

Excerpt from:

“From the Stage to the Studio: How Fine Musicians Become Great Teachers”,  
Chapter 6: Teaching Principles, by Cornelia Watkins and Laurie Scott,  
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Principle, n. A basic truth, law, or assumption; a rule or standard, especially of good behavior; a basic or essential quality or element determining intrinsic nature or characteristic behavior [of a teacher].

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## 6 Teaching Principles

ONE OF THE BIGGEST surprises to most musicians venturing into the world of teaching is the discovery that having performance expertise will not give them everything they need to become good teachers. Like music, teaching is an art that requires skill acquisition, development, and experience. Whether you have come to teaching by choice or by circumstance, your satisfaction with your role as a teacher will directly correlate with your investment in excellent teaching.

You have just examined in detail your life as a performing musician, perhaps discovering that you knew more than you realized. Now consider how and where you learned all this. Even if your student days are long behind you, there is a good chance that this vast body of information and insight originated from or was influenced by your teachers. There's a good chance they worked harder than you know to offer you the best instruction and guidance—a lot of which they learned from their teachers. What will you pass along to your students, and how you will do it?

There are no absolute rules about teaching: every teacher has his or her own distinctive manner and unique approach. Sometimes we teach the way we were taught because we want to give the same wonderful experience to our students. Sometimes we teach the way we *wish* we had been taught, to make sure our students won't have to overcome similar problems resulting from poor training or callous treatment.

No matter our reasons, there are certain principles that are fundamental to our ability to connect with students, deliver information, and nurture growth in a manner that is meaningful and rewarding. These principles make it possible not just to believe in values such as integrity, sincerity, optimism, and passion, but to make them an integral part of our work, every day, at every lesson, with every student.

**Personal Inventory:** Think about teachers you have had who you knew cared about you. How did you know? What kind of relationship was it—formal, friendly, warm, nurturing? What did that rapport mean to you, both personally and in your development as a musician?

1. Care about your students as individuals.

Remember that your students are people first, musicians after that. Take time to get to know them, and respect who they are: their intelligence, personalities, and preferences. Know something about their families, their outside interests, and ask about events that occurred during the week. Students need to know we care about them as people.

2. Infect your students with your passion for making music.

"I can't wait for you to learn this piece—it's one of my favorites!" or "Listen to how your instrument just sings when you play beautifully in tune!" Share what you love about making music with your students. Play even the simplest pieces expressively when you demonstrate. Lessons should first be about the beauty, the thrill, and the creativity of making music . . . and then how good technique helps to create those exquisite sounds. No matter how much of the lesson is focused on technique, the attention should invariably be directed back to the beautiful, expressive result.

3. Develop teacher–student relationships based on trust.

By demonstrating honest interest in your students, you begin to nurture relationships based on trust. We know firsthand that learning to be a musician is challenging. Students need to know that the lesson is a safe environment in which to make mistakes, voice concerns, or offer personal descriptions of the music they are making. It's almost impossible for students to be expressive if they are worried about being criticized or belittled for being wrong or thinking differently from their teacher. Other aspects of building trust are essential: that you will be honest with them about

their development as musicians; that you are clear and open about expectations in the teacher–student relationship, and promise to uphold your commitments; and that you believe in the student’s potential and value the relationship.

4. Teach the person in front of you.

Create a balance between student interests and teacher agenda. Stay aware of what students *want* to learn in addition to what they *need* to learn. Allow students to demonstrate what matters most to them—this will be revealed by what they practice the most. The student in front of you should inform your teaching, so allow what the student brings to the lesson to inspire positive momentum. Speak to the issues of the person in front of you, never in comparison to another student or other players. If comparisons are made, they should refer only to the student’s best self, as in “Your tone was so much better the last time—try again.”

5. Teach students to listen, to move, and to sing.

Musical expressivity first exists inside us and emerges when the voice and body are free and uninhibited. The issue is not whether musical expressivity can be learned, but how to access it in ways that are most natural and meaningful. Listening to music on the outside gives us an opportunity to respond physically and vocally. Natural movement and uninhibited singing away from an instrument frees expressive possibilities. Lessons should be a safe place to sing and move.

