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Improving studio music teaching through understanding learning styles

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Abstract

The role of a studio music teacher is a delicate balance of creativity and organization. In a one-on-one setting a teacher must guide a student through the physical challenges of playing an instrument as well as conveying the abstract notions of music and aesthetics. The goal of guiding a student into becoming a fine musician is universal, but teaching approaches differ. In this article I propose using learning style models as a teaching framework. The use of learning style models in the classroom is not a new idea, but the music lesson provides a unique setting for the assessment and implementation of these models. By identifying a student's dominant learning style, a teacher can more effectively develop an individualized pedagogical approach for each student. The models can be used to organize a teacher's curriculum as well as provide a framework for new and creative teaching ideas.

Key words

aural, kinaesthetic, learning styles, musical instruments, teaching tips, visual

Learning styles or types classify how an individual learns best, and can provide insight into how a person processes information. Carl Jung (1921/1971) first theorized that individuals are either born with, or develop, certain ways of thinking, and therefore acting. Briggs-Myers (1980; Briggs-Myers & Myers, 1995) recognized that most people possess a combination of learning styles; they suggest that everyone possesses a naturally occurring combination of type differences.

For some educational researchers, learning style models are controversial with regard to their validity and application. Those in favor of the models argue that individuals who complete a learning-style questionnaire gain a better understanding about themselves. They argue that by identifying their strengths and weaknesses individuals can make informed decisions, especially in important areas such as career choices. Some argue that the more complicated models help identify situational outcomes such as group dynamics, employment/recruiting guidelines and matching approaches for collaborative projects (Sternberg, 1997). In England researchers cited approximately 71 different learning style models that are being used throughout the school systems as well as in career and job counseling centers (Coffield, Moseley, Hall, & Ecclestone, 2004). (Many self-help books are modeled on these learning styles with a simpler classification of 'if-then' scenarios and conclusions.)

Those not in favor of learning style models question the procedural basis of the models (Stahl, 2002). They argue that the scientific foundation of the models is weak, resulting in highly variable outcomes. Studies have been done to scrutinize these models and in most cases only less than half of those who took learning style questionnaires scored consistently (Coffield et al., 2004). Some educational psychologists also argue that there is little evidence for the efficacy of these models because of the considerable number of variables that enter into a growing child's development. They usually contest that aptitude tests misrepresent the child's potential ability, thus giving misleading results (Stahl, 2002).

In most of the models cited (for or against), the focus is kept on identifying the individual's dominant learning style while in a large classroom setting or an aptitude testing environment.¹ By shifting the focus to a music lesson, it is possible to take a new look at the efficacy and application of these models.

Learning style models and studio music teaching

The role of a studio music teacher is a complicated one that is often overlooked. Professionals in most other disciplines don't understand the delicate balance that a music teacher has to achieve in order to bring each individual student to the next level of understanding. Whether in a university, conservatory setting or in one's own private studio, a music teacher *individually* nurtures and prepares his/her students. In a limited amount of time each week, a teacher relays the abstract notions of music simultaneously with the physical act of playing an instrument, all under the pretext of aesthetic beauty and approval of the general audience. Performances, such as classroom examinations, bring together the progress made in lessons, the repertoire and the teacher–student relationship.

From this discussion two questions arise:

- How does a teacher successfully teach every student in her/his studio?
- What sets a master teacher apart from an average teacher?

The answer to these questions lies in the *organization* and *application* of information that is relayed to a student.

A vast array of methods and philosophies can be found among studio teachers. Yet in music, especially in individual instrumental lessons, the information is explicit and established. In other words, when teaching (any instrument, or musical genre), good intonation, sonority, stage presence or effective practice room habits do not differ among teachers, countries or even between generations. Every teacher expects good tone production, relaxed posture, exact intonation and musical interpretation from her/his students. Interestingly enough, the resources accepted and available to the majority of music teachers are ubiquitous, such as scale books, étude books and the progression of repertoire (to a certain degree). So with all of this 'universal harmonization' within this field, why are there so many teaching variations?

The answer lies in the organization of information that the teacher presents. The content may be similar, but there are differences in the order, depth and way in which it is related back to the student. Among the array of teaching methods and strategies is the use of learning styles in the individual instrumental studio setting, an area that is in its preliminary stages of research.

A music lesson setting is a one-on-one experience, during which a set number of skills must be attained. One can apply and follow through the development of a learning model

with the student's progress over a period of time without the distractions that seem to come up in teaching multiple students at once. One potential reason for using learning style models in individual music lessons is not for the student to classify him-/herself as a specific type of learner, but for the teacher to identify each student and plan individual musical curricula according to the students' needs. By identifying each student's dominant learning style, a teacher can better guide each student according to his/her learning characteristics, and more effectively organize individualized short- and long-term lesson plans. Throughout the day, the music teacher modifies his/her teaching method according to each student's learning style. The result is that the teacher is continually inspired and refreshed through the variety introduced into the daily and weekly lesson plans, and by the students, who are encouraged because their lessons are taught in a more effective way.

