

Nicky Schrire comments About Jazz with SAJE: (September 2017)

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Learning to Teach - Teaching to Learn – Nicky Schrire

I started teaching when I was a student at the SA College of Music. I was an aural tutor and appreciated getting to play “teacher teacher” and earn some extra income. Towards the end of my degree, I was hired as a part-time saxophone teacher at Wynberg Girls’ High School. Out of my depth (and out of love with the instrument), I’d drag my feet into the school to teach beginner saxophonists, trying desperately to remember a time when I didn’t know how to fit the reed into the ligature, or I had to think twice about which finger action resulted in a “G” note.

After I’d moved to New York to embark on an intensely steep learning curve, I experienced a newfound confidence when I returned to South Africa. Suddenly, due to good fortune, I’d experienced things and learnt lessons that I could share with students back home. I had something to offer. I felt empowered and my confidence as a teacher grew. I could lead eighty Rustenburg High students in a circle-singing workshop, or give a master class to jazz students at the University of KwaZulu-Natal. But, perhaps, the biggest teaching lesson came in the form of a single phrase delivered during graduate school. Chris Rosenberg, my pedagogy lecturer at the Manhattan School of Music, was an avuncular, engaging, and infinitely wise man (and also a sublime jazz guitarist). Midst drawing up imaginary course curricula and lesson plans, he gave us this nugget of gold: Teach the student, not the subject.

I’ve been a part-time lecturer at the SA College of Music at UCT in Capetown for nearly two years now. I love working with university level students, and specifically those interested in studying jazz. I don’t consider myself a jazz musician anymore, but I have a newfound appreciation for why jazz is an invaluable foundation - not just for other musical genres, but for life. Can you think on your toes if something goes awry? Can you adapt quickly and successfully? Can you work with others? Can you put your own stamp on something you didn’t necessarily create? I’m aware that I don’t have an education degree - both my undergrad and Masters were performance degrees. So, every lesson and student that I teach is an invaluable opportunity for me to learn more about teaching. Here are some aspects of the work that have encouraged, challenged and surprised me (likely not news to more experienced teachers! But, perhaps, useful for newer teachers like myself): -

Don’t forget to teach an approach or practising methodology to the student before teaching the subject. This has been particularly true when teaching improvisation, especially for singers. Many students never learned how to practise. They don’t know the power of repetition; how to break up longer phrases into smaller, bite-sized pieces for efficient practice; or how struggling through written transcription will halve the time it takes to learn a solo. It’s also worth remembering that in teaching the student, not all students learn the same way. Some pupils are theoretically minded while others run a mile at the mention of chordal analysis and tritone substitutions. Find a system that works for the student, e.g. working aurally; in-class repetition; relating concepts back to theory. –

The psychology of learning an instrument is fascinating. I can see a student shut down mentally when they don’t understand a concept. Some students become visibly frustrated and angry, while others retreat and mentally check out of the lesson, though they remain physically in the classroom. How do you coax someone back into engagement when all they want to do is escape frustration and confusion? It’s different for every person, but I’ve learnt not to push students to grasp concepts immediately. My own experience has taught me that most of what I learnt at university only made sense years after

graduation. Maybe it's the great aggravation and joy that hindsight delivers. It's only with the benefit of time spent away from a subject that we are able to sift through information and finally absorb it. –

I love being a student. My past teachers are the most revered figures in my life, even decades after learning with many of them. And my singing teachers were particularly influential in offering support and guidance as I was discovering how to be a musician, and how to be and sound like myself. Each lesson had therapeutic effects and benefits and I've sorely missed having a teacher figure in my life. I recently started having lessons with a wonderful teacher in Cape Town. Her methodology combines Alexander Technique, eurythmy and classical techniques. It is difficult for me to understand and to practise, but it's precisely because it is challenging and foreign to me that I return, week after week. But I've also realised that learning again is expanding my offerings as an educator. When I identify a student's vocal challenges but feel stumped as to what a possible antidote may be, I discuss the issue with my teacher. Not only does she offer exercises to correct the niggle, but I walk away understanding the anatomical cause of the problem. It is my version of teacher-training.

Mostly what I've realised is that if I'm not learning from another teacher, from an experience, or from the students themselves, then I'm a teacher with limited abilities.