

Podcast #5 – Life Skills Meet Love of Music
The Music Educator’s Crucible

Hello and welcome back to the Music Educator’s Crucible. My name is Merlin Thompson and I’m the creator of this podcast series devoted to exploring music and education – in particular topics related to teaching and learning to sing or play a musical instrument. So, if you’re a music teacher who teaches private or group lessons - in your own home studio or an institution - you’ve come to the right place. And I’ll also mention that this series has lots to offer schoolteachers, parents, and community leaders as well. So be sure to tune in as often as you like. And before I get any further, I want to thank Musopen.org for making available Cecile Licad’s performance of Chopin’s opus 28 Preludes. Much appreciated.

The title for this episode is Life Skills Meet Love of Music. What I’ve got for you is an exploration of real life experiences, a look at some relevant research, an urban legend – and to get things underway... I’ll get you to come with me to 1975 and visit my university piano teacher on the day I’ve come to say goodbye before heading off to Montreal for a master’s degree. My teacher – like I think all teachers – has some advice for me.

“Don’t become a piano teacher,” is what he said. It’s a bit of advice I never took. But his remarks did give me something to think about. Like – What did becoming a piano teacher mean to me? My attraction for piano teaching was that I could spend every day connecting with my love of music. So I opted to follow my gut and I think becoming a piano teacher turned out to be a good decision. What I value the most about piano teaching is that it doesn’t come with a script – it’s an adventure that unfolds brand new each day. And every once in a while, something about piano teaching interrupts my state of mind and compels me to explore more deeply - like life skills - the topic for this podcast that I most certainly couldn’t see in 1975.

Looking back on my teacher’s advice of “Don’t become a piano teacher”, what seems extraordinary is that my love of music gave me the strength to determine my own future. Actually, it’s more likely the combination of life skills and love of music that did the trick. But at that time, I’m not sure I had even the slightest awareness of what life skills were all about. The meeting between love of music and life skills was more than a decade away – and when it took place – there would be no going back.

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Our next stop comes just over a decade later - February 1986. Inspired by my love of music, I've moved to Japan in order to study at the Matsumoto Talent Education Institute. I'm in the final months of my three-year teacher apprenticeship and I'll be teaching some of the students whose lessons I've been observing since my arrival. It's a somewhat daunting situation, but I'm excited about the opportunity to find out more from the parents who enrolled their children in music lessons. One afternoon, Mrs. Nakayama arrives with her two daughters. Their dedication to music seems obvious to me in their consistent progress and high standards week after week. Soon after the lesson begins, I turn to Mrs. Nakayama and ask, Could you tell me something about why you decided to have your daughters learn to play the piano? Much to my amazement, it's as if Mrs. Nakayama has been waiting years for someone to ask her that question. With an entire list at the ready, she proceeds to articulate her reasons one by one.

I nod my head in response to her first reason - time management - it's not what I was hoping for, but I can see where she's coming from. I'm really hoping she'll prioritize - love of music. But - no - on she continues with "making improvements" and more reasons of a similar genre. Until somewhere around reason number 7 or 8 - she throws in - love of music - like I'm hoping for. It's only a brief stopping point before she's on to numbers nine and ten, after which I thank her for her thoughts and resume her daughter's lesson.

Underneath it all - I'm truly perplexed - I can't process that a parent could voice so many reasons for music lessons before getting to love of music. I'm so convinced there's only one legitimate answer to such a question - love of music - that I fail to see what Mrs. Nakayama's talking about is none other than life skills. As the years go by - after all this takes place in 1986 - I find myself returning to this conversation again and again. I share it with my colleagues and often with new teachers in teacher training sessions as a way of demonstrating - it's highly possible there's a mismatch between how parents and teachers think - that parents and teachers may maintain completely different perspectives when it comes to music lessons. It's my first meeting between life skills and love of music - and there's still more to come.

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Fast-forward 32 years to 2018. I'm in my fourth decade of music teaching, having worked with students, parents, and teachers all over the world. And on numerous occasions, I've shared my story about the mismatch of differing perspectives between parents and teachers. In September of 2018, I'm researching ideas related to teaching and

learning when I come across an online resource by Arthur Costa and Bena Kallick – a rather large book titled Learning and Leading with Habits of Mind – 16 Essential Characteristics for Success.