From my observation of over 120 students from several different studios over the course of several semesters, and the continual honing of the teaching curriculum and approach, it appears that the learning style model best suited for a music lesson setting is the Representational System.² This model focuses on the sensory stimuli and strengths, and its three categories – visual, auditory and kinaesthetic/tactile – relate directly to learning a musical instrument.

The visual learner

Visual learners gain and retains information only after seeing it (Gardner, 1983). They tend to memorize in picture format. They prefer to take extensive notes and like to have supplementary visual information such as hand-outs, videos and micro film (Poon Teng Fatt, 2000). In a music lesson, these students tend to grasp the lesson when the teacher demonstrates the specific technique. The use of a mirror is very helpful for these students, especially when they can compare their reflection with that of the teacher. When these students are reciting or playing something from memory, they know where they are on the page. Videos of major performers inspire these students because of the positive visual stimulus that is being etched into their memory. Encouraging them to watch video recordings of their own performances, especially without sound, reinforces the lesson, because it allows them to compare their own 'picture' with that of the professional performers that they have seen. Using color to mark up their music (or on their instrument, such as colored tape on their bow, or gadgets for breathing and embouchure exercises, and step sheets for foot position) helps them remember the particular point being conveyed. Teaching pieces that are a 'theme and variations', especially when the edition being used presents the variations as separate pieces, is successful with these students. One can teach the variations out of order and rely on the student's visual recall to put the piece back together in the correct order for the performance. Scale books with clear numbers or sections are also effective. These students tend to be good sight-readers. If they are not being challenged enough, they tend to read ahead in their music books. Turning this into an advantage is easy. Having various duet books on hand allows the teacher to create a reward system, where the visual learner gets to read new music and the teacher gets to evaluate their reading skills and technical progression. More advanced students can be encouraged to use 'visualization techniques' before their recitals or auditions to help them become more confident with their performance at hand.

Identifying the weaknesses of this type of learner helps to avoid unnecessary teaching mistakes. For these learners, the use of different editions for the same piece is not successful because it merely confuses their use of the picture format in the memorization of a piece. They also don't respond positively to repetitive, minimalist sequences, especially when playing

études. Assigning music with small or cluttered print also inhibits them from memorizing the whole 'picture'. Etude books with multiple variations for one exercise can be difficult for these students. Asking them to play a musical work by ear without having seen the notes can also lead to wasted lesson time. Intonation and body awareness topics have to be creatively introduced into the lesson, because if they can't see it, visual learners have no reason to learn it.

The auditory learner

The auditory learner gains and retains their information after hearing it. They learn best through verbal lectures, discussions, talking things through and/or listening to what others have to say (Poon Teng Fatt, 2000). Auditory learners interpret the underlying meanings of music through listening to tone, pitch, speed and other nuances (Gardner, 1983). An auditory music student tends to have a beautiful tone because of their sensitivity to sounds and sonority, even if he/she is not technically advanced. These students love to listen to music. They memorize music quickly and like to perform something more than once. They tend to try and copy whatever it is that they are listening to at the time (and it is usually out of their technical range). These learners respond positively to the presence of a tape recorder in the lesson. The teacher can ask them to play their lesson and then to listen to it with them in order to make the lesson points more clear. The teacher must present technical points in short sentences and encourage the students to repeat these 'sound bytes' of information back in order to ensure that they have retained the lesson. Auditory learners show their connection with music easily. Guiding an auditory learner by the sound you want them to learn and then associating it with its technical description helps their technical progress. Giving them easy guidelines for producing emotional associations will also ease their practice room frustrations. The teacher can help them solidify seemingly hard technical effects with easier repertoire. For them, the sound is important, not what it looks like on the page. In fact, they are quickly discouraged when they are faced with a page full of notes. In order to help them overcome this frustration, their tone production, dynamics, vibrato, color changes and other sonorities must be encouraged. A helpful exercise for these students is to play a short sequence of the music and ask them to repeat it. Another creative exercise is to ask them to imitate the interpretation of several different performers for one piece. Doing this helps the teacher to understand the student's degree of listening skill. It can also serve as an introduction to teaching different technical points that the student can emulate while not necessarily understanding the mechanics or function. Interestingly enough, these learners tend to be curious about vibrato before the other learning types. These students are usually more open to different styles and genres of music, such as folk, jazz, Celtic, traditional. Using this as a reward system for their lessons helps expand their tonal range and repertoire.

