

## Music makers – reflective practice

### Teach What You Do Not Know

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*Abstract – Where can we find inspiration to teach and explore the unfamiliar aspects of provincial music curriculum documents? Try thinking of leading your students instead of instructing. Experiment with technology, composition, improvisation, or other areas that may be less comfortable for you. When we become highly trained music specialists within any particular pedagogical approach, it is possible that we may become blinded by our own expertise; teaching the same things the same ways. Instead of teaching what we already know, we may need to learn and grow alongside our students. Without this leap of faith, we may be left just ‘walking’ through our professional development...or sometimes not moving at all. In summary, just go for it!*

What should you teach? Should you start with what you know...or not? Could you start with what your *students* know, and might want to know more about? Is it possible to start with less familiar aspects of the curriculum requirements, aspects that require a level of confidence that as a music educator and musician, you are capable of learning and exploring? This year I have been thinking about the idea of *teaching what you don't know*. Do we only teach what we can do, or do we also teach what we cannot do?

I was trained as a classical violinist (Sevcik studies and Bach Partitas), yet I now love to experiment with electronic pedals plugged into my violin. There is an uncertainty in this trial-and-error process that feels like getting lost in a forest and taking the time to appreciate the trees (of course, with my iPhone shoved deep in my pocket). Teaching repetitive rehearsals geared towards a high music festival mark, or double checking the fastest route to a polished piece, doesn't always leave room for *not* knowing something – or – for growing.

I start each school year by playing my violin. Admittedly, it feels like I am showing off (demonstrating my musical proficiency), but then we talk about how I became an accomplished violinist. The answer; practice, practice, love of music, and more practice. We talk about how I also play the piano, guitar, ukulele, drums, etc., but that I am not as good on these instruments because I haven't practiced as much. The students know that in Guitar Club I work beside them to prepare for a show. Other teachers, parent volunteers, and a few senior students play guitar better than I do, and yet I don't feel bad leading because I believe that leading, motivating, enriching, modifying, organizing, and cheering are so much more important than playing bar chords. A grounding in musical knowledge along with these essential teaching abilities should allow us to experiment more with unfamiliar areas of music education.

I need to keep my music lessons fresh and interesting, for myself and for my students. I do my best to stay relative...and ‘hip’. My first lesson in the 2016/17 school year was about The Tragically Hip's final tour. Their song *Fiddler's Green* is age appropriate, has four easy guitar/ukulele chords, and generated a lot of shared personal anecdotes and good discussions about the power of performances. To prepare for this lesson, I taught myself to sing and play

*Fiddler's Green* and then sang it with my classes. Eventually some students in my classes will be able to sing and play it better than I can, but this doesn't bother me as it is a sign of progress.

As music educators and musicians, I believe that we all have the ability to teach a lesson on bebop, Miley Cyrus, double fugues, or cello thumb position playing technique. The internet can provide assistance, along with your students. You can combine these rich resources. Ask your students open-ended questions and freely admit that you are learning beside them. Your students do not need you to know all of the answers, but they do need you to lead, motivate, enrich, modify, organize, and cheer. With your class, share what you find and then determine the next step. Try celebrating music not only with a concert performance, but in other ways as well: a webpage posting, a hallway mural, a YouTube tutorial, a school Open House, or perhaps a letter home.

### **Participate in New Initiatives**

Two years ago my Grade Six students and I embarked on an adventure with seven other schools in the Toronto District School Board (TDSB) called "Continuum in the Classroom." This collaborative outreach project with the Toronto-based contemporary chamber music ensemble *Continuum*, began in 2012 and has now engaged over 4500 elementary and secondary students.

