

# Being Kind AND Holding Students to High Expectations

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## I. Competency and Compassion

Music educators in 2023 are called to be equal parts **competent** and **compassionate**. The more deeply we understand **human learning** and the varied **pedagogies** that are inherent to our discipline, the more **confident** we become as educators. We become more assured in our ability to “meet” any student “where they are” - in their understanding of music, themselves, and the world – and to move them toward where they deserve to be as a person educated through music. In that awareness - **that each of us as educators “is enough”** to do this work - is a “place” in which calm, stability, patience, center, wholeness, compassion, and kindness reside.

In *Compassionate Music Teaching* by Karin S. Hendricks, a compelling case for compassion in music education is made through case study, research, and first-hand experience. The **six qualities of compassion** that serve as the organizational structure of the text are: **trust, empathy, patience, inclusion, community, and authentic connection.**

“In a more egalitarian view of compassion in education, teacher and student have different roles to play in the learning process, but neither role is viewed as superior or inferior to the other.”

“What compassionate teaching isn’t:

- a weakness (i.e. “letting students walk all over you”).
- getting overly caught up in students’ lives.
- impossible in an education system run by governmental accountability and testing.”

## II. Thinking about Learning: Identifying and Sequencing Component Skills

Most all dimensions of mature musicianship which are commonly referred to with a singular label (i.e. tone quality, rhythmic independence, intonational independence, etc.) are actually comprised of a number of specific and individual component skills. For the educator in a performance-based music classroom, a large indicator of competency is the ability to identify and sequence learning experiences in those component skills.

For instance, an “intonationally independent musician” has skills in two essential areas (with component skill areas noted after):

- a. *Perception Skills* (i.e. ‘inner’ hearing, tonality, pitch discrimination, and ‘beatless’ sonorities)
- b. *Performance Skills* (i.e. tone quality and refined pitch manipulation)

In moving a student toward “intonational independence” meaningful experiences in which these component skills are developed, refined, and ultimately realized are required.

## III. Approaching and Setting High Expectations

Three dimensions of the performance-based music classroom to which “high standards” can be set are 1) culture & community; 2) music making & performing; and 3) artifacts of learning (i.e. submitted work, assignments, etc.). Consistently high standards in each of these three classroom dimensions aids student and ensemble success. The prompts (in bold) below are “pearls of wisdom” from the profession that serve to nurture reflection and aid clarification of expectations.

## **“Begin with the end in mind.”**

### Culture & Community

What do you want pre-rehearsal activity/energy in the room to be?

What do you want the rehearsal culture/climate to look/sound/feel like?

What language do you want students to use?

How quiet do you want it to be in the room during rehearsal?

How much independence do you wish the students to exercise during rehearsal?

### Music Making & Performing

What do you want the composition to sound like at the performance?

Score study

Do you have a process that facilitates an “image” with specificity/accuracy?

What is the “sound image” to which you are comparing your students?

Compositional “fit”

What are the skills students will need to perform the composition to your expectations?

Where is the status of their skills to that of the composition?

What are you going to do about the gap between the two?

How much time is needed to garner those skills out of context?

### Artifacts of Learning

What do you want the quality of responses to be for a given assignment?

What will you use to evaluate a submission (complete sentences, proper grammar, etc.)?

Does the rubric enable you – and the students – to consistently evaluate a response?

What quality and quantity of feedback are you going to provide?

How much time will it take to complete the assignment?

How relevant is the assignment to the daily student experience (i.e. is it “busy-work”)?

How will you handle a student who doesn’t submit?

How will you handle late submissions?

Will you ask students to redo their submission if necessary?

Is this a formative assignment or summative assignment?

## **“Know thy students.”**

### Culture & Community

Where are they currently in relation to your ideal cultural atmosphere?

How do they talk to one another?

How gentle are they with themselves? Others?

What do they look like when they are really “on-task?” “off-task?”

How long can they generally be focused before you need to mix-it-up?

When you do mix-it-up, what resources do you have to do so?

### Music Making & Performing

What are their skills as individual and ensemble musicians?

How attentive to detail are they (particularly beyond notes and rhythms)?

How consistent and mature is their quality of sound (i.e. tone)?

How independent are they rhythmically? intonationally? stylistically?

How critically (i.e. specifically) do they listen?

Generally, when performing do they play slightly better as an ensemble or slightly worse?

If the latter, what would help them in that regard?

### Artifacts of Learning

How accustomed are they to submitting/completing assignments?

When they submit assignments, how does the quality compare to your expectations?

What would help them in that regard?

How well do your students express themselves in writing? verbally? musically?

For those who struggle, what would help?  
Is the assignment/task important enough to warrant class-time to complete?

**“Celebrate effort and improvement.”**

Culture & Community

“Who has good news to share today?”

“Shawntay, I heard from Ms. Timmons that you had an incredible performance at yesterday’s hockey game!”

Music Making & Performing

Shuffle your feet as professional musicians anytime something goes well.

“Bass Clarinets – the passage you played at m. 74 was the best it has EVER sounded from a intonation perspective.”

Artifacts of Learning

“Henderson, the quality of this submission is so vastly improved grammatically. Thank you for applying yourself so well in that regard!”

IV. Confrontation

Confrontation has gotten a bad rap. Confronting a behavior, a problem, or a situation, is not a bad thing ... particularly if the issue is negatively impacting the quality of a relationship. At the heart of confronting any situation is the facilitation of understanding. In better understanding circumstances, conditions, decisions, choices, etc. is the potential for healing, forgiveness, and growth, and enriched relationship with others.

V. Other Thoughts

In considering all of this, it is important to recall that we have a great deal of freedom in what we prioritize in our teaching (perhaps too much freedom?). How we use our time, the repertoire we select, what dimensions of the repertoire we decide to explore, the number of performances we have, how “good” is “good enough,” ... each of these dimensions of our classrooms are largely in our control. What is not in our control are the human beings we are called to serve through our teaching. It is our responsibility - and privilege - to meet them where they are and care for them while in our care.

“It is not the development of technique that got most of us into this business; it is the students. It is the music. It is the dynamic interplay of connecting living, changing, unpredictable beings with living, changing often unpredictable sounds – and dancing in the space between them. It is surfing the waves of unknown events and experiencing the unexpected: lesson plan gone awry, lesson gone surprisingly well, glimpses of virtuosity from student on whom we have prematurely given up hope. It is finding the unique key to unlock the motivation and potential within each individual student. It is thrilling. It is frustrating. It is exhilarating.”

– Karin S. Hendricks *Compassionate Music Teaching*

VI. Discussion and Conversation

VII. Resources

Duke, Robert. A. (2007). *Intelligent music teaching: Essays on the core principles of instruction*. Austin, TX: Learning and Behavior Resources.

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