

Continuing professional development, part 1

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This is the first of two resources on continuing professional development for visiting instrumental teachers, and in it, I'll be exploring some fundamental questions about our own attitudes to teaching and how we can start pupils off with secure foundations. Part two will look at further development for both ourselves and our pupils: maintaining high standards, organising ourselves on a practical level, juggling diverse careers as performers and teachers, and encouraging our pupils to flourish beyond the confines of an exam syllabus.

Introduction

Many instrumental teachers enter the profession with no formal qualifications or training in teaching. A music degree is not a teaching qualification, and even if we've received advanced training on our instrument from a music college, this is no guarantee that we'll make a good teacher. Indeed, sometimes the best players make the worst teachers, because everything has come so easily to them: they may never have had significant technical or musical hurdles to overcome, and may not know how to deal with common problems.

Any classroom teacher is used to having lessons observed, sharing good practice and reflecting on what they do. Many instrumental teachers, however, plough a lonely furrow, repeating the same lessons over and over again – and often the same mistakes. In this resource, I'll be looking at how we can reflect on our approach to teaching and stimulate ourselves to do better. However experienced we are, and however good a teacher we might think we are, every pupil presents a unique challenge that should lead us to question our approach and refine what we might think is a tried and tested formula.

Reflecting on our teaching

Firstly, here's a basic question we should ask ourselves:

Why do we teach?

- ▶ I love working with children and think they should be encouraged to find creative outlets.
- ▶ I'm passionate about music education and think every child should have the opportunity to learn an instrument.
- ▶ Making music has been a wonderfully fulfilling part of my life, and I'd like to share that with others.
- ▶ Music is a rich and varied subject that teaches people a lot about themselves.
- ▶ Music is a learning accelerator that can help pupils with their personal and academic development across a range of disciplines.
- ▶ To get pupils through music exams.
- ▶ I can't think of anything else to do with my music degree.
- ▶ I'm biding my time, waiting for my performing career to take off.
- ▶ I want to take the money and run.

Some of these answers may help you to answer the follow-up question:

Would you want yourself as a teacher?

Do you try your hardest for every pupil, or have you written off some of them? Of course, there are some pupils we enjoy teaching more than others, but are we trying hard enough for those pupils who are a struggle to teach? Do you finish every lesson thinking 'I tried my hardest', or were you just wasting half an hour and pocketing the cash?

We have an obligation to parents, pupils and ourselves to give our best efforts to every pupil. In my early teaching career, two incidents reminded me of what a unique responsibility I held.

One of my first jobs out of music college was teaching brass in a rough inner-city school. The instrumental teaching room was next to the music classroom, where it seemed that a permanent

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riot was taking place. My pupils were all very pleasant individually, but it seemed that in a group they were completely unruly. One week, a particularly keen trombone pupil didn't show up for his lesson. I mentioned it to the music teacher, who said, 'He's been suspended for fighting again. He's always in trouble – he comes from a difficult home and he's a complete nightmare.' I was genuinely astonished – he'd never caused me any trouble. And then it occurred to me that his weekly trombone lesson was probably the only time in his life that he had one-to-one time with an adult. I had assumed that a music lesson would be a very peripheral activity for him. In fact, it was probably the only time in his life that he had an adult's undivided attention.

At another school, I had a pupil with whom I found it hard to connect. He was the sort of pupil who is unresponsive, never smiles and seems completely uninterested. I was most surprised when his mother told me that he absolutely loved his trumpet lessons and they were the highlight of his week. I was relieved that I'd evidently managed to hide my indifference towards this child and resolved to give every pupil the very best teaching in every lesson.

It's worth remembering that even for pupils from affluent families, a music lesson may be one of the few times a child gets one-to-one time with an adult. Parents may have high-flying careers that allow for little time with their children. They may be happy to throw money at their children and send them on a carousel of activities – ballet, swimming, horse riding, sports clubs – but the child's music lesson may be a rare one-to-one activity where they experience some human warmth, and of course, expression and creativity to boot.

So if you're the person who wants to take the money and run, and are not willing to face the responsibility you have for every pupil, *please think about doing something else*. Perhaps you make more of an effort in lessons if you're teaching the offspring of your head of music, an eminent musician, or a friend, but don't try so hard with other pupils. This isn't fair – you should be trying as hard as you can for every pupil in every lesson. And the more you put into a lesson, the more you get out of it: giving a lacklustre, formulaic lesson is soporific and soul-destroying. The motivation to get pupils to play better should be self-evident – who wants to spend their working life listening to music being played badly? It surprises me that some people seem to be resigned to doing just that.

