

Professional Development Sessions for String Teachers

There are several techniques that I've found are most effective for teaching kids, and they are somewhat different depending on the age group. When doing pedagogy sessions, I generally include a variety of these techniques because the participating teachers are often both elementary, middle and high school teachers, but obviously I can focus on one age group if there is only one age group present.

The biggest mental obstacle for most teachers is if they themselves do not improvise. This is especially true of string teachers. So a big part of how I conduct these pedagogy sessions is to do exactly with the teachers as I do with the kids themselves, so they can feel what it's like for the kids to be taught these techniques. The best proof of these methods is this: if I can get a string teacher to improvise who has never improvised in her life, that teacher can get a kid to improvise.

Each of the following topics are generally covered in a separate 1-2 hour session, but an overview session is possible where I hit on all or most of this material in a single session.

Here are some of the topics I cover and the approaches I use for various age groups:

The blues—this is such an important part of popular music and it's necessary for the teacher as well as the student to understand the chord progression as well as how to improvise over it. With all ages, even 1st year players, I will get them to play a simple pentatonic scale, which we learn as a very simple fingering. We can then immediately use that scale to play a blues tune called "Sonny Moon for Two" by Sonny Rollins. We do call and response using just that simple scale over a blues progression. I demonstrate my planet-and-2-moons choreography as a way to explain the 1-4-5 chord areas of the blues and then reinforce this by applying it to "Sonny Moon". If the kids are advanced enough, I will show them the closed fingering version which is transposable to any key and within 3 minutes we are playing "Sonny Moon" in any key I choose, including simple improv in any key using that simple pentatonic scale. If they are advanced enough, we get into the different versions of the blues progression, including jazz blues, and how to solo over them.

Improvising and Playing Jazz—jazz can be so intimidating: all the chord symbols, how to improvise at all, let alone on such complicated material. I show how really

simple most jazz is, and how these very simple elements make up more complex jazz tunes. I show how to decipher a jazz chart and simplify it to a few basic key centers and scales; how the 2-5-1 progression, the heart of be bop, is really just one key, and how to improvise on it; inner melodies and how to discover them and use them as a “path through the woods”; how to find the cool jazzy sounding inner melodies by knowing the 4 key altered notes; and how solos are the combination of melody and scale/arpeggio ideas. I talk about jazz style and the key elements which define your style: vibrato (I teach the “car alarm” exercise), inflection, bowing. I get into jazz bowing and using “gesture bowing” to show where the downbows are. This session is generally for intermediate to advanced kids (and their teachers.)

Strum Bowing—my integrated approach to playing rhythm. I run through the basic ideas, including the horizontal strum or shuffle, the vertical strum or “chop” and the 3-D strum which is a combination of the 2. I talk about the importance of physicalizing what you play; the importance of singing or verbalizing what you are doing and why that is so effective. I talk about how to be a good rhythm player in a group situation and the importance of upbeats and constant mutation to keep rhythms alive.

Improvisation Games—there is really no limit to the games and ways you can get kids started with improvisation. The approach varies with the age of the kids but there are many of these games which will work on all ages, depending on the tone and type of sense of humor used by the teacher. Free improvisation is really easy—get kids to play their favorite colors and other kids have to guess what it is. Favorite food, different moods, seasons all make good guessing games. Then you can have them play their impression of a painting or a poem. The telephone game is especially fun and works great after having done a little call and response with them: you play a simple phrase and each person has to repeat exactly what the person before them has played, which means that if someone plays it wrong, you have to play it the new way, etc, so you have to respond to what has just happened and there’s no way to prepare. There are lots of these kind of games that are effective with all ages.

I most often work with string teachers and as you can see, many of these issues are unique to string players. But much of it is applicable to other instrumentalists or to general music teachers as well.