

Mentoring a trainee or newly qualified teacher

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by Jane Werry

INTRODUCTION: THE CHALLENGES AND REWARDS OF MENTORING

Mentoring a trainee music teacher or newly qualified teacher can be hard work and time-consuming. But it is also incredibly rewarding, and is guaranteed to make you reflect on your own practice. With recruitment and retention in a dire state nationwide, creating a new generation of effective and happy music teachers needs to be a priority.

A mentor can play a tremendous part in the success – or otherwise – of a new teacher's training. It's not productive to play this fact down: mentoring is crucial at a make-or-break level, and the responsibility cannot be taken lightly.

This resource will give you some ideas as to how to make the whole process as productive and stress-free as possible. Ethos and attitudes will be considered, alongside practical ideas for helping with planning, evidence gathering, classroom management, musical skills and administration.

The background: types of trainee and the role of the mentor

If you are recently qualified yourself, you'll probably have a good idea about the different routes into teaching. However, if you trained a while ago, here's a quick rundown on the most common routes through initial teacher training (ITT):

- **University-based PGCE:** the student will undertake general educational studies, alongside some subject-specific work, at their university, and do two placements in schools.
- **Schools Direct (salaried) or SDS:** the trainee will be based in a school, and will usually have some relevant experience. The school needs them to fulfil a timetable need – hence the salary – and they are likely to need to take some lessons from day one. The school will have links with an ITE (Initial Teacher Education) provider, with whom the trainee will have sessions at least once a week.
- **Schools Direct (tuition fee) or SDT:** as above, but the trainee pays their own fees rather than being salaried by the school. They are super-numerary (ie they are not needed to teach a timetable), so can have a gentler lead-in, and will be teaching classes assigned to another teacher (in most cases, their mentor's).
- **Teach First:** a competitive two-year school-based course, mostly in urban areas. No tuition fees, and trainees are salaried. Trainees have an intensive five-week summer school before they start in their placement schools.

Schools Direct trainees, in particular, will have potentially less music-specific input from their ITE providers, and so your role as the mentor becomes even more important.

Let's not beat about the bush: music is hard to teach, partly because music is invisible and exists only in the moment, and partly because it involves so many complex skills, which can be difficult to explain, model and manage.

In a music classroom, you'll be giving students sources of noise, which complicates matters of behaviour management. Music is simply not like other subjects. The advice that the mentor provides, and the example that they set, will have a profound effect on how the trainee develops into a music teacher.

I use the word 'trainee' here to encompass both ITT trainees and NQTs. Obviously NQTs, being more experienced, will have a lighter touch from their mentor, and the admin requirements of the NQT year are not as all-consuming as in the ITT year. However, as the mentor, you will still need to be empathetic and prepared to adapt how you work with them depending on their level of skill, confidence and prior experience.

ETHOS AND ATTITUDES

There are many good ways of teaching music. Your trainee or NQT needs to be able to find out what works for them, discover their own teaching personality, and their individual educational philosophy. They will not be able to do this if you constrain them too tightly: they need a carefully worked-out mixture of support and freedom.

The extent to which one or the other of these is required at any given moment depends on the circumstances of the day – and the mentor's empathy to those. There is no one-size-fits-all approach. However, here are some guidelines:

