

19 Things That Great Teachers Do

Description

I don't know if this is a universal phenomenon or not, but I remember my kids both going through a phase where they tried to avoid explaining things by saying "it's complicated."

To their credit, some of the things we experience in life really are difficult to articulate in words – despite being clear to us in a non-verbal sort of way.

Like a child trying to [explain what love is](#) . Or [what harmony is](#) . Or [what gravity is](#) .

Or, defining what it is that makes a great teacher great.

Have you ever wondered what *exactly* renowned teachers do during lessons that help their students make progress and sound better from week to week? Do they rely on the same key set of strategies? Or is it different from teacher to teacher?

What's the secret sauce?

Three artist-teachers

Researchers [Robert Duke](#) and [Amy Simmons \(2006\)](#) were curious to learn more about the pedagogical approaches of individuals who are highly regarded not just as teachers, but as performers as well. So they videotaped three renowned artist-teachers as they worked with their students in regular weekly private lessons. Specifically, violist [Donald McInnes¹](#), oboist [Richard Killmer](#), and pianist [Nelita True²](#).

Altogether, about 30 hours of lessons were recorded, with participants ranging in age from high school to doctoral-level students.

The researchers then analyzed ~8-9 hours of video of each teacher, looking specifically for:

- teaching strategies that *all three* teachers used, and of these, narrowing in on...
- only those strategies that *led directly to improvements* in the students' playing, and which...
- were used in almost *every lesson* (and again, by *all three* teachers)

Despite being very different people, teaching very different instruments, it turns out these teachers' pedagogical approaches might fundamentally be more similar than different. The researchers identified 19 key elements that were common to each teacher's approach, which fell into three broad areas – **Goals and Expectations**, **Effecting Change**, and **Conveying Information**.

Ready to take a look?

Goals and Expectations

#1: “The repertoire assigned students is well within their technical capabilities; no student is struggling with the notes of the piece.”

Lessons tended to be centered around issues of musical expression and interpretation. So students came to lessons with pieces already in their hands, and even with some musical ideas of their own.

Some students will of course need much more time and help with technical fundamentals, but this speaks to the *kind* of work that can be done when repertoire is not too far beyond a students' current capacity. Compare this with how a lesson would look when a student tries to tackle a piece of music that they love, but is simply too demanding for them technically to be able to do much with beyond just getting the notes out³.

#2: “Teachers have a clear auditory image of the piece that guides their judgments about the music.”

Even when teachers haven't come across a particular piece before, they are able to take what they know about the composer, style, etc. and apply what they do know in such a way that the lesson is just as helpful as if they did know the piece.⁴

#3: “The teachers demand a consistent standard of sound quality from their students.”

This is one of the two elements that seemed to trump everything else. No matter what they were working on at the moment, if the sound quality was anything less than beautiful, everything came to a screeching halt, and sound quality became the primary focus until it was raised to the teacher's satisfaction.

#4: “The teachers select lesson targets that are technically or musical important.”

Interestingly, teachers didn't stop to work on *every* single imperfection – just the areas that would lead to the most meaningful or impactful improvement.

#5: “Lesson targets are positioned at a level of difficulty that is close enough to the student's current skill level that the targets are achievable in the short term and change is audible to the student in the moment.”

Rather than focusing on areas of the students' playing that might still be over their heads, the teachers appeared to focus on adjustments that the student could make in the moment and experience immediate success with.

#6: “The teachers clearly remember students’ work in past lessons and frequently draw comparisons between present and past, pointing out both positive and negative differences.”

Sometimes it’s easy for us to focus so much on how much more we have to do, that it’s easy to forget how far we’ve come. Sometimes it’s nice to get some perspective and a pat on the back from someone whose ears and judgment we trust.

Effecting Change

#7: “Pieces are performed from beginning to end; in this sense, the lessons are like performances, with instantaneous transitions into performance character; nearly all playing is judged by a high standard, ‘as if we are performing.’ ”

[John Wooden](#) once said, “If you don’t have time to do it right, when will you have time to do it over?” Similarly, if we don’t make it a habit to practice playing as we would for an audience/jury, the less-than-fully-committed, lackadaisical “meh” approach may follow us out on stage.

#8: “In general, the course of the music directs the lesson; errors in student performance elicit stops.”

The students were usually stopped immediately upon making an error. The idea being, I think, to help the student hone their standards and gain a clearer understanding of what beautiful/accurate playing sounds like while the memory of the offending moment is still fresh in their ears and fingers.

#9: “The teachers are tenacious in working to accomplish lesson targets, having students repeat target passages until performance is accurate.”

