TEACHING PERCUSSION: GROWING WITH YOUR STUDENTS

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Most percussion instructors would agree that we hope to help students not only develop technical proficiency but also understand that there are many acceptable technical and musical approaches to a given piece of music and that the student must select the approach that is right for him or her. This has been called an understanding of relativism by William Perry, who has done research on the development of intellectual and moral relativism among college students.1 Perry presented a scheme of stages through which an individual progresses in learning that "everything is relative." Robert W. White says of the scheme, "So important is this pattern of change that the teacher who hopes to nurture it must practice his art with responsive versatility."2

Since percussion students tend to move from instructor to instructor, it may be difficult for a given instructor to know how best to help a student develop this understanding. In this paper, I will present a general description of Perry's scheme of stages, and will discuss how a typical percussion student might progress through them. If a teacher is able to understand how far along in this development a student has come and what sort of information will best help him or her to develop further, the teacher may offer technical and musical training that reflects White's "responsive versatility."

Perry's Scheme of Stages

Perry presents his scheme in terms of learning in academic areas such as English and history, so I present the scheme in that context. The scheme involves nine stages, each of which is marked with a roman numeral in the following discussion. He suggests that students may pass through the stages with a steady, forward movement, but students may also deviate from the path as I will discuss below.

Perry suggests that a young student begins his or her education by viewing the subject in polar terms, i.e., right vs. wrong. Authorities are present to teach what "Is Right" (I). However, when a student receives conflicting information from authorities, the student holds on firmly to what he or she first learned as "right" and sees authorities with different views as "wrong" or needlessly confused (II). When authorities acknowledge the student that they do not know some answers, the student accepts uncertainty as unavoidable sometimes but feels that the right answers do exist. He or she also feels that authorities should know those right answers so may question their competence (III). As the student perceives that authorities continue to judge him or her while not knowing the right answers, the student sees that while no one can know some "right answers," everyone is entitled to his or her own opinion (IV). As a student grows older, he or she comprehends more of the diversity inherent in the world, and recognizes the importance of contextual considerations in the judgement of any question. Broad opinions give way to opinions about special cases (V).

As the student grows still older, the need for a self-identity becomes an important factor. He or she apprehends the logical necessity of orienting himself or herself in a relativistic world through personal commitment to particular opinions (VI). Therefore, the student makes an initial commitment and recognizes some degree of acceptance (VII). The student experiences the tensions of responsibility for his or her commitment, particularly in response to others with differing opinions (VIII). Finally, the student recognizes his or her own changes in mood and approach over time; consequently, he or she sees commitment as an ongoing expression of his or her changing identity (IX).

Application to the study of percussion

To understand how this scheme might describe the learning process for a percussion student, let us imagine a very interested young percussionist studying with his or her first teacher in today's educational system for musicians. Initial instruction is most often aimed at developing technical proficiency, while often ignoring concepts of sound quality. Our hypothetical student has no background in percussion, so the instruction is centered upon the learning of snare drum technique and most often involves the pointing out of his or her mistakes. The student comfortably accepts the system as proposing the "rights" and "wrong" of technique (I).

The transition from stage I to stage 2 might occur when the student leaves his or her first teacher and begins to study with another. This new teacher begins instruction much like the first one, focusing on technique and pointing out the student's mistakes, which reinforces the student's beliefs in the existence of "right" and "wrong." The new teacher's approach will, no doubt, differ in some respects from that of the first teacher; the student will slowly perceive this diversity of opinion. According to Perry, the student may be resistant to accepting those novel aspects of the new teacher's approach and may question the teacher's competence (II).

As the student is exposed to new teachers and peers, the student becomes aware of many different and sometimes conflicting technical approaches exist. Also, the novel issue of sound quality may be raised, which would expand the domain of potential diversity. As the student perceives diversity of opinions in terms of sound quality and technical approaches he or she may question the competence of conductors or teachers, inferring that they are "confused" or lacking knowledge (III).

Exposure to new playing situations and instructors continues, and the student soon realizes that the "right approach" does not exist and that teachers and conductors have a right to their opinions. This recognition may result in a reduction of the resistance that may have characterized the student's dealings with teachers and conductors who request a change in the student's approach (IV). Perhaps as the student enters high school, further playing opportunities and an exposure to the history of music may lead the student to see that each musical situation connotes a different set of musical values and the concepts of technique and sound quality should vary with musical situations (V).

If the student sustains a serious interest in the study of percussion, as adolescence progresses he or she may feel the need to establish a self-identity in terms of commitments to particular technical and musical approaches (VI). By this time, an understanding of phrasing and musical expression presumably begins to develop, and the student sees his or her identity in terms of both those expressions and the technical sound quality choices.

The author would like to thank Niel Deson for his "responsive versatility" in teaching, which is the primary inspiration for this paper.