Intrigued by the title - I dive in to see what the 16 essential habits of mind are all about. As I work my way through the list, I can't ignore the feeling that something feels very familiar – until it dawns on me that Costa and Kallick have basically put together an expanded reworking of Mrs. Nakayama's response from thirty years ago. There's an uncanny commonality of thinking between Costa, Kallick, and Mrs. Nakayama that's directed at life skills. Costa and Kallick are educational researchers who through their analysis of successful outcomes uncover 16 essential characteristics they call habits of mind. Mrs. Nakayama is a dedicated parent who considers successful music lessons as the opportunity for her daughters to cultivate a similar list of personal attributes. Even though they're coming at things from different backgrounds, they all share a common regard for success and the life skills that contribute to success.

I'm thinking - the correlation between success and life skills is all very interesting – but what about my own students? What's the connection between success and their life skills? Luckily for me, my class is fairly small and it doesn't take me long to see that indeed – students of mine who are successful in achieving high performance levels. And students who've made it through various obstacles and come out on top, those students routinely tap into the life skills Costa and Kallick identify as 16 habits of mind.

At first, I'm thinking I must be the most fortunate teacher there is – to have such amazing students. Then – over the coming weeks and months – I see something I've never noticed before. How life skills are interspersed in the language I use to teach - Even though I don't remember ever being intentional about such a thing. Suddenly, I have this unexpected appreciation for what Mrs. Nakayama intuitively articulated some thirty years previous. At the same time, it's also obvious that there's a huge difference between my almost accidental approach to life skills and what Costa and Kallick are suggesting teachers may accomplish. I'm grateful for their work in developing the 16 habits of mind. There's still more to this exploration.

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The next part of this podcast has to do with a story I've heard circulating in music teacher circles. I don't know if it's based on actual events or if it's an urban legend – only that it's a story that resonates with music teachers. The story goes something like this. A young adult – someone in their mid-twenties or thirties – someone settled into a regular job or maybe still a student - is visiting their parents. With no

apparent prompting, the young adult spontaneously says, “Mom, Dad.” I just want to thank you for making me take music lessons when I was a kid, and not giving up when I said I wanted to quit. Especially because I see how it’s given me an advantage over pretty much everybody around me. Thanks to learning trumpet, I basically know how to get things done and – believe me – not everybody else does. There are lots of people with no idea even where to start - let alone what comes next.

Stories like this get warm and fuzzy reactions because they represent the classic – coming of age – epiphany. How we like to celebrate those moments when someone reaches a point of deep understanding, especially when it comes completely out of the blue. Here, we champion the young adult in their mid-twenties or thirties who – it seems almost miraculously – is finally able to take stock of their own musical process. It’s brilliant! Right? I mean if someone in their mid-twenties or thirties shared their recent insight into taking music lessons with us – of course, we’d be happy for them – wouldn’t we? At the same time, there’s something not entirely satisfying about this scenario – I mean – I think it’s all fine and good when young adults in their mid-twenties or thirties make their own coming of age discoveries. But it seems likely that they don’t really need to wait that long.

That’s where Costa & Kallick come back into focus. They’re important to me not just because they sparked my thinking with their 16 habits of mind. Actually it’s because their primary focus is on how teachers may help students exercise their own awareness of the 16 habits and strengthen the habits by deliberately putting them into action. That’s something remarkably different from waiting for young adults to have some kind of epiphany related to music lessons, or – as in my own case - being fortunate enough to have students who show up already primed with successful life skills, or – also as in my own case – being a teacher who incorporates life skills into their language of instruction without even knowing about it.

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By now – I’m guessing you probably want to know what are the life skills that Costa & Kallick include in their 16 habits of mind? – So I’ll refer you to the blog on my website merlinthompson.com where you can find a pdf with the entire list. As you examine the document, you’ll notice how each of the 16 habits pinpoints a distinct aspect of personal development, yet – there’s a fair amount of overlapping between the 16 habits. For example – accuracy overlaps with clarity and precision. Thinking flexibly overlaps with creativity and imagination. And so on.

What's interesting for me is how this overlapping serves to condense the 16 habits into a smaller more manageable framework of five principal qualities – namely, persistence, reflection, accuracy, interdependence, and humor. While Costa & Kallick are deliberate in separately identifying and discussing each of the 16 habits, their work really took on meaning for me when I realized that the five principal qualities have a dynamic and interactive impact on each other. It's their interaction that makes it work. Let me explain.

Take the first quality Persistence. We can all recognize the connection between success and persistence: how achieving success frequently requires keeping on going. However, persistence may entail coming up with another strategy when the one you're using doesn't work. That's where Costa & Kallick's habits of creativity, flexibility, curiosity, questioning, taking risks, and open learning come into play. They're all strategies that may make persistence possible.

