

## Learning how to learn

I realize that I am about to talk about a subject that you, as teachers, will all have strong ideas about. Here, for about five minutes or so, are some of mine

Medical science tells us that we learn as much in our first five years as in the rest of our lives. We learn to crawl, walk, speak and sing with no formal teaching and probably very little or no awareness of the learning process.

We all learn effortlessly about anything that genuinely captures our interest.

This fluent, effortless learning, continues unless or until something gets in the way such as:

Emotional, mental or physical disturbance or trauma!

The problem might come up in a negative home, social, working or learning environment.

Teaching a student how to learn seems to me to be helping them develop awareness of what might be 'getting in the way' of their natural ability to learn, then giving them a way of removing the barrier.

Students must realize that poor coordination of the mind and body undermines the learning process. Pain or discomfort is often a barrier, it demands our attention, it is telling us to stop what we're doing - find another way! When we ignore pain we lose sensitivity in the nervous system, which disturbs the psychophysical unity that supports the learning process. I believe we learn easily if we feel interested, safe, comfortable, balanced, respected and happy.

I see learning a skill, such as playing an instrument, as building a huge variety of reliable repetitive responses (a collection of habits) to different but connected stimuli. These responses are developed and, like all habits, can be good or not so good. Our repertoire of habits can be recognized as character or musical personality. Described in this way, recognising habits that we would like to change is part of what is involved in developing as a musician. Students often need help getting past blockages - ingrained negative habits. Noticing the existence and nature of the negative habit empowers us to change.

We also need to see there is a moment of choice between stimuli and our automatic or habitual response to it - that is potentially, the moment of change. Students must take on board that they need to change something if they are going to improve.

Imitation is another valuable learning device. Imitation will be happening possibly on a conscious level but definitely on a subconscious level. I think it is worth discussing, with our students, how to use imitation well. We must be careful to clearly identify what we hope will be imitated if we demonstrate. I expect we have all had the student who watches the left-hand like a hawk, while you demonstrate a bowing technique.

Questions are an invaluable tool in the learning process. Students should be encouraged to ask questions of us, their teachers. The question informs us where the student has got to in their thinking and development. We are then very likely to work with their interest and at their level.

Students should ask themselves questions to raise the level of awareness of what is happening in the present

If I ask you now:

What are you feeling about listening to this presentation?

How would you like it to proceed from here?

Is there any pressure, tension or pain in your body?

What are you doing with your feet and hands?

Where is your weight meeting the chair?

Do you feel like moving?

All these questions raise your awareness in way that could be useful.

As teachers we can ask our students questions continuously. They should feel their ideas are of genuine interest and value to us whatever they are. As practice is one of the most often wasted learning opportunities you might ask:

How would you go about practising this passage? This movement?

This shift? This rhythm? Creating a suitable sound colour for this passage?

Through discussing the answers we help the student to develop a good approach to practice.

I think the way to start is to identify with the student's method and rationale for practising in a particular way and then help them with the next evolutionary step in their thinking.

What I have talked about for the last few minutes is the Alexander technique. A research project carried out at the Royal College of Music about 60 years ago concluded that the Alexander technique should be the basis of the education of all musicians. I agree with that bold statement. A thorough knowledge of the technique 'teaches you how to learn!'