

## ABOUT THIS DEPARTMENT

Teaching is the trade of a lifelong learner: Inspiration comes from all manner of experiences. My Studio is a space for teachers to discuss their influences, profound teaching moments, daily quandaries, and the experiences that helped define their approach to teaching.



Jessica Ivry

MATT WASHBURN

## BACK TO SCHOOL

Learning to teach well required more than just my performance experience

By Jessica Ivry

As usual, I jumped up from my chair, took hold of his hand, and tried to mold it into the correct shape to play a scale with an extension fingering.

Immediately this young man was taken aback, and said he was not comfortable with such a literal hands-on approach, and would prefer simply to watch me demonstrate. “But playing the cello or any string instrument means you let the teacher maneuver your hands into shape!” I retorted.

He quit the next week. It took me a while to see how that experience—one from my very first year of teaching—could morph from insult into insight. I assumed I understood how to teach the cello from all my years as a cello student. But then I never had a teacher ask me how I wanted to learn. In fact, by the time I understood my own learning style, I was about to finish my graduate studies.

When I was a music student, I imagined a professional life as a performer and assumed teaching would be the backup. But over time, I grew to enjoy teaching and preferred it to

endless driving for low-paying work. It allowed me to accept gigs based on creativity and my own schedule, and not out of economic need. So, I had to refine my teaching skills. While I had some implicit teaching knowledge about the cello, I needed to learn more about basic pedagogical theory and practice. It has made all the difference with my private students.

I decided to glean what I could from a variety of educational approaches and philosophies—I participated in Kodaly and Orff method workshops and took a few college classes in lesson planning, curriculum development, and music technology. I’m planning to attend a weeklong course about working as a teaching artist, and how to connect my performance and instructional skills with other academic disciplines.

While all of this education does not apply directly to specific technical or musical challenges in say, a Brahms sonata or a movement from a Bach suite, it has given me many tools to help my students become well-rounded ones. I provide a safe and creative learning

“  
I found that once a student takes ownership of the basics, it leads to creative ideas about sophisticated concepts.”

environment where student goals are based on their individual needs and various learning styles are cultivated. I am consistently supportive and vary ways for my students to demonstrate and apply new thinking and problem-solving skills. I place explicit value on the learning process as well as the performance experience.

I respect a student’s personal space and ask some basic questions to create a comfortable learning environment: Can I approach you and place my hands on yours? Can I guide your bow hand while you play that passage? Can I play that excerpt on your instrument so you can hear it another way?

When I offer musical suggestions, I encourage students to try them out but not to accept them outright. Initially I thought my job was to spell it all out, writing in every bowing articulation and fingering—even the obvious ones. I would demonstrate the piece as much as possible and encourage a bit of copycat playing. But I found that once a student takes ownership of the basics, it leads to creative ideas about sophisticated concepts, including phrasing and musicality. Ultimately my students are thinking about the stories behind the melodies and how to approach them—even the youngest students working on beginner folk songs demonstrate more creative playing, infused with more joy and spark.

I enjoy the work as an instructor much more than I would have imagined and feel more confident in what I have to share—not only based on my performance experiences, but on what I have learned from other pedagogical sources. My students appreciate that I offer options and diverse musical perspectives. This wide-angle approach may not work for every teacher, but it’s certainly helped me forge stronger bonds with my students. ■