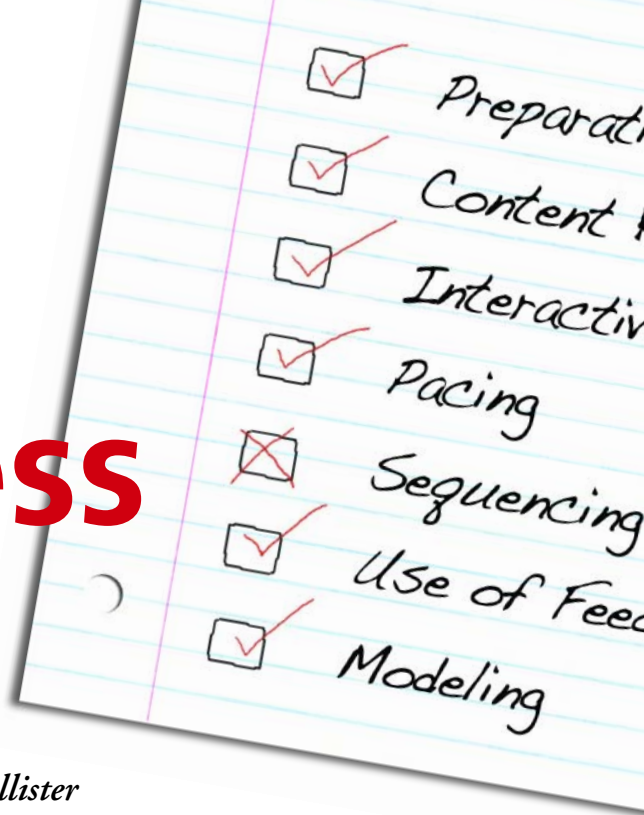


# Evaluating Teaching Effectiveness In Music



By Lesley Sisterhen McAllister

All professionals must routinely go through an evaluation process to progress in their field. Likewise, teachers must assess their own level of effectiveness to develop their skills. This process allows even experienced teachers to underscore their strengths and devise specific strategies to overcome their weaknesses.

In the general educational system, systematic evaluations by supervisors or peers occur on a regular basis. Most independent music teachers, however, do not have the opportunity to be regularly observed by other teachers. For many, it becomes very easy to rely on experience, or what has worked well in the past, rather than submitting to examination. The strengths and weaknesses in personalities and teaching styles often become more rigid with

time, and it is easy to see one approach as the only “right” way. One method to counteract this tendency is the process of self-evaluation.

Self-evaluation can take place informally, through the process of record keeping. It includes reflecting on teaching strategies that were used during a lesson and considering how a student’s learning was affected by the teacher’s behavior. Even more effective in self-evaluation is the act of video recording and watching lessons to observe ingrained personality characteristics or unconscious behavioral tendencies. Although teachers are aware of lesson content, they may not be aware of personal mannerisms, gestures or vocal inflections that may have an affect on student behavior.

The process of watching and hearing oneself can help narrow the gap between how we *think* we are teaching and our actual behavior during lessons. By observing themselves, teachers will become more self-aware, as well as more attentive to individual student needs.

In the music education research, the following categories are often used to evaluate teaching: preparation; content knowledge; interactive skills, such as delivery, teacher affect and teaching intensity; pacing; sequencing; use of feedback; and modeling. All or some

of these factors should be considered when conducting self-evaluations.

## Preparation

Expert teachers plan ahead for lessons, considering both long-term and short-term musical and technical goals for each student. These objectives are well-defined by the teacher and are clearly communicated to the student. To ascertain whether the student understands the goals for the lesson and the upcoming week of practice, a teacher might ask a student to summarize at the end of the lesson the main ideas that were addressed.

Teachers who show good preparation skills give specific practice assignments and have clear expectations for their students’ progress. They may even choose to have students write in the strategies on their own assignment sheet. This approach would help give students ownership over the practice strategies and may also set the foundation for independent learning.

Writing out lesson plans requires reflection on the part of the teacher; these preparations may include creating a semester-long or year-long curriculum in addition to short-term goals in advance of each individual lesson. For some teachers, these written plans may be as simple as taking notes after a student’s lesson has taken place

**Lesley Sisterhen McAllister** is assistant professor of piano and director of piano pedagogy at Baylor University in Waco, Texas, where she teaches courses in piano pedagogy and class piano and directs the Piano Laboratory Program for community piano students.



and consulting these notes before the next lesson. With a full studio, it can be difficult to keep track of what piece each student is playing and even harder to remember how long they have been playing it or what practice expectations have been communicated. Written plans are ultimately a time-saver because there will be less repetition in each lesson. In addition, students feel more motivated to prepare for lessons when they are aware of their teacher's expectations.

