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FROM HERSCHER TO HARLEM

A SUBJECTIVE ACCOUNT

Altering traditional perspectives and expectations can help promote success in the urban music classroom.

BY RANDALL EVERETT ALLSUP

In a recent survey, researchers asked successful urban music teachers, "Do you feel that your undergraduate/graduate education courses prepared you to teach in the urban setting?" The majority of respondents "felt woefully unprepared." Most shared the criticism that "preservice education prepared them for teaching the 'ideal' student and left them unprepared for the reality of urban schools, where most of the students do not conform to the ideal."¹

How does the urban music teacher sustain a program in the face of these problems? What teaching strategies work and under what conditions? During six years of teaching music in New York City's poorest neighborhood, I have gone from the traditional "master/apprentice" philosophy of music education to one focused on and designed around an understanding of my students' lives. This has not been an easy or evident process.

I grew up in the Herscher School District among the countless acres of Illinois cornfields. As a student, my perspective on music education included traditional marching bands, jazz bands, wind ensembles, and solo

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and ensemble contests in a small farming community of 700. With a high school population equivalent to the size of the community, it is not surprising that the community took a great deal of interest in the schools and spent a good amount of money on them. As a student, athlete, or band member, young people were always proud to represent the Herscher Tigers, even though being in the

Herscher band could mean twenty hours a week in practice and rehearsals.

In 1990, I arrived in New York and accepted a job teaching instrumental music in an all-boys high school in the South Bronx. I discovered firsthand that discipline is the primary concern for the majority of city teachers. In my first year in the South Bronx, I couldn't do a lot of teaching; most of the class time was spent trying to control my students. As a result, the pace of learning was very slow. We would often have to stop for "heart-to-hearts" on the issues of respect and valuing class work. While these talks prevented many problems, I still had to deal with graffiti-painted cymbals and fist-fights in the band room.

Relearning/Rethinking

As a result, I found out rapidly that it was not possible to teach music in New York City the same way it was taught in Herscher, Illinois. In my early teaching experiences in New York, I failed most often when I assumed that my own personal educational experience could dictate the making of music within my classroom. Everything about teaching in New York was different. Compared to Herscher students, my students looked, dressed, and spoke differently. School organizations, from debate teams to track teams, were underattended. The



Photo courtesy of author

Students can learn to play new instruments using melodies they already know.

students I have taught live lives free of commitment. Most are used to following their own impulses. With regard to music, they have radically different likes and dislikes. Because of that first experience, I can empathize with the new urban teacher. We are often prevented from doing what we were trained to do because of discipline problems in the classroom. Learning often becomes secondary.

I am currently creating an after-school performing arts program for Our Children's Foundation in Harlem. A community-based educational and cultural enrichment organization for students ages 7 to 20, the foundation is open after school, weekends, and all summer in order to provide a nonviolent and drug-free alternative to the streets.

The experience I've gained has taught me that to keep a student involved in music, every teaching consideration must be student-focused. Teaching strategies must be designed not only around the learner's interest, but must also take into account the student's culture and values, along with the student's relationship to learning and self-discipline. It is difficult to get the students to practice or even attend a minimum of rehearsals, say two hours a week. Therefore, for

each student I make a diagnosis. What is motivating this student to learn a musical instrument? Is it to play what he hears on the radio? Is it so she can have fun? Is it to be with a group? (Most have no idea what they're getting into.) I realized that I must capture my students' feelings; their likes and dislikes must be central to each strategy.

So I began to experiment, improvise, and research. What follows are suggestions for the urban teacher based on informal research from daily experience over the past six years teaching in an environment that is difficult and rewarding for students and teachers alike.

What Works

■ *Expect commitment.* Many students have not had positive experiences with school. In order for them to care about music, becoming involved with it must be a decision they freely elect to make. Students should be responsible for one thing: commitment—in effect, showing up regularly. If a student wants to take the clarinet, do not require an audition. Have only one requirement: attendance at weekly lessons. Allow the student to quit, if necessary, or to choose another musical activity at any time.

■ *Use nontraditional class groupings.* Group students by ability and personality type, not by instrument. Allow students to learn at their own pace. Some will be more relaxed, even casual, in their approach to music, and others will be more serious. If you know certain students can't get along with each other, why set them up for failure by placing them in the same group? If they make it past the first year, special arrangements will no longer be necessary.

