

Motivating Groups

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Article:

"For every problem there is one solution which is simple, neat and wrong.

— H. L. Mencken

The ways and means of motivation are complex, laced with misconception and often based on subjective claims predicated on thin air. Yet the ability to motivate is arguably one of the most essential skills in any teacher's arsenal of critical pedagogical weapons, for without it we are mere purveyors of the transient, relying upon coercive tactics that were long ago damned by the likes of John Dewey and which have forever been doomed.

Motivation Vs. Activation

First, what is motivation? While the word has as many definitions as it has champions, it is best understood in juxtaposition to what it is not — activation. Activation comes from without and relies upon the teacher or parents to scold or praise. Motivation is an internal drive that propels its host to partake of life because he wants to, not because he has to. The difference is in the wanting. Students who are motivated study and practice because they find pleasure and fulfillment in doing so. Students who are activated study and practice because they are coerced or seduced into the doing.

Activators include gold stars, stickers, medals, gifts and so forth, given for good work. These are positive activators or rewards. Even judgmental praise involving phrases such as "I am proud of you" or "You have made me so happy" are activators. Students hearing such words will likely assume that the teacher's personal view of them is predicated upon their productivity and performance. In fact, this is a dangerous and unfair perception to foster. Students should feel secure in the knowledge that the teacher likes and respects them personally regardless of their professional endeavors. For the same reasons, criticism that is personal ("I am disappointed in you") is an activator. The pedagogical advice on this point is simple — hate the sin but not the sinner. The use of negative activators or punishment, including threats, scolding and so forth, was roundly criticized in an article in the Harvard Business Review wherein Fred Herzberg acronymized negative activators as KITA, euphemistically translated as a "kick in the pants!"

The trouble with activators is twofold. First, they are short-lived. In the famous Hawthorne Studies conducted in the 1920s and 1930s at the Western Electric plant in Cicero, Illinois, researchers found that external rewards increased productivity only briefly, then pre-intervention work levels returned. Gold stars and stickers become boring after a while. Where then is the incentive for practice? The ante has to be altered and/or increased to remain effective. Second, any number of scientific studies (Deci, Lepper and Greene, Nicholls, and Raynor) have shown that the administration of activators tends to hinder the development of true motivation. Activators create a psychological dependence on the dispenser of rewards or punishment. They do not promote an innate love for the task; rather, they encourage a perverse desire for reward and recognition. This is teaching and learning for all the wrong reasons; it is, in fact, a startling manifestation of the basest tenets of capitalism. The bottom line problem with activators is how to wean students from such expectations. All too often, you cannot. Like Pavlov's salivating dogs, students become captives of a conditioned reflexive action: when there is no teacher around to "ring the bell" of reward or punishment, the *raison d'etre* for practice vanishes. The result is

that interest in music study wanes. Activated students study and practice because they feel they have to, not because they want to.

On the other hand, motivation, the internal desire to fulfill the needs of self-esteem and self-actualization, is fostered through a variety of pedagogical tactics. Motivators come in many forms, and they all look inward. A preponderance of data testify to the efficacy of the following motivators. For instance, an important motivator is participative goal-setting, particularly as regards the decision process about choice of repertory, assignments, deadlines, practice schedules, and so forth. The clever teacher will allow the student to feel ownership of as many decisions as possible. With youngsters, this may be more illusion than reality; with older students, participative decision making should be increasingly practiced. Further, goals should be challenging, yet realistic. Most students respond best to short-term goals that are moderate in expectation, enabling them to measure progress in discreet steps. Be careful not to ask too much too soon, thereby dooming the student to probable failure and frustration. Remember that success is the mother of self-esteem.

