

Eric Berlin's Workshop

I want to first acknowledge a very important person in my life, my Junior High Band Director. Jim Metzger came into my life in 8th grade and became the most important influence to becoming a professional musician. His office was my refuge from that moment through high school. He is so important that he was at my side as a groomsman at my first wedding. Most professional musicians had someone like Jim invest in them well beyond the band period. We all owe them a debt of eternal gratitude! These are the educators that not only teach the skill, but teach how to teach.

I was with Jim at the conclusion of his final concert at Manheim Central Junior High School. I was there for his first and felt I had to be there for his last.

Oddly enough, I never envisioned myself as a teacher. While in high school making choices about where to go to college and what path, he asked me if I was going to go into Music Education or Performance. My response still makes me smile: "I don't want to teach, I see how hard you work."

I began teaching not because it was a path I chose, but rather out of necessity. Freshly out of college with a performance degree and rent to pay, I was given an opportunity to take on some private teaching through a school system in suburban Boston. Within a couple of weeks, I called Jim to eat crow. Very shortly, I discovered how much I loved teaching and began to realize the reciprocal benefits that come from investing in my students as my teachers had done with me.

For the first ten years of my career, I made my living primarily from teaching privately. At its biggest, my studio was 60 students every week, ranging from 4th grade beginners through high school with a few occasional college students. I adored every moment with these kids.

I will admit that many of my students had a great deal of success on the instrument, but the real beneficiary was me. It is so refreshing to connect with the energy of those who are still in touch with the "play" of "playing" the instrument. A young mind who hasn't saddled music with the weight of lifetime employment is usually a sponge thirsty and open for what a teacher has to offer. There is little more satisfying than being a part of this joy of discovery.

In teaching music, we are teaching a language and physical experience which really defies vocabulary. When

dealing with a 4th grade beginner, our most fundamental terms of "tonguing" and "embouchure" are absolutely meaningless. Our vocabulary for sound, such as bright and dark, sharp and flat, etc are even more mysterious. Learning to get results and understanding through actual experience and connecting to things that they already knew - such as speech - was vitally important. In addition, I found that imitating the sounds that I heard them produce gave me incredible insight into the mechanisms. In these early days, my students taught me how to teach. Many of these same techniques I discovered in my days of teaching beginners continue to occupy my toolbox for students of all levels.



Eric Berlin with Jim Metzger.

After enjoying the intoxicating energy of two young students and a friend's status on Facebook, I was inspired to write this post. The question was posed on FB:

"What am I supposed to do when my students don't practice?"

Responses varied, but the response "tell them not to waste your time or their parents' money" was common. My response may surprise you especially if you have been reading my "Practice Space" series:

"It doesn't matter if they practice or not."

During my years teaching 60 young students a week, this was absolutely the norm for a majority of my students. Realizing the overload imposed on kids, standardized testing and pressures

about futures they haven't begun to comprehend, they can barely be blamed. In an ideal world, all of our students would be completely self motivated and improve dramatically as a result. This is rarely the case.

Remember that your success as a teacher is not measured just by making great brass players, as most of our students will not do what we do, but rather teaching a connection to music. If you can keep them interested, engaged and enjoying the process of making music in the 30 minutes that you see them every week, you are doing them and all of us a great service. What you will find is that if you keep them coming back, eventually a few figure out on their own timetable that they love it and they will go after it. That instant when your pushing suddenly feels like them pulling you is incredibly satisfying. Even if it doesn't ever come, you have cultivated an appreciative audience member for the future.

My approach then, as now, is without judgement to take them from the present moment forward. If they have not touched their instrument between lessons, working on a warmup or breathing can get them set up better for their band period the next day. It is often a blessing if the bad habits of poor practicing are not further ingrained! Good habits worked on once a week can eventually accumulate into something that sticks.

Even more than the eventual progress of our students, there is a much weightier reason to take this positive approach. We are able to frame music either as something they can relate to and appreciate or something that they remember as an early failure and will feel an aversion to the rest of their lives. Nowhere else do we as musicians have such direct access to make a case for our own relevance than in a private lesson.

I count among my former students the following:

- Congressional Aides
- Corporate Executives
- Dentists
- Doctors
- Engineers
- Film makers
- Intelligence Analysts
- Lawyers
- Ministers
- Pilots

...and so many more.

Some of these were very gifted students driven to relentless practice, but honestly most were not.

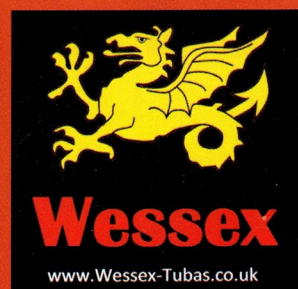
And of course I have a handful of those that followed in my footsteps to become:

- Professional musicians
- Music educators in K-12
- Private teachers
- College professors

It is the first list which we need to remember will support the efforts of the second. How likely is a lawyer to support his/her local symphony if the dominant memory of music lessons was impatience and scolding? How likely will he/she be to enroll a child in your school band programme or support your efforts to purchase new uniforms?

From the amazing musician educators in my past, I learned the sacred duty we have to the future. Educating in any of the arts is so much more than just dispensing a skill, but rather crafting a whole approach to life in which playing an instrument is the least important component. Jim helped me realize my calling to be a musician, but to countless more he nurtured a lifelong love of music. To me, his influence on me is completely overshadowed by his impact on everyone else.

So, provide the best possible information to your students and use it as a wonderful opportunity to learn how to teach. Use time with kids to reconnect with the joy of "playing" your instrument. Their energy can be such a welcome antidote to the struggles we face in the current climate. In addition, the creativity demanded of an educator to reach numerous unique young student minds is one of the most rewarding parts of the job. But remember, if you are not able to reach each student directly, if they don't catch your passion to pour themselves wholeheartedly into a life in music, your own infectious enthusiasm for our art can illuminate the path to a life of appreciation and support instead. Either way, job well done.



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