■ *Start with what they know.* Incorporating popular idioms within a lesson is a very successful technique. It can maintain interest during the most difficult period of learning an instrument—the first year. For students, rap is the first room they enter in the house of music. It is a room they may stay in or return to visit later. From rap, invite them to try the blues, then jazz or classical music. Once they are intrigued, they may have little resistance to moving beyond and trying another room. Students and teacher will learn to respect the unfamiliar while creating commonalities.

■ *Teach through rap.* Tailor every lesson to the individual player or small group. Look for openings. For example, for those students who like rap music, focus learning around rap. Teaching "hip-hop" beginner instrumental methods is not the most comfortable approach for many teachers, but for students whose only musical experience is listening to rap, it is the only logical place to start.

■ *Use keyboards.* Structure lessons around a multifaceted keyboard.² This instrument is an invaluable tool for integrating what students hear on the radio with any musical element or fundamental the teacher wishes to focus on. Take, for example, a lesson that concentrates on tonguing. Choose a beat and a matching chord progression. For a trombone lesson, program the repeating progression in F and ask the trombone player to stick to first and third position. The lesson will take off from there. Insist on proper breathing and tonguing. The student will take ownership of the process by reproducing the popular rhythms and melodies of the day.

Teach students the basics of count-

ing and playing whole notes and half notes by choosing a popular beat and accompanying chord progressions.³ Learning these simple fundamentals with a back beat parallels the student's conception of what music is and could be. Any beginner melody sounds much better when accompanied, for example, by a salsa beat. It is more fun to play, and the electronic beat provides the perfect metronome. The simple chord changes underneath help with intonation.



Players get to perform in front of their friends, many of whom have never seen a clarinet or trombone before.



The electronic keyboard is also a successful tool for helping young instrumentalists establish a repertoire of songs. Try takeoffs on such tunes as "Hot Cross Buns (with Honey and Jam)," "Mary Had a Little Jam Session," and "Jinga Bellz." Sometimes you can introduce a song by rote, such as Coltrane's "Blue Train" or the theme from *The Simpsons*.

Other songs can be composed by the students. For example, the Foundation Flute Club created a piece called "Tropical Rainforest." Helping students create rap is much easier than it sounds, even if you are an urban music teacher who considers yourself an inexperienced rap artist. Let your

students start at the keyboard. (Make sure they are composing in a key that is good for the instrument they usually play.) Be there to assist and encourage, especially when they get stuck. Keep an open mind and let them have final approval. You will definitely improve the more you do it, and so will they.

■ *Record and play back.* It is not difficult to extend the exercise described above. After playing back a recorded improvisation, start with general questions, like "What did you hear? Did it work?" Next, find material from the improvisation and segue to new concepts. For example, ask your players, "Can you repeat an idea exactly the same twice?" "Can you copy something the person next to you played?" "Can we make a song out of this?" "Would you play differently if we chose another beat?" Record the lesson and play it back. Ask technical questions. "What were you doing with your lips when the sound was good?" If the sound wasn't right, ask, "What happened?" Do not focus solely on technique. Try asking, "What did you like about your solo?" "What would you do differently a second time?" "Can we make a song out of this?" "Where do we go from here?"

■ *Defer notation.* Do not teach music reading to beginning instrumentalists right away. Teaching the fundamentals of notation outside the context of what students know as music can be an exercise in irrelevance. Most of the students who experience frustration early in the learning process will not return to class. It is important that no one is *required* to read music. However, students who have demonstrated a proficiency on their instrument and want to be in a band will discover that they need to learn to read music in order to make progress.

Counting rhythms doesn't have to be complicated. Try using car names: Say "Jeep" for a quarter note, "Lexus" for two eighth notes, "Cadillac" for two sixteenth notes and an eighth note, "Volkswagen" for an eighth note and two sixteenth notes, and "Maserati" for four sixteenth notes. Extend the exercise by collectively creating your own version. This is a big help to students for remembering difficult rhythms.⁴

■ *Perform regularly.* Because their success is tied to peer approval, the more students perform, the better they feel about themselves. Encourage students to be visible with their instruments. Celebrate birthday parties monthly, which are perfect opportunities for small-group or solo performances. Players get to perform in front of their friends, many of whom have never seen a clarinet or trombone before. The experience then becomes educational for everyone. In the future, larger concerts may become necessary as young musicians and your band become more sophisticated and polished.



