



ADVENTURES IN TEACHING: REFLECTING ON THE SOPHOMORE YEAR

In sports, the sophomore jinx is a term that has afflicted second year players who have had unspectacular seasons, especially after a usually glowing rookie year. It is as if a curse affects their performance and that player was unable to meet the expectations of coaches, fellow players, or management. I refused to believe that I would be jinxed in my second year and indeed with double the number of student-musicians signed up for either choir or band for my second year was any indication, then there must be something I was doing right. As you read forward, you will find that this year for me was not without its challenges.

Pre-preparations and "what I did for my summer vacation"

Having that one year of experience opened up a few more doors for me and enabled me to plan accordingly. Before school was out for the summer, I helped out with timetabling and scheduling for the following year and I was able to place my "spare blocks" in such a way that it would make certain days easier to do the department's administrative paperwork, to go to the music stores to pick up supplies or simply to take an early afternoon for a good book or to take an extended lunch break with a colleague. Helping out with scheduling also allowed me a peek at the number of student-musicians I would have in the music department. To both my delight and surprise, I had found that 143 had joined, a little more than double the 71 I had for my first year.

My summer was spent realizing a healthy number of recording and producing projects. I was anxious to get back into playing and practicing my instruments and to work with the people I had wanted to work with for quite some time. I also called some leaders around town to let them know that I was available for freelance work if they needed a bassist, drummer or singer. Being paid over twelve months meant that I could be picky and choosy about the gigs I was to take. What a treat!

Before the school year was to start I checked out a local reading clinic with better knowledge of the groups I would be working with. The year before, I really did not have an idea of the level of the student-musicians I would have and so choosing repertoire, most of which was really new to me anyways, was rather difficult. This year, I was better able to identify the repertoire that would work with my groups by giving them a musical challenge that they could overcome with some work and at the same time would address some of the musical concepts I wanted to impart on them. Stylistically, I wanted to maintain the so-called "balanced diet" approach in order to expose the student-musicians to a variety of music.

Continual collaborations and higher expectations

I was also dealing with my own raised expectations. I have always told my student-musicians that if there was anything worth doing, it was worth doing well. I wanted to raise the bar this year but a part of me did not want to pull away from working on the development of musical understanding with my student-musicians to the point where we were solely on the polarized "performance-based" program side. Balance, as always, would have to be the key but I knew and felt that this would be tested this year with the number of performances we had planned.

With more than double the number of student-musicians this year, and after having a successful first year, I raised my own expectations and that of my student-musicians. Specifically, I wanted to take what we had built upon during that first year and continue to reinforce concepts and ideas. I also wanted to continue to give them the opportunity to collaborate with me in making certain musical decisions.



Fast forwarding to the choral warm-up room before a festival performance, a parent-chaperone who had accompanied us on the trip remarked that it was impressive to see the collaborative nature between my student-musicians and me. At one point after running through a song, several student-musicians spoke to the rest of the group of paying particular attention to dynamics and diction. I was naturally impressed and proud to the point where the performance itself did not matter as much as what they had learned and applied. And to boot, we get paid for this gig?

Backtracking to the day before the start of classes, I had suddenly felt that I had forgotten how to teach. It was a somewhat frightening prospect since I had not really "flexed my teaching chops" all summer. Rehearsal and conducting technique, introduction of instruments to newer student-musicians, and probably most importantly my output of energy and pacing of instruction was what I felt I needed to get together in a hurry.

Recording, intention, and the tests of endurance and patience

Included within the plans was to make use of our multi-track recording gear and make a record of the chamber choir. Again, I consulted with my student-musicians on the line up of songs that we would include on the disc and we both agreed that we wanted it to be a retrospective of what we had accomplished over the span of only two years. I had wanted to share my experiences as a record producer with them and making the disc was an opportunity to rally together and really show what we could accomplish with a lot of hard work. I insisted on making sure that we were well prepared and so we agreed that extra after school rehearsals would be necessary especially since, as a choir, we wanted to make sure that we captured the best possible performances.

