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10 min Tips to Teach Music Podcast Week 11 - Refocus, Critical Thinkers and more.

Tip of the Month - Re-Energise!!!

Is your energy level dropping? Do you feel burdened with too much work and too little time to do it? Do you sense that your students are becoming lethargic? Then you and your students may be experiencing midcourse droop--an insidious yet common syndrome. Why? When enthusiasm wanes, the ability to cope with stress decreases and the joy of teaching is sometimes lost.

At the start of the year, energy levels were high as you and your students got excited about what was to come. Now that some of you have just finished the HSC practicals with your year 12 students, you realise that learning is not so rosy. Survival experts tell people caught in a bottomless quagmire in the woods to stop struggling -- uncoordinated effort only causes the victim to sink ever deeper. Only by calm, purposeful and coordinated actions can the victims save themselves by swimming through the muck or sand to the safety of a solid shore.

How can you recover yourself from the ooze of a sinkhole?

Try a REFOCUS strategy. REFOCUS means:

- R ecognize
- E mpower
- F ocus
- O bjectivize
- C ommit
- U nburden
- S urprise



Recognize

Recognize your achievements and the achievements of the students so far. Remind yourself that lessons were well organized, delivered and received. The visuals enhanced understanding, the assignments sparked critical thinking and you used innovative ways to activate and encourage your students in the learning process. Give yourself a pat on the back for learning all your students' names, staying after class to answer questions, meeting with your students even though you don't have an office and taking the time to develop the individualized feedback designed to help each student improve his or her performance. Recall the work that you and your students have completed despite the demands of other classes, a job and perhaps a family. Acknowledge everyone's achievements and improvements.

Empower

Create a list of your strengths as a teacher. Are you an excellent communicator, manager, instructional designer or leader? When are you at your best -- leading a discussion, planning a collaborative learning activity, delivering a lecture, or going one-on-one with a student who needs help? Maybe you're an outstanding motivator. List your five greatest personal achievements in the past year. Can you remember how you felt during these moments? Reliving these peak experiences can really empower you to teach with greater enthusiasm and sense of purpose.

Focus

Take a quick look at your syllabus or planning setup. Are you on track? Will there be enough time? No? Then you have a management problem. Use a triage system to gain control of the situation. Triage is a strategy used by hospitals to deal with patients in the emergency room.

Number 1: treat those who benefit the most and who are easily treated, Number 2: move on to those who are more difficult to treat but benefit the most and lastly attend to those who have the most difficult treatments and probably won't benefit from it. In other words, when time is short and learning is slow, work on the material that will bring the greatest reward with the least amount of effort. Plan to accomplish first the learning tasks that will bring the highest reward for your students. This will encourage them to continue to work right through to the end of the calendar year.



Objectivize

Since you started the year, the stresses and strains of teaching and daily living may have caused you to veer from your original targets for each group that you teach. It is easy to do. By refocussing on the situation, you can create altered learning targets for your classes. This will allow you to take the pressure off yourself because, in your mind, you haven't been able to maintain the program that you originally initiated. This is quite normal because each child is different and their learning speeds will vary.

Commit

The number of variables in the learning process are too many to control, so once you have worked out your new plan of attack, commit to it. Don't waste time rewriting it, just make notes and reschedule in your day book. Review and reflect at the end of the year, when you have the time to deal with it.

Unburden

Tony Robbins calls it "leverage", and we call it "delegate". You don't have to be perfect; you just have to be yourself. You may hold the expectation that teacher should have all the answers. Once you accept the fact that successful teachers emphasize the roles of learner, presenter, guide, coach, facilitator, designer, evaluator, manager and leader and minimize the role of expert, you unburden yourself from unrealistic expectations. Then teaching becomes much easier and more enjoyable. Delegate what you can to your students and other colleagues to assist in making the teaching experience a less stressful place.