6. Validate the expressive musician in the student.

Most students don’t decide to play an instrument only because they want to work on technique—they want to make music. Don’t save music-making until students are “good enough.” Teach them underlying concepts about musicianship, and then work with *their* vision for a piece, not just yours. Allow them ample opportunity to make personal connections with and create individual interpretations of the music.

**Personal Inventory:** Look back at some of the expressive explorations about making music in Chapter 1, *Musicianship*. What aspects of musical interpretation can be explored by beginners, even at the most rudimentary level? How can you involve students in performing beautiful music from the first lesson?

## 7. Give your students honest feedback.

Your students trust you to help them get better. Overlooking wrong notes, a bad tone, or miscounted rhythms—even saying “good” when you don’t mean it—compromises the teacher–student relationship. In other words, if something is “a little” out of tune, it’s out of tune, plain and simple. Correcting intonation doesn’t mean you don’t like the student—it means you care about whether or not they play and sing in tune. Give honest, objective, and specific feedback based on what you hear and see: “Your right arm is too high” . . . “The G-sharp was too low.” Be sure that you criticize the problem and not the person: flaws are not character defects, only unrefined movements and sounds that can be made accurate through correction and practice.

## 8. Fix fundamental problems.

Comfort, ease, and freedom of the body with the instrument should be a high priority at all times. Do not overlook bad habits or foundational problems that will inhibit progress. Show the student why the current habit is causing problems, and if at all possible get the student to immediately experience how the new behavior will make things easier. Isolate, resolve, and repeat the new behavior many times during the lesson, and be sure the student understands the importance of daily reinforcement outside the lesson. Stay focused on the issue as long as necessary, repeating the routine as needed until the new habit is established.

## 9. Vary your teaching approach.

Gives students an opportunity to understand a concept from many perspectives, to enhance the learning experience and reinforce understanding.

*Aural:* Aural learning is most basic to musicians. Play or sing a phrase, and ask students to play the same phrase, comparing similarities and differences. Teach students to listen in a variety of ways for the purpose of analysis, imitation, and inspiration. (See Chapter 2, *Listening*.)

*Visual:* A visual approach gives a student the opportunity to see how his teacher creates a rich tone, to watch himself making a correction, or to observe how a string vibrates. Draw the shapes that movements create, and use visual images from nature, science, architecture, sculpture, painting, and engineering for visual representation of techniques, physics of sound, instrumental mechanics, compositional structure, and musical nuance.

*Kinesthetic:* Kinesthetic learning has to do with the experience of body position, weight, or movement. Kinesthetic experiences directly relate to

fundamental positioning issues and a variety of skills, but can also be used to explore emotions and life experiences with gestures and physical responses that can be applied in music-making.

*Verbal:* A verbal approach enhances learning through talking, reading, or writing about a skill or concept. Eloquently chosen words can enhance performance when they are used to explore phrase structure, clarify musical intent, and deepen expressive meaning. Despite music's "wordless" reputation, language is an indispensable tool for music teaching, and therefore the struggle to find the best words that describe technical information, expressive ideas, and even the most elusive concepts is a worthy one.

10. Give students specific instructions for practicing.

Don't just say "Practice!" Clearly define your goals for students' work until the next time they see you. Make sure they know what to watch and listen for, how many times to repeat specific passages, what the tempo goals are, and how much to have memorized by the next lesson. Be wary of practice charts and goals that are based only on time spent. Approximate time frames can be helpful if they give students a sense of expected depth and detail of work, such as "If you practice the entire piece the way we've worked on this section today, it will probably take about an hour." But saying "Practice an hour a day" can make students more aware of the clock than their work. No one approaches homework this way ("An hour is up, so that means I'm finished writing this report!"); so they shouldn't practice this way, either.

11. Give students a chance to play.

Once you have given your students the necessary feedback to be sure they are fully set to play or sing, then let them. You will see and hear issues to address, but exercise self-control, jot notes if need be, and don't interrupt. Allowing students to get into a performance flow gives you the opportunity to see and understand much more about them and their developing abilities than if they are constantly being stopped for every problem. Even when portions of the lesson involve detailed technical work, balance this type of focus with opportunities to apply the new information in the musical context.

