

# Triggering

And

# Holding On To *Students’ Interest*

*By Merlin B. Thompson*


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Isn’t it fascinating how casual conversations have a way of revealing unexpected and delightful insights? At least, that’s what happened when I got together with a colleague for a sushi luncheon. “How’s teaching going?” I asked, and my colleague responded with a theme vital to her teaching. Something so basic I could not imagine why it had never surfaced in our previous conversations. It is the theme for this article—interest—a simple word with a remarkable impact. Because one thing is certain, we all

know how a person’s interest has an undeniable influence on his or her learning.

Interest may be described as the feeling of attention, concern or curiosity a person experiences in being engaged by an object, thought, feeling or event. When we acknowledge our interest in something, we may notice how interest brings a kind of vitality into play, a highly desirable heightening of energy. Examining the past 100 years of contemporary educational developments, interest and educational opportunities enjoy a close relation-



ship. John Dewey<sup>1</sup> was one of the first North American educators to acknowledge that learning is influenced not only by personal interest but also by the interestingness of tasks. More recently, Ontario Institute for Studies in Education member, Suzanne Hidi recognized interest as a “motivating force and as a mental resource”<sup>2</sup> in education.

My goal in this article is to develop greater understanding of interest as a teaching tool for music instructors. I examine how teachers may trigger and hold onto their students’ interest, especially in working with beginner students during their weekly lessons. Three themes provide an overarching structure for exploration: unconditional personal connections, novelty and challenge, and the power of smiling and humor.

### Unconditional Personal Connections

I have often thought music teachers are much like generous hosts who make meaningful connections with people through the marvels of music. Granted, there are hosts who may lack generosity in their outlook. For example, hosts who only invite people like themselves, or hosts whose exclusive focus is on controlling others or hosts who bring people together for the purpose of self-aggrandizing. That is not what I am referring to in this case. I am talking about inclusive and sensitive hosts who welcome and appreciate others, hosts who happily give others their full attention, hosts who open up without reservation because they’re comfortable with themselves as persons. Generous hosts readily foster unconditional and personal connections with others. They create the fluid

and dynamic conditions for triggering and holding onto another person’s interest.

Music teachers may prepare for hosting musical explorations by making sure they have a comprehensive understanding of music teaching and by getting to know their students. And just as hosting a dinner party is more complex than knowing what’s on the menu and who is on the invitation list, musical hosts know that successful musical explorations rely on more than an established curriculum and information garnered from a student questionnaire. Musical explorations involve unconditional personal connections—the illuminating conversations, silences, investigations and intuitions that occur between teachers and students during their weekly lessons.

Connecting with students in unconditional and personal ways is something I take very seriously in my teaching. On the one hand, I look fastidiously at student details. How do students enter the room? Do they come with their parents? If so, who enters first? What words do they use to communicate? What does their body language reveal? On the other hand, I am attentive to my own actions, how I acknowledge students, the words I use, where I look when I talk and the kinds of questions I ask. Particularly during the beginning student’s first weeks of lessons, I do everything I can to demonstrate warmth, sincerity, likability and cooperation. I know that students will pick up quickly on who I am and that who we are precedes what we do together. So I am mindful that my language, gestures, body language and tone of voice need to be student compatible. I avoid being overly bold with shy students or artificially friendly

with self-assured students, and I stay away from the perils of over-eagerness like smiling too hard, trying to be too witty, being overly polite, too clever and patronizing. I want students to feel they can trust me.

With unconditional and highly personal connections as our mutual starting point, my role as teacher is to actively engage students in explorations that generate instant enjoyment and immediate success. This feature of teaching is affirmed in research by Ithaca College Associate Professor P.R. Subramaniam<sup>3</sup> who proposed educators offer activities or tasks that give students ample exploratory opportunities ultimately leading to the instant enjoyment of learning. Subramaniam’s emphasis on instant enjoyment is of particular importance with beginning students whose trust in teachers may be meaningfully amplified by the immediacy of their enjoyment and achievement. Conversely, beginning students’ belief in teachers’ trustworthiness may be severely jeopardized by overly passive and lengthy instructional tasks.

