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Teaching adult music students

Many music teachers are seeing an increase in the number of adult students, who are either beginners or returning to piano tuition following a long break. In response to this, we would like to share with you a summary of the research carried out by Leah Coutts from Brisbane, who presented a paper at the 2013 Piano Pedagogy Conference on the subject of adult student learners.

Many adult students start piano lessons with unrealistic expectations and aspirations to be able to play without much effort. This can impede their learning and result in frustration at uncooperative fingers and feelings of helplessness. Leah Coutt’s paper, “Why can’t I just play already? Addressing adult frustrations at the Piano through mindsets and experiential learning strategies.” (2013) explains possible ways to allow students to reach their end goals faster, while also enjoying the journey. The following is an extract of the paper which can be found at: http://appca.com.au/2013proceedings.php

Through consultation of literature on educational psychology and adult learning theories, it appears that the answer to adult students’ uncooperative fingers may not lie in motor issues, but in those of the mind. The paper discusses the ways in which self-theories and mindsets affect a student’s approach to learning and addresses how experiential learning techniques, the power of language, and technology may be utilised to guide students’ focus towards a growth mindset.

Fixed vs growth mindsets

It was educational psychologist Carol Dweck, (Dweck 2007) who first explored the relationship between people’s implicit self-theories and the effects on their learning. The two theories that Dweck identified are “fixed mindset” and “growth mindset”, and it has been argued that a student’s predilection to one or the other will affect their approach to learning.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Fixed mindset characteristics</th>
<th>Growth mindset characteristics</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Avoid challenges</td>
<td>Embrace mindset</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Get defensive/give up early</td>
<td>Persist despite setbacks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ignore negative feedback</td>
<td>Learn from criticism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feel threatened by others’ successes</td>
<td>Feel inspired by others’ successes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May plateau and achieve less than potential</td>
<td>Are able to reach higher levels of development</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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Professional development

Following the popularity of recent teacher workshops in Violin and Piano, AMEB Victoria will be offering further professional development opportunities to AMEB teachers throughout 2015.

Piano for Leisure workshops with Peter Hurley

During Term 2 and Term 3, Peter Hurley will present a workshop on Piano for Leisure in seven locations, including: Albury, Ballarat, Bendigo, Traralgon, Geelong, and Melbourne on two dates. For more information and to register, see the information at the end of this article about receiving emails.

ATMusA preparation seminars

In 2015, AMEB Victoria will provide a series of lectures, seminars and workshops designed to support preparation for AMEB’s Associate Teacher of Music, Australia examination. Providing a comprehensive study of a wide range of areas associated with private studio teaching, the six units of the program will be presented by renowned experts in their field: Ms Elizabeth Mitchell, Dr Ros McMillan, and Mr Fintan Murphy. Teachers are welcome to enrol for individual units if wishing to develop knowledge in a particular area. For more information and to register, see the information at the end of this article about receiving emails.

Make sure you receive the email about professional development dates and times!

All teachers who enrolled candidates for exams in 2014 will receive an email early next year detailing the dates and venues for these professional development opportunities. To ensure you receive the information, place the email address enquiries@ameb.unimelb.edu.au on your safe sender list so the email goes to your inbox instead of your junk mail. If you did not enrol in 2014, go to the AMEB Victoria website, click on Subscribe to AMEB Victoria News, and you will receive an email with details in February 2015.
New Recorded Accompaniments

Beginning in 2015, AMEB will progressively release recorded accompaniments for use in study and examinations. Where AMEB recorded accompaniments are available, candidates may perform with those recordings in examinations at Performance tempo. Available in CD format or as a digital download, the first recorded accompaniments to be released will be: Flute Series 3 (Preliminary to Grade 3); Percussion Series 1 (Preliminary to Grade 4); Violin Series 9 (Preliminary to Grade 3).

Whilst the recorded accompaniments will be very useful practice tools, learning to play with an accompanist can be beneficial to a young musician’s development. Although it is possible to present for lower grade examinations using the official AMEB recorded accompaniment, performance with an accompanist is encouraged, where possible.

Candidates should note that, if presenting for examination with an official AMEB recorded accompaniment CD or downloaded audio file, only the Performance (100%) tempo may be used. Further, the candidate is responsible for providing and operating playback equipment.

Once available, recorded accompaniments can be purchased as CDs from AMEB Victoria, or purchased as a download from digital music outlets such as iTunes, Amazon and Google Play.

My Tempo App

AMEB will also release an app for use with the recorded accompaniments. Called My Tempo, the app allows the user to speed up or slow down the accompaniment tempo as required for practice purposes. The app also allows the purchase of individual tracks from within the app or transfer of tracks into the app from a CD. Other features include a “loop function”, allowing repeated practice of the same passage and a metronome function that enables the speed to be checked.