Another effective motivator is the use of non-judgmental feedback when evaluating students' work. Tell them the truth about their progress, but make sure they know you like them regardless of that truth. You are assessing their performance, not their humanity. Instead of "I am disappointed in you," try "You still don't have that quite right" or "What can we do to make your practice on this spot more productive?" Instead of "I am proud of you," try "Congratulations on such great progress!" Still another motivator is the use of interesting, appealing repertory. There is too much good literature available ever to assign something that bores a student. Drop the piece if the student is simply not interested in it. Music is not like a bitter medicine — you don't take it simply because it is good for you. You should take it because you love it.

Teacher enthusiasm is one of the most powerful motivators. You must convince students through word and deed (and vocal inflection, body language, facial expression, eye contact, and so forth) that their lessons and progress in between their lessons are absolutely thrilling to you. Your enthusiasm will usually be contagious. Even if it is 9:00 p.m., you have taught for six hours, you haven't had dinner and you have a headache, you still owe the last student of the day all the zeal and vitality you can muster. What you must exhibit is a dramatic flair, as the best teachers usually do. Perhaps all music teachers should take courses in drama. We are, after all, selling a product --- music — and a salesman must be convincing.

The creation of achievement heroes is yet another motivator. Give the students a role model to look up to by bringing into group lessons or performance classes your best older student, perhaps someone who has gone on to major in music in college. Have them talk with and perform for your younger students. The success of a cohort is usually highly inspirational. Also, take your students to hear visiting artists in your community. Such exposure to the greats in the profession is vitally important. How many youngsters would never have dribbled a basketball if it were not for the influence of Michael Jordan? Introduce your students to the Michael Jordans of the music world: put their posters in your studio; play their recordings, especially their videos (after all, we have to compete with MTV) for your students; and take your classes to their concerts.

The use of humor can also be a motivator. There is nothing more deadly than a humorless lesson. A little laughter can work wonders with a student who, for whatever reason, is disinterested. Still another motivator is the equal treatment of all students. Never play favorites. Researchers have demonstrated that perception of inequity is a severe block to motivation. Of course, some students occasionally will require more time and professional attention. Just make certain that no student feels over-looked or slighted. Similarly, a demonstration of empathy with students' feelings and concerns is a powerful motivator. Talk with students; take a personal interest. Ask about their week, their activities, their thoughts. Also watch them closely during lessons for signs of boredom or fatigue. No matter how well-prepared the lesson plan might be, switch activities or tactics in mid-stream at the first sign of learner disinterest.

Further, students respond well to a demonstration of a high level of professional competence on the part of the teacher. Know what you are talking about, be prepared and organized, and demonstrate frequently. Confidence

inspires. Finally, employ discovery learning when possible. Discovery learning is student-centered and is often described as "Aha!" learning. Students are given questions or tasks and asked to seek their own answers and solutions. In discovery learning, the teacher talks very little while encouraging creative thinking by making assignments without complete instructions. Students find their own way. Of course, such learning allows people the freedom to make mistakes, but that is exactly how we all learned to walk and talk. Discovery learning also encourages students to help each other find solutions.

Motivational Group Strategies

Tactics for motivating groups do not differ substantially from those useful in motivating individuals. In fact, the task is often easier, given that research has demonstrated that most people learn best in groups. That is how youngsters are accustomed to learning in school.

The two inviolable rules of group teaching are that a homogeneous match of student abilities must be achieved, and that all activities must involve the whole group and not focus on individuals. Group teaching strategies should not devolve to the level of several brief private lessons while other class members work on their own projects. Group unity and cohesiveness are of primary importance.

Group cohesiveness has been the subject of a considerable amount of research. Wlodkowski developed a self-diagnostic Cohesion Behavior Inventory (adapted from Johnson and Johnson) that allows teachers to assess their pedagogical tactics on nine criteria. Each question is evaluated on a Likert continuum scale as follows: Never: 1: 2: 3: 4: 5: 6: 7: 8: 9: Always.