Having been through the process before, I knew that I firstly had to prepare the music well so that I could concentrate on ensuring that the technical process worked efficiently. But throughout the rehearsing, we talked about the music and collaborated on how we thought a particular phrase should be sung or how the dynamics of a particular section would be taken care of. This experience was beneficial to me because it

would mark my own progress as a teacher. It would be foolish to say that I knew everything about the choral art form and yet recording a disc would, in effect, leave me naked to the world and expose how relatively little I knew. As a musician and producer, it had never stopped me before because I realized, fairly early on, and quite luckily that the recording process, as with anything, was all about the experience. In this case, and in particular, it was not about my insecurities, it was about my student-musicians' experience.

We setup the monitor speakers in our recording environment so that we could discuss each take collectively immediately after recording. I was astonished at how critical the student-musicians were of themselves. We tried take after take to get the right intonation, the right dynamics, and the right tempo. But it was more than getting the notes "in tune and on time." We worked long hours and I could tell where the initial enthusiasm had begun to fade. Most of all I had to remember that they were at the centre of this experience. If it was at all possible, I was even more critical than they were at certain moments. There was a side of me that came out that is now difficult to admit. There were times when I was irritable, impatient and short-tempered where nothing I could do or say could evoke in them what I was hearing in my head. I knew that this was detrimental to the sound of the group as the tension in the air was sometimes thicker than a knife could cut through.

The night we finished the recording, I went to bed thinking about how I could have potentially ruined their experience of the whole process and that my quest for excellence had clouded the original intention. I felt badly and just thought about the conductor of the community chamber choir that I sing with and how he seemed to handle setbacks and potentially infuriating situations with grace. I also thought about how I could not forget that it is a privilege to be a teacher. Idealistic as it still sounds, I wake up

every morning before heading to school with the idea that the day would be full of potential to enact positive change with the student-musicians. Was I heading in the wrong direction?

I called a meeting of my chamber choir members the next day and we had a good long discussion about what we had just gone through the weekend before. We talked about the positive outcomes such as how our collective musicianship had improved immensely as a result of all of the rehearsal and we agreed that when I visibly showed my frustration that we did not get the results we were after. I apologized for having lost sight of the intention and we went back into the control room to listen to what we had accomplished. I sat at the back and watched their faces light up with content as they realized that they were listening to themselves in action. Smiles were beaming across the room. Only time can tell, but hopefully, the whole experience of working hard at something, believing that you can do it and just going for it can show that with that kind of determination almost anything is possible.

I finished our meeting with one other important lesson that I wanted to impart on them. It was to tell them that relationships are based on good communication. If I had bottled up my feelings of guilt and if they continued to harbor any feeling of resentment toward me, it had to be settled in an open forum with an open dialogue or risk bottling up these emotions with no resolution. Our next rehearsals were filled with a renewed sense of optimism and accomplishment. We then focused on the next mission which was to prepare for our festival field trip.

The development of reasoning and the "lighter" and "fiery" sides of adolescence

Our festival field trip this year was, by many student-musicians accounts, a success. I had brought up the entire department as I had done the year before including the Eighth graders. Other directors had felt that perhaps grade eight student-musicians were a little young for a tour and after the parent orientation meeting for the trip, I was leaning toward not including them in future trips. I was still, however, trying to build my program and when they got back to the school, there was a buzz amongst the grade level about how much fun they had on the trip.

I placed my student-musicians on a contract that they and their parents had to read through and sign. Included within the contract was language pertaining to my expectations of behavior, conduct and comporment. I also spent the class before the trip reminding the student-musicians of the value of trust. I know that they did not want to let me down, that they genuinely want to have a good time and they wish to participate in future trips. Nevertheless, they knew that being on a trip was a chance to prove that they could be responsible and that the consequences for breach of the contract ranged from clean-up duties to loss off free time privileges to the student-musicians being sent back home at their parents' expense.

One of the things I dealt with last year along with the chaperone team was the cleanup of many rooms. Clearly, I had missed the very important point of keeping one's room neat and tidy within the contract. I made sure that this year's contract had the point and during the first chaperone meeting, I mentioned the idea of the "Dirtiest Room Award." Every night, the chaperone team would keep a running tally of which room group had the untidiest room. That room would have to carry down all of the luggage and instrument cases down to the bus on departure day. Needless to say, at room check time, each room was neat and tidy. I guess the thought of having to carry over a hundred bags and instrument cases down a couple of flight of stairs were sufficient incentive. Can we say, "Cruel, yet fair?"