But, persistence on its own is only going to take us so far. We also need the second quality – reflection. That's where we keep track of whether or not we're actually getting closer to or further away from success. Here, Costa & Kallick also include the habits of - thinking before reacting, applying past knowledge, and using all our senses as part of our reflective toolkit. Reflection takes us closer to success than persistence on its own - yet, once again, reflection and persistence can't take us the entire way.

The third Quality – accuracy reminds us that success is undoubtedly concerned with the level of execution. When we strive for accuracy, we incorporate a process of refinement. We pay attention to the excellence, clarity, and precision associated with successful outcomes. Accuracy – in turn - relies on reflective processes and influences how we may use persistence to achieve success.

The final two qualities – interdependence and humor – give us an idea of what the surrounding environment may look like. For Costa & Kallick, - that environment is characterized by teachers and students who think interdependently. They listen with empathy and understanding. By working collaboratively, teachers and students may generate more information, establish new ideas and possible solutions. Furthermore, the environment also includes humor – as a reminder there's room for playfulness in successful processes. Humor is all about having fun with our own idiosyncrasies as different from ridiculing or shaming who we are. My impression is that shared laughter – creates an amazing bond between teachers and students. Whether it's a joke, riddle, or one-liner, humor lightens the load and prompts all kinds of innovative insights into the persistence, reflection,

accuracy, and interdependent relationships necessary for successful outcomes.

In this way, each of the life skills have importance on their own – but achieving success really comes about because they combine to create an ongoing system of checks and balances that keep everything on track.

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So here I am in the final months of 2018, reading through Costa & Kallick's work – thinking about persistence, reflection, accuracy, interdependence, and humor– and I realize – I've seen these qualities show up in my teaching for years.

For example – with persistence, I've had one student in my studio who stands out above all others – his name is Andrew and he was my student for nine years. Andrew came to me at 8 years of age after having started as a beginner twice with 2 different piano teachers. After a few weeks, I realized there was a particular expression I constantly used to describe his efforts – stick with it. But, there was a problem – Andrew's stick-with-it-ness was greatly overshadowed by his frustration – which kept him from progressing and blocked him from seeing his own successes.

Equally important to Andrew's ability to stick with it was his need to think about what he was doing. In other words: the skill of reflection. In order to resolve his frustration, Andrew needed to recognize when he was getting frustrated and respond before frustration got a firm foothold. All together – it probably took Andrew somewhere between two and three years of persistent practice and reflection on his efforts to come out on the other side of frustration.

Another experience from my prior years of teaching resonated with Costa & Kallick's focus on striving for accuracy. Most immediately there's a parallel with how music teachers help students to master high levels of musical performance. So for sure – I already had a commitment to accuracy. I also recognized how accuracy involves the precision and clarity teachers and students use to communicate. See if you recognize the following scenario:

A student with 2-3 years of lessons has some inconsistencies in line 4 of a 2-page piece. During their lesson, the teacher works with the student to overcome the inconsistencies. Together they explore various strategies like playing hands separately and hands together, keeping the beat while playing, playing with eyes closed, slow and quick tempos. Finally, the teacher says something like – "Tell me what you're going to do with line 4 when you get home." The student replies – "I'm going to practice." When the teacher looks to the student for

more information, the student replies – “I’m going to practice really hard. Every day! Right!#?” Naturally, the teacher wonders what just happened during the previous deliberate exploration.

Throughout the span of my own teaching, I already knew the value of students saying something like - “I’m going to check line 4 and make sure it’s okay with the beat and with eyes closed”? Because I’d seen when students communicate with accurate language, they increase the likelihood that their participation will be as intentional as the words they use.

When Costa & Kallick described the successful environment as interdependent, I couldn’t help thinking about the images of my students interacting with me and with their peers.

Around the time Natalie was 12 or 13 years of age, I noticed she would start doodling on the keyboard whenever I started to give her feedback. When I pointed out what was going on, Natalie revealed her classroom teacher at school had mentioned she often seemed to be in her own world. In the two years that followed my pointing this out, Natalie would occasionally start doodling - Maybe once every two months. When she does – we stop – talk if it seems we need to. We’re empathetic with each other – we create open spaces for each other – because we both have something to say.

I remember an example of how students learn from their interactions with peers. The scenario: a group class of several students ages 8 to 10 who are working through a flash card activity. As the activity progresses, it becomes obvious that Kevin needs more time than the others to respond. After a dozen or so rounds, suddenly another student, Richard shouts at the top of his voice – “Kevin, just concentrate.” No one moves – including myself. Then Kevin replies – “I thought you were my friend.” I say, “That’s a good point. And most likely friends have enough patience to allow their friends the time it takes.” For about a minute – we talk about how friends help each other. The students get what’s going on. We’re learning about ourselves, each other, and music.