The weaknesses of auditory learners tend to be in the area of note-reading skills. They are prone to being poor note-readers unless they have an exact recording to match what they are seeing on the page. The more notes on the page, the less inclined they are to practise that page. Larger print or copies of a piece can help alleviate this. If the part has characteristics such as minimal fingerings, bowings and dynamics, it is easier for these learners, because they can add the musical nuances themselves. Sight-reading is also a weak skill for auditory learners. Until they hear the music, the written score is not very useful. This presents a problem for participation in ensembles and auditions. One has to patiently help them overcome this 'blind spot' with short note-reading exercises of various difficulty levels. Assigning them 'musical' études and scales with added nuances can motivate them to notice

what is written on the page. An effective teaching technique is to play a passage for them and ask them to write it down on staff paper. When the excerpt has been written down, ask them to play what they have written and compare it with the actual excerpt. Eventually they will learn not to just 'play by ear'.

The kinaesthetic/tactile learner

The third type of learner is the kinaesthetic or tactile learner. They learn through moving, doing, touching or actively exploring the physical world around them (Gardner, 1983). They tend to have a hard time sitting still for long periods of time. They need activity. They retain information with repetition or a 'hands on' approach (Poon Teng Fatt, 2000). These students don't seem to mind a cyclic routine of short exercises. Keeping explanations short and even trying some exercises without the instrument clarifies the lesson for these students. Because they like movement and motion, the teacher can give them short, simple exercises that explore a vast array of techniques. Explaining the lesson with kinaesthetic points such as arm or finger angles, range of swing motions, breathing control, posture and other physical aspects, allows them to internalize the motion, thus teaching them the technique. It may be necessary to introduce the repertoire in short segments, each containing a specific point relating to the body, but in the long run, this type of student can have a stronger technical foundation because they are aware of *what* they are doing at all times. A kinaesthetic/tactile learner gives the impression of being a natural performer because he/she is comfortable with the instrument. This type of learner usually shows curiosity about position changes or other technically advanced topics before the other learning styles. Using *étude* and scale books that present exercises in short and repetitive segments produces the best result with these students. They enjoy playing fast because it feels good to them. Assigning fast fingering passage exercises that have changing rhythms and varying speeds is a simple solution for helping them become clean 'technicians'. These students love body awareness tips. Using the Alexander Technique, circular breathing ideas or an assortment of the teacher's own warm-up exercises inspires these students to continue being aware of how their body is working with the instrument at different levels of their progress.

The limitations of the kinaesthetic/tactile learner are ambiguous and tend to produce some teaching dead-ends unless the teacher is willing to identify them. One of the areas in which a kinaesthetic/tactile learner can show a limitation is with the topic of musical interpretation and nuance. They usually feel and understand the musical connection but can't seem to show it with the instrument. When listening to their performance, one is taken by their control of instrument, the agility of their fingers, breathing and overall coordination, but in a slower passage one hears a boring rendition of the piece. They prefer the fast passages and seem to skim over the slower or transitional passages, thus making their performance a technical interpretation of the piece instead of a musical interpretation. To help overcome this difficulty, the teacher can ask them to move to a recording of their lesson piece. This helps them to create a 'choreography' of their piece. In the sections during which their motion is ill-matched to the meaning of the music, the teacher can steer them in another, more appropriate direction. After this exercise, during their performance of the piece, an association of the music and body movement is created, which can help them overcome the problems that have hindered them before. Some kinaesthetic/tactile learners also have a hard time producing an appropriate sonority. This can be alleviated by linking a physical association to the tone color that you want them to produce. Simply allowing them to try the certain skill in slow motion will give you the same result as the use of video and audio

tapes for the visual and auditory learners respectively. A tactile learner needs to link physical motion to a specific command or thought. By doing so, they can connect several ideas about the aesthetics of a piece and link each thought with an action, resulting in a well-thought-out and executed performance.

Conclusion

Playing a musical instrument requires three primary sensory skills. Regardless of the instrument and genre, there is the physical aspect of holding and working with the instrument, the auditory sensitivity of listening to the sounds that are being created and the visual ability to read music and relay the message that the composer is asking the performer to express. As a music teacher, one must nurture each one of these skills in order for the performer to be successful. Identifying each student's strengths helps build confidence. Being aware of students' weaknesses helps the teacher organize the long-term curriculum for the student. The result is a positive cycle in which both teacher and student are continuously inspired to work, discover and enjoy the process of learning an instrument. Using a sensory-oriented learning style model as a teaching framework can help a teacher attain this balance more efficiently. Success comes with identification and organization of the skills that the teacher can offer each student.

