

Two Questions

By Merlin B. Thompson

Whether you're a music teacher with decades of experience or you just recently launched your music teaching career, you've most likely noticed – Times have changed. Things look differently to what they were five years ago, ten years ago, let alone twenty or more years ago. But what exactly are we referring to with the catch-all phrase, "Times have changed"?

This essay is the first in a series devoted to the theme: Times have Changed. My goal is to demonstrate how various themes provide ample evidence that, indeed, times have changed. My hope is to shed light on the power of change, to invite music teachers into the beauty of change, and inspire music teachers to transform their teaching.

Question #1 – For over forty years, I've been conducting professional development seminars for music teachers across Canada, USA, Australia, China, Brazil, and New Zealand. When I first began in the 1980s, I thought it would be useful to launch my teacher workshops with the following primary question –

What skills and knowledge do we want students to take away from music lessons?

During the ensuing decades of workshops, music teachers responded to this primary question with a comprehensive array of fundamental music teaching components. Technique. Practicing. Interpretation.

Repertoire. History. Composition. Dynamics. Scales. Improvisation. Theory. Ensemble. Reading. Music teachers purposefully identified aspects reflective of their commitment to musical excellence. More often than I can remember, responding to this question required thirty minutes or more of workshop time for teachers to fully flesh out the infinite number of critical details to develop in our students. A substantial launchpad for discussion.

Question #2 – Fast forward past the middle of my career and a shift in my teaching so gradual I'm not even aware of it. That is until one day, I'm reviewing the planned activities for another teacher workshop, when something about the primary question strikes me as out of place. Yes, it's a great launchpad for teacher explorations, but I can't help feeling this question no longer accurately represents what I'm trying to accomplish. I seriously need a new angle to engage teachers' thought processes. Two days of heavy thinking are necessary before I settle on –

What will students take away that's meaningful for themselves? After the first lesson? After a year of lessons? Ten years of lessons?

Three words stand out – *meaningful for themselves*. Focusing on what's meaningful for students sharpens my instructional viewpoint. I'm aware there's been an intuitive rerouting of my instructional approach. After some reflection, I assemble a list of student outcomes. A combination of things students have mentioned to me over the years and my own observations of what students valued on their music journey. Let off steam. Teach a song to a peer. Form a band. Complete an exam.

Explore past music masters. Connect with current music stars. Make a music video. Chill out at the instrument. Pursue a professional career. Play for Grandma's birthday. A list as diverse as my students.

Two Questions – It's interesting to consider how the above two questions have a reciprocal impact on each other. How music skills and knowledge provide solid foundation for students to explore what's meaningful; and, what's meaningful for students sheds light on which skills/knowledge will be most efficacious for their musical journey. The challenge is that teachers can be so focused on teaching excellent skills and knowledge, we may fail to notice what we're doing doesn't really match the student. It's the classic example of Sir Paul McCartney, who took music lessons in school, but there was nothing from that experience that he could purposefully or meaningfully incorporate into his love of music and successful musical career.

The above questions highlight something most remarkable – that successful music teaching in today's instructional environment comes with various responsibilities. From the skills/knowledge side, today's teachers are responsible for leading the way, mapping out practical steps to students' musical journey, and keeping students on track. While from the meaningful-for-students side, today's music teaching is also about following our students' lead, paying attention to students' own musical journey, and finding ways to build on and exercise their musical interests. On occasion, it's even about teachers getting out of the way, providing students with the space to experience their own successes and failures.

What I appreciate is that today's music teachers take all this on because they're passionate about music; because they're inclusive and considerate of students themselves; and because they know nothing is more powerful or engaging than students' own heartfelt musical interests. They recognize – **Times have Changed.**

Whether it's visible or invisible, change is a major driver in teaching and learning across multiple musical interests, generations, and geography. While some music teachers may respond to change with caution and inflexibility, others regard change as a welcome companion. Teachers can reinvent what we do. We can revitalize teaching and learning. We can make amazing adjustments to our teaching that reflect how times have changed.

Now that I've got you thinking about change and what's meaningful for students – I'll round out this essay with a few questions:

1. How much of your teaching is focused on passing on musical skills and knowledge?
2. How much of your teaching is devoted to nurturing what's meaningful for students?
3. What are the benefits of teaching what's meaningful for students?
4. How do you feel about change?
5. What makes you nervous about teaching what's meaningful for students?
6. What makes you excited about teaching what's meaningful for students?