Surprise

The elements of surprise can be the most powerful motivator for you and your students. When you are feeling a little stressed or flat in class, why not introduce the element of surprise. Tell a story or create a crisis, develop a new game or use tactile materials to juice it up. Whatever strategy you use, pick something that you haven't done with this class before or something that you haven't done for a long time. It will keep the students and you on their toes and help to keep you re-energised as you head on into the last quarter of this year.



What is Critical Thinking?

No one always acts purely objectively and rationally. We connive for selfish interests. We gossip, boast, exaggerate, and equivocate. It is "only human" to wish to validate our prior knowledge, to vindicate our prior decisions, or to sustain our earlier beliefs. In the process of satisfying our ego, however, we can often deny ourselves intellectual growth and opportunity. We may not always want to apply critical thinking skills, but we

should have those skills available to be employed when needed. We are thinking critically when we :

- rely on reason rather than emotion
- require evidence, ignore no known evidence, and follow evidence where it leads
- are concerned more with finding the best explanation than being right
- weigh the influences of motives and bias
- recognise our own assumptions, prejudices, biases, or point of view.
- Recognise emotional impulse, selfish motives, or other modes of self deception
- evaluate all reasonable inferences
- consider a variety of possible viewpoints or perspectives,
- remain open to alternative interpretations
- accept a new explanation, model, or paradigm because it explains the evidence better, is simpler, or has fewer inconsistencies or covers more data
- accept new priorities in response to a re-evaluation of the evidence or reassessment of our real interests, and
- do not reject unpopular views out of hand.
- are precise, meticulous, comprehensive, and exhaustive
- resist manipulation and irrational appeals, and avoid snap judgments.



In sum, critical thinkers are by nature sceptical. They approach texts with the same scepticism and suspicion as they approach spoken remarks. Critical thinkers are active, not passive. They ask questions and analyse. They consciously apply tactics and strategies to uncover meaning or assure their understanding. Critical thinkers do not take an egotistical view of the world. They are open to new ideas and perspectives. They are willing to challenge their beliefs and investigate competing evidence.

I like to produce Critical Thinkers. So in order to do that, I need to look at my teaching practices and see where I can focus my energy into creating Critical Thinkers.

According to Arthur Chickering and Zelda Gramson from the American Association for Higher Education, there are seven principles for good teaching practice. I thought we might look into these practice suggestions and see how they relate to Music Teachers. Their seven principles are:

1. Encourage contact between students and teachers
2. Develop cooperation among students
3. Encourage ACTIVE learning
4. Give prompt feedback
5. Emphasize time on task
6. Communicate high expectations
7. Respect and teach to the diverse talents and ways of learning.

So far so good. All of these suggestions are items that I would consider important. But how do they stack up in your classroom. Well I have a few thoughts.

1. Encourage contact: - in and around the music staffroom, it is not unusual to find students either engaged in conversation with teachers regarding all sorts of topics, from performance strategies to teaching assistance. It is usually one of the most welcoming staffrooms in the school. As a head teacher, I always found it important to separate the students who were in "trouble" from those who were engaged in positive conversations. I didn't want those students who were reporting for misdemeanours to be put on show to the other "good" kids. The key is to have a system for both types of communication and be consistent.



2. Develop cooperation: - easier said than done at times. There are lots of strategies that I am sure you already use in this area. For me, the best strategy is to show by doing. Make sure in the view of students, you are seen to be cooperative. I have seen many teachers in the past, complain to students about "so and so". This is not the best role modelling and lets face it, Music teachers are massive role models within a school. They are always on show, whether they like it or not.

3. Encourage ACTIVE learning: - Active learning is achieved through facilitation, not traditional chalk and talk teaching methods. The Music classroom is one of the most active in a school. Sometimes, this can be a downfall because students and parents can see it as a "bird course". Naturally we know it isn't, but you do need to keep a balance between writing and playing. Make sure you use tactile resources to assist with the written learning aspect. The flipped classroom model helps to encourage this type of learning. I will look at flipped learning strategies for music in future podcasts. Another important point to mention at this point is to not be afraid. The best music teachers are the ones that are willing to give something a go. They do not know all the answers - they are not the Oracle. But they do know where to find the answer, or how to find the answer.

