

Building a Lasting Lineage through Mentorship

By David Schumacher, Pentucket Regional Schools

More than two decades after graduation, I still try to grab a drink with my middle and high school jazz band director, Dick Rabideau, when I'm back home in Plattsburgh, New York. I was privileged to have many great music teachers, but Dick was the first to expose me to the music that would shape the rest of my life. There was something unique not only about how we played jazz but how we learned it. As my own students return to share their experiences, sit in on rehearsals, or ask for guidance, I become increasingly aware that it's all about the relationships. More than the first place finishes and outstanding musicianship awards, the gold medals, or the spots in District and All-State ensembles my students earn, it is going to be the student-to-teacher and peer-to-peer relationships that truly hold lasting meaning and significance. They will sustain my own sanity and longevity in this field and provide the paramount formative influence on my students. At Pentucket, these relationships have been key to perpetuating a cycle of mentorship, a method of learning long admired in the jazz tradition but sometimes overlooked in the hyper-academic settings into which jazz education has been assimilated.

Under the premise of strong mentorship, I asked a mix of former students to articulate their thoughts on what distinguished our program, how it prepared them for "real" life, and what continues to bring them back for concerts, rehearsals, and advice. I was struck and humbled by the consistency of their impressions. Many of their thoughts served as confirmation of the approaches I trusted to be effective and had learned as a student myself.

Speaking the Truth

"Y'all sound like s%\$. You need to practice!" Those were the first words I and my fellow classmates at Michigan State University heard from jazz master Branford Marsalis.

You can imagine our indignation, but as isolated university students we simply had no perspective. Turns out, he didn't really mean it. He thought we were on the right track—though he didn't confess that to us until a few years later—but the tone was set. There would be no room for attitude, pride, or entitlement under his direction. Feedback would be instant, direct, and brutally honest. Praise would be earned and deserved. It's these principles that changed the way I learned as a student and that continue to resonate in my teaching philosophy today.

While it's imperative not to break a student's spirit, learning is optimized

when your ensembles have an accurate sense of reality and perspective. Students aren't necessarily used to hearing the truth, which can often be diluted within our politically correct society, but their potential for growth will improve dramatically once an open and honest dialogue has been established.



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The main reason I bring my students to events like the Berklee High School Jazz Fest is so that they can hear what other students their age have accomplished. It's the same reason I play them the recording of an eighteen-year-old Lee Morgan soloing on Dizzy Gillespie at Newport. The exposure leaves them inspired and hungry to return to the woodshed. I have each student write a reflection detailing the perspective they gain from such experiences and then update their personal goals accordingly.

I believe in training students to not only openly accept constructive criticism but to actively seek it out. They come to crave and depend upon it. When praise is given, it needs to be meaningful, not gratuitous. This will instill a direct and honest correlation between effort and achievement.

Creating Independent Learners

Student ownership of the learning process is key. Bard College pianist Cooper Slack (PRSD, class of 2015) admits, "I wasn't provided with the option to coast through the program and stay on the periphery of the

stage as I probably would have liked at the time . . . I would have to invest myself on a level that took more than attendance alone. This was the first time in my academic life that I felt like I was being pushed by the intrinsic value of a subject.”

A solid foundation in jazz theory, style, history, and ear training is non-negotiable. However, it’s imperative that we preserve the traditional ways of learning jazz through listening, emulation, and experiences. Teachers need to dissolve the notion that we are dispensers of information and focus on our position as facilitators of independent learning.

I rely heavily on a Socratic approach in my teaching. If students know they can get an answer from me, that’s where they will turn. Though that is quick and easy, it’s lazy. Mendonca articulates this point well: “What made Schumacher and his program so effective was that he would lead us to water, but it was up to us to do the work and drink up the material. That often used to drive me crazy because I just wanted to know the answer to a question right away, and he would only give me clues in the right direction. The older I get I realize how beneficial that is, not only as a student of the music but a student of life. That is where the real learning takes place.”

Students should be provided opportunities to exercise their independence as an integral part of their experience in the program. For instance, my Jazz Combo students are largely responsible for organizing their own gigs, building set lists, and arranging our songs. I play no active role in their performances beyond a basic introduction. They are expected to announce tunes, discuss historical context,



(L to R: Bobby Spellman, Adam Mendonca, Brett Boland, David Schumacher, Jeremy Wegrzyn, Dicky Gilmore, Brendan Noury)

and otherwise engage the audience. In the classroom, they transcribe chord progressions, melodies, and grooves for our tunes. No sheet music is allowed on the bandstand. New England Conservatory grad and NYC-based trumpeter/composer Bobby Spellman (‘06) echoes, “There are no shortcuts to artistic achievement.”