Possibly the most relevant type of preparation for private teachers to consider is choice of repertoire. One of the most important aspects of a teacher's job is choosing appropriate repertoire; this includes assigning pieces that are neither too difficult, nor too long, for the given student. Assigning pieces that are too advanced for students prevents them from being able to learn a wide variety of repertoire while covering a broad range of styles and composers. Assigning a larger amount of pieces that are a shorter length helps students become better sight readers and more well-rounded musicians.

### Content Knowledge

It almost goes without saying that the best teachers are experts in their field. To be a good music teacher, one must be a good musician. Musical content knowledge includes the understanding of style, theory and analysis; performance ability; and a historical knowledge of composers and musical periods, among other things. "Pedagogical content knowledge" is the ability to diagnose problem areas and develop an appropriate preventative device or remedy for each individual student.

New teachers are often more equipped with musical, rather than pedagogical, content knowledge because they usually possess a significant amount of training in their performance area. These newly minted graduates have advanced training, and it may be difficult for them to speak to young beginners at a level appropriate for the students' age and degree of musical training. Beginning teachers are often used to thinking in great

detail about musical concepts, but must learn how to speak to their students in the simplest and clearest way.

Novice teachers also may not understand why a student is having particular problems, such as playing a fast scale, because it comes so easily for the teacher. In these instances, isolating the problem and breaking it down into small bits of information helps the teacher understand the reason for the difficulties. Each problem solved becomes another tactic to employ with future students.

### Interactive Skills

The core of research on the evaluation of teaching effectiveness in music has been dedicated to interactive skills or delivery. These skills are what observers notice most when watching another teacher, and they have a powerful effect on students' attention and interest level. In fact, some research shows that students see delivery as being more important than even the content of a lesson.<sup>1</sup>

However, we often ignore these skills when evaluating our own teaching if we do not make a conscious effort to record and watch ourselves. Interactive skills include a teacher's instructional style and personality; his ability to explain concepts, question students and give musical demonstrations; and vocal qualities, such as the speed of talking, tone of voice, and variety in volume or pitch.

The word "teacher affect" can be defined as the teacher's gestures and body language as well as vocal delivery. "High magnitude teacher affects" include eye contact with students and facial expressions indicating enthusiasm, such as smiling or raising the eyebrows. Leaning toward the student and using clear articulation, as well as varying the volume of one's voice, are also indicative of high magnitude teacher affect, which has been connected in research with higher levels of student attention.<sup>2</sup>

The term "teaching intensity" was introduced by Jayne Standley and Clifford Madsen as a label for overall teaching quality.<sup>3</sup> Teaching intensity was defined by Madsen as "sustained

control of student/teacher interaction with efficient, accurate presentation of subject matter combined with enthusiastic affect and pacing."<sup>4</sup> Madsen suggested that increasing teaching intensity will increase the level of student attentiveness during lessons.

Teaching intensity has been studied less in private music teaching, perhaps because of the intimacy of the student/teacher interaction in a one-on-one setting. The lesson may feel less like a "performance" and more like a conversation between two people. The nature of a private lesson may help teachers feel more comfortable and at ease, but it may also result in less energy. A higher level of energy, which occurs more often in a group atmosphere, is more likely to hold students' attention. Teachers should always consider the intensity of their interaction with students, even during private lessons.

As musicians, the content of the subject itself can stimulate enthusiasm on the part of both student and teacher. When the teacher demonstrates her enjoyment of the music, that passion is contagious and teaching intensity occurs, even if the teacher's verbal discourse or gestures are less energetic.

For most students, accomplishment results in intensity. Therefore, the teacher's job is to provide the student with opportunities for success. When teachers choose pieces students enjoy and that offer motivation, as well as an appropriate level of challenge, a sense of accomplishment will arise as the student thinks, "Wow, I really can do this!" The most effective teachers are able to isolate where students are having difficulties and prescribe effective practice strategies to overcome these problems. However, even the best teachers will not be able to help students succeed if they assign pieces that are overwhelmingly long or too technically or musically difficult for the individual student.