To facilitate instant enjoyment and immediate success, I purposefully break down and expand activities in relation to what students can positively handle. When musical explorations are too difficult, I find something easier. When there’s a lack of sufficient challenge, I find ways to explore at a higher level. I favor vocabulary my students can understand and use their experiences to introduce new words or concepts. I ask questions students may easily answer within their realm of comprehension, avoiding questions that may result in “I don’t know.” I often marvel aloud at their ability to answer my inquiries. Above all, I’m

fastidious in validating students' success with empowering descriptive language, deliberately stepping away from what might be termed as noncommittal language. It is not unusual for me to follow up successful students' performances with conversations similar to the following:

MBT: Nicely done! What do you think?

Student (passive): It was good.

MBT (incredulous): Good?? I thought it was fantastic! Why don't you play it again and we'll check it out. (Student successfully plays again.) Yes! It definitely was fantastic. What do you think?

Student (hesitating): It was fantastic?

MBT (championing): Absolutely! Or if you want, you could even say "Amazing!" Or "Extraordinary" How about "Best Ever!"?

Student (active): Okay. Amazing!

My goal is not merely to help students be successful. It is to make sure students actually enjoy their success, that they're uplifted by what they accomplish. For beginner students, I encourage this kind of active affirmative language, knowing that when they get home, students are more likely to be interested in re-engaging with "amazing" or "fantastic" explorations than "good" ones. Not to mention, it will be a lot of fun to reexamine their "fantastic" explorations at their next lesson with me. Taking on the role of a generous musical host may explain a lot about why I enjoy teaching so much, because every week I'm privileged to witness my students experience the self-affirmations of instant enjoyment and immediate success.

### **Novelty And Challenge**

Whether it is a basic skill like walking or talking, or a complex skill like

mathematic calculation or theatrical performance, stable and repetitive activities provide human beings with the means for developing ease and proficiency. We flourish in the security of repetitive habits because the routines of daily life provide us with a sense of permanence and continuity. Stable and repetitive activities also provide music teachers with the secure means for developing students' consistency and competency in learning to play a musical instrument. This is especially apparent and beneficial with beginner students wherein positive repetitive activities strengthen students' level of mastery and affirm their trust in the teacher-created learning environment. With the goal of developing consistent habits, teachers intentionally and intuitively incorporate teaching strategies that allow them to monitor the fundamental concepts of musical performance: for example—tone production, technique, concentration and rhythmic continuity. Yet, in spite of the obvious benefits to this kind of habit-forming instruction, there's a major drawback in that students may become bored and disengaged with the relentless pattern of repetitious activities. Such activities may become the antithesis of triggering and holding onto students' interest.

One reason students typically lose interest in repetitive instructional activities relates to their perception of learning activities as having "nothing new." Week after week, they experience their lessons as the "same-old-same-old." Teachers may be so intensely focused on specific performance or repertoire needs that they lose sight of their students' response. To counter this drawback of "same-old-same-old," I fill my teaching with an endless stream of flexible explo-

rations, using a wealth of energetic expressions that spring spontaneously from that day's lessons. For example, on the day Keenan shows up wearing his hockey jersey, we use hockey energy to enliven our explorations. When Janine begins with a story of diving on the weekend, diving becomes the operative energetic theme for exploring tone production, technique, concentration and rhythmic continuity. Teachers who find ways to make activities or tasks novel have a better chance of increasing students' interest and participation.<sup>4</sup> Using dynamic metaphors like the weather, holidays, colors and more allows my students and I to bring fresh energy to students' repetitious explorations while purposefully strengthening their habits of musical performance.