4. Give prompt feedback: - I have seen many interpretations of this term "feedback". In most Australian schools, it is part of our curriculum to give the students written feedback. Teachers are always careful to make sure that anything in writing is backed up by processes. I have seen many situations where the processes have not been structured and organised, and the teacher finds themselves having to justify their comments to a panel. Make sure you have a system for feedback to students and be able to explain that system to anyone who asks. Feedback usually exists in a music classroom in a number of ways: stickers/comments/stamps in books, verbal discussions after performances, written reports from performances, marked tests, using videos of the students to discuss their performances, etc. Over the years, the one that some music teachers struggle with is the written form of feedback. To address this issue, some over enthusiastic teachers would right monthly reports to parents in the hopes of being able to justify a high level of communication. I am not saying that this is what you must do, but make sure you do have a system that is clear to your, your head of department and your students. Remember the best form of feedback is in 3 levels - what worked, what didn't work and what strategies can I employ to help me improve



5. Emphasise time on task: - "Time + Energy = learning", or if you read Tony Robbins, "where the focus goes, energy flows". One great method that I am sure you all use is to count down the task time. With only a small amount of time devoted to some compositional, discussion or practical tasks, students need to learn to manage their time. By placing the countdown on the board and announcing it, the students will learn time management. For a 20 minute task, I would place the numbers 15, 10, 5,4,3,2,1 on the board and cross them off as we got to that time. If you are looking for a more interactive way, you can find plenty of timer count down models on YouTube.

6. Communicate high expectations:- your students are going to aim for the stars if you do. Expect more and you will get more as long as you give the students belief and structure. All students have the ability to understand music but it is usually the belief that stops them. Believing in the students becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy.

7. Respect and teach to the diverse talents and ways of learning: - There are many roads to learning and great teachers know them well. They can recognise the signs in their students. When you are talking, the student who plays with their pen or looks out the window, needs know that they are going to get up and do real soon. Great teachers recognise this and communicate it to these individual students without making the others in the class aware of it. How? By simply starting the lesson with a simple statement: In this lesson, we are going to....and stick to it!



The Bakers Dozen Tips for Teachers

1. Be nice to secretaries, avoid the bus drivers and don't let your room get too messy.
2. Never apologise in class about the curriculum. Don't ever tell your students that your lesson might not be as good as you had planned, or that you forgot something. Most kids don't notice when things are missing.
3. When leading a class discussion and a student asks a question softly, make sure you are the one to repeat the question loud enough for all to hear rather than putting the quiet one on the spot. Build confidence in that student by speaking with them separately and reminding them to speak louder when asking a question.
4. By the end of the class, try to learn everyone's name. Make notes in the roll if need be to help you. You would be astonished as to how much respect that can generate from a single effort on your part.
5. Issue directions one or two at a time.
6. Don't say, "You must raise your hand to answer a question" and then answer several questions without a raised hand. Consistency is the key.
7. Be consistent with your behaviour and then the students know what to expect.
8. A well taught and organised lesson mitigates against discipline problems.
9. Variety is the spice of life and the spice of a classroom. Vary your teaching techniques.
10. Circulate through your classroom.
11. Scan the class at unpredictable times like during a task and if you discover someone doing the wrong thing like chewing gum, turn your back to the class and say something like: before we continue, Johnny throw out the gum." The element of surprise is so cool.
12. If a student is doing the wrong thing with equipment, like playing with a beater or pencil, I usually circulate through the room and simply remove it from the student without saying a word. A single look has an amazing amount of power.
13. Teach your students how to READ, WRITE AND STUDY for your subject—Don't leave it to the English teacher.