- Have the trainee observe as much music teaching as possible: your lessons, your departmental colleagues' lessons (if you have any), even some observations at neighbouring schools. These need to be 'warts and all' observation opportunities: music teaching at its best, worst and average. All will be of interest and benefit.
- Allow the trainee to plan their own lessons for your scheme of work: it will not help them to develop if you plan every minute of every lesson for them. They need to be able to run with a topic. Let them have access to your resources to use/develop/ignore as they wish, but don't insist that they create all their resources from scratch. Research has shown time and time again that one of the biggest factors in happiness at work is a degree of control over what you do. Allow your trainee some control: they need to try things out, and we want them to be happy in their new profession.
- Take a pragmatic approach to lesson planning, assessment and admin. There will be more on planning later in this resource, but a trainee's paperwork burden is huge, and adding unnecessary extras to it will not help anyone. Know what is required, admin-wise, by the ITE provider, and plan for fulfilling the criteria in a pragmatic way.
- Make it clear right from the outset that perfection is not required or even possible to achieve. Most teachers have a perfectionist streak, but life in a school has far too many variables, and learning is too messy, for us to be able to survive without being able to roll with our punches. John Finney, former head of the music PGCE course at Cambridge University, has the excellent phrase 'good *enough* music teaching', which is a great mantra to have, particularly when many ITT courses still grade trainees and even individual observations, on a scale of one to four. The pursuit of 'outstanding', while noble, needs to be tempered with a realisation that being generally outstanding means being consistently good. Every lesson simply cannot be a 'one' and we will do ourselves many favours by not beating ourselves up over it.
- Perhaps the most important thing is to be a reflective practitioner. Encourage your trainee to try things out for themselves, and reflect on what went well and what could be improved. Tell them explicitly that this is a habit to maintain for their whole teaching career, not just the start of it. As a teacher you are never the finished article – it is vital to keep learning and keep developing.

EMOTIONAL SUPPORT

Being a trainee or an NQT is hard work. One of the things that mentoring will remind you is just how many teaching skills and survival skills have become second nature to you. Your mentee is not yet at that point, and when everything is new it takes a lot of effort.

Your trainee will have disastrous lessons and bad days. And you are at the front line of support when this happens. Be ready with tea and biscuits, or maybe a trip to the pub after school. If you are up to your eyeballs in your own teaching, set a time later in the day when you can have a chat. Reassure them that, while everything does get easier with experience, even experienced teachers have disasters and still struggle. Share some of your own mishaps. Focus on any positives about their disaster – what *did* go well in that disastrous lesson? Were there students who were doing the *right* thing? Chances are there were. Remember that it's often the bad things we remember at the expense of the things that went well.

Remind them that what students say is almost never personal: there may be any number of reasons for bad behaviour and rudeness. Some of these may be to do with students' home lives, their struggles with coping with the school environment, or masking feelings of inferiority or failure. Often it is because the teacher is the person in a position of authority, who is telling the student to do things they don't want to do. Teenagers are at a really tough time in their lives: they are living with rapid physical changes and working out where they fit into the world. A comforting fact is that the pre-frontal cortex, the part of the brain involved in regulatory 'don't do that' thoughts, does not fully develop until a person is in their 20s. If students say horrible things, they very rarely really mean it. Students need teachers to be the adult in the room, and surprisingly often, that involves not taking things personally.

LESSON PLANNING AND COURSE ADMIN

Every ITE course provider has its own lesson plan pro formas. They are, quite often, extremely long-winded. The big question here is: do you insist that your trainee completes one of these for every single lesson they teach? The answer has to be: probably not. This is where your pragmatism and empathy for your trainee must come to the fore. Do they *need* to write out a detailed lesson plan for every single lesson they teach? If the answer is no, then don't make them.

It may be that they start out making detailed plans for everything, and they may find that reassuring. Perhaps briefer plans can be made as their confidence grows. However, make it clear from the outset that it's not a disaster if the lesson does not stick to the plan. Sometimes, things take longer than you thought they might. This is fine. Sometimes, you have to change tack during a lesson, depending on how things go with the class. That is fine, too. Your trainee or NQT needs to realise that being responsive to the class is infinitely more important than sticking to a plan for the sake of sticking to a plan. Developing a sense of when a class is ready to move on, or when they need something explaining in a different way, or when you are 'losing' them, are essential weapons in any teacher's armoury.

As music teachers, perhaps the most important aspect of our planning is where the music actually comes into our lessons. As Mark Phillips, then HMI for Music, said: 'If it hasn't got music in it, it probably isn't a music lesson.' When in a lesson will students have their first direct experience of music, through listening, singing or playing? The answer to this is surely as soon as possible. How much of the lesson is involved in making music? And *why* are we doing the things that we are doing? What do we want the students to *learn*? Considering these questions is ultimately much more important than filling out repetitive 'all students/some students should/could...' statements.

Writing really good learning objectives is worth spending time on. These need to focus on what students will *learn*, not a list of activities. The teacher needs to be very clear on this, even if the objectives are not shared explicitly with students. The value (or not) of sharing objectives with students will be a good discussion to have with your trainee.