Another way teachers may avoid the drawbacks of "same-old-same-old" is by introducing challenges that elevate students' involvement. Teaching that inspires high levels of engagement from students is more likely to evoke students' interest, while passive rote instruction is likely to produce minimal engagement. Teachers need to challenge students at appropriate levels because tasks that are too simple may be perceived as a waste of time, while tasks too difficult may be detrimental to students' striving for success. As Abuhamdeh and Csikszentmihalyi<sup>5</sup> affirmed, challenges are important for the enjoyment of intrinsically motivated, goal-directed activities. Challenges empower students to take ownership of their efforts whether playing with eyes closed, keeping a steady pulse, playing with no mistakes, looking at the ceiling or playing with no assistance. Both my students and I enjoy coming up with suitable challenges. For example, my student Ethan likes

playing with his legs crossed while standing up. His sister Janet can't resist sitting crooked as her favorite challenge. Most likely, students will intuitively challenge their performance ability at home by playing fast, loud or out of tempo. So, by incorporating a variety of teacher-directed and student-valued challenges into the weekly lesson, teachers stimulate and validate students' own intrinsic sense of meaningful exploration. They reinforce the repetitious practice necessary for strengthening students' level of musical mastery.

### The Power Of Smiling And Humor

There may be no better way for teachers to set the tone of their teaching than by smiling. Even before teachers find out about their students or respond to students' questions, before handing out studio policies or tuition documents, smiling reveals a lot about what students might expect from their teachers. It tells them that teachers care about their students and endeavor to create educational spaces where students feel a sense of safety, inclusion and being valued. Smiling is an easy way for teachers to show sensitivity to their students' vulnerability and support students' most basic needs of acceptance and belonging before engaging with the business of learning.

The anatomy of smiling is captured in the curls at the corners of the mouth, in the twinkle of the eyes, and in the way a person tilts and nods his or her head. These multi-layered dynamics of facial expression essentially transmit a snapshot of information that others may interpret. Furthermore, when we smile, we initiate an entire flush of extraordinary changes to our outlook because facial

expressions not only communicate our current mood, they also have the ability to influence our mood as well. Research by P.B. Pillippen<sup>6</sup> revealed that smiling has a positive impact on numerous physical, subconscious, intellectual and emotional levels. It calms the heart and relaxes the body. It reduces blood pressure and lets us physically work without overworking. In counteracting the stresses associated with unfamiliar situations, smiling helps in broadening and opening our perceptions to insights that might come from our own subconscious or someone else. By choosing to smile, we may bring about positive internal and external changes that automatically impact our capacity for creativity, learning and decision making.

Smiling has two important implications in working with my beginner students. First, I smile to communicate my own approachability, courteousness, credibility and competency. I want students to be comfortable with the immediacy of our relationship. Second, I interpret students' smiles as indication of how they feel about what's going on. Given that lesson activities involve all kinds of intensities, students' smiles may reveal whether they are fully engaged, passively taking part or completely disconnected from what we are doing together. This doesn't mean my teaching is only about encouraging students to smile. Obviously, there are numerous occasions when not smiling may be an indication of complete engagement. Paying attention to my students' facial expressions helps me to stay attuned to their state of mind. The information gleaned from the intensity of their smiles or not-smiles lets me know when it might be appropriate and how it might be beneficial to introduce a

bit of humor—a momentary indulgence in light-heartedness.

A sense of humor may be characterized as the capacity we have for taking delight in the extraordinary and ordinary situations of life. Humor is experienced in those moments of optimistic amusement that often arrive unpredictably as demonstrated in the following example from my teaching:

Nathan's performance confidently displayed his own refreshing approach to dynamics:

"I could hear your imagination going full force all the way through," I enthusiastically reported. "I'll bet people are always telling you what a great imagination you have."

"Well," Nathan affirmed nonchalantly. "Actually some of my friends have said I do have a good *imagi-Nathan!*"

Humorous incidents like Nathan's *imagi-Nathan* have vital implications for teaching and learning because they strengthen the connections between students and teachers. They emphasize how students' and teachers' shared amusement can put them both on the same page.

As a highly widespread and appealing social phenomenon, humor is deeply embedded in culture, personal attitudes, interpersonal structures and current trends. According to John Hopkin's University Professor Ronald A. Berk, a self-identified humor enthusiast, most any form of humor must incorporate incongruity—that is the "*juxtaposition of the expected with the unexpected.*"<sup>7</sup> We might describe humor as taking pleasure in the incongruous twists of life, those delightful moments when predictability and routine are replaced by something that elicits our laughter and tugs at our sense of enjoyment. Humor is all

about our ability to discover, express and appreciate what is funny about the unexpected.

Education scholar Mary Kay Morrison has researched the use of humor to maximize learning. Morrison's work is noteworthy in pointing out how the element of surprise in humor "defies the brain's predictions and expectations. When someone acts out of the ordinary, when something unusual happens, our brain pays attention."<sup>8</sup> Using humor is a most effective teaching strategy because it attracts students' attention and interrupts their awareness, therein increasing their active comprehension, retention, interest and performance. By promoting creativity and encouraging divergent thought processes, humor may help students to overcome resistance to learning routines, provide temporary relief from overexertion and introduce playfulness as a way to express the truth even when the truth might be hard to take. Humor often succeeds where other methods have failed.

As American university professor R.L. Garner described, for humor to be most effective in learning situations, it must be "specific, targeted, and appropriate to the subject matter."<sup>9</sup> It must be relevant to what's going on. Unfortunately, not all teachers are comfortable with using humor in educational settings. Some believe their role as teachers and their topic are too serious to merit using humor. For other teachers, their use of humor seems directed at maximizing their comedic finesse. With little or nonexistent connection to students or the topic of exploration, they teach with an endless stream of jokes, one-liners, riddles or anecdotes designed to entertain but lacking in educational value. When properly used, humor may

effectively make learning more enjoyable and sustain a meaningful learning environment, without trivializing the opportunity for intentional learning or falling into the pitfalls associated with overzealous teacher comedians.

I appreciate using humor in my own teaching because of how it keeps me attentive to students' moods and how it strengthens students' opportunities to be involved in their learning. I incorporate humor in age-sensitive and individually suitable ways because humor for a 16-year-old is not the same as a 7-year-old; nor is it humorous to incessantly bring up Nathan's *imagina-Nathan*. All humor has its own limitations. As a consequence, I tend to keep things simple, relying on dynamic twists of language that convey exaggeration and surprise in order to elicit students' response. I treat humor as a two-way street, wherein it's marvelous to watch for students' response and to delight in their own spontaneous humorous injections.

### Final Thoughts

Inspired by a colleague's revelations during a sushi luncheon, this article has focused on teaching strategies for triggering and holding onto students' interest: unconditional personal connections, novelty and challenge, smiling and humor. Looking at teaching from this perspective, I appreciate how two things stand out. First, a confirmation that students' interest is not something students either have or do not have. Music teachers clearly play a vital role in creating conditions that may dramatically impact students' interest. Second, a reminder that music teaching draws not only from what teachers know about music, but also from how they engage with their students. Music teachers make teaching meaningful by building on their

own interests in people, relationships and communication. Week after week and year after year, their teaching takes on boldness and intimacy as they willingly explore, share, and heighten that beautiful thing we call life. ~

### Notes

1. John Dewey, *Democracy and education* (New York: Macmillan, 1916). John Dewey, *Interest and effort in education* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1913).
2. Suzanne Hidi, "Interest and its contribution as a mental resource for learning," *Review of Educational Research*, 60 no. 2 (1990): 566.
3. P. Subramaniam, P. "Unlocking the power of situational interest in physical education," *Journal of Physical Education, Recreation, & Dance*, 81 no. 7 (2010): 40.
4. Subramaniam (2010). Unlocking the power.
5. S. Abuhamdeh & M. Csikszentmihalyi, "The importance of challenge for the enjoyment of intrinsically motivated, goal-directed activities," *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 38 no. 3 (2012): 317-330.
6. P.B. Phillippen, "The effects of smiling and frowning on perceived affect and exertion while physically active," *Journal of Sport Behavior*, 35 no. 3 (2012): 337-353.
7. Ronald A. Berk, *Professors are from mars and students are from snickers* (Sterling: Stylus, 2003) 11.
8. Mary Kay Morrison, *Using humor to maximize learning: The links between positive emotions and education* (Rowman & Littlefield Education, 2010) 50.
9. R. Garner, "Humor in pedagogy: How ha-ha can lead to aha," *College Teaching*, 54 no. 1 (2006): 178.