### Pacing

Many researchers in music education have investigated how a teacher's pace in the classroom affects student attention. Pacing is related to teaching

intensity because in general, a faster pace is indicative of a higher level of intensity. In a review of the music education research on instructional effectiveness, Robert Duke found evidence in many studies that more experienced teachers are more efficient in their use of time.<sup>5</sup> A similar finding was suggested in a study by Dennis Siebenaler, who described the most effective piano lessons as having “frequent and brief student and teacher interactions.”<sup>6</sup> Siebenaler found that a more rapid rate of teacher music talk was related to higher performance ratings by the student. His study also indicated that students tend to perform more successfully when their performance episodes are generally shorter.<sup>7</sup>

## Sequencing

In the most effective lessons, the order of performance tasks is chosen to increase the likelihood that students will be successful. The most effective order, or sequence, of tasks often depends on the individual student. In some cases, teachers may elect to have a student choose their favorite piece to begin the lesson. This approach may help build the student’s confidence and give the student a sense of independence. On the other hand, for students who have problems focusing their attention during the entire lesson, it might be best to start with the piece that needs the most work.

Activities should be ordered to allow

### MTNA Assessment Tools Available

In 2004, MTNA unveiled “Assessment Tools for the Independent Music Teacher.” This booklet was designed to aid studio teachers with assessing the many aspects of their work through a three-part evaluation: self-assessment, peer assessment and client assessment. The Assessment Tools are available for purchase for \$3 including shipping and handling. It can be ordered through the MTNA website at [www.mtna.org](http://www.mtna.org) or by phone at (888) 512-5278.

for both balance and variety. Younger students or those with attention problems especially need a variety of activities within the lesson time. At a midpoint during the lesson, it may be helpful to do a written activity or other away-from-the-piano activity such as a rhythm exercise.

A balance should be also maintained among technical, theoretical and musical concepts. For example, when playing a scale for the first time, the teacher should focus not only on the theoretical organization of the scale in terms of half steps and whole steps, but also on the position of the thumb and use of the wrist, as well as musical phrasing and a smooth legato. Students may become frustrated if technical instructions seem disconnected to the desired sound. When a correlation can be established among these three areas, the result is an integrated understanding of the logic behind each concept.

One set of terms used in music education literature is “proactive teaching” versus “reactive teaching.” If a student has learned a piece on his own and brought it to the lesson playing inaccurate notes or rhythms, teachers would react with a negative response, such as admonishing or correcting the student. Reactive teaching occurs when the teacher is reacting to the student, rather than vice versa.

In proactive teaching, which is more effective, learning situations are purposefully structured in order to elicit a correct student response. The learning sequence is created to bring about opportunities for student success.<sup>8</sup> Teachers should always think ahead about what is going to be difficult in a piece and then preview that difficulty with the student. For instance, if there is a passage with a particularly difficult rhythmic pattern, teachers might clap that part of the piece with the student, and then have the student clap while the teacher demonstrates the way it should sound. Students are much more likely to be motivated to practice when they are successful during the lesson.

## Use of Feedback

Among the research studies reviewed by Robert Duke, teacher feedback was the most common and most prominent variable. His review revealed several important findings on the role of feedback in piano lessons. During private lessons, expert teachers give more feedback than experienced teachers who are less skillful. Furthermore, the feedback statements of expert teachers tend to be more specific than the positive feedback statements of other experienced teachers and novices.<sup>9</sup>

Perhaps the most interesting discovery was that expert and experienced teachers provide more negative feedback than comparison groups. This finding may appear to indicate that teachers need to be negative to be effective, but it may also mean that expert teachers are more proactive making corrections. Siebenaler used the term “descriptive disapproval” when students are told specifically what needs to be corrected and are given specific strategies for improvement.<sup>10</sup> The more specific the feedback is during lessons, the greater the likelihood students will improve.

It can sometimes be helpful to start with broad, general statements before working on specific details. If students understand how the isolated corrections relate to general musical principles, they will be better prepared to work more independently and transfer the same ideas into other pieces they play in the future. For instance, a teacher might begin by saying the balance between the hands needs work in a particular piece. She might point to specific measures and show the student strategies for improving the balance, such as “ghosting” the accompanimental hand or softly blocking the chords in the accompaniment.

With time, teachers may become habitual not only in their vocal inflections or physical gestures, but also in their use of teaching strategies. Experienced teachers have many effective teaching strategies under their belt, but they should always consider the long-term effects of each tactic on the student’s musical growth. When

using a strategy such as ghosting, the teachers should ensure the student understands why they are performing the particular action and when to use the same approach in future pieces.

In the music education literature, a distinction is often made between what is referred to as “inquiry-based teaching” versus “rote learning.” In rote learning, a teacher demonstrates a passage and has the student imitate the model or follow instructions precisely. Although rote rehearsal may be very beneficial in certain instances, it does not promote long-term retention or independence on the part of the student.