Our philosophy of teaching

CPD programmes often start by asking teachers to state their philosophy of teaching. The replies are often things like these:

- ▶ 'To introduce the joy of music to my pupils.'
- ▶ 'To make music lessons fun.'
- ▶ 'To foster a lifelong love of learning.'
- ▶ 'To share my love of the compositions of the great masters.'

I may be quibbling over semantics, but I'd suggest that these are aspirations – if very laudable ones – but not philosophies. One dictionary definition of a 'philosophy' is a *theory or attitude that acts as a guiding principle* and there's no guidance in these. I passionately believe that good teachers should make themselves increasingly redundant: my own maxim is 'To teach pupils to teach themselves.' In other words, I aim to give them the skills to learn independently. Admittedly that's rather prosaic and doesn't express any lofty ideals. But although any English teacher may want their pupils to ultimately develop a love of Shakespeare and Dickens, in reality they are usually taking a much more pragmatic approach in teaching the basics of reading and writing, as well as analytical skills, in the hope that it will open the door to a love of literature in the future.

In these days when every school has a motto, can you come up with one that summarises your approach to teaching?

As well as having 'guiding principles', we need a nuanced philosophy for every pupil, so rather than trying to shoehorn the pupil into a rigid method of teaching, we should be continuously adapting our teaching style to suit every individual.

Consider how you get your methods of teaching. These may include some of the following:

- ▶ Following methods used by your own teacher.
- ▶ Following advice given in inset days, training sessions and professional development courses.
- ▶ Informal chats with other teachers.
- ▶ Observing other teachers' lessons.

Now consider how many basic assumptions you make, which may have long gone unchallenged. For example, the vast majority of pupils I take on from other teachers have only learnt exam pieces. A common method, which seems to be widely adopted, is: learn three exam pieces (usually over the course of a whole academic year), take the exam and then learn three more from the next grade. What

is the ratio of exam pieces to non-exam pieces that your own pupils are currently learning? In part two of this resource, I'll address repertoire development and suggest that focusing mainly on non-exam repertoire significantly increases the speed with which exam pieces can be learnt.

How do children learn?

As you might guess from my motto, I'm not a big fan of learning by rote. However, copying is how young children learn: they learn to speak before they can read or write. Why shouldn't children learn aurally before learning to read music, as pupils do when they use the Suzuki Method? Many group teaching projects such as Wider Opportunities are run very successfully using aural stimuli initially. Different approaches may be necessary for different pupils.

I do, however, believe that learning to read music is vitally important, and I'd draw parallels with school education, where literacy and numeracy are huge priorities. When children learn to read, they have a very fast turnover of easy books. Fluency is the key, rather than stumbling through books where they struggle to read or understand many words. In maths, there may be some rote learning (of times tables, for example), but this is incorporated into learning with understanding. If you learn a particular maths problem, you generally do lots of variants to ensure that you fully understand it. How many children can play a dotted rhythm in a particular piece because they know the tune, but can't play the same rhythm in a different context, because they can't actually read it with understanding?

A couple of rules I try to apply are: give pupils something new every week, and consolidate something they're learning by giving them lots of examples in different contexts – perhaps finding different pieces that all use the same rhythm, or playing some pieces in the key of a scale they've just learnt. Frequently, tutor books only contain a small number of exercises on any one thing, so find others elsewhere or write your own.

By their very nature, teachers who give group lessons generally have to adopt a 'one-size-fits-all' approach (though of course, they can still adapt to the needs of their particular cohort). When teaching individually, however, we can tailor our approach to suit the individual student: we can consider ourselves artisans, giving bespoke lessons. But do we really take advantage of this lucky position, or do we still churn out production-line lessons?

- ▶ Be adaptable and don't stick rigidly to a plan if it clearly isn't working.
- ▶ Be aware of any educational needs – for example a dyslexic pupil might need a more aurally based approach.
- ▶ Develop a customised curriculum for each pupil, including a fast turnover of diverse repertoire. Remember: an exam syllabus is not a curriculum.
- ▶ Find out what pupils like to listen to and give them a voice in choosing repertoire they may wish to play.

Mistakes

It's time to reinvent the mistake as a positive thing. Mistakes get a bad press, yet they are hugely important and essential for progress. How can you experiment, and try things out of your comfort zone, if you fear something may go wrong? Of course something may go wrong – that's the point. We can analyse what went wrong and gain new insight. We learn far more when something doesn't go as planned and sometimes we might actually like the unexpected result. Many times when I've been composing, an unintended note on the piano has led me down an interesting harmonic or melodic path. A 'wrong' note has turned out extremely useful.

In his excellent article, *Why Failure is the Key to Flying High* (www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2016/jun/19/why-failure-is-the-key-to-flying-high) journalist and author Matthew Syed talks about how people can only succeed if they learn how to fail. He uses the example of James Dyson who had 5,125 failed prototypes of his dual cyclone vacuum cleaner, and Shizuka Arakawa, a figure skater, who estimates that she fell over approximately 20,000 times on her journey to being an Olympic champion.