Once available, My Tempo will be available for both Apple and Android devices and can be purchased from the relevant app stores.

Revised Theory of Music Syllabus

A revised version of the Theory of Music Syllabus will appear for the first time in the 2015 Manual of Syllabuses. There have been no changes to Grades 1 to 6, but Grade 7 has been removed so candidates now progress from Grade 6 to Diploma level where three new diplomas are now available at both Associate and Licentiate level: Musicology; Harmony & Counterpoint; and Orchestration & Arrangement.

Within each specialty, there is a wide variety of choice as well as exciting and innovative elements designed to appeal to the creativity of candidates. With the exception of the Licentiate in Harmony & Counterpoint, all diplomas consist of one written paper, while the Licentiate in Harmony & Counterpoint has two examinable sections: Section I consists of a written paper (total mark of 60), and Section II consists of the creation of an original composition (total mark of 40).

Candidates currently studying for exams within the old version of the syllabus will be able to complete their qualification within the timeframes previously published. For more information on the revised syllabus, please consult the 2015 Manual of Syllabuses. The Theory of Music syllabus is also available as a digital download in PDF format, and can be purchased from AMEB Victoria. Publication order forms can be downloaded from the AMEB Victoria website.

Special discount offer extended

Buy the publications and syllabuses you need for 2015 from AMEB Victoria before 30 January and you will receive a 10% discount on purchases over $100. AMEB Victoria clients will continue to receive free postage on all orders.
Those with a fixed mindset believe that intelligence is innate and thus expect that if they are not ‘good’ at something straight away then they must not be talented in that area. They are concerned with proving their ability to others, and any negative feedback is seen as a threat. They tend to exert less effort and persistence in the face of challenges due to the fear of exposure. The end result is that the desire to learn piano and participation in piano lessons does not necessarily mean that positive practice strategies will be employed at home. Having a fixed mindset may be a root cause.

Of course, it is not as simple as the dualism described in the table, and there is a scale between fixed and growth mindsets with each person finding themselves on a different degree of the scale. However, how people spend practice time has a direct bearing on their learning progress, which further impacts on their mindsets, and confirms their beliefs about ability, practice, skill and effort.

Experiential learning
Most experts believe that the most productive focus for learning a skill comes from being immersed in the process, rather than being focused on the end product or goal. This focus on mastery over performance leads to the development of a strategy and the characteristics of growth mindsets that result in optimal learning.

Dweck discovered six key interventions that are able to move students from a fixed mindset to a growth mindset. These show that:

1. Awareness of the existence of mindsets is enough to start shifting mindsets automatically.
2. Providing information supporting nurture over nature moves people towards a growth mindset.
3. Praise of the use of problem-solving strategies, effort, persistence and hard work move people towards growth mindsets; while praise of ability, intelligence or competence moves people towards fixed mindsets.
4. Constructive criticism, such as the need for different strategies, more effort, more persistence, or to try harder move people towards a growth mindset.
5. Consistently drawing attention to the amount of improvement shows that learning is happening incrementally.
6. Teacher’s behaviours and actions model the theory they hold and students absorb and adopt these.

The power of language
Language is a powerful tool for influencing and shaping students’ mindsets. ‘Doing’ phrases have a tendency to create tension and result in a student trying too hard. Awareness instructions, on the other hand, allow students to experience and give themselves feedback.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Doing phrases</th>
<th>Awareness phrases</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Do…</td>
<td>Be aware of…</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>This is difficult, but…</td>
<td>Listen for…</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Play it like this…</td>
<td>How does it feel when you…</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Make it better…</td>
<td>Tell me the difference you notice between…</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Try harder to…</td>
<td>What do you hear when you…</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Now relax!</td>
<td>Pay attention to the…</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Let’s get it right this time…</td>
<td>Notice the feeling you get when…</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Use of technology
In between lessons, the student does not have a role model to demonstrate the desired output, so a video of key sections of the lesson may help to bridge the gap. However, it is the job of teachers to guide students on how to use the feedback and answer critical questions to inform their next execution.

Reflective piano practice takes the form of sensory feedback, which is used to evaluate outcomes. There are two types of feedback: inherent, which comes from within the student, and instructional, which comes from an outside source. While instructional feedback allows students to understand what is required to produce the desired outcome, it is important students also learn to self-analyse in order to practice effectively at home.

Reflective questioning within the studio and also during home practice may include:

- How did it sound/how did you expect it to sound?
- What worked/didn’t work?
- Are there other ways of playing that may produce a more desirable sound?
- How did it feel?

By fostering a focus on process over product and guiding students to generate their own ideas, draw their own conclusions, analyse, evaluate and reflect on their learning responses, growth mindsets can be developed. This will not only contribute to a student’s musical growth, but may also impact positively on their longevity as students by replacing frustration with inquisitiveness and enjoyment of the journey towards their musical goals.