Inquiry-based teaching consists of asking questions and leading students to a correct response. This approach helps students link information to prior knowledge so they are more likely to remember the underlying musical concepts. There is an art to deciding what questions are asked and how they should be phrased; questions should be as specific as possible. For instance, the question, “What is difficult about this piece?” may lead to a variety of answers.

As an example, consider a piece that starts on an upbeat in which the student needs to emphasize the first downbeat. A teacher might ask, “How can you clarify the meter at the beginning?” By asking a leading question rather than merely showing the student what to do, the student will gain a sense of independence and will be able to transfer the same ideas into other pieces.

### Modeling

Modeling, or demonstration, is a vital component in music teaching. Teachers should always be careful to show, rather than just tell, students what needs to be corrected. For example, the teacher imitates a student’s incorrect performance, provides an alternative correct demonstration, and then has the student choose the appropriate version. This is an effective demonstration technique to aid in aural discrimination.

A review of research on modeling showed that it is a more effective strategy than verbal description for teaching musical performance.<sup>11</sup> Students

also tend to perform at significantly higher levels when taught by teachers who used frequent, high-quality modeling.<sup>12</sup> In general, musical concepts must be experienced rather than just explained, so students should be allowed to imitate the teacher’s model, using repetition as necessary to correct their performance.

### Teacher Development

In addition to self-evaluation, observing other teachers can counteract the natural inclination to rely on old habits. By maintaining active communication with other teachers in the community, opportunities may arise to observe those teachers and see the unique effects of their teaching style. This practice does not always lead to imitation. Instead, it can encourage creativity by stimulating teachers to try new approaches and think in new and different ways about teaching. By observing many teachers in a wide variety of settings, teachers will be able to integrate the strategies and personal characteristics that fit most appropriately with their own teaching philosophy.

Designing an evaluation form helps teachers to decide which teaching characteristics are most relevant to them. By attending to the factors that seem most personally important, teachers will be able to discern whether their actual behaviors are in line with their intent.

Perhaps the most important element in teaching effectiveness and motivation is to ensure that change occurs in each lesson. When teachers are well-prepared for lessons and teach efficiently with appropriate pacing and sequencing, they have set the stage for students to be successful. In addition, teaching proactively and using modeling with an appropriate amount of repetition will give the students tools for home practice. Independent teachers must make continuous efforts to evaluate themselves and assess teacher behavior, as well as student learning. In the long run, attending to the factors cited in teaching effectiveness research will increase both self-awareness and teaching success. ☺

### NOTES

1. Donald L. Hamann, Dawn S. Baker, Peter A. McAllister and William I. Bauer. “Factors Affecting University Music Students’ Perceptions of Lesson Quality and Teaching Effectiveness,” *Journal of Research in Music Education* 48, no. 2 (2000): 102–114.
2. Wendy L. Sims. “The Effect of High Versus Low Teacher Affect and Passive Versus Active Student Activity During Music Listening on Preschool Children’s Attention, Piece Preference, Time Spent Listening, and Piece Recognition,” *Journal of Research in Music Education* 34 (1986): 173–191.
3. Jayne M. Standley and Clifford K. Madsen. “Intensity as an Attribute of Effective Therapist/Client Interaction,” *Quodlibet* summer (1987): 15–21.
4. Clifford K. Madsen. “Teacher intensity in relationship to music education,” *Bulletin of the Council for Research in Music Education* 104 (1990): 38–46 (38).
5. Robert Duke. “Measures of instructional effectiveness in music research,” *Bulletin of the Council for Research in Music Education* 143 (1999): 1–48.
6. Dennis J. Siebenaler. “Analysis of Teacher-Student Interactions in the Piano Lessons of Adults and Children,” *Journal of Research in Music Education* 45, no. 1 (1997): 6–20, 17.
7. Ibid.
8. Robert Duke and Clifford K. Madsen. “Proactive versus Reactive Teaching: Focusing Observation on Specific Aspects of Instruction,” *Bulletin of the Council for Research in Music Education* 108 (1991): 1–14.
9. Duke, 14–15.
10. Siebenaler, 19.
11. Marc R. Dickey. “A review of research on modeling in music teaching and learning,” *Bulletin of the Council for Research in Music Education* 113 (1992): 27–40 (37).
12. Richard C. Sang. “A Study of the Relationship Between Instrumental Music Teachers’ Modeling Skills and Pupil Performance Behaviors,” *Bulletin of the Council for Research in Music Education* 91 (1997): 155–159.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.