The teachers carefully selected areas for improvement that were achievable, so even if a student was struggling in the moment to get things sounding just right, the teachers didn’t let the students off the hook by sending them home to practice; they continued to provide guidance, feedback, and model the desirable way to play the passage until the student finally got it right.

#10: “Any flaws in fundamental technique are immediately addressed; no performance trials with incorrect technique are allowed to continue.”

This was the other thing that seemed to trump all else⁵. If a student played something with incorrect technique, correcting this flaw became priority #1, and they didn’t move on until the mechanics were fixed.

#11: “Lessons proceed at an intense, rapid pace.”

There was a pretty rapid cycling between the teacher’s instruction and students’ playing attempts. As

opposed to a teacher droning on for minutes while the student sits and gets cold and starts to forget what they were doing.

#12: “The pace of the lessons is interrupted from time to time with what seem to be ‘intuitively timed’ breaks, during which the teachers give an extended demonstration or tell a story.”

That being said, teachers also seemed to know when it was time to sit back a bit and take a short breather from the intense back and forth of instruction/playing. And who doesn't love stories? Plus, it really does seem that occasional breaks in the flow of a lesson/lecture/presentation/etc. help us stay more engaged⁶.

#13: “The teachers permit students to make interpretive choices in the performance of repertoire, but only among a limited range of options that are circumscribed by the teacher; students are permitted no choices regarding technique.”

While there seemed to be appropriate flexibility in the musical aspect of how a phrase was played, the mechanics were not up for discussion.

Conveying Information

#14: “Teachers make very fine discriminations about student performances; these are consistently articulated to the student, so that the student learns to make the same discriminations independently.”

Much of the teachers' feedback seemed to be geared towards honing the students' ears. Helping them appreciate more of the subtle nuances and details that the teachers hear, so that they could continue to raise their standards and eventually, the level of their playing. After all, if they can't hear it, they can't work on it in the week between lessons.

#15: “Performance technique is described in terms of the effect that physical motion creates in the sound produced.”

Remember #3⁷ and #10⁸? Teachers didn't talk about these in isolation, but always addressed technique as a means to the end of sound production, and...wait for it...

#16: “Technical feedback is given in terms of creating an interpretive effect.”

...always toward the *ultimate* end goal of musical expression. As someone once said, “The only reason for mastering technique is to make sure the body does not prevent the soul from expressing itself.”

#17: “Negative feedback is clear, pointed, frequent, and directed at very specific aspects of students' performances, especially the musical effects created.”

In this study, there were more instances of negative feedback than positive, which goes against findings in some other similar studies⁹. BUT, the feedback was very specific and clear, and seemed to be geared towards helping the students fine-tune their ability to discriminate between good playing and *great* playing.

#18: “There are infrequent, intermittent, unexpected instance of positive feedback, but these are most often of high magnitude and extended duration.”

Of course, when the students did something nice and their teacher was genuinely pleased, (which happened at least once in almost every lesson), the teachers didn’t hold back, and were very “emphatic and detailed” in the feedback they shared.

#19: “The teachers play examples from the students’ repertoire to demonstrate important points; the teachers’ modeling is exquisite in every respect.”

As you can imagine, these particular teachers were probably quite inspiring to listen to whenever they demonstrated what they were asking...but I think the bigger idea is that their demonstration (whether played on their instrument or simply sung or gestured), effectively and clearly illustrated the musical essence of what they wanted their student to aim for.

Take action

It’s important to note that it’s unclear how generalizable these findings may be to all teachers and students (which the authors make a point to acknowledge). After all, the students whose lessons were taped in this study probably represent a relatively narrow slice of the range of students that exist out in the world. However, I would imagine that many of the 19 common teaching factors observed would be pretty broadly applicable to many students and teachers.

But what do you think? Do any of these strategies hold a special place in your own teaching approach?

If you have some time, it’s well worth checking out the complete results section of their paper¹⁰, which also includes multiple video examples of each teacher illustrating many of the 19 elements described above: [The Nature of Expertise](#)

If you found this study intriguing, one of the study authors, Robert Duke, will be featured in an upcoming podcast episode. He’ll share more insights from his research on effective practice and teaching, like how to bake inflection and musical expression into the learning process from Day 1, and how he got his band students to yearn for more practice time by doing the opposite of what you might expect a teacher to do. To make sure you get it in your inbox when it’s released, you can subscribe to the weekly newsletter [right here](#).

References

Duke, R. A., & Simmons, A. L. (2006). The Nature of Expertise: Narrative Descriptions of 19 Common Elements Observed in the Lessons of Three Renowned Artist-Teachers. *Bulletin of the Council for Research in Music Education*, 170, 7–19. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40319345>

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