A Sense of Community

Among my most valued experiences in college was the sense of community we felt as students of jazz. Spontaneous jam sessions, one-upping each other with amazing moments in our favorite recordings, and passionate debates over where the music should go next cemented lifelong friendships. One of my earliest goals in teaching was to establish a similar culture of collective curiosity and exploration among my students, and the students who responded to me for this article were unanimous in naming community and relationships

paramount to not only the success of the program but the nourishment they gained from it.

Aspiring journalist Ryan McNamara (‘10) proclaims, “The program created such a strong community that my fellow musicians became my best friends regardless of age, defying typical high school allegiance to one’s grade-mates. A trumpet player four years older and a guitar player three years younger were among my best friends.” Several students echoed that sentiment, including Bard College saxophonist Alden Slack (‘14), who remarked, “Schumacher is the only instructor I’ve had whose homework assignment might be ‘Hang out with your bandmates.’ The result: more productive and welcoming rehearsals and continued group-learning outside of school. He has faith in camaraderie.”

Michigan State University bassist Duncan Tarr ('12) agrees, "Schumacher had a special gift for . . . building relationships within the jazz program that made it feel more like a family than an extracurricular. . . Relationships based upon mutual respect and mentorship . . ." Once that respect is established, your students will find a sense of ownership over their studies. Alden Slack declares, "Schumacher's mentorship proves that it's better to be loved than to be feared. The only fear I ever felt around (him) during a lesson or a rehearsal was that he would know when I hadn't practiced enough—not because I'd be scolded but just because he'd know. I think that's the only incentive you need from a teacher you really admire."

Building that respect includes maintaining your own professional presence. Whether you perform, compose, conduct, or publish, it's vital that your students see evidence that you're living the music, not just teaching it. Sharing those experiences cements your authority on the subject and serves to draw in your students. Spellman says, "Schumacher's work as a composer is of the highest caliber, and his multifaceted life as a composer, educator, and civilized family man has always been an inspiration."

Stonehill College English major and pianist Joe D'Amore ('12) adds, "The democratic nature of the program was such that my bandmates were sometimes as helpful teachers as Mr. Schumacher himself. Instead of just one mentor, I had half a dozen, and I myself was a mentor to some of them. Sharing and communion was absolutely central to our experience."

This all leads to more inspired performance. Drummer Eddie Gaudet ('13) says without this collective approach "I would have never learned a crucial part of the language of music: communication. I learned, under his direction, how to make magic happen during a performance, simply by being aware of my fellow players and their nuances."

I practice meditation and mindfulness with my students before our performances to facilitate these moments of oneness with the music. Using jazz as a vehicle to teach such life skills and philosophies is part of a holistic approach to education. My students know those moments are fleeting, but those who experience them feel like they're part of a special club. And they now strive to find such connections in other aspects of their lives.

Giving Back

"The fundamental value in Schumacher's approach to education lies in the fact that he treats every young musician not only as a student of the jazz tradition but as an active participant in that tradition." Spellman raises this important distinction on behalf of the alumni who understand that they are now responsible to help move this music forward. He continues, "Now that I find myself living the life of a professional musician, I feel it is my duty to return from time to time to help inspire the most experienced students." But this concept of mentorship isn't just to benefit the best players in the program or to be shouldered by those who became professional musicians. Mentorship needs to be promoted throughout the process at every level.

D'Amore says, "Giving back wisdom and encouragement is not something I consciously think about but rather something that flows organically from the give-and-take nature of the program." Tarr adds, "Not only did Schumacher teach me how to play and how to hang, but he also taught me how to teach. It is a Pentucket jazz alumni tradition to return to sit in on rehearsals . . . to help the next generation of high school jazz musicians."

And so the cycle is complete. I am a better teacher because of these students and what they bring back from their experiences, both in and out of music. It could be a new approach to a concept I hadn't considered or inspiration to push through a difficult year. We are all colleagues now, learning from each other. It is this lasting lineage that will continue to bring me pride and satisfaction long after these alumni are grabbing drinks with their own former students. •

David Schumacher is an active composer and Director of Jazz for the Pentucket Regional School District. His music has been commissioned and performed by artists, bands, and schools across the country, including at the Kennedy Center, Jordan Hall, and NASA National Convention. Visit www.DavidSchumacher.com to learn more.