



Jazz Teaching Philosophy

Considering jazz is losing its appeal in American popular culture, jazz education has become increasingly important in keeping this art form alive and vibrant. In today's world, the university jazz program is the main river from which the tributaries of jazz flow. The prevalence of the jazz degree at the college level is evidence that most young musicians are learning to play at in school. This is quite a change from the classic era of jazz when musicians learned on the job, traveling and performing with various bands. From the perspective of the general public, the college jazz program also provides an invaluable cultural contribution to the community. In any given city, it is typically the university jazz faculty and students who constitute the jazz scene. It is also the Jazz Appreciation students who make up much of the fan base. In this way, the jazz program is the lifeblood of jazz, breeding new musicians as well as fans.

However, with the institutionalization of jazz come new pitfalls. Educators must walk the fine line between structure (having a solid, logical curriculum) and flexibility (allowing the student to experiment and find his or her own voice). I feel it is important to have educators with considerable playing experience as well as teaching experience, since they must be able to convey both theoretical knowledge as well as intangible knowledge. By intangible knowledge, I mean things like emotion, rhythmic feeling, intensity etc. In order to do this, they must approach their teaching duties with the same intensity that they approach their playing. As all educators know, the act of teaching itself is a skill that must be diligently be practiced and improved. As a teacher, I enjoy this challenge as well as the satisfaction it brings when it is done in a way that is efficient and effective.

In every class I teach, I begin by creating a list of very specific goals that I want my students to achieve. For instance, in my Jazz Appreciation class, I came up with the following list:

1. attend class for each and every lecture
2. remain attentive to the lecture
3. read the assigned chapters of the book
4. attend concerts to hear live jazz
5. share their thoughts and questions in class
6. understand how the instruments interact with each other in jazz
7. understand basic terms that are used to describe music
8. hear the form of a song when presented aurally
9. recognize the instruments in a recording
10. know the most important players in jazz and their importance
11. know the major periods of jazz
12. know how the periods of jazz relate to the overall history of the country
13. be able listen to a piece and recognize the style/period of jazz it is from
14. learn to think independently about music and express those thoughts in writing
15. identify the sound of certain key improvisers when presented examples aurally
16. talk to each other about the material and share their thoughts

17. listen to musical examples regularly on their own time throughout the course
18. enjoy jazz and appreciate it's inherent subtleties and complexities
19. To listen to all music in a more critical way

Based on this list, I put together a curriculum that makes it possible to achieve these goals.

In terms of lessons and ensembles, the same basic philosophy holds true. I begin each course by setting a realistic overall goal as well as smaller performance goals for each lesson/class. Each performance goal must be a small step in the direction of the final goal. Throughout each lesson, my immediate concern is to make sure my students regularly practice correct behaviors, not incorrect ones. Often, I recap the same material from the last lesson to reinforce it to the student, instead of moving on and having to correct fundamental mistakes later.

In my Jazz Appreciation course, I try to teach the material in a context that gives it more depth. To do this, I distill the history of the music down to a few important players. Then, I talk about those key musicians in more depth, from the small scope (their musical contributions) all the way up to the large scope (their place in American history). I even talk about their personal eccentricities and human flaws. In this way, I am able to teach students to think about the musician in a wider variety of contexts, not than just "jazz history." For instance, I could just say Charlie Parker was important as an innovator in bebop improvisation and stop there. But, after the class is over, how many times will students have to think about anything just in terms of jazz history? Probably never. But, if I also talk about Parker's personality quirks and drug addiction, I humanize him, make him more interesting and teach students to associate him with more than his musical contributions. They also learn about how drugs created a subculture in the music scene, how Parker's lifestyle influenced other musicians, how his music became associated with a larger cultural movement that experimented with drugs (the beat generation), and how this movement helped alienate much of the general public from the music. In this way, I am teaching my students how to transfer what they learn about Parker as a musician to larger concepts/discussions they are more likely to encounter in the future.

This idea of emphasizing context is also important in lessons, theory, ensembles, etc. For example, when teaching an element of jazz theory, it is always coupled with an explanation of how the technique originated historically. In addition, I play examples from recordings of jazz masters to demonstrate techniques/harmonic concepts in practical use. In addition to lectures and recordings, I try to make use of all tools available to me, including Powerpoint presentations, videos and live demonstrations, in an attempt to bring theoretical knowledge off the page and allow it to come to life.

Lastly, I think it is important to draw attention to the importance of viewing jazz as a language when teaching improvisation. I'm not speaking metaphorically here. Jazz isn't like a language. It actually is a language: a musical language. Instead of letters, we have notes. Instead of words, we have licks, and instead of paragraphs, we have phrases. And, how does one learn to speak? There is only one real way: by imitation. All of us learned our primary language at a young age through imitation. Most of us didn't learn grammar

until after we could speak the language on at least a basic level. Imitation has and will always be the most efficient way to learn to speak a language and to learn to play jazz. Not only do students learn the building blocks of the language quicker through imitation, but they learn so many intangible things that cannot come from a book. With a spoken language, you learn things like inflection and accent. In jazz, you learn things like rhythmic feel and articulation. The reason I feel this point is so crucial has more to do with the jazz student who is at the very first stages of learning to improvise. A lot of beginners feel they can learn to improvise by reading books on scales and chords. In my humble opinion, too much of this at the onset can prove very destructive. For someone who is completely in the dark, all of this theoretical information is extremely overwhelming and just gets in the way of what should be a very simple period of learning by osmosis.

Of course you'll eventually have to learn theory, but it will make more sense to tackle it after you've learned to "speak" the musical language to some extent. It's the equivalent of trying to teach a child about prepositions before he or she can even say the word "preposition." Instead, we let our children pick up basic speech by imitating us. Then, when they are older and have a basic grasp on the language, they can take the time to learn grammar. Grammar gives them a control of their language and allows them to create art in the form of stories, poems, etc. Music is the same way. We must give students enough time to learn to speak the language of jazz through listening, transcribing and ear playing. And, above all, patience must be stressed. Think about how long it takes to master a language; that is, to really speak it fluently and effortlessly. The same applies to jazz. To teach jazz improvisation is really to teach the process of *teaching yourself*. These skills, properly set up, will allow students to grow as musicians even after they leave school.