The aim of every teacher is to gain, retain and relay information. The aim of a *successful* teacher is to continuously search for a better way to relay this 'gained' and 'retained' information.

Notes

1. Since the topic of the learning styles is ubiquitous among a vast array of disciplines, many have utilized this topic as an initial introduction to their research. Thus, one finds repetitive patterns of introductory material and cross-referencing. The resources cited in this article were selected from, but are not exclusive to, the most widely acknowledged resources available.
2. The Representational System has been attributed to Howard Gardner's initial research into the learning styles that eventually evolved into the multiple intelligences theory. The three categories have since become three of the seven major categories: visual/spatial, musical (aural), and bodily/kinaesthetic. Many others have since used the Representational System but under different titles.

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Appendix: Suggested reading list

The suggested reading list below includes articles and books covering the general topic of learning styles and educational programs based on the various models available. They provide interesting insight into creating pedagogic strategies for various learning levels and types.

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Wyoming and northern Utah areas. The Oberon String Quartet later became the graduate string quartet at San Francisco Conservatory of Music, performing concerts with guest faculty artists such as Frederica von Stadt, Robert Mann, Paul Galbraith, and Donald and Vivian Weilerstein. Besides performing, Ms Beheshti has always maintained an active teaching career from Suzuki beginners to graduate conservatory students. Currently in Tehran, she has started a Suzuki violin program, become the advocate for a university-level music pedagogy degree and teaches full time at the University of Tehran.

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Abstract

Ameliorer l'enseignement de musique de studio en utilisant des modèles d'apprentissage

Le rôle d'un professeur de musique de studio consiste entre un équilibre sensible de la créativité et de l'organisation. Dans une situation de face à face, un professeur doit aider l'étudiant par les gestes à jouer d'un instrument aussi bien que lui apprendre des notions abstraites musicales et esthétiques. Le but d'accompagner l'étudiant à devenir un bon musicien est universel, mais les approches d'enseignement diffèrent. Dans cet article, je propose d'utiliser des modèles d'apprentissage comme cadre d'enseignement. L'utilisation de ces modèles en classe n'est pas une nouvelle idée, mais la leçon de musique fournit une situation unique pour l'évaluation et la mise en place de ces modèles. En identifiant le modèle d'apprentissage dominant d'un étudiant, un professeur peut plus effectivement développer une approche pédagogique individualisée pour chaque étudiant. Les modèles peuvent être employés pour organiser le programme du professeur aussi bien que fournir un cadre pour des idées d'enseignement nouvelles et créatrices.

Das Einsetzen von verstehendem Lernen im Privatmusikunterricht

Die Rolle eines Studiomusiklehrers ist ein heikler Balanceakt zwischen Kreativität und Organisation. In einer eins-zu-eins Unterrichtssituation muss ein Lehrer einen Studenten durch die physischen Herausforderungen ein Instrument zu spielen führen, aber auch zum abstrakten Verstehen der Musik und Aesthetik. Die Zielsetzung einen Studenten zu einem guten Musiker auszubilden ist universal, aber die dazu angewendeten Unterrichtsmethoden unterscheiden sich. In diesem Artikel schlage ich vor, Lernmethoden als Grundlagen zu benutzen. Der Gebrauch von Lernmethoden im Unterricht im Klassenzimmer ist nicht neu, und der Musikunterricht bietet dazu einen einmaligen Rahmen für deren Einführung und Anwendung. Bei der Feststellung eines vorherrschenden Lernstils eines Studenten, kann der Lehrer einen erfolgreicherem, individuellerem pädagogischen Zugang für jeden von ihnen finden. Das Modell kann vom Lehrer benutzt werden um den Lehrplan zu gestalten aber auch Grundlagen für neue und kreative Unterrichtsideen zu erhalten.

La mejora de la enseñanza instrumental individual a través de la comprensión de los estilos de aprendizaje

El rol de un profesor de instrumento exige un equilibrio delicado entre creatividad y organización. En las clases individuales el profesor debe guiar al alumno en las cuestiones físicas de la ejecución instrumental a la vez que le transmite nociones musicales y estéticas más

abstractas. El objetivo de ayudar al alumno para que llegue a ser un buen músico es universal, pero los enfoques didácticos son diferentes. En este artículo propongo usar los modelos de estilos de aprendizaje como marco didáctico. El uso de los modelos de estilos de aprendizaje no es una idea nueva, pero la clase de música proporciona un entorno excepcional para la su evaluación e implementación. Al identificar el estilo de aprendizaje preferencial, un profesor puede desarrollar más eficientemente un enfoque pedagógico adaptado a su alumno. Los modelos pueden servir al profesor para organizar su planificación y pueden proporcionarle un marco para desarrollar ideas didácticas nuevas y creativas.