

Finding Comfort in the Listening Zone

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As teachers, we are constantly trying to cultivate an environment in our classrooms that provides a zone of safety, a place where students can take risks in their learning, a place where they can

safely make mistakes and know that it is all right; we are all learning together.

We spend careful hours planning for a sequence of learning that allows for students to take ownership of and responsibility for their learning. We consider the questions we might pose, the reflection we'd like to see, all the while being aware that 'teachable moments' could veer us slightly from our objectives, sometimes causing a necessary diversion from the plan that may lead us to make connections in ways we wouldn't have imagined.

Every era in education brought with it changes and modifications, new expectations for teachers and hence, for students. And the era of which we are currently a part is no different. Compounding all the planning we normally do with a heap of

other considerations placed upon us by administrations, districts and society in general causes our comfort zones to be challenged it seems, in every direction. When planning for concerts, programs or special events I probably put myself "outside the comfort zone," planning extensively, so that students will be comfortable performing and enjoying the music. I want their focus to be on the enjoyment of the experience, rather than concern for all of the extraneous details.

In what instance should students take risks with their learning? Each student has a different comfort level. We look for ways to create a culture of comfort; we take small steps toward making giant strides. In time, we develop that feeling of safety. We can listen, discuss and feel free to pursue and develop original ideas that come from collaboration and tolerance for innovation. I'm reminded of the old adage about students forgetting what you said, but never forgetting how you made them feel.

This summer I took a course at the Wisconsin Center for Music Education during which the instructor posed a thought-provoking question: "Am I here to learn or am I here to change?" Of course, all students, given the magic of inspiration, want to learn. But doesn't real change come with stretching our comfort zones? And how do we, as teachers, effect that change by listening to music?

The amazing dancer, choreographer and writer Twyla Tharp has said, "Before you can think out of the box, you have to start with a box." We try to build a repertoire of musical learning experiences for our students so that from kindergarten on they are acquiring a set of pieces that exemplify many style periods, forms, composers and tone colors. We want to build on previously acquired knowledge, cycling pieces back with a different focus or fresh viewpoint in order to get another

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'listen' to a piece. Those pieces we term 'war horses,' don't we want them to continue to be familiar to all? If we start with a sturdy box we can continue to put plenty in it! Think of a piece of music you have loved for a long time. It becomes as much a part of you as a favorite pair of shoes. Both make a lasting impression!

By creating that foundation, keeping our expectations of student abilities high and continuing to add to students' musical vocabulary in order to keep widening their background knowledge, students become more adept at responding and connecting to the musical world around them. Sometimes we must go out on that limb to model for students so that they gain that sense of confidence that will allow them to, as the American naturalist John Burroughs said, "leap and the net will appear."

iListenWI (wmeamusic.org/iListenWI), as it forges a new path into an ever-changing era, endeavors to include pieces of many different genres and style periods. This year's offerings include pieces from that 'sturdy box,' and pieces that peek out over the edge of the box, ready to become new favorites for students. Some of these are: "Morning Mood" from Peer Gynt, "Minute Waltz" by Chopin, Mozart's "Eine Kleine Nachtmusik" (assess their understanding with a Sonata Allegro Rap Project!), "America" from *West Side Story*, "Roll 'Em" by Mary Lou Williams,



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and J. S. Bach's "Little Fugue in g minor" (see the score or watch a contemporary map colorfully outlining the piece). These outcome-based digital plans include many links embedded in the materials relating to the pieces or composers, making it convenient for teachers to access what they need all in one place. Formative and summative assessments are included as well. While our comfort zones might be under assault at certain points, iListenWI seeks to provide the safety net for teachers needing to be ready with current materials.

Listening is so critical in our lives, especially at a time when a scan of popular television talk shows reveals people who constantly interrupt each other's attempts at being heard, and perhaps you have experienced students who also seem

desperate to be heard. Cultivating our listening skills as members of society and as musicians has rarely been needed more. LIFE - Listening is Fundamental Every Day. Let's keep working to help our students attain confidence and love for music for a lifetime. No matter how many initiatives or acronyms arrive, music alone shall live, never to die! Emily Dickinson also said it well, "We never know how high we are till we are called to rise, and then if we are true to plan, our statures fill the skies."

This year the iListenWI delivery format has been slightly different. When you purchase the materials you will receive a password allowing you access to the digital files and supplementary materials ready for copying. Several pieces were

up and running in October. Others have been added continuously throughout the past two months, and users have received an email blast when each piece was active. It is easier than ever to navigate the compositions/ outcomes/composers/ styles/assessments desired. It is a \$25 investment that comprises many hours of work by your iListenWI committee. If teachers have comments, suggestions or would like to share in this endeavor, they are encouraged to email me, or the committee members listed at wmeamusic.org/iListenWI.

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