I must admit – I was very happy to see “finding humor” on Costa & Kallick’s list of habits. There were a ton of examples that came to mind. Here’s one from my student Nathan.

He’s just finished a confident performance of Beethoven *Romance* characterized by his own refreshing approach to dynamics.

I say, “Thanks Nathan. I could hear your imagination going full force all the way through. I’ll bet people are always telling you what a great imagination you have.”

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

For someone who insists he doesn't use words all that well – it seems like a great example of how using humor can trigger new ways of looking at ideas and ourselves.

With these experiences and more like them as my backdrop, not surprisingly, things started to percolate after reading Costa & Kallick. Where would I go next?

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Once I realized that I already included life skills in my language of teaching, I decided to get a better handle on what I do to exercise my students' life skills. I mean – I'd already sown some seeds related to life skills – I just hadn't done much with them. With Costa & Kallick's 16 habits as inspiration, I put together my own list of simple actions and character traits related to successful music studies. I started with words and expressions that I already used in my teaching, like – stick with it, challenge, and freedom. And I also recognized the opportunity to expand my language to address ideas that I wanted to give a more prominent position – things like – cooperation, authenticity, and gratitude.

A year and a half later, the result is a very fluid and evolving project – that seems to hover more or less around 30 key life skills. To make the life skills visible and easily accessible, I printed off small cards with one life skill on each card and I keep them scattered on the top of my piano – so I can get a quick glance at them whenever I need to. (You can get a pdf copy of my small cards template on my blog at merlinthompson.com) It seems so simple – but organizing my language and printing off the life skills cards has really helped my teaching both in weekly individual lessons and my monthly group classes.

For example, a recent lesson with my student 11-year-old Robin – who arrived very nervous about not having practiced and after he'd missed several lessons because of his being sick with the flu. He played his first piece – encountered an obstacle on page 2 – retraced his playing a few times before making it to the end. I pulled out the "stick with it" card, set it on his piano, and asked him to tell me what it meant. He did. I thanked him for sticking with it as I pulled out the "appreciation" card. Could he tell me what appreciation meant? He could. I asked if he could show me where he ran into trouble - as I pulled out the "challenge" card. And so we continued for the entire lesson. Robin would play something. I'd respond with a card and ask him to tell me what it meant as I set the card on his piano. In spite of being sick and

not practicing for a long time, Robin's lesson was full of signs that indicated success was firmly in his hands.

With 16-year-old Emily, her lesson had focused on learning through multiple strategies – like playing with and without the book, playing with scrambled lines, and writing instructions for herself in her notebook. After I set the “get organized” card in front of her, she asked me – Why are you showing me that card? I replied, that I wanted to give her a visual way to remember what we talked about during her lesson. So on the days when what we talked about and what she wrote for herself go out the window – maybe she'll still remember that black and white card with “get organized” on it. Five days later – at group class – she picked “get organized” as something she really wanted to work on.

In my monthly group class for 5-year-olds, I've started including an activity called – you're the teacher. The goal is for beginner students to demonstrate something they think the other students should know about. It's an activity that draws from the principle themes of reflection and accuracy, wherein students need to think about what they'll demonstrate, execute the demonstration with accuracy, and explain the importance of their demonstration. It's inspiring to watch – like when my student Penny demonstrates hugging fingers on the chords of Mary Had a Little Lamb, and explains how it can strengthen any students' fingers. She's totally in charge of her reflection and accuracy.

In my monthly group class for 14 to 17-year-olds, we currently use the final 10 minutes to examine all the life skills cards. My guidance is for them to choose 2 or 3 cards that express where they are on that day. Students pick cards that relate to their strengths – like Kevin who has lots of creativity and imagination. Another month, Kevin picks out some weaknesses like “refine & rework” and “challenge” as indication he's ready to step out of his usual pattern. When Jennifer picks “take a risk” and explains that even though I'm always encouraging her to use her body more when she plays, she knows she never really does. With picking “take a risk”, it feels like she's opened the door just a crack.

What seems key for each of these recent examples is that exercising my students' life skills isn't a one-stop destination – it's a circuitous and multilayered tour that will necessarily evolve and grow over time. At this point, we're just getting going. If you're worried that I've become some kind of life skills teacher fanatic who can't focus on anything else during my students' lessons - It's not the case.

Exercising my students' life skills is a thread I weave into the fabric of my teaching – without letting it take over what I'm doing. After all – piano teaching is my specialty.

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There's probably one more place we should visit before the end of this podcast – So I'll get you to join me in January 2020 – on the day I decided to introduce – for the very first time – the life skill cards to my teen group class. