

The student teacher relationship is as old as humanity and one that is full of rich and beautiful complexities. Teaching in higher education comes with many privileges but it also comes with great responsibility. As a faculty member in an institution of higher learning, one has the opportunity to help shape the future leaders of our society, those who will carry the mantle of knowledge into the future. As a musician, I am accustomed to a variety of teaching scenarios: classroom teaching, one-on-one applied lessons, group lessons, and ensembles. As a chamber musician, I appreciate the value of collaboration and the ability to learn from all people. But as a classroom teacher and conductor, I also understand the value of setting boundaries and establishing appropriate roles within a framework of mutual respect. In any teaching scenario, I find it absolutely necessary to draw from both areas of experience. In higher education, the faculty have the chance to not only teach a student about a specific subject, but also to teach students to be critical thinkers, to ask good questions, and to fully engage in everything they do. Higher education is a tandem journey in learning a skill set and becoming the best member of society one can be. As a teacher and a mentor, there is no greater reward.

Create an Open Dialogue

Clearly a dialogue requires the participation of all parties and this is absolutely step one. From the moment I step in front of a room full of students, impressions are being made. It is vital to seize that first opportunity to establish a safe and comfortable environment. This dialogue should take place not only between the student and me but also among all students in the classroom. In the Quaker model of learning, the teacher and students sit in a circle and all learn from one another. Even when the teacher is the source of the knowledge in the class or rehearsal room that does not mean that the thoughts or opinions of the students should be in anyway disregarded. Instead, I aim to establish an environment where each student has a voice and the confidence to raise her or his voice. And once this dialogue is established, it must not only exist within the confines of the classroom but also extend into office hours, email, and all forms of communication.

Establish Respect

Once the students and I have established a dialogue, garnering respect is paramount. Establishing a respectful classroom environment is something that happens over the first few weeks of this new relationship. As faculty, we must establish mastery of our fields and demonstrate its relevance to the academic lives of the students. We must foster an environment where students are partners in a relationship of mutual respect with us and with their peers. This does not mean that the classroom is an environment free from challenge or the stretching outside of comfort zones. Quite the contrary. Establishing an environment of mutual respect allows students to explore beyond where they rest comfortably knowing that their observations and concerns are respected and valued.

Set clear goals and expectations

In any class where evaluation of any kind is given, the goals and the expectations must be forthright and transparent. The syllabus must be clearly laid out with all expectations presented as quantifiably as possible. For ensemble and lesson grades, this is a challenge as it can be seen as being incredibly subjective. As some students may be overwhelmed with a lengthy syllabus full of goals, objectives, official university policies, and the like, it is always worth the time to talk through the syllabus with the students to ensure their full and clear understanding of the course expectations.

Establish fair and equitable grading policies

Because of the perceived subjectivity ensemble and lesson grading, it is very helpful to grade each rehearsal or lesson individually. If a student has concern at their midterm grade, it is then very easy to explain the rationale behind said grading when every meeting is given an individual score.

As members of the human race, I strongly believe in the concept of grace and on certain occasions would gladly allow a student to try something again if they “fall down” in their journey in my classroom. Of course this opportunity must be used judiciously and equitably, but in the end I strongly believe in the educational process—in learning, and sometimes the concept of grace is a valuable lesson.

Encourage bold choices and loud mistakes

This is a simple but timeless adage from choral singing. Whether in ensemble singing, lessons, or in the classroom, I will always support a student who makes a mistake boldly—at least she or he is fully engaged. It is important for students to learn that there is no shame in making mistakes. Great musicians make mistakes but great musicians also learn to correct them immediately.

Philosophy of Scholarship

As a professor, it is vital that I find ways to serve the university, the local community, and the greater community of choral artists. This can be accomplished by remaining active as a conductor and singer, continuing to arrange and publish choral music, presenting at the American Choral Director Association or National Association of Teachers of Singing conventions and so on. All of the off-campus work helps raise the profile of the university and signal to colleagues that there are exciting things happening on my campus. At the same time, my primary focus must always be my students. While waving the banner of the university and continuing to raise my own national profile is important, it must never come at the expense of the students who are on campus.