

Philosophy of Teaching

Those who can MUST teach.

‘Those who can’t, teach’ is an antiquated misnomer that serves to separate music education from performance, yet is still used as a mantra pervasively, and dangerously, throughout professional music circles, in music education curriculum, and in the everyday application of music appreciation.

Music education modifies this statement further, making the tired suggestion that, because they intend to teach, their performance skills need not be as polished as someone majoring in a performance-based area. This modification is reinforced by music education curricular requirements. Music education trains *teachers*, after all, not performers, and the typical bachelor’s degree program in music education supports this; there are fewer credit expectations for lessons, recitals, and other performance classes, while there are higher numbers of credits in methods courses, education-based philosophy courses, and other comparable courses. This is not to suggest that these courses aren’t significant; rather, a better balance must be struck between the classroom-based philosophy and the performance-based curriculum to encourage the further development of the ‘performer-as-teacher’ concept.

This isn’t a suggestion that every musician should aspire to teach, or that it is a calling we as musicians must naturally follow. Instead, this is a call for musicians who have been inspired to teach to follow the path and provide educational support to a fledgling system that is in need of an overhaul, for musicians to provide a newer model to support progressive policy in education, one that provides balance in curriculum through performance, and for musicians to help stop the ever present ‘those who can’t’ adage.

The concept I offer should always be present in jazz education, an area in which *modeling* is crucial, in which there are still developing, and divergent, philosophies, and in which there is a lack of equality on the music education playing field, yet the one area of music education that serves underrepresented populations regularly, that promotes diversity and inclusion, and that reveres its roots as *black music* as created by Armstrong, Parker, Davis, Ellington, Basie, Jones, et al.

Find out how students LEARN.

In fifteen years of teaching music, specifically jazz, at the university level, I have discovered one simple, fundamental truth: everyone learns differently. Edwin Gordon’s Music Learning theory suggests that, loosely speaking, teachers should prioritize how students learn, rather than how teachers teach, and speaks of the importance of *audiation* (roughly translated: hear it, sing it, play it). This is at the foundation of my philosophy. Teachers must address the individual student, how he/she learns, and whether a blanket statement of philosophy is appropriate for them.

Having said that, at the core of my concept for learning are three points. First, rote training, ear development, and improvisation are all not only valid forms of music education, but crucial to the experience of learning jazz, and must be prioritized. Second, areas for improvement will, generally speaking, outweigh a musician's strengths, and that we, as lifelong learners, should use this to our advantage. Third, failure is an important counterpart to success, and should be deemed as crucial to the learning process. Additionally, while not all music students will make a living in the field, they can all learn to appreciate the art, and should receive an opportunity to realize any natural potential, even if they, ultimately, realize that the career of music is beyond their scope.

I help students establish a set of practical foundational skills (scales, chords, arpeggios, patterns) while, simultaneously, encouraging the development of a broader, critical thinking disposition (analysis, creativity, listening). I encourage students to embrace experimentation, to live within a set of established creative priorities, and the courage to take chances. Finally, we are setting up students for a lifelong learning quest. We must aid our students to self-assess, self-diagnose, and self-prescribe tools and methods for their immediate and long-term learning. They will have, on average, 128 one-hour lessons in a four-year college/university curriculum. It is my responsibility to help them teach themselves the other six days a week, and for the next sixty years.

The academy has potential.

Wynton Marsalis, in his October 2009 issue of DOWNBEAT address, offered this deeply resonant statement: **jazz is life music, and education is not anti-life.** To paraphrase and apply here, the academy can be a place to formally learn jazz, and *experiential learning* plays a huge role in the process. How to proceed is often the concern. Though there are many possibilities, a foundation of teaching jazz should always be built on deep listening, aural absorption through rote learning, as all language is developed, and improvisation rooted in swing, in dance, in the rhythm of jazz. It isn't the role of the teacher to regurgitate disseminated information; rather, we must establish a foundation for learning and for self-discovery that becomes a shared experience between teacher and student.

To elaborate further, a formal jazz education can thrive if we examine the music of the masters through performance, historical, and cultural study, allow creative artistry to develop through composition and improvisation, and create 'real world' experiences through recording sessions, guest artist appearances, gigging opportunities, and entrepreneurial concepts. Additionally, the pedagogy of jazz must remain fluid, must evolve, and must be analyzed regularly. Jazz education must have foundations, but it should never live in a bubble, nor should it ever be forced into restrictions that prohibit the natural flow of absorbing and disseminating information because of the convenience of existing degree plans, expectation of a 'classical-first' approach, or applications of jazz education models that may be inappropriate for the unique situation you inhabit.

Though the university may have inherent flaws for learning as our forefathers/mothers did, it does provide a physical space to perform and practice, and, in several cases, models from which jazz pedagogues can study, implement, expand, and retool/rebuild. There is much to learn and absorb from the successful models of jazz education, and much to borrow from all methods of music education. Imitation, assimilation, and innovation, Clark Terry's alleged process for learning to improvise in jazz music, are just as important to establish a foundation for a successful formal jazz education.