

notes on
Teaching

I heard once that there is a time to teach music, and a time to teach people. After twenty-five years at the Old Town School of Folk Music, my best guess so far is that you should start with people.

by mark dvorak



2. Your students are human beings, just like you. They have feelings and are busy. Just like you.
3. If you aren't the most talented or knowledgeable person in the class room, be the funniest.
4. People want to belong to a welcoming, creative community that exists for no longer than three hours at a time.
5. On the first day of class, you and your students are silently agreeing on many things. Do your best to uphold your end of the bargain.
6. Calling one's bluff is an effective short term strategy.
7. You gain control of a class by giving up control. Only you, the teacher, is in the position to do this.
8. It is a very large pain in the ass to try to care about every little thing that happens in your classroom. Your very survival depends on this caring.
9. The laughter of your students, and the smiles on their faces are good barometers by which to measure your teaching.
10. You are not training dogs for show here. You are helping people to become more complete human beings. You are helping your students to become themselves.
11. People tend to be nervous in class, and many students arrive on the first day with their defenses already up. A teacher has the power to diffuse or heighten tension by the way he enters the room.
12. Some students wish to identify with, or demonstrate obedience to their instructor. Work to change this if you can. Look for ways for students to begin identifying with and becoming obedient to, the work of getting good sounds to come from their instruments.
13. Comb your hair and wear clothing that makes you feel like you're the shit. Then, when you walk into your classroom to teach, forget about all that stuff.

14. Consider that every remark you make in class will be heard, and that every action you take will be noted. Then consider that only some of what you have said and done will take root and bear fruit. Please also consider that some of what you have said and done will come back to you in ways you may not be prepared to handle.
15. Call your students by name. Welcome the gifted and the distracted equally. Prepare activities that require your students to listen. Prepare activities that require your students to think as a musician might.
16. Blessed are the flexible for they shall not be bent out of shape.
17. When silent, you are able to see more.
18. When not reading off a sheet or a screen, you are able to hear more.
19. Think about this: Fortunate teaching is offered as an expression of kindness toward students who have come to your class from an outside world that is mostly unkind.
20. Bribery works only sometimes.
21. One can be strict while still being fair.
22. One cannot be strict without being funny.
23. You will know it when your teaching begins to mature. All of your own insecurities and shortcomings will become apparent to everyone around you.
24. Whatever teaching is, you need it.
25. However unimportant teaching is, you need it.
26. There are many ways, and many opinions, but there is only one heart. Work with that in mind.
27. Build on a student's sense of pride. It will become evident to both they and you, when they've had enough of themselves.
28. Learn to be good at opening doors. Keep in mind though, that the student is the lone guardian of the doors not yet ready to be opened.

29. A good teacher works in the service of his students. Good teaching includes sharing the creative process with everyone in the room, in a way that each individual can accept. Re-creation and reenactment are for other people and other circumstances.
30. As a teacher, you will be disrespected. That is part of the deal.
31. As a teacher, work at learning to love all music. If you do not do this, you will soon begin to not like any of it.
32. Everyone likes to give a lecture. Hardly anybody likes to listen to one.
33. The less often you relate to your students in terms of judgement or criticism, the less often you will have to write things down.
34. Every student is deserving of a compliment. Every day.
35. Once you have a student's attention, walk lightly. You are working now within the heart and there's a real possibility that an insensitive piano teacher has been there before you.
36. A student cannot hurt you unless you've already been hurt. Chances are that is what called you to teaching in the first place.
37. Be open to your emotions in class.
38. Build control over your emotions. Then learn to be funny.
39. Set expectations for yourself and for your students somewhere way up there with the stars in the sky. Once class begins, refocus your attention and actions towards the people who have come to you for help and instruction. Listen again for the sounds being made in the room. Everything you need to know is in those sounds.
40. Information can be found almost anywhere. Center your class activities around other things that are more fun.
41. Avoid at all costs, becoming a dispenser of dogma. In the end, your responsibility as a teacher includes undoing the dogmatic principles that hinder and insult the creative heart.

42. After a certain amount of time, it is easy to be a hard-liner. You know your facts and you know your music. You've got a lot of listening behind you and a lot of experience. You've earned the right to an informed opinion. But here's what: There's a hell of a lot of responsibility that comes along with being a hard-liner, and if you can't live up to it every time, every day, try taking yourself down a couple notches.
43. A day will come when you realize that what you believe, what you think, what you feel and what you have accomplished as a teacher does not matter, will not matter, and has not ever mattered. That is a day worth working towards.
44. Think again what it means to know something, 'By Heart.'
45. At birth, your students' became the sole authors of their own creative lives.
46. Everyone has to teach themselves, that's just the way it is. Also, everyone needs help from time to time. That's where you come in.
47. If you really want your students to listen to you, speak more softly. If you have something really important to say, try saying it differently than a teacher might.
48. Choose classroom activities that are instructive. Act and speak reasonably and compassionately. Being cute and relying only on what's fashionable are other things altogether.
49. When addressing your entire class as a whole, speak as if they are all one person. When speaking to one person, use his or her name. If you've forgotten their name, ask again. It shows respect.
50. An electronic tuner will rob you blind if you let it.
51. It is impossible to over-prepare for a class.
52. Preparing for class is overrated.
53. Listening begets technique. Really.
54. You don't have to tell your class everything you know about a given subject.

55. Be thankful for what's gone right and celebrate, but not too much. Look for ways to learn from the things that haven't worked out so well, trying not to take any one thing too personally. Either way, take heart, you are not traveling alone.