What is a festival field trip without at least a few students attempting to validate the well-known assumptions of the development of adolescent reasoning? The third day of the trip, I received a call from one of the chaperones saying that the front desk had informed her that a group of our student-musicians were seen trying to light "something" on their balcony during the early morning. A chaperone from another school had seen this happen, told them to stop what they were doing and subsequently reported the incident to the front desk. When I got this call, I kept rather calm. I quietly excused myself from

one of the director's workshops and headed back to the hotel to see what was going on.

The three involved in the incident were in their room and had the idea (I was to learn later) that they did not think the chaperone from the other group had reported them in. Thinking they were scot-free, I asked them to leave their room and to proceed quietly to an open area where I interviewed each one of them individually and before they could formulate a common story. This way, I would hear three different accounts of the same "story" and piece together an objective (hopefully) view of what had happened. Each person would fill in a missing part or perhaps illuminate certain actions in a different way. I would then talk to them again individually after having this new information and newer and more accurately described "truths" would enter the picture. Maybe I have been watching too much "Law and Order: SVU." J

What had happened was that they decided to light up some foliage in an empty pop can on their wooden balcony as an antidote to a rather boring morning (we had finished performing the night before and they did not have an instrument workshop until later in the day.) The part that almost made me laugh and blow my best stone-cold "Ice-T" interrogator impersonation face was when one of the student-musicians remarked that "at least they had made a good decision in trying to light up the leaves on the balcony rather than inside the hotel room." I guess the attempt was to show that they were at least thinking about doing it "safely" not realizing that the hotel along with the balcony was a wooden structure.

Thank goodness nothing burned down. I told them that I would discuss the matter with the administration when we got back to

school, that they were lucky I did not call their parents to come pick them up. Their free time privileges would be revoked for the remainder of their stay. I explained to them that they needed to think about the consequences of their actions and to be responsible for the results. Furthermore, I let them know that they let me and the rest of the group down because they had forgotten that they represented the school first before themselves. I explained that because our school was identified by the hotel staff and by another school that our reputation could suffer. They understood that they would have to face some sort of consequence when we returned home.

When we got back to the school, and after everyone had been picked up, I sat the three down in the parking lot and had a conversation with them about decision-making and responsibility. They knew they had let me down but I mentioned to them that the lesson to be learned was that they had to think before they acted. After the round of apologies, we all agreed that it would be appropriate for each three of them to write letters of apology to the hotel staff for any inconvenience. I thought that their remorse was genuine and that the lesson would stay with them. To answer your question, I did not report them to the administration.

Plans for next school year and "what I want to do for my summer vacation"

Shall I raise the bar of expectation and excellence once again? In the spirit of experimentation, and in celebration of new beginnings, next year I am planning to amalgamate my concert bands and concert choirs into two performing ensembles of about 70 student-musicians each. I found that the student-musicians were especially excited at performing in a large ensemble but that there is the potential for less individual accountability. To that end, I am entrusting my section leaders with more responsibility.

My administration also gave me the go ahead to start the jazz band and I want to start an extra-curricular contemporary vocal/hip hop/rhythm and blues/vocal jazz group consisting of twelve singers. The kick for me though is that a few teachers have mentioned



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PRINCIPAL THEMES

interest in wanting to be a part of it and so I am going to try a collaborative group that will see teachers and student-musicians working within the same ensemble. I will let you know how it goes.

As for my own plans, I need to mix and master the recording projects I started last summer and get back into the performing scene. I applied to the Master of Arts in Music Education program at the University of British Columbia and was accepted to begin this summer. I also plan on fitting in some camping and hiking in there somewhere.

In the final summation, I still do not believe I was jinxed and though there were trying times and funny times and times still where it would

have been easier to pack up and quit we persevered and accomplished great things together. I think that these are the types of shared experiences that we are all so lucky to have.

I hope you've all enjoyed your summer!

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