I often boast to my pupils: 'I've played more wrong notes in my life than you've played notes.' It's not something to be proud of, you might think, but actually I'm making an important point: I've got to be a professional trumpet player not in spite of the mistakes, but *because* of them.

From the very beginning, children love experimenting and taking risks. They get loads of things wrong and are constantly refining their approach as a result. They learn far more from this approach than from just doing what they're told.

A pupil playing something perfectly tells us very little, and we learn far more when a pupil makes

mistakes. Have they spotted what went wrong? Have they analysed the problem and found a solution? If so, you can be reassured that they are capable of independent learning.

Just as pupils need to learn from their mistakes, so do we as teachers. We can also learn a lot about ourselves by trying to look objectively at our own pupils and those of our colleagues. Listen to other teachers' pupils – for example in school concerts – with a critical ear. Analyse what could be better and how this could be achieved. Consider what other teachers may be thinking about our pupils and what they may be surmising about our own teaching.

I remember once judging a fellow trumpet teacher very harshly for his inability to transpose at sight when we were playing in a school orchestral concert together. Being able to transpose is an essential skill for any trumpet player (in my opinion). You have to do it in orchestras, trumpet exams and for music college auditions. But he was a jazz specialist and he could have equally bemoaned my inability to knock out a decent improvised jazz solo. We all need to keep learning and addressing our weak spots.

Feedback

Sources of feedback include:

- ▶ A pupil's performance
- ▶ Self-reflection
- ▶ Comments from pupils and parents
- ▶ Exam marksheets
- ▶ Formal and informal chats with colleagues, who may share ideas and offer solicited or unsolicited advice

Many instrumental teachers do not have their lessons observed, and therefore do not receive direct feedback. It's very hard to reflect objectively on our own teaching, and the scant feedback we do receive is often filtered through our biased opinions. Some people have a very high opinion of themselves with little evidence to back this up, while others are full of self-doubt, despite pupils flourishing under their guidance. We might apply confirmation bias, in which we twist any positive comments to support the opinion that we're doing well. How many times have we gladly accepted praise from parents, yet rejected criticism because 'they don't know what they're talking about'?

We think examiners who give our pupils high marks really know their stuff, yet they're clueless when their marks are harsher than we expect. We can't have it both ways. Although praise is, of course, good for our self-esteem, criticism can be far more valuable in addressing our weaknesses. So, let's always assume that the negative criticism is valid. However misguided we might think the critical parent is, they are seldom malicious and are only concerned about the welfare and progress of their child. It doesn't have to turn into a confrontation, because we're actually on the same side – we should all be equally concerned about the progress of the pupil.

Don't be afraid to ask the opinions of colleagues, parents and pupils themselves – this shouldn't be perceived as a weakness. Often teachers of different instruments (or indeed different disciplines altogether) have different approaches, so it's useful to share ideas as widely as possible.

Establishing good foundations in our pupils

Firstly, we need to establish a positive relationship with our pupils and find out what their interests are (both musical and non-musical) and what makes them tick. If they have any learning difficulties, it's essential to know.

I once heard a senior member of a music service say, 'We don't worry too much about technique. The most important thing is for children to play a few tunes they can recognise.' I profoundly disagree. Bad habits quickly become ingrained and can hinder development in the long term. Pupils can get through a few grades with terrible technique, but they will eventually hit a wall, at which point they will need to go back and relearn the basics, which can be extremely demoralising. It's important to establish good foundations first time. So, what exactly are the essentials?

- ▶ Making a good sound.
- ▶ Being able to articulate notes with a sense of flow and direction (phrasing).
- ▶ Playing with a good posture.
- ▶ Learning the basics of reading music.
- ▶ Being aware of the shape of pitches – how they move up and down and if they move in steps or bigger jumps.
- ▶ Maintaining a pulse.

These apply to all instruments. Of particular importance is the second point – articulation. As a brass teacher, a particular bugbear of mine is hearing pupils blow each note in a separate breath, rather than tonguing notes in a fluent stream. This applies equally to woodwind players, who frequently huff each note individually. Young pianists are sometimes unable to play legato notes and lift one finger up before the next one goes down, so the music is always disjointed. I have seen plenty of string players who jerk the bow one way, stop, and then jerk the bow back with no fluidity. Singing is an excellent model for phrasing, regardless of the instrument. One word flows naturally into the next, and you naturally breathe in phrases. If a piece doesn't have words, make some up and get the pupil to sing it.

