

TEACHERS ARE LIKE CHAMELEONS.

By Amy Meenk

Teachers are like chameleons. For survival, chameleons transform their skin color to communicate different messages and adapt to changing climates. Teachers must have these same adaptive qualities to “survive” in today’s classroom. The challenge of maintaining a positive classroom dynamic while structuring lessons for a variety of learning styles to reach every child requires the educator to wear many “skins.” A broad understanding of learning theories that have developed over the years coupled with diverse teaching and life experiences has shaped my teaching philosophy.

Educational philosophies typically understand the belief that every person can learn as an effort to be all-inclusive in our pedagogy. Teaching a wheelchair bound student clarinet, a dyslexic student how to read notes, or an ADD student how to organize his practice schedule brings into focus the acute realities of truly knowing that every person can learn. Certainly, as educators, we all share in the challenges of teaching those who learn at different rates, with preferred learning styles. Instructional activities and assessments, therefore, should appeal to the different forms of intelligences (Gardner). As a director of bands, the belief that every person can learn takes on new meaning. I continually work in opposition to the notion that musical talent is somehow a gift or inborn. Every person can *learn* to play music.

The technique of modeling has proved to be an efficient and effective way to teach music. Playing with students in their private lessons, demonstrating concepts, rhythms, and tone without the use of words, clearly speaks the non-verbal language of music. Adding visual notations or labels results in stronger retention over the student’s week of practice (Bandura). Student modeling is also utilized in full band rehearsals. I encourage and guide my young bands to collectively solve musical problems through conversation and peer demonstration (Pask). The ability to improve as group, using the talents, ideas, and knowledge of members from within, creates a true sense of empowerment and ownership in the band. “Self-initiated learning is the most lasting and pervasive” (Rogers). Student modeling also provides a positive way to nurture more advanced students in the ensemble.

Creativity and learning are deeply interwoven, if not one in the same. Providing opportunities to create and transform ideas within the context of the classroom actively engages the student (Bruner). National standards have called to attention the imperative nature of composition in the music classroom. Teaching music through composition results in a deeper musical understanding that comes through students enabling themselves, ascertaining their own knowledge and putting their new skills to use. I teach students to compose, notate and perform simple melodic phrases from the first weeks of discovery. As such, the student fosters the identity of composer; creativity is not an unseen goal, achieved only after one has mastered the system of music.

Every young musician encounters the challenge of learning how to practice. Teaching students this skill, how to independently improve as a musician, provides a

solid foundation to the successful band program. Playing an instrument requires the development of muscles in the face and jaw, hands and fingers, arms and shoulders. “Connections become strengthened with practice and weakened when practice is discontinued” (Thorndike). Repetitive hand, finger, and embouchure exercises lead to muscle memory. The novice musician *thinks* about how to play his instrument, while the expert views his instrument as an extension of his body, freely expressing himself through the art of music. Ultimately, students are more fully engaged, and feel more successful, when they practice.

The various performance opportunities offered by a healthy band program helps students realize - through experience - that their talents are valued within their community. Performing at fundraising events, and sharing our music with the surrounding community, such as Summerwood residents, are examples of how band students learn responsibility towards others and for themselves. Social interaction is essential to the development of the young musician (Lave and Vygotsky). Successful participation in band is, in many ways, a progression of each individual student’s role as they share in a common goal. First, students recognize their place in a section. Second, the section learns its place in the larger band. Finally, the band, as individuals acting in concert, learns the value and purpose of community. Each performing opportunity positively reinforces their newfound sense of identity. One of my joys as an educator is to observe the powerful change I see in my students as they come to know themselves as part of a larger whole.

The responsibility of an educator is to teach every child. This central mission is best achieved with the acknowledgment that students learn differently. Clearly understanding and applying accepted learning theories establishes a basis of instruction for the effective educator. Lesson plans and units of study should appeal to every learning style and classrooms ought to include teaching aids for many learning approaches. We transform ourselves- our teaching styles- daily to meet the needs of our students affirming the idea that teachers are, indeed, like chameleons.