

# Observing the Student-Teacher Relationship

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Have you ever noticed that you feel exhausted after teaching some of your students and exhilarated after others? With some, you're catching yourself frequently glancing at the clock (which appears to have stopped) and with others you are constantly surprised that the lesson is over already?

I used to attribute this phenomenon to working with talented students versus the not so talented ones. While of course it can be more interesting to teach students who find picking up a musical instrument easy and make speedy progress, I've found that there are other factors to consider too, and they're totally within your control.

One of the most striking realizations that I've had is that there is a correlation between how much effort I put into a lesson and how much effort the students make- and sometimes it's an inverse correlation! As a young, inexperienced teacher, it was as if the harder I tried, the more I demonstrated, the more I spoke, the less my students did any of those things. As if there were only a certain amount of oxygen in the room and the deeper and faster I breathed, the less air remained for my student.

At one extreme, I remember lessons where I literally was left panting at the end of the hour, and the student appeared cool and unmoved. I began to realize that I needed to sit back in my seat, loosen my jaw, roll my shoulders, breathe deeply, speak less and give the students more space. As I began to become more aware of my energy and body language, it was quite an adjustment for my students, and me, and it was also the beginning of a wonderful journey of exploration for me, discovering what it really means to be a teacher.

As a result of gradual but substantial changes on my part, I began to notice other factors at work. When I sat back and gave eleven-year-old Rosie space at the piano, she shyly expressed an interest in composing her own pieces, and we took our lessons in a whole new direction. On the other hand, when I did the same with fourteen-year-old Natalie, she remained the taciturn, sulky teenager she had been all along, and it became clear that she would rather have been at home playing video games. She quit lessons shortly afterward, to our mutual relief.

One thing I've learned is that I don't need to be an entertainer. If the child is really not interested in playing the piano, I'm very happy for them to take up electric guitar, horse-back riding or ballet.

A big discovery for me, as a young teacher, was that I needed to be more discerning about which students I accepted into my studio, not necessarily in terms of talent, but in terms of interest. I was keen to build my business, partly for financial reasons, and was therefore susceptible to the enthusiasm- and sometimes cajoling- of the parents who brought their students for lessons, "because I gave up the piano as a teenager and

regretted it” or “because I never had the chance to play and always wanted to”. Worthy sentiments, but when their children were fidgeting miserably or blankly gazing around the room, I discovered that I was well advised to direct my questions to them personally, and ascertain whether they in fact were interested in learning the piano, or indeed music of any kind.

Now if I discover that the child is showing no interest, I immediately encourage them to try another activity rather than piano lessons, and if the child is ambivalent, we set up a trial period of four to six lessons, “to see if we are compatible”, with no obligation on either side to continue after that period.

This system made me uncomfortable initially, as I had to become more assertive, and risk parents’ displeasure. However, 25 years on, I am delighted with the students in my current studio, all of whom practice diligently and energetically, focus enthusiastically during lessons, and perform with evident love of music and their instrument. After all, as one of my colleagues in London said to me, “I don’t want to have to convince anyone that music is beautiful.”