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he or she makes (VII). Interactions with students and instructors who have differing
options will not doubt give rise to internal tensions about the commitments the student
makes (VIII). However, changes in his or her own commitments in response to these
pressures and changes of mood allow the student to comfortably accept his or her
own commitments and those of others as expressions of individual identities (IX).

Implications for percussion instruction

This description of a percussion student's development has a number of implications
for percussion instruction. For example, movement from stage to stage is primarily
motivated by external events. Studying with a number of different teachers, interacting
with peers, and working with conductors seem to be important stimuli for growth. A
student who does not study privately after an early point or who does not play in an
ensemble under a conductor and interact with peers may be staled at many points in
development. Frequent exposure to a diversity of percussionists is important.

Beyond encouraging students to study privately and to play with ensembles, there
are other important implications of Perry's scheme. Most of us know that we can't teach
a 10-year-old relativistically about the many possible techniques he or she might use in
different situations. We also know that it doesn't make sense to train a conservatory
student to play according to a narrow technique as we would a 10-year-old. Perry's
scheme helps to illuminate the nature of development so we know when it may be best
to raise certain issues in teaching.

For example, a young student beginning study with his or her second teacher might
resist certain aspects of the new approach because it conflicts with his or her past training.
It seems that this student would be best told to try out the new system for the period of
these lessons, given that he or she may go back to the old system after a specified amount
of time if he or she elects to do so. Thus, the difficult process of accepting the multiplicity
of systems by the student may be discouraged. A relaxed confidence behind a teacher's
evaluations of the student's performance will aid his or her acceptance of relativism.
Instructors could best aid serious students who have reached stage 4 by discussing relativism
openly and explicitly presenting many approaches to a given musical situation.
Students who reach stage 6 should have some understanding of musical expression, which
teachers should provide explicitly; such students should be encouraged to make
commitments and should receive feedback on the integrity of their chosen approach, not on the
alternative approach they should take.

The scheme has implications for the issue of teaching students about sound quality
as well. We might assume that the primary concern of conductors is quality of sound
rather than the particular technique a student employs. However, many conductors ask
young players to change the technique they are employing with no mention of sound
quality. That is, they might suggest playing closer to the edge of the drum head or using
harder mallets. If a student has reached stage 2 or 3, this technical instruction may add
to the student's confusion and may cause needless resentment toward a conductor.
It seems that conductors could avoid arousing such feelings while still achieving their goal
by describing to the student the change in sound desired and by encouraging him or her to experiment with different techniques to produce it. This may be somewhat
more time-consuming in rehearsal situations, but the time is well-spent from an
ducational perspective.

One potential problem with this approach would stem from the fact that some students
may not think in terms of sound quality. Many students' instruction today focuses only
on technical issues; a conductor's request to change the quality of sound may require these
students to suddenly think in new terms. This, too, would cause confusion and perhaps
resentment. The most obvious solution, then, is for teachers to raise this issue long before
the student enters an ensemble. Even lessons using a drum pad can incorporate a concern
for quality of sound. If teachers raise this issue early in a student's training, the priorities
among sound quality and choice of technique can be made clear and an important founda-
tion for an understanding of relativism can be established.

Another implication of the scheme addresses the conservatory situation in which
many percussion students interact as a cohort and are instructed by one teacher. The
tendency in these situations may be for all students to assimilate toward a common
musical and technical approach. This does not provide a supportive environment for the
establishing of unique self-identities. Teachers might be very helpful by explicitly encour-
gerading students to play the same piece in their own ways and to develop a repertoire
of techniques. It may also be helpful if instructors exaggerate their concern for quality of
sound and integrity of musical expression while acknowledging that technique merely
serves these two goals.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have presented a scheme of stages developed by William Perry, Jr.,
which describes the development of a student's understanding of relativism. This scheme
is valuable to percussion instructors because it may help cast light on the needs and
perspectives of their students so that their instruction may be more responsive to them.
Indeed, the scheme may also be helpful to percussion instructors so that we may see ourselves
and our own needs more clearly. It may be useful for us to examine the degree to
which we have made commitments from a relativistic perspective and the tensions that
have been consequent to those commitments. If we have had difficulty making
commitments and establishing a self-identity with respect to our playing, it will no doubt be
difficult for us to support our students in such an endeavor.

Footnotes

1. William G. Perry, Jr., Forms of Intellectual and Ethical Development in the College
2. Robert W. White, Foreword to Forms of Intellectual and Ethical Development in the
   College Years by William G. Perry, Jr. (New York: Holt Rinehart and Winston, Inc.,
   1968), p. v
3. J. Piaget, The Origins of Intelligence in Children. (New York: International Univer-
   sities Press, 1952); and J. H. Flavell, Cognitive Development. (Englewood Cliffs,
5. Research has offered evidence in support of these intuitive notions; see R. C. Glaser and

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