

Marlene Rosenberg- Teaching Philosophy

Story #1:

As an example of my ensemble teaching, I had an experience at John Clayton's Centrum summer jazz camp/workshop that illustrates my approach. I had been asked to do a bass clinic and was expecting to have about 10 bass players and was all set with a plan. But 25 people showed up, including not only bass players but horn players and non-performing, avid fans of the music. I had to think fast on my feet because my plan was clearly not going to work. My challenge was to find something that was going to be helpful for the huge range of abilities from intermediate high school to advanced college level.

Additionally, I only had 12 copies of the transcribed bassist's lines, set up in 3 staff "choir" fashion, in bass clef, for all of these people in the room! Once I got over my OMG moment, I decided to group bassists and horn players together, and rotate the various groups. I said, to the participants, "One of the things I've been doing for years and so have you, to some extent, has been improvising. Time to use our improvisational skills in a different way! Are you all up to the challenge?" There was an excited and conciliatory vibe in the room as we positioned ourselves to play my transcribed choruses of 3 bassists; Ron Carter, Paul Chambers and Ray Brown on *Some Day My Prince Will Come*, and *Autumn Leaves*.

In order to keep everyone involved, I asked everyone else not playing to listen and give comments afterwards and think about what was distinctive, different and/or similar about what they heard and saw in the playing of each of the three transcribed versions? We also talked about how students would have played their bass lines in comparison to the masters, and how they might play now, given this experience. It was an animated discussion.

We also discussed how the relationship of the melody to bass lines represents a musical and melodic counterpoint for all songs. I had put them on the spot by having one of the musicians play the melody and one play the bass line. I could tell this was awkward for them by their expressions and body language, but it woke up their curiosity and made the ensuing discussion so worth the initial discomfort. I asked them if they thought the melody was, or was not, important to the creation of these bass lines and if so, how and why? I had the impression most had not analyzed music within a group in this way but because they were curious and had already played for each other, it led to a lively discussion and new insights. In my approach to teaching I tend to put people on the spot, and although sometimes they're self-conscious, I find the discussion afterwards to be very worth this leap.

For me the goal is always to have everyone in the room walk away with something new. Since this experience I regularly experiment with asking students to work in small non-traditional groups, and to clarify and describe what they hear and the distinctions between lines. The sense of group support and learning has been the biggest win for them and for me.

Story #2

I had a fairly new student we can call Neal, and we were working on his hand position. He \came into the studio each week with a collapsed left hand position (what I call “choke the chicken” grip) on the bass neck.

It was a significant technical problem we needed to solve. To help him, I asked Neal to use a balled-up piece of paper between the bass neck and the palm of his hand so he could feel the difference between a closed vs. open position. We had gone over this for a month and he wasn't getting the idea.

And I was curious as to why he was not open to taking in my comments.

With some students they're clearly projecting on me and I must represent either their mom or another unwelcome authority figure that they don't want to deal with. For other students, they just don't want to take suggestions from a woman of any age. With other students it's an ego issue and they're not ready to accept ideas from a new teacher. I can totally understand all of this and it's something that we have to work through.

And early in the semester with a new teacher, it may be unclear what the real roadblock is. So it wasn't until I insisted that Neal look in the mirror at his hand position that he finally had the “Aha” moment! Instead of his usual mildly annoyed stance, Neal smiled and said, “Oh, I see!”

The same thing happened with his aural transcriptions. There were often spots he either misheard or refused to concede were wrong. It wasn't until I had Neal play his transcription with the recording that he got it. I could see his eyes widen and a smile as he really heard the part with which he struggled.

Prior to this lesson, I was close to having a discussion with Neal regarding his Resistance. I was glad to see we were able to move forward and he has since become more able to make important changes to certain aspects of his playing. All the “isms” can potentially come into play when working with students. I've found that the most important thing I can do as a role model is to try first to see my students as individuals. And to help them really hear and see their own playing so we can build from there. It's about not jumping to conclusions.