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Handbook Development

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Abstract

This essay details the development of a new teacher training manual for a student-led school of popular music. One draft of the manual is finished and plans for a second draft are laid out.

Keywords: Music Education, Training Manual, Music, Self-expression

Introduction to your Capstone Project

My project was to create a manual to train new hires at the Boise Rock School. BRS is a non-profit, after school program that teaches kids aged 3-18 how to play rock and pop music. There are a few things that set us apart as a school, the main thing being that students choose the material that they play. We've been operating since 2008 and I have been teaching there since 2016. We gained non-profit status this year and acquired a new building that we own outright. Once the build-out of classrooms is completed in February of 2022, we will move into the new building. As I currently am the only teacher that works Monday through Friday, I am hoping to expand my role at the school after the transition.

I had many reasons for making this manual: I feel I wasn't initially adequately trained to do my job, we've lost many staff members, this transition comes with many new staff members being added that we will need to quickly train, we've never had a codified culture or philosophy that we as a team have agreed on, and I anticipate being put into a senior position at the school so I want to have an organized set of information to send to new hires.

Through making the manual and discussing it with my co-workers and bosses: I feel I've done an adequate job of explaining many of the nuances of educating students in this informal school environment while also explaining the overall culture of the school for its students and teachers.

Section 1: Innovative Approach

The first step in this project was doing academic research about music education. I have formal musical training, but it came after a decade of self-teaching. I had never explored what music education has been, is, or could be, outside of my own experience as an educator or first-hand experience as a music student. What I found in exploring the recent academic side of music education was very much in line with what I had experienced as a teacher.

The article "Student-as-master? Reflections on a learning innovation in popular music pedagogy" by Don Lebler was revelatory for me. It details how a bachelor level degree program

has developed their system for teaching popular music. I was shocked to find many similarities between their program and ours and, specifically, many techniques to develop self-learning that I use almost daily. The idea is to not make playing music or a song *easy*, but to develop the ability to understand music from the outset with a focus on utility. This is contradictory to what American based pedagogical discourse typically focuses on, which is “legitimacy and quality (repertoire and teaching)” (Mantie 1).

Here’s an example of this: many children are taught to play [Für Elise](#) by Ludwig van Beethoven (1876). A beautiful, historical, and important piece of repertory, but it’s written in an atypical time signature (3/8) and based on the melodic minor scale - not exactly beginner territory or skills that will be used often. It’s easy to learn, as it’s easy to sing and hear any incorrectness, but it doesn’t really teach anything beyond how to phrase a melody.

By contrast, let’s discuss [“Takin’ it to the Streets”](#) by The Doobie Brothers. This song is not great by many standards: it has not held up as timeless, Michael McDonald’s voice is enough to turn some people completely away from the song, and it lyrically it doesn’t make a whole lot of sense. But from a pedagogical, utilitarian stance it’s a perfect transition from beginner to intermediate piano development. The song’s first section has a driving left hand single note pattern, which develops muscle and makes syncopation easy to feel against the right hand, which is simply playing inversions of different D 7th chords: D half diminished 7, D dominant 7, and D minor 7. The second section reverses this separate hands idea: the right hand plays a single repeated chord while the left hand plays a melody doubling the bassline. This song makes students use both hands, but gives them opportunity to think of them as more important in different sections of the song (Section 1 focus is on right hand, Section 2 focus is on left hand). It teaches and introduces many skills that students will consistently use going forward in their playing while being silly, fun, and challenging.

Understanding this concept helped me to legitimize the work that I do as an educator to myself, even though I don't have a credential and am working in a field that has historically looked down on our school and curriculum.

I wanted to help create this feeling of legitimacy within the other teachers, but also wanted to have their input before I finished the first draft of the manual. Historically, teachers have operated pretty autonomously and had little conversation about what we do as a unit. I believed that the other teachers' input would be invaluable to my own edification as well as to them moving forward as stakeholders. So I formed a questionnaire for my co-workers which consisted of five questions: "What is the purpose of Boise Rock School?", "What is important for students to learn?", "What is important for musicians to know?", "If you could change one thing about the school what would it be?", and "If you could make sure one thing never changed about the school what would it be?".

The last perspective that I wanted to make sure that I included was that of my bosses. They have final say over what will be used as training materials and are closely linked to the success of the school. Their decision making thus far has been sound as they have kept the school running as a for-profit business for over a decade. I trust their vision for the school, and want to make sure that whatever I did was satisfactory to their standards and in line with the school's voice.

The combination of these distinct ideals lead to many innovations and avenues for creativity. But at a certain point I felt very overwhelmed by the sheer enormity of trying to pare down: all the knowledge of music education I gathered, my experience, and the combined decades of experience of all of our educators in this niche realm. What kept me moving forward was my primary stakeholder, students.

Section 2: Emotional Intelligence

The school has always operated on a scholarship mentality, meaning we've never turned a student away for an inability to pay even when we operated as a business. This level of

acceptance and inclusiveness permeated our philosophy without our team ever having a discussion about it. All continuing staff members answered the first question of my questionnaire, “What is the purpose of the Boise Rock School?” with essentially: “To be a safe place for any child to express themselves and explore who they are through music.” Most answered the next question, “What is important for students to know?” with some version of “Teamwork and Compromise.” Surprisingly to me, the only answers where most people mentioned any kind of musical skill were in the third question that specifically asked for it.

