



The Teacher's Role in the Learning Process

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The Student's Journey

- You need a vehicle to get yourself going, figure out how to drive it, and be prepared that there will be lots of learning, maintenance and fine tuning along the way.
- You want beautiful places to go visit, and wonderful scenery along the way, hills and valleys, mountains, plains, unexpected interesting places to stop at and explore.
- You'll want to have moments of pure inspiration.
- You'll want to have a clear road to drive on, without debris, road blocks, bad weather, etc, though unfortunately this can't always be the case.
- Fortunately you will have a knowledgeable mechanic tour guide with you, who can teach you how to fix things, how to make your engine even better, how to drive better.
- This mechanic will also be your tour guide, because when you are so busy figuring out how to make the car go, you might miss all the beautiful scenery. Your tour guide will show you what places are especially great to visit, places to explore you would have never known about without him. He can also guide you around road blocks and through rough weather.
- When you take a trip, staying on schedule is sometimes necessary and important, but not all the time. Hopefully your tour guide won't always be checking the clock, and neither should you. Be willing to take time to explore, take unexpected side trips, see and experience new things, discover how special your surroundings are, and find out more about yourself while you do it.
- One thing you must know is that as helpful as your tour guide/mechanic is, he will not always be with you. That means you have to learn to fix things yourself, and learn how to explore on your own.

QUESTIONS FOR THE MECHANIC/TOUR GUIDE TO PONDER:

- Is there really a destination point in this trip?
- What happens to the learning experience if we (as mechanics/tour guides) are always pointing out things about the car?
- What happens if we do all the fixing, maintenance, and driving ourselves, not letting the student figure things out?
- What might we miss if we always need to stay on schedule?
- Is the student's trip with you, the tour guide, going to last forever? What will the student do without you?
- What do you want your student to remember from this journey, even if he never continues it without you?

The Teacher's Role in Learning

Keep in mind that your role is truly **part-time and temporary**—we can only be with them 30 minutes to an hour, one or two times a week, and even then maybe only for about 4 years. How can we teach what they need to have a great journey on their own?

1. The Mechanics of String Playing—Teaching Technique and Notes/Rhythms

- **Making sure there is understanding behind the learning**
- Understanding how the instrument works—bow (how shape works for us, balance point/bounce relationship), strings, harmonics and overtones, sympathetic vibrations, wolf tones, wave patterns in the wood of instrument
- What does playing in tune really mean?
- Why can't press the bow into the string by the fingerboard?
- **Danger! Repertoire can become simply technique** if we only teach notes, rhythms, bowings, louds and softs.

2. Seeing the sights—Teaching musicianship

- **What does being musical really mean?** Some basics: the differences between song/dance/march, and bowing styles that relate; using the voice to explore expressive sounds and articulations, how to create sounds that reflect the mood of a piece
- **Music from the page** (composers, periods, styles, dynamics, expressive markings)
- **Ask students to look up information on internet**
- **Self-expression**—making music from personal experiences (colors, nature, emotions)

3. Giving Ownership of the Learning Process to the Student

Students need to know that learning how to play an instrument is not something being done to them.

- **Sense of ownership about musical choices.** We have to choose technique for them in most cases, but musicianship should really be their own. Dynamics, Moods, Timing, etc.
- **Fostering student independence**—helping students become aware, think for themselves, know how to critique themselves and practice effectively.
- **Understanding what practicing really is**, how to work effectively—Having a process for practicing, and having a bag of tricks (Practice techniques)
- **How to use time well**—what can you do with 5 minutes? What does it mean to be fully absorbed? How effective are practice charts and minimum timed practice requirements?

- **Undoing unwanted habits** by isolating desired technique and have student do only that position, bowing etc every day. If the old technique tries to slip in, student simply STOPS—to starve it out of existence.
 - **What did they learn?** Consider having students write their own program notes about what they learned from studying this piece
4. Removing roadblocks so that students can easily and willingly move forward.
- **Making new things easy—keep it simple.** Use games, images, parallels to student’s life and share stories about yourself.
 - **Being as clear as possible about how to do something.** Break a new technique or musical element into small, sequential, easy to attain steps, even if the end result (everything together) is more complex.
 - **Find several ways to communicate** anything student needs to learn—visual, aural, kinesthetic, verbal/written
 - **Find ways to them overcome obstacles:** technical problems, low self-esteem, the need to be perfect, frustrations trying to keep up with older sibling, right/wrong, good/bad, black/white issues.
 - **Positive teaching:** Make the path to excellence direct, so that students can experience as soon and as often as possible. You can do this. Wow, that was great! How did you do that? You did this here, now do it over there. Make sure your students experience at least one moment of excellence, beauty, or inspiration in every lesson.

References:

Edmund Sprunger: Helping Parents Practice, Vol. I—order through www.yespublishing.com

Cornelia Watkins: Rosindust (to be published January 2008—check www.rosindust.com for ordering information)

Frank R. Wilson: Tone Deaf and All Thumbs? Random House, 1986