Product vs. Process – Calibrating General Music Instructional Goals

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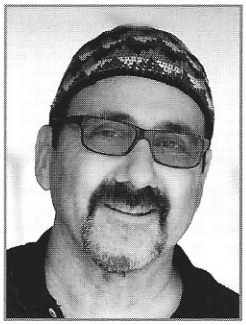

It is a fundamental question in the general music classroom: should the primary instructional goal be developing students' performance ability – product – or to develop their overall musical understanding and fluency by encouraging musical behavior – process? All good music programs contain elements of both, of course, but there are important ways the trajectory of these objectives diverge. The question becomes, what then?

The virtues of performance as the central goal are well established. Working in an ensemble promotes teamwork and the development of mastery. Being in an ensemble or part of a performance requires students to practice at home and to read music, skills that are often less successfully addressed in general music class. Performances are also one of the most direct ways a teacher can assess what their students have learned, and the most direct way teacher performance can be assessed. On top of that, being in an ensemble is fun.

But there are limitations, the chief one being that, while we may argue that music education is right for all children, being in the band is clearly not. Students who possess (or whose parents believe they possess) a natural musical aptitude may embrace the challenge associated with performance, but a greater number will not, having already concluded that performing music is "too hard." In trying to convince them otherwise, we teachers are competing with several hundred years of emphasis on virtuosity and an endless supply of online videos of kids doing astonishing musical things, all of which seem to prove that music is for the gifted few.

The pressures associated with performance excellence do not affect the students alone. My school has a winter festival, in which all 500-plus students perform. It is one of the highlights of the year, but I never like the kind of teacher I become at that time, as my focus shifts inevitably to the end result. Suddenly things like getting them to bow together or enter and exit in a organized way begin to compete with the development of real musical understanding. By the time the show rolls around, the pleasure of simply being in the groove together can be lost.

Like a lot of generalists, I am drawn to process, an outlook which, I am sure, arises in part from being a terrible practice musician and a white-knuckle performer myself. My first school had a separate choir director and band director, and I was delighted when I was told that it was their job to put on shows and that mine was to focus on fundamentals. Over time, however, my thinking about this has evolved. The longer I teach the more I am convinced that music instruction, even at the elemen-

tary school level, must contain a performance component to be complete, and not just culminating classroom sharing, but full-on shows. As David Elliot and others have pointed out, the appropriate objective of all music education is to have students perform music.[1] Apart from completing the experience, performing in front of an audience allows students to develop critical skills such as the ability to make real-time adjustments that are highly desirable and cannot be obtained from classroom exercises.

If, however, performance is to be a central focus in general music, strategies must be developed to keep all students engaged. It is well established that teaching within the Zone of Proximal Development, defined by psychologist Lev Vygotsky as the gap between what a student can do on their own and what they can do with assistance, is the best place to reach kids,[2] but ZPD is different for every student, and that disparity increases as the pressures and preconceptions associated with performance are added to the mix.

One thing that seems to help is to choose material that students can identify with. With both my ensembles and seasonal shows, the temptation to select tried and true material that serves some incrementally appropriate instructional goals is strong. Nevertheless, each year I select at least some new material, in part by asking students for input. Champions of culturally responsive teaching would argue that this kind of collaboration is appropriate in any case, but whether kids relate to a selection because it is of their native culture or from pop culture, they are going to be more enthusiastic about learning and playing music they think is cool.

Once material has been selected, it is important that authentic instruction continues even up until dress rehearsal. To facilitate this I try to have a lesson plan for each rehearsal that contains some achievable short-term goals. The hope is that this will give every student a sense of daily accomplishment and optimism about their ultimate success the day of the show. Meanwhile, the process of breaking down the performance piece into smaller, more manageable chunks and then putting it back together gives me plenty of teachable moments to discuss how the music is constructed.

Another thing I have found helpful in keeping students engaged is to allow them to be the author of some part of each number in the show. Whether this is a B section for a piece that they compose, the development of choreography or additional verses, incorporating their compositional and presentational ideas invariably leads to a greater investment on their part. They care more about doing well, because it is their own, and, here again, they are collaborating on a process level.

Finally, it is a good idea that you educate your audience to the extent that you can about what they should be looking for. This isn't a matter of lowering expectations, as much as redirecting them. For some reason, we are able to observe a show of children's art or attend a children's play and enjoy it for what it is, but when it comes to music, many parents, students, and even teachers compare children's performances not to other children's work, but to the professionally engineered work of professional musicians. Part of the solution here is to select material your students can fully realize – pentatonic folk tunes, for example – but another part is to improve your audience's appreciation for what is actually taking place on stage. When parents comment about the musical proficiency on display, even if those comments are complimentary, I try to direct their attention instead to the same things I am looking for – working effectively within a group, sustained concentration, and joy.

A mentor teacher once told me that if you are not careful, you can wind up having the same conversation every day with the three smartest kids in the room. This is a particular danger in the music classroom, where standout ability is something that is cultivated and featured. But as generalists we are responsible for insuring an optimum musical experience for all students. Maintaining a strong sense of process even while pursuing performance excellence will go a long way towards achieving that goal.

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1. David J. Elliot. **Music Matters; A New Philosophy of Music Education.** Oxford University Press; NY. 1995.

2. L.S. Vygotsky. **Mind in Society: Development of Higher Psychological Processes.** Harvard University Press; Cambridge, MA. 1978.