If your trainee is teaching multiple classes in the same year group, as is usual for music teachers, get them to take each lesson as it comes. This is a wonderful opportunity to refine what we do: if something didn't work in the first lesson, work out why and tweak it for the second and third lessons. Asking for plans for the whole week in advance stops this kind of reflection from happening, as well as placing an unnecessary weekly burden on trainees.

Consider using a quick planning pro forma day-to-day rather than the full lesson plan. There are many different ones online, but my favourite is the five-minute lesson plan.

For ITT trainees, there will no doubt be other pro formas that are required by the ITE provider. These may include logs of mentoring meetings, weekly reflection documents, and short- to medium-term target setting. Work out the most efficient way of getting these filled in, using the previous one as a starting-point wherever possible. Your weekly or fortnightly meeting with your trainee must be ring-fenced time. Get as much of the paperwork done in this meeting as you can, using their reflections and plans as the basis for your target-setting.

Make target-setting specific and useful for the trainee: it could be as simple as trying out a specific teaching strategy, using a particular method of assessment, or focusing on getting students musicking as soon as they enter the classroom.

MUSICAL SKILLS: IDENTIFYING AND ADDRESSING GAPS

Your trainee might have come from any number of musical backgrounds. Music degrees are so varied that they could have specialised in a particular genre or musical activity early on, and have huge gaps in their knowledge or skills. This is probably a bigger issue in music teaching than in almost any other subject. In the most extreme cases, it can feel like being asked to teach French when you have done a degree in Spanish. It's important to address this issue with your trainee, and figure out together what to do about it.

To a certain extent, this may depend on the context of your school and the courses you teach. If you teach post-16, the skills required for music A level, music technology A level, and BTEC performing arts are very different. However, on a more basic level, there still may be gaps at KS3 or 4 that need to be plugged.

Is your trainee classically trained? If so, they may be less confident with working with chord symbols, tablature and improvisation. Can they tune guitars and set up amplifiers? Are they familiar with sequencing programs such as GarageBand? If they have come from a rock/pop background, there may be theory and notation gaps to plug. Are they familiar with notation programs such as Noteflight or Sibelius?

Does a lack of confidence in singing or playing affect your trainee's classroom practice? All music teachers need to be prepared to sing with their classes, and if they don't have a singing background, might need some tips on how to get going. Some good vocal warm-ups are a good place to start, and there is a collection of good warm-ups on the Musical Futures website. More great songs, arrangements and warm-ups can be found on the Vocal Union website. There is also some very useful guidance on the Sing Up website about how to get going with singing.

Another thing every music teacher needs is a go-to instrument, preferably one that can be used to demonstrate musical concepts and accompany a song. It's not necessary to be a keyboard player (although I would say that a knowledge of what's where on a keyboard *is* essential) if your guitar or ukulele skills are good enough to play a chordal backing. If your mentee has only ever played a melody-line instrument, they will need to develop strategies for accompanying songs, and decide whether using backing tracks all the time is more or less hassle than learning a chord instrument.

Once gaps have been identified, provide appropriate resources for support, and set targets as part of your routine. It will be most relevant and effective to make these fit in with what's being taught: for example, to learn about Indian music in order to teach some lessons on it to a GCSE class, or to learn the chords for 'Wake Me Up' on the guitar in order to teach it to Year 7.

It may be that the best person to provide support in plugging these gaps is not you. Is there a departmental colleague who is an expert in a particular area? One of the peripatetic teachers? Perhaps even a teacher at another school may be willing to host a visit. There is also a wealth of information online. Encourage your trainee to join relevant groups on Facebook – it's worth getting an account even if you don't intend using it for social purposes. KS3 Music Hints and Tips is a great source of information, and there are music groups for every GCSE and A level board. Other websites that will be invaluable for them might include:

- **Little Kids Rock:** this is an American organisation with amazing funding that allows them to host a huge quantity of top-quality free resources for teaching rock and pop music. The content is added to constantly, and is very up-to-date.
- **Teoria:** this includes music theory tutorials and exercises, and is perfect for anyone who needs to brush up on theory matters.
- **Musical Futures** and **Musical Futures International** both have a wealth of free resources and content. The downloadable Teachers' Resource Pack is a comprehensive guide to MF pedagogy with a detailed account of how to run classroom workshoping sessions. There are also plenty of resources for practical classroom activities, including the Just Play and Everyone Can Play resources, which are invaluable aids for trainees who need to focus on the practical element of their lessons.
- **Music Tech Guru:** this website has some very useful free tutorials as well as paid content that's very relevant for those teaching A level music technology, or RSL/NCFE music tech level 2.
- **Music Teachers' Resource Site (MTRS)** is now quite old, but the content is now all free and much of it is still relevant and useful, with ideas and resources for all key stages.

EXPLAINING AND MODELLING

Explaining is at the heart of what all teachers do, all of the time. But for music teachers, the process can be more complicated than for teachers of other subjects. We are not just organising knowledge and explaining concepts to our students. We are also linking knowledge and concepts to practical and creative skills.

Music trainees often need help with unpicking what they're teaching, especially the link between understanding music and making music. What do students need to understand before they can perform or compose? This takes practice, and may be a point of frequent discussion when you're planning upcoming lessons. Giving some advice about common misconceptions can help here. Ask trainees to consider the following:

- Are students clear about the link between up and down in pitch and what this actually means on the instrument they are playing? This can be particularly troublesome on the guitar and ukulele. What drills and exercises can the class do to consolidate this understanding?
- Do students understand the difference between a note and a chord? How can we reinforce this?
- Do students understand the difference between sharps/flats and major/minor? This is a frequent point of confusion.
- How can we ensure that students know that musical notes are A-G, the order that they go in, and where to find them on a keyboard?
- Do students have a grasp of the difference between pulse and rhythm, and tempo and duration? How can we develop that sense of the beats in a bar?

When linking musical knowledge and concepts with practical skills, there are several things that should be considered in every lesson:

- What do the students already know? What can they already do? How can this be consolidated? Remember it may have been a while since their last lesson: many will have forgotten things.
- What practical warm-ups or drills could be done to introduce concepts in a practical way, *before* picking them apart and explaining them with words? This is a form of musical dual coding (presenting the information musically as well as verbally).
- Can we actually triple-code musical concepts, by representing them visually as well? This may be through movement (ie showing the contour of a melody with you finger in the air) or with diagrams or notation. However, sound before symbol – the maxim of the great music education pioneer John Paynter – is a useful mantra: do not introduce the symbols until after there has been direct experience of the sounds.
- The difference between explaining and modelling is that when you model something, you *show* how it is done while you are talking through the processes involved. In music, this means performing or composing at the same time as explaining what is happening. This, in itself, takes practice. Planning and practising the

modelling phase of the lesson in detail is infinitely more useful than spending unnecessary time on elaborate lesson plan documents.

Classroom workshopping – where musical ideas are explored through whole-class collaborative performing and/or composing – is the ultimate form of musical modelling. It can cover a lot of conceptual ground while keeping students' experience entirely active and practical. It does, however, seem daunting at first, and takes a bit of practice. It definitely helps if trainees can observe an experienced teacher lead some workshopping sessions. The process is explained in detail in the Musical Futures Teacher Resource Pack, and there are plenty of videos on YouTube as well: just search 'Musical Futures classroom workshopping'. It could be an ideal thing for you to team-teach with your trainee at first, if timetabling allows.

On a simpler level, teaching a song is something with which every music teacher needs to be confident. Again, this may take some practice. On a basic level, this involves breaking the song down into chunks, and delivering it in call-and-response format using gestures to make it clear when the teacher is singing and when the class should respond. On a more advanced level, it involves maintaining a sense of pulse throughout, and perhaps throwing in some supplementary gestures to show significant pitch contours or rhythmic features. Observing an experienced teacher will be helpful for trainees. If a video example would be useful, this one showing Sharon Durant teaching the 'Dynamite' round (itself a useful vocal warm-up) is ideal.

ASSESSMENT AND DIFFERENTIATION

When it comes to assessment, your trainee or NQT will of course need to be introduced to your departmental way of doing things. However, an ITT trainee – who may end up working somewhere else – will need to get a wider overview of the way that music assessment works, and some of the issues and background that inform current thinking, particularly at KS3.

The key reading here is *Assessment in Music Education* by Martin Fautley, published by OUP. The book succinctly and clearly outlines the particular challenges presented by assessing music. However, another very useful source of information is the ISM guidelines on music assessment, which make clear the links between curriculum planning and assessment, and provide very practical strategies. Further practicalities are covered in this ISM webinar.

Differentiation is another area that may need some clarification, especially if trainees have had generalised training that is mostly focused on subjects where written work is important. It's likely that they will have learnt about differentiation by task, outcome and support, but may not have thought in detail about the ways in which these work in the music classroom. There are a million ways to differentiate in the music classroom, and music teachers tend to be very good at it, as it fits very naturally with the way that musicians work. You are the ideal person to point out to your trainee everything that happens in a lesson that adapts to the needs of the individual – sometimes these are subtle musical details that may pass a non-musical observer by.

Playing different parts in an ensemble, or the same parts with varying levels of complexity, is the main way that we achieve differentiation by task in music. A great example of this can be seen in this scaffolding video from Little Kids Rock, which shows how each part (drums, guitar, bass and keyboards) has three levels of varying difficulties within the same song. Planning for this requires knowledge of the instruments and techniques involved: this is the area in which your trainee might need input from you. Help them to see how parts can be differentiated in the music tackled by their classes, and how resources can be best used to support students in working at the level that suits them best.

GATHERING EVIDENCE

Perhaps one of the most labour-intensive aspects of the ITT or NQT year is compiling evidence to show that the teacher standards are being met. Familiarise yourself with the way that your trainee is required to do this – it may be a paper portfolio or an online version – and how many pieces of evidence are required for each standard. You can help greatly by pointing out when the trainee has done something that could contribute to evidence for a standard, and remind them to collect the requisite items.

For example, standard 8 is about 'fulfilling wider professional responsibilities'. 8b is 'develop effective professional relationships with colleagues, knowing how and when to draw on advice and specialist support'. If the trainee has had contact with SEND staff about a particular student's needs, or with a form tutor or head of year regarding a behaviour matter, this falls under this heading. Relevant emails can be kept to show that communication has taken place (remind your trainee to anonymise any names), and then linked to lesson planning and evaluation. Encourage them to highlight relevant parts and make explanatory notes on the evidence, so that the assessor does not have to search through to work out how the evidence relates to the standard. Doing this as they go along, rather than leaving it all to the end of the year, will make the whole process a lot less painful.

SUPPORTING A STRUGGLING TRAINEE OR NQT

There are real differences between having a lot to learn, having a disastrous lesson or day, and consistently failing. As the mentor, you will be working closely enough with your trainee to know which scenario fits the situation.

- If they have a lot to learn, make plans together about how this will be tackled, chunking anything big into small achievable goals, and providing support for the *how* as well as the *what*. Having a lot to learn is no problem as long as the trainee is doing something – enough – about it.
- Having a disastrous lesson or a bad day just happens – to us all. This is when you need to supply reassurance and coaching, together with tea, tissues or beer as appropriate. What *did* go well? What can be done about the things that went badly? Is any follow-up required? What can be learnt from the experience, and how will this influence future planning? Can any of this contribute to evidence for a standard?
- Consistently failing to meet the requirements of the job, or failure to respond adequately to feedback, is a much bigger problem. The ITE provider (for ITT trainees) or NQT co-ordinator will have systems in place for this scenario, so you will need to consult with the relevant people to find out how it works, and make your worries known at the earliest opportunity. If a trainee becomes an official 'cause for concern', documentation will be required to show exactly what support has been put in place for them, so make sure that all paperwork is detailed and up to date. A system of target-setting and review is likely to be put in place.

If your trainee or NQT makes it through the year successfully, you can be satisfied that you have played an important role in the creation of a new member of our profession. However, do remember that teaching is simply not suited to everybody. If, despite your best efforts, your trainee does not make it to the end, don't feel bad: they will be happier in a job that suits their attributes better, and – despite the recruitment crisis – schools are better off without unhappy or ineffective teachers.