Students used Garageband to record and compose sounds around their school. The pieces were then transcribed by Canadian composer Chris Thornborrow, and performed by the contemporary music ensemble, "Continuum". We suggested revisions after seeing a video of the first rehearsal, and then attended the performance of our works. I asked my students what they thought about having me lead them without expertise in technology or composition, one student answered, "It gave us the freedom to take the music whichever way we wanted allowing us to be more creative in our music making true to ourselves." So many unknown aspects at the beginning of this project led to so many discoveries at the end. Without a leap of faith, we're left just walking...or sometimes not moving at all.

### **Perform music from home**

Three times a year my students and I enjoy, "Sharing Music from Home" lessons. Students prepare performances for a show-and-tell style class and know that I will insist on respectful listening from their peers. One day, an anxious, quiet Grade 6 student came to class with an electric guitar and led us in a sing-a-long of "Wonderwall." Another girl organized a Mariachi band, with full choreography. These lessons enrich my teaching. I discover who takes private lessons, who might be able to fiddle with me in a show, and which pop songs the kids can all sing along to. Students learn from each other and often get together the day before to share their music. My students also know that I am always looking for good songs and band recommendations. If they take the time to write down the song title on a sticky note, I will take the time to look it up. This is my favourite way of winning over a reluctant music student. Talking about favourite music in the halls often leads to making music in the classroom.

### **Improvise**

On my music room wall, I painted two student quotes from a unit on active listening and improvisation: "Improvisation is like freedom" and "Improvisation is like a party in my music

and mind.” This is an excellent example of inspired teaching of what I did not know. Prior to teaching my first unit on improvisation, I had very little formal training, professional development, or professional experience in this area. I began with Schafer listening exercises and Orff pentatonic scales. Improvisation allows for creativity in both music planning and playing. Students brainstormed ways of sharing their music improvisation in a concert setting, resulting in adaptive lessons. Our concert consisted of a live soundtrack to a Charlie Chaplin film, a skit with instruments “speaking” the lines, a graphic score live interpretation, and student gesture-conducted improvisations. Improvising while music teaching is a source for professional inspiration and work-satisfaction, especially on days with no prep time, recess duty, choir at lunch, and a meeting after school.

During a recent lesson one of my Grade 4 students started to talk to me about his love of the band, Caravan Palace, and I shared his excitement for the Parisian group, especially their piece *Jolie Coquine*. I then looked at the rest of the class talking amongst themselves and the precious 40-minute period slipping away and told him it was time to get to work. He replied, “Ms. Fraser, you start to talk about cool things but then you always get down to business.” How true! As music teachers, we sometimes experience limitations with what we can cover, accomplish, and take on during the amount of time we have with our classes. I would suggest that despite such restrictions we should not feel limited in how we cover music curriculum and pay attention to what we feel we cannot teach.

### **Summary**

When I teach strings (my main instrument) I feel like I’m going to bubble over with information, technical advice, and personal stories. I stand in front of my students and speak far too quickly, barely stopping for questions. I am sure I lose many of them. Some days I feel as though the lesson was a failure because I had so much more to teach them or because their playing technique is not improving quickly enough. Ironically, my technical strength and extensive experience as a violinist might actually be my weakness as a string teacher. Perhaps I did not start my teaching career with the goal to be the type of music teacher I am today, but here I am. Where are you at professionally? Or, maybe more importantly, where are your students at musically?

### **Precis**

Où peut-on trouver l’inspiration pour enseigner et explorer les aspects inconnus d’un programme de musique provincial? Avec vos élèves, pensez à guider au lieu d’instruire. Expérimentez la technologie, la composition, l’improvisation ou d’autres facettes qui vous sortent de votre zone de confort. Quand on devient un spécialiste en musique hautement qualifié dans une approche pédagogique particulière, il est possible d’être aveuglé par notre propre expertise, c’est-à-dire d’enseigner constamment les mêmes choses de la même manière. Plutôt que d’enseigner ce que nous connaissons déjà, nous pourrions apprendre davantage et se développer aux côtés de nos élèves. Sans cet acte de foi, notre développement professionnel risque de ralentir, voire stagner. En bref, allez-y!

### **Biography**