Since I have lost several potentially great musicians to the streets, I am continually looking all around for answers.



■ *Stay current.* It is important to keep up with the latest theories, trends, and community values. On a personal note, since I have lost several potentially great musicians to the streets, I am continually looking all around for answers to my questions on how to reduce or prevent recurrences. Ironically, broad-based books and articles on social policy can often be as helpful to me as periodicals strictly devoted to music education. I recently saw the Spike Lee film, *Clockers*. I have read books by Maxine Greene,



File photo

By encouraging every effort early on, the teacher can help students build toward later success.

Bell Hooks, and Jonathan Kozol.⁵ On the radio, I listen to Hot 97.⁶ And above all, I try to listen to the kids I teach. We all need to know what is important to them in order to fight against the violence and apathy that may debilitate their potential. “What is going on in their world? How can I help?” These are vital questions, and answers may change daily or even hourly.

■ *Interact with other teachers.* Does your organization or school work together and think like a family? I have observed that successful urban schools are decompartmentalized. Try to break out of the traditional music teacher role. Be a community activist, help with homework, or get a group of teachers and student leaders to organize a voter registration drive. Be seen as someone who cares about your organization and its community and get to know kids outside the music program. “Respect” is the word in the city, and you will get it if you are seen as caring for everyone.

■ *Establish links within the community.* For example, organize a concert around a charity, such as a food drive for the homeless. Ask as many different departments as possible to contribute by sharing a common theme,

such as “giving thanks.” I helped to establish this type of event while teaching in the Bronx. Afterward, it became the springboard for interdisciplinary projects. Your students will often come up with great ideas, but they must also see and hear what others are doing.

Seeking Success

Failure is easy to find in the city. It is everywhere, inside and outside the classroom. In order to keep going, it is essential to look for success daily in small places. I am happy when a student is curious and asks questions. Success is watching my players believe in themselves or seeing them identify themselves as trumpet or flute players. We are lucky that in music we can see the best sides of our students. I’m thinking of a sax player I’ll call Troy. Troy is a thirteen-year-old who doesn’t allow many adults to get close to him. He has had a lot of trouble in and out of school, but always shows up for his saxophone lessons. By focusing on his musical talent, we have made his street reputation irrelevant. Troy loves to improvise, and I have found him to be a sensitive and intuitive musician. Maybe he doesn’t approach the sax with the same rigor as the students

back in Herscher, but he is engaged and thinking critically, and therefore an “ideal” student.

Studying how children develop, whether through course work or observation, is invaluable. But in the classroom, success hinges on one’s ability to be empathetic, even in the midst of chaos. As valuable as objective research may be in certain settings, it would be a mistake for urban educators to view their students too clinically. Such a perspective reinforces the us/them paradigms already in place within the school community. As with Troy, there are plenty of intelligent and talented students whose gifts are hidden. Whether we are from Herscher or Harlem, we should all grow up with the chance to create a song, play the flute, or sing in a choir.

Notes

1. Richard K. Fiese and Nicholas J. DeCarbo, “Urban Music Education: The Teachers’ Perspective,” *Music Educators Journal* 81 (May 1995): 27–31.

2. A typical \$300 keyboard can contain hundreds of popular beats from techno to salsa, just as many synthesized sounds, and gives chord progressions that can be programmed in any key. I use the Casio CTK-650.

3. There are several good beginner method books: *Band Plus*, by J. Swearingen and B. Buehlman, Heritage Music Press (501 E. Third Street, Dayton, OH 45401); *Yamaha Band Student* by S. Feldstein/J. O’Reilly, Alfred Music Publishing (16380 Roscoe Blvd., Van Nuys, CA 91406); and *Standard of Excellence* by B. Pearson, Neil A. Kjos Music (PO Box 178270, San Diego, CA 92117).

4. This strategy was created by Dr. Nathalie Robinson, arts administrator, Creative Arts Library, Teachers College, New York City.

5. Maxine Greene, *Releasing the Imagination* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1995); Bell Hooks, *Teaching to Transgress* (New York: Routledge, 1994); and Jonathan Kozol, *Savage Inequalities* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1991).

6. A New York hip-hop radio station. ■