- I try to make sure that everyone enjoys being a member of the group.
- I disclose my ideas, feelings, and reactions to what is currently taking place within the group.
- I express acceptance and support when other members disclose their ideas, feelings, and reactions to what is currently taking place in the group.
- I try to make all members feel valued and appreciated.
- I try to include all members in group activities.
- I am influenced by group members during instruction with respect to their specific needs and opinions.
- I take risks in expressing new ideas and my current feelings.
- I express liking, affection and concern for all group members.
- I encourage group norms that support individuality and personal expression.

A high response to most or all of these criteria would distinguish a teacher who is likely to achieve a significant degree of group cohesiveness.

The establishment of group norms is vital to the motivational health of any group. Norms are shared beliefs among the group about appropriate behavior. They are formulated either formally via group discussion or by teacher edict, or informally via trial and error. Where possible, norms should be created through group discussion and mutual consent. As already noted, participative goal-setting is a powerful motivator. With younger students, discuss the norms, vote on them and write them on a poster board kept in a highly visible place.

For the first few weeks of group lessons, review the norms at the beginning of each class. Discipline is made much more effective when the rules are clearly stated and understood by all. Properly administered discipline, by the way, does not imply scolding or getting upset. Rather, it is best administered by quietly, non-judgmentally, even humorously reminding students of the rules they created.

Group music teachers can also enhance the learning process by creating a stimulating, supportive pedagogical environment. Numerous researchers have shed light on this subject by describing the following hallmarks of appropriate strategies.

Learning must be based on humanistic principles. Teachers must be supportive, kind and empathic toward every member of the group. Further, the teacher must believe in the innate potential of each person in the group, for students will often live up, or down, to the teacher's expectations for them. In 1960 Douglas McGregor described two basic leadership/pedagogical approaches. He said that Theory X teachers believe that the average person is basically lazy and irresponsible and must be controlled, punished and forced to work. Such assumptions result in an autocratic pedagogical style. Theory Y, which McGregor felt was more appropriate based on the research, holds that: people are naturally industrious; self-control can effectively replace punishment and coercion in directing effort; true motivation results from the pursuits of such basic needs as esteem, achievement and self-actualization; people seek responsibility; and most people are imaginative and creative under the proper circumstances. Students will intuitively sense whether or not you believe in them and are genuinely interested in their progress, making a Theory Y approach essential.

Open and free communication must be encouraged. All students should feel free to ask and answer questions. In a recent study of some leading group piano teachers in the United States, Connie Arrau Sturm found that "overall, students responded to teacher questions approximately fifty times per class session (about once every minute). Student responses were generally quite short, usually lasting five seconds or less."

Ask many questions and involve everyone. You will be teaching people to think for themselves and to become problem-solvers. This is probably not the way more of us were taught, and since we all tend to teach the way our teachers did, it will be hard to break the old pedagogical mold and embark on the path to discovery learning. The trip, however, is well worth taking. Also, through uninhibited conversation and exchange of ideas, students teach each other, and such learning is often the most revealing and enduring. A danger to watch for is the phenomenon known as "groupthink," or control of the group by one or two strong personalities who dominate the others, thereby making the more submissive students in the group feel less free to speak and to express their views. Clear warning symptoms of groupthink are repeated unanimity within the group on highly subjective issues and domination of discussions by one or two students. To stop groupthink in its tracks, call on the quiet students more frequently and praise them often. If necessary, talk with the domineering students, but be careful not to stifle their creativity.

Lessons must be interesting. Watch your students' eyes and body language. When they start to show signs of boredom, switch activities quickly. Create a set of "attention getters" and keep it handy to use at such moments. "Attention getters" should be short, fun and beneficial. The following are the sort of things you can do to put the pep back in a group piano class:

- find notes on the keyboard with eyes closed
- chant scale/arpeggio fingerings in rhythms
- echo play five-finger patterns
- echo clap, including polyrhythms
- creatively play scales: such as canons, simultaneous keys, different rhythms
- create instant error detection exercises by turning to unplayed repertory
- play folk tunes by ear
- have spelling bees with chords, intervals and so on.

