

Maintaining High Standards When Students Don't Practice

Patti Misita, Winter Score 2009

Lately I have been so frustrated by students who come in week after week without having practiced. It's always the same old story. Just fill in the blank: "basketball, volleyball, homework, Grandma came to visit," or just "we were really busy last week." How do you maintain high standards when students don't practice? I believe that most of my students love to play, like their lessons and have supportive parents. But yet sometimes they seem to make little or no progress. Even when they practice it is not productive. I find myself in an endless loop of correcting the same mistakes and renewing the same goals. Before long half the year is gone and it seems little or nothing has really been accomplished. Actually I had decided that the world had changed and that my students were just too busy to reach my standards.

Then I had an epiphany! Perhaps I was measuring success in the wrong way. Perhaps I needed to measure progress and success based on what the student learned instead of how many pieces she had managed to play flawlessly. It occurred to me that my lessons revolved around my needs and not the needs of my students. I felt a need to accomplish certain goals or tasks at a certain point in time. My thought process was that children needed goals to keep motivated, and that accepting less than the stated goal was a failure on my part. Here's where the epiphany occurred: I remembered that my real job was to motivate and excite them about playing the piano. Yes, I want them to build a repertoire, establish an effortless technique and develop solid reading and rhythm skills. But if it becomes a chore for the student the process has failed.

I recently purchased a copy of Beth Gigante Klingenstein's new book "*The Independent Piano Teachers Studio Handbook*." Immediately upon scanning the contents I turned to the chapter titled *The Studio Atmosphere*. The first thing she addressed was what she calls BSE: Boredom, Stress and Exhaustion. BSE was the perfect encapsulation of what was happening in my studio. I have been doing the same things, basically the same way, for years. The things I do in lessons are old hat to me. No wonder students are not responding, I have lost my sparkle and probably some of my intensity. I have become bored with the process. Instead of being excited about the music, I am expressing frustration and disappointment.

I was exhausting myself by setting the same old goals, assigning the same old pieces, and then becoming frustrated when the poor unsuspecting student failed to respond like I expected him to. "Franz L. Piano" did it so much better years ago! I find myself caught in a circle. The students are not responding to corrections and I am tired of repeating myself, they are tired of playing the same piece and encountering the same frustrations, they don't practice, so I repeat myself.....lessons are spent fixing notes and correcting rhythms instead of making music. And so I bemoan the lack of commitment. I fret about how the world has become so watered down. I wonder "where is the commitment to excellence?" I find myself in a cycle of repetitious harping on the values of hard work and commitment and correction of repeated mistakes.

And so it is time to make a change. These are my resolutions:

- *I will offer a variety of performance events that are not judged.*

This fall we held a Playathon where students played mostly ensemble music. Music included favorites such as Pachelbel's Canon, Disney tunes and Broadway tunes. We also held a Christmas Musicales for a local retirement home. Both of these events were very well received by students and parents. The students liked playing familiar pieces. The parents liked the idea of service to the community and also liked hearing music that they know. I think sometimes we forget that our mission is to lead students to a broader and deeper appreciation of all musical styles. To accomplish that goal we must start from where they are.

- *I will shift the focus of lessons to the mastery of skills.*

Group lessons focused on improving rhythm and counting skills last fall. Games included "Rhythm Bingo" by Cheryl Lavendar and "Tappin Termites" from TheoryTime. Every student has improved by working on these skills **together**.

- *I will be selective about judged events.*

Too often when students do not practice lessons are consumed with learning and preparing for the next judged event and everything else falls by the wayside. I am taking a new approach. Rather than expecting that students will be prepared for and participate in every judged event I am going to move through the repertoire and expect only a few things to be polished. I am allowing students more choice and giving them more responsibility for preparing for this type of event. The age range in my studio has shifted more toward middle and high school. I will give these students more say in the direction and content of their lessons.

- *I will choose and introduce new music on a regular basis.*

After all, variety is the spice of life. I never keep young beginners on the same piece for months. We study lots of little pieces and choose a few favorites to memorize and polish. Why is it suddenly so different for intermediate level students?

- *I will look for tangible and immediate ways to motivate and excite students about practice.*

I will try to engage my students in the learning process by offering incentives to accomplish weekly goals. I was having trouble getting 5th and 6th grade students to learn two-octave scales hands together. The solution is an in-house "technique tournament" as an incentive to meet this goal. Charts are posted on the wall and stickers are awarded as each keyboard skill is mastered. **Measuring progress as a group has had a big impact on individual success.**

There will always be a few students who practice methodically and consistently and are prepared for every lesson. Most students however are juggling school and family obligations along with at

least one other extracurricular activity in addition to piano. Increasingly younger children are participating in sports that consume several days a week. There is only so much time available to devote to good, effective practice. As teachers we need to be creative and inspiring to capture a student's attention. We want the child to leave the lesson excited about practicing. We must look for new ways to create that excitement in lessons and motivate children to practice effectively. We also have to understand that the student will make progress over time and that just because a few lessons do not go well, that does not mean all is lost.

Maintaining high standards means a daily commitment to excellence in teaching. It is a commitment to sharing a love for music with your students. It is not producing perfect minuets and sonatinas from every child. My standards are reflected in a studio environment that is warm and inviting. My standards are reflected in my love of music and the piano. I will create excitement about learning new skills by trying new things. I will foster a sense of community in the studio by working toward shared goals. I will teach my students to find joy in the learning process and to be proud of what they have accomplished. Piano lessons are a journey that teacher and student take together. I will remember to include my students' needs in the journey.