

Teaching by Example

BY Angela Myles Beeching

Dear Angela: Like most musicians, I perform and teach. And though I love what I do, I find myself wondering what we—as college teachers—are actually preparing students for in these crazy times. How should I think of my role and the value of my work?

In the face of astronomically high tuition fees, with music careers still reeling from COVID-19, it's no wonder that many of us are questioning the value of teaching music.

Unfortunately, no matter how well we teach, there's no guaranteeing how things will play out for our students. And what they end up valuing from their studies may not be apparent to us—or them—until years later. So, take a moment to . . .

Reflect on the value of your own college education. What made the most lasting impact?

Back when I was teaching career courses at New England Conservatory, I conducted my own informal outcomes-based research. I questioned music school alumni, acquaintances, and consulting clients, asking people what they'd gained from their college educations. These were musicians reflecting back ten, twenty, and thirty years. I asked them what made the biggest impact—what they valued most from their college experience.

Respondents didn't cite specific skills or knowledge gained. Instead, they focused on the importance of having a mentor—a caring adult who challenged, encouraged, and dared them to expect more of themselves.

Surprisingly, a fair number of respondents reported that the person they considered their most important mentor was *not* their studio instructor. For some, it was their chamber music coach, a history or theory teacher, or a liberal arts instructor.

Young people unconsciously seek out role models to help them find their own

way to be in the world. As music journalist Ted Gioia writes, “my best professors were more valuable as role models than for the books they assigned. They gave me a sense of the kind of life and worldview I wanted to cultivate for myself.” As Ted did, we look for people “who radiate a kind of wholeness and depth,” the light that allows for an expanded life.

This, of course, is subjective. And you may never know that you are that role model for a student. But as faculty, you are part of a constellation of influences in students' lives. And we do this work on faith, wanting to contribute to a better world. It helps to keep in mind that the education that anyone receives is far more than training and coursework.

Remember: an education is *not* the curriculum.

It's not the repertoire or the technique we learn, or the performance experience we gain. That's the content. It's not the prize.

The real education is in the habits of mind we develop, including the curiosity to pursue meaning through an examined life of artistic inquiry.

It's a long-term process with many mentors needed, including *you*.

I'll close with a quote from Andrew Abbott, professor of sociology at the University of Chicago. He writes: “Education is the light, the shining thing that assigns meanings. It is an invisible creativity that radiates from within. It's not something you have. It is something you are.”

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