12. Define artistic standards.

One potential source of frustration for performers who teach is the gap between their high artistic standards and the raw behaviors of a beginner. Teachers need to

first define excellence for themselves and then for their students. You have learned to play with a “beautiful tone” and “fine intonation,” but can you define and describe the components of these attributes? (See Chapter 1, *Musicianship*.) If so, you can begin teaching to this standard from the first lesson: how to sit or stand, the position of the instrument, the shape of the hands, or the way to breathe.

Your focus on artistry from the beginning does not mean that students will be able to reproduce high standards immediately or every time they perform, but with persistence you can foster an artistic standard as a habit. If not, students will fill in the gap by learning something else. Remember, it is not the piece that makes a student an artist; it is the artistic approach to any piece that makes an artist. How would Rampal, Heifetz, Ma, Stoltzman, Primrose, Horowitz—or you—play “Hot Cross Buns”?

#### Consider This

If a student performs with a bad tone or seems to be working too hard to play the instrument, don't be critical until you've tried to play on their instrument. Your students' lack of experience already makes playing challenging; combine that with a badly set up instrument, and it's sometimes a wonder they can play at all. Check their current instrument to identify any repairs and adjustments that could make playing easier for them. Recommend a good instrument shop to have it set up as professionally as possible (while mindful of potential costs) and be on the lookout for sources of affordable, good-quality instruments for your students.

#### 13. Foster the full potential of every student.

Teach with the maximum potential of every student as your goal. Make no assumption that a student “isn't talented” or “doesn't have what it takes.” It is up to the teacher to find pathways that help each individual learn. Don't underestimate a student's potential to be better than “just okay.” Work to make every student really good—even great! Any willing student can and will progress with the guidance of a thoughtful and skilled teacher. Provide the tools and environment for each to achieve his or her highest potential while creating a positive, meaningful, and enduring connection with music.

Our chief want is someone who will inspire us to be what we know we could be.

RALPH WALDO EMERSON

## 14. Approach each student with optimism.

When a student is challenged by a certain technique or concept, stay optimistic that with perseverance—yours and your student's—there will be success. When students struggle, don't allow them to practice bad habits or inefficiently repeat passages they simply can't execute. Instead, go back to the most fundamental aspect of the technique and then move forward. This allows you to reinforce all the things your students can do well, and when you find a weak link, that spot can be targeted for clarity of understanding or skill development in a simple direct way.

## 15. Do no harm.

Teachers are authority figures. They are in charge of what happens in the learning environment. Lessons and classes should be positive growing experiences. Students can be challenged, and they might struggle, but at all times you should be working alongside your students, helping them to move forward. If a student isn't learning, take an honest look at your teaching before you blame the student. If a student isn't practicing enough or demonstrates a lack of discipline in any other way, explain clearly what is necessary and expected. Calmly end the lesson if you think you might lose your temper, and if problems continue unresolved end the relationship.

I have come to a frightening conclusion.

I am the decisive element in the classroom.

As a teacher I possess tremendous power to make a child's life miserable or joyous.

I can be a tool of torture or an instrument of inspiration.

I can humiliate or humor, hurt or heal.

In all situations, it is my response that decides whether a crisis will be escalated or de-escalated, and a child humanized or de-humanized.

It is my personal approach that creates the climate.

It is my daily mood that makes the weather.

HAIM GINOTT

## 16. Keep a balance between personal involvement and objectivity.

As you come to know and care for a student, it's important to keep a balance between being a friend and being a teacher: supporting them personally while staying focused on their growth as musicians. Remember, you are not being kind to students when you ignore problems—in fact it is kinder to demonstrate your belief

in their ability to make changes for the better. Shifting your perspective can enhance your level of objectivity. Try to observe your student as if another teacher (perhaps your most revered teacher) was in the room. What would he or she see, hear, and correct? Or imagine that the student in front of you studies with someone else—what do you hear and see now? You could also imagine yourself performing like your student just did—what would you correct or change?