Classes must be planned yet flexible. Group teaching requires careful planning. Specific goals must be set and met for each class. However, teachers must also be willing to "go with the flow." If something interesting but unanticipated arises, build part or all of the class around it. For instance if a student says, "I wrote a piece this week" you should stop everything to hear it. Then ask other students to discuss what they heard in the piece. Next ask the student composer to tell her colleagues how to compose. You might add a few helpful hints about composition. Finally, give everyone a composition assignment.

A sense of belongingness must be established. In 1943 Abraham Maslow articulated his famous hierarchy of needs. He felt strongly that unconscious needs are fundamental in motivation theory. He also believed that

certain needs are more pressing than others, thus leading to the establishment of a hierarchy of needs. Maslow argued that each level of needs must be satisfied before the next level can command attention. As each rung of the hierarchical ladder is scaled, the next higher plateau of needs looms as the brass ring of motivation, the Theory being that everyone shares common basic needs that yearn for fulfillment, and until each lower need is satisfied, individuals are unable to aspire to the higher-order needs. From a pedagogical standpoint, a teacher can facilitate the movement up the hierarchy by smoothing the way and focusing behavior. The levels of needs, beginning with the most basic, as defined from the standpoint of the music student, are as follows:

- Physiological needs: such as adequate and accessible practice facilities; a satisfactory and properly tuned instrument; money for lessons and music; sufficient time for practice.
- Safety needs: such as freedom from negative parental or peer pressure; a reduction of performance anxiety; elimination of teacher hostility.
- Belongingness needs: a sense of group or group support and interaction
- Esteem needs: recognition as a worthwhile person through achievement and status via success in class or in public
- Self-actualization needs: the internal drive to make music

The last level, self-actualization, is self-perpetuating and should be the ultimate goal of every student. Interesting to note, though, is that this top level cannot be reached until all the earlier levels have been fulfilled, and right in the middle of the hierarchy sits the need to belong. This roadblock has to be removed if true, enduring motivation is to be achieved. Students want to feel that they are part of something larger than themselves. Solo practice can be a very lonely experience, and the sense of ostracism from peers who are involved in other types of play or school activities can be very discouraging. Reassurance comes from knowing that others are experiencing the same joys and frustrations and breakthroughs that you are. Group lessons can be the conduit for that balm.

Competition within the group should be limited. Group members must support one another and take pride in colleagues' successes. When you play games in class that involve two teams, change the composition of the teams frequently so that subgroup allegiances that might be detrimental to the whole do not form.

Give students the right to be wrong. One of the most efficient ways to learn is through trial-and-error. Encourage creativity with a great deal of positive feedback.

Deal with group conflicts quickly. Talk with quarreling students, reason with them, even separate them if necessary. Do not allow disruptive students to spoil the learning environment, and do not ignore interpersonal tensions.

Use electronic keyboard equipment. Students of all ages enjoy the latest technology. It can be fun and educational when used properly. The one important caveat is that this technology must be used in such a way as to enhance accomplishment as a group rather than as individuals who happen to share a room. Never let computers become surrogate teachers that separate and isolate.

Motivation That Lasts

Motivation is the sine qua non of any educational activity that endures for more than a brief time. Anyone can be motivated for a short burst, but interest too often wanes within a year or two. One has only to look at the high attrition rate among music students to realize that most of us in this noble profession could use a few pointers on motivation.

Motivation, unlike its arch-rival activation, means getting students to love to do what you want them to do. You have to get them to want to study and to practice. Sadly, David McClelland has found that only about 10 percent of the population is naturally motivated (he calls such folks high achievers). McGregor, on the other hand, has postulated that everyone has the innate ability to want to achieve, but teachers must treat students with respect and expectation if that motivational potential is to blossom and flourish.

Motivation is not an easy task, but it is a possible one. As teachers, we need to be psychologists to figure out what will work best for each student. We have to be all things to all students, and we have to be full of energy, ideas, enthusiasm, flexibility and a genuine joy for teaching. If we love what we do, then maybe, just maybe, so will our students.

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