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Teaching Philosophy by Jonathan Saraga

One of my primary philosophies in teaching is the same as one of the most important ideals I maintain in my everyday life- Love Thyself and Thou will Love All. It may sound like a paradox at first, but in fact, if one does not love oneself, it is not possible to truly love others. Often enough even the wisest of us neglect to affirm positive and praiseworthy qualities about our person and our work, and instead focus on imperfections, and pursue a path of corrective development based on failure. This behavior can lead one down an endless road of constant dissatisfaction, and a constant state of doubt. Fortunately, through life experience, self-realization, and focused practice, one can learn to divert this habit, and exchange it for an outlook of acceptance and love. However, individuals throughout their developmental years, need role models and parental figures to encourage and help to foster this outlook within them.

It has been proven that children learn more and develop into happier and more naturally-fulfilled beings when they are complemented on their achievements and efforts, and not scolded for making mistakes and for poor performance. A person, especially one in early developmental stages of psyche, needs positive reinforcement even if it is only in the form of self-affirmation.(Actually, self-affirmation is *the* most important form of positive reinforcement; I will cover that shortly). So, even before delving into to subject matter, it is imperative to address the student at a personal level, even subtlety. Of course, some students are shyer and more introverted than others, so I don't recommend diving into personal matters immediately, but instead do your best to make the student *feel comfortable* in your presence. This is truly the most important thing you can administer in the beginning stages of tutelage.

As lessons progress and the relationship blossoms, it may be useful to ask some more direct questions that will allude you to an understanding of their personal state of awareness. You might ask about their life outlook, self-perception, and qualities of upbringing. All of these inquiries can be related to course material, and should be gradually introduced, when the teacher senses it may appropriate to address. Of course, such inquiries are related to deeper levels of psychological development, and can, if approached incorrectly, the student may become uncomfortable, if they are made to feel subjected or if they in fact have experienced improper parenting. It is the teachers duty to investigate these matters in a way that creates trust within the student for the teacher; which not only will continue to strengthen the students belief in themselves, but will enable to continue to open them to their own potential.

After all, a student is a human being, not an information retention machine. They, like everyone, retain and can apply information in a more readily-available way, when teaching occurs in a way that will reach *them* best. That is up to the teacher to determine, as not all students receive, process, and internalize information at the same rate, or in the same manner. Therefore, by exhibiting leadership qualities (see "Tao of Leadership" by

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John Heider), as well as being constantly communicative in a truthful and direct way, it is possible to maintain an orderly classroom environment, as well as engage and reach all students.

It is possible to reach all students regardless of prior circumstance, however it can be a sensitive process, depending on the precise nature of student's background. For a detailed approach to teaching students with special needs, see *Teaching Special Needs Students by Jonathan Saraga*.

By implementing the idea within my students that they *will* be smarter, stronger, and better, at things they already do in life, (things they enjoy: sports, arts and crafts, games, etc.), if they concentrate focus, and apply themselves, at least for the duration of the lesson, their perspective on the subject matter may change from one of dis-interest, and inapplicability to one of repeatability and perhaps even enjoyment. They will be more inclined to exhibit positive behavior in the classroom, one that will add joy, peace, and other strengthening qualities to their own lives, as well as impact the lives of all with whom they interact with. In addition, when this philosophy of treating a subject matter, a person, and one's self with this approach of universal importance and equality, it can be applied to inter-student interactions, student-teacher relationships, or even a student's interpretation of a musical instrument, and it can have far reaching and beneficial effects across the board.

Another goal of mine is to distinguish myself as someone who strives to enhance a student's experience in the classroom, and not someone who dictates how they should develop, or perceive the material; however there are a few core values in my approach to lessons, that I modify based on the lesson, age group and/or any other specific criteria.

- 1) Safety first! Presenting and explaining the instrument, and musical concepts, using interactive models; discussing what is "OK" and what isn't, in terms of sharing and usage of the instruments.
- 2) Presenting my own knowledge, and skills of the material, this includes sharing through discussions, displaying pictures, playing audio and video examples, as well as playing the instruments for the student, to demonstrate my own expertise, and my own passion for music.
- 3) Having fun! I am a fan of an extremely creative class, filled with interaction and teamwork, and when class is over, I like to include time for discussion, and to hear the spontaneous thoughts of my students.
- 4) Individualizing the lesson- Each student is different and comes to class with a unique spectrum of life experience, anticipation, and characteristics; therefore tailoring, as best as possible, each lesson to the distinctive qualities of the individuals, will not only make each student feel good, but also empower them as well.

It is my desire and duty as an educator, to help my students meet their full potential, by providing an environment that is safe, that supports risk-taking, and invites a

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sharing of ideas. With this constructive classroom environment in place, and for students to achieve their goals, they need the opportunity to discover for themselves and practice their skills in authentic situations. By providing students access to hands-on activities and allowing adequate time and space to use materials that reinforce the lessons, I am able to create opportunities for individual discovery to enhance their acquisition of knowledge. In addition, by allowing students' natural curiosity to direct his or her learning, and by promoting respect for all things and all people, I help to create an environment that will promote advancement, and refinement.

I develop my curriculum around student interests, which fosters motivation and stimulates the passion to learn. One way to steer learning in a direction relevant to student interest, is to invite student dialogue about the lessons and units of study. Given the opportunity for input, students generate their own ideas and add to the pre-existing ones that have fostered my own imagination, and impact how I develop my lessons. When students share ownership in the curriculum, they feel a strong sense of purpose, are motivated to work hard, to set and accomplish their own goals, and to perform well.

Helping students to develop a deep love and respect for themselves, others, and their environment, can occur with a consistent and steady approach to discipline, and an open sharing of ideas. When a teacher offers each student the opportunity for his or her voice to be heard, the environment evolves to a point where students feel free, willing, and able to express themselves. The comfort level of students in such an environment, will directly affect the degree to which they grow in the subject matter at hand. Initially, by setting fair and consistent rules, and allowing for a sharing of ideas, a necessary balance between creativity and instruction is created. As a result, students can then learn respect for themselves, for others, and for their environment, in a non-forced, natural way.

My teaching philosophy provides an opportunity for growth on both ends of the spectrum. As an educator, one of my hopes is to instill a love of learning in my students, as I share my own passion for learning with them. It is important for students to not only receive a solid education, but to work with someone who is aware of and sensitive to their individual needs. It is also important for students to experience studying with a teacher who is aware of the areas that need strengthening and encourage them toward improvement. Overall, I chose to foster growth in my students through leading by example, promoting self-expression, individuality, creativity, and mutual respect.