17. Cultivate thinking, independent musicians.

Students should not be utterly dependent on their teachers to make music. They should be challenged to listen, notice, solve problems, and think for themselves. Can your students read music? Can they count rhythms, understand key signatures, and name notes? Can they tune their own instruments and recognize good intonation when they hear it? Do they understand how to play in different styles, translate terminology into meaningful sounds, shape a phrase, and create a musical performance? (See Chapter 8, *Fostering Student Independence*, for a thorough discussion on this topic.) These are all essential skills every musician must acquire. It is your job as a teacher to make yourself obsolete.

18. Foster confidence in students.

“I know you can do this” speaks volumes to students. Follow encouraging remarks with the necessary information to make a goal become a reality. Don’t hold back information because you assume it’s too detailed or challenging—clearly explain a concept, engage their intellect, and give students the opportunity to demonstrate their understanding. Celebrate accomplishments and bolster confidence during the process of learning, at every lesson if possible: “You reached a new level in your playing today. Well Done!”

19. Keep students motivated.

A good teacher is sensitive to the student’s level of interest, engagement, and forward momentum. All students, even those who seem self-motivated, need their teachers to provide ongoing sources of inspiration. Demonstrate beautiful sounds, share a favorite recording, or take students to concerts. If you sense a student is discouraged, consider changing repertoire or exploring a new musical style. Be sure they are involved in activities with their musical peers. Continually reconnect students with their initial desire to study and play music. Encourage them to offer their talents in personally meaningful situations: playing at school events, for family

and friends, or for their religious community. The most powerful motivator for anyone, however, is the satisfaction of doing something well—and knowing it.

20. Take responsibility for your students' progress.

It is always the responsibility of the teacher that students leave a lesson playing or singing better than when they came in. We fail our students if we

- Let students play through a piece without providing feedback.
- Vaguely comment "Good," turn the page, and assign the next piece.
- Stop to fix a problem, fail to make a change for the better, and then abandon it without resolution.

Moving students from piece to piece is not evidence of progress if the student plays no better than before, and giving up on a potential correction can leave both teacher and student feeling hopeless. Divide a skill to be learned into simple incremental steps that move toward a more complex goal. Guide the student in a positive direction along those steps, helping him or her to be aware of each improvement along the way by immediately repeating and reinforcing it. Even if the ultimate goal is not reached in a single lesson, the student should come away with improved skills and ideas for effective practice to ensure continued progress.

21. Make short- and long-term plans that support a vision for each student.

Beginners won't be beginners forever; a modest middle school student can become a confident section leader in high school, and a good college student can become a fine professional. Make plans with and for your students, always teaching with a bigger picture in mind. When they know you are thinking that way, it tells them that you believe in their potential, and helps them create a positive vision of themselves as well.

22. Demonstrate your integrity.

You don't have to be perfect to earn respect as a musician, person, and teacher. Your students already look up to you. By modeling how you deal with mistakes and problems, you show your students how they can do the same. Explain how you improved or overcame a challenge, or how you mastered something that was once difficult for you. Students need to know that not everything comes easily to their teacher: teachers make mistakes, they practice, and they work hard to solve problems.

Your work ethic and perseverance can inspire students to approach their work with comparable integrity.

Setting an example is not the main means of influencing another, it is the only means.

ALBERT EINSTEIN

### Ideas for Further Exploration

1. Thinking ahead twenty years from now, write a letter to yourself from the perspective of a student who studied with you. What important principles did you instill in your student? What significant memories, large or small, stand out in your student's mind as evidence that you cared for his or her well-being?
2. What motivated you to keep working to become a musician? What, if anything, did you find discouraging? What role, positive or negative, did your teacher play in these experiences, and how will your memories influence who you will be as a teacher?
3. Choose one skill from your master list of techniques and create four different approaches to teach this skill by utilizing the aural, visual, kinesthetic, and verbal learning styles as described in principle 9, "Varying Your Teaching Approach."
4. While the principles in this chapter are numbered, they are not necessarily ranked in order of importance. If you were to prioritize them, what order would you choose? Are there any missing principles that should be added to this list?

### Recommended Reading

- Duke, R. A., & Simmons, A. L. (2006). The Nature of Expertise: Narrative Descriptions of 19 Common Elements Observed in the Lessons of Three Renowned Artist-Teachers. *Bulletin of the Council for Research in Music Education* (170), 7-19.
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