This all helped me understand that the real core of our school is built around emotional intelligence and functioning as a group. In order for students to succeed and focus on their goals, we need to make sure that they feel safe and are able to express themselves. This became one of the primary goals of the manual: stress to the reader that they need to ensure that they value the emotion of students and their diverse viewpoints in order to help them succeed in their goals. In my experience once a student has opened up as a person they grow swiftly as a musician.

I explained in the manual that one way to do this is to act as an Artist-Teacher (USC Music 2019). This means using not only your formal educational experiences as lessons to teach, but also using your personal experiences. Every teacher at the rock school has played gigs, worked with promoters, recorded, played in bands, toured, etc. Having those experiences and being able to explain what to expect from being a professional musician is knowledge that students may need in order to achieve their goals as a musician. If a music teacher goes from high school to college and then directly back to teaching in an elementary school, then they have never have many of those experiences and never receive that knowledge. This knowledge our teachers have not only sets us apart as a place to learn music, but by practicing it we show our students that we are humans. In my experience, once a human connection has been made in the classroom, the students seems to relax their guards a reasonable bit.

Section 3: Creative Thinking

Now, with a firm goals in mind, I started to write the manual. We have BRS branded handbooks for each our instrument classes that I have worked with nearly every day for the past three years. They are written with children in mind, have humor, and are quite plain in many of their explanations of complex musical concepts. They introduce ideas in a fun way, and then the teacher is given room to explain the concepts in more depth, or give their own application for the concept. I decided that I would write the manual in a similar way. I would introduce educational or cultural concepts in a fun way and leave room for further explanation to occur by experience, talking to another teacher with expertise on the subject, or pointing them directly to the hand books that we use with students.

I decided to have the manual exist solely online so I can continuously edit it as we update curriculum but also because if a new hire loses their physical manual: they have an excuse not to read it, we lose money on having created it physically, and very little is gained. This also meant that I could add links, so I requested access to the .pdf links of the handbooks we use to print the physical copies for students. I'm not sure if this was on purpose or by accident, but our program director, Bri, did one better and sent me the entire google drive folder *above* the handbooks. I got access to every piece of curriculum and lesson plan that had ever been created and digitized in the entire history of the school. For this project it was an absolute goldmine.

There were complete lesson plans that had never been used, there were great ideas that were half-finished but still usable, and entire curriculum frameworks for classes that had been refined, put into practice, and then been ignored and forgotten. I was able to use these resources as links in nearly every section of the manual for new lesson ideas that are deeper dives into content for intermediate and advanced students, and as another option for new and old hires to explore content that they may need more experience with.

Section 4: Your Innovative Solution

So with all of this knowledge and my new resources, I really got invigorated to write the manual. This draft was written specifically in order to make sure that my bosses would be happy; I used the website's verbiage often while explaining our purpose and goals, I referred back to the curriculums that we're currently using and have links to them, I reference the documents we have for student and teacher expectations and have links to them (both of which I never knew existed prior to starting this project), and generally just tried to make it feel like I was talking with one of my bosses.

My thought process behind these decisions was that if my bosses didn't like my first draft then the project would be dead. I would never be able to get further teacher or student input involved at all if I pushed too far in those directions from the outset. But I did have a plan for moving forward to serve the ultimate goal of helping the student with what they want to learn.

Section 5: Results

I finished my draft on November 27 and sent it to my boss and our education director, Jared Goodpaster. We scheduled a meeting for December 1 to go over what I can do to get it to be usable document for the school. I sensed some hesitancy about the whole concept of it once we sat down for our meeting, but as we went through the document together almost every issue he had was actually already addressed within the doc. What I was able to gather is that because of his wealth of experience he hadn't thought that much of the common sense, no-brainer information I put in the manual about teaching was worth codifying for teachers coming in, but reading the whole thing reminded him that they often come in with absolutely zero experience teaching.

After that discussion his only issue with putting it the manual into practice is that some of the outcomes are potentially being expanded in our band classes, and there's not a firm agreement between him, the co-founder of the school, and the Board of Directors of what they

will be yet. We ended up having a long discussion about it and came up with some really fun potential ideas for what we could do with classes going forward.

He gave me very minimal notes on what to change and wants to help me expand it to include another couple sections on performance and explain how to teach the Little Rockers course for ages 3-6 (which I've never taught). I threw out an idea that I would like to, once this draft is finished, open it up to the staff to comment on as well; which he agreed to.

Section 6: Conclusion

This final agreement marks a step forward in the school. There has always been a disconnect between the teachers as a group and management that I have been trying to bridge. This idea that we are working on a physical manifestation of an agreement of what we're doing as a group makes me very hopeful for the continued development of the Boise Rock School. I feel proud of what I've done as a student and employee because this is a legitimate attempt to unify us to take care of some of the people that I care about most deeply, my students



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