Case study

We are constantly problem-solving – identifying issues that need addressing and working out solutions. At this page on my website (<http://edwardmaxwell.com/poor-pupil/>) you can listen to 'Poor Pupil' playing 'Gheta Sea' (he and his mother agreed to allow the recording to be made public for training purposes).

See how many problems you can identify. If you're not a brass player, you should still be perfectly capable of critiquing the playing (which, incidentally, is why examiners *can* judge musicians beyond their specialist instrument). It's hard to believe, but this pupil had been having euphonium lessons for nearly two years, and the piece he was attempting to play first appeared in his notebook a full year before I recorded this. It sounds like a very first lesson, and it's a testament to the dogged determination of 'Poor Pupil' that he had continued lessons for this amount of time. His teacher was, at the time, a salaried full-time brass teacher. The mother of 'Poor Pupil' had paid around £1,000 for lessons when I recorded him play. In most professions, there is some recourse for shoddy workmanship. If a plumber had relieved you of £1,000 with no discernible progress to show for it, you might consider contacting trading standards and you'd certainly want a refund.

Things you might have come up with about 'Poor Pupil':

- ▶ He was huffing each note separately and lacking any attempt to link notes together (he was also failing to use his tongue correctly).
- ▶ Some of the pitches came out too low (brass teachers might have spotted a poorly formed embouchure – he was not using his facial muscles and was puffing out his cheeks).
- ▶ He hadn't learnt the names of the notes (which had to be written in).
- ▶ He hadn't learnt the fingerings (again, written in).
- ▶ He wasn't following the shape of the pitches on the page. If a note goes higher on the staff, it should sound higher.
- ▶ Why was he still trying to play a piece first set a year ago? If he hadn't made any headway with it after a couple of weeks, he should have tried something different. In fact, he was only on the fifth page of his tutor book and had been given no supplementary material. If a child had got through just five pages of a reading book in two years and made no discernible progress, there would be some serious questions asked about the standard of teaching.
- ▶ You may wonder why he is learning a bass instrument in treble clef. Although this practice is commonplace among brass band players, it shouldn't be accepted without question.

I took on 'Poor Pupil'. In the first lesson (when the recording was made), we went on to play some long notes to train the embouchure in not collapsing, and then I taught him how to tongue. You can hear the results on the link, in which we also introduced pulse and rhythm to his playing. Note that he's now articulating a higher pitch more easily because he's using his embouchure more efficiently and not puffing out his cheeks. After teaching him the basics of reading music, he was able to play 'Acapulco Bay' without notes or slide positions written in. (You may notice this is played on trombone – he had to return the euphonium when he stopped lessons with his previous teacher.) Compare two weeks of focused teaching with two years of time-wasting. You'll be pleased to know that 'Poor Pupil' went on to pass grade one a couple of terms later and enjoyed playing in his school orchestra and brass ensemble: a pupil transformed by applying some basic principles.

The mother of 'Poor Pupil' had told the previous teacher that she was going to seek a second opinion on his progress and received a note: 'I strongly advise against seeing another teacher. Different teachers have different approaches, which just end up confusing pupils.' Did he really believe that, or was he just worried about being found out? Pupils should be introduced to different perspectives, and I'm always keen for my pupils to see other teachers, who may be able to shed new light on their playing. Admittedly, any advice or comments given by another teacher can feel like implied criticism, but we must accept it (and offer it back) in good faith.

Imagine someone is judging your teaching not on your best pupil, but your worst. What would they conclude? We probably like to claim the credit for our good pupils, but pass the blame onto the pupil

if they don't do so well. Maybe our worst pupils are bad *because* of us, and our best pupils do well *despite* us, rather than vice versa. It's so important that we never become complacent. We need to be constantly refreshing our approach and appraising our methods.

When asked why he continued to practise at the age of 90, the legendary cellist Pablo Casals responded: 'I think I'm making progress.'

Summary

- ▶ We have an equal responsibility to **all** pupils.
- ▶ Every pupil is unique – adopt a pupil-centred approach rather than trying to impose a dogmatic style of teaching.
- ▶ Allow your teaching style to evolve – every pupil will challenge our preconceptions about good teaching.
- ▶ Embrace mistakes (made by both ourselves and our pupils) – that's how we learn.
- ▶ Listen to all feedback with an open mind and consider comments that we perceive to be negative as valid.
- ▶ Gather information from disparate sources – talking to colleagues, pupils and parents; listening to pupils' performances; reading articles; and chats on online forums. These can help us to analyse salient points to move our teaching forward.
- ▶ Establish secure foundations. While there are some bad habits we might decide we can reluctantly live with, fixing others is non-negotiable.
- ▶ If we don't enjoy the endless challenge of being a teacher, we should simply do something else – we owe that to ourselves and our pupils.
- ▶ We should always be aware of our pastoral responsibilities and be fully up to date with our safeguarding training.