship.

Do not introduce the comments of an absent third party into the lesson. This technique is usually used by teachers to express something negative without their having to take responsibility for it. ("Professor Johnson doesn't think your trills are very good.") The problem here is that the student is left with a vague feeling of inadequacy and disapproval, yet there is no one to whom the student can respond to ask for clarification

Avoid global judgments of other performers. If you have a consistent pattern of comments to your students that implies that no one is good enough, you need to be aware of the dangers. Your students will not be able to be themselves when you're present and they will learn this attitude from you. This is one of the most pernicious and hidden causes of performance anxiety. If a musician listens to a performance with a judgmental and destructively critical attitude, his or her psyche will have little choice but to assume that others attend his or her performances with the same attitude. This can create unnecessary internal anxiety that may not manifest itself until the musician is on stage.

The Final Lesson

Finally, learn to let go. There will be a time when it is right for your students to leave you. If you can acknowledge this with grace and encouragement, it will be among the most important lessons you can teach your students. Your chances for extraordinary teaching will be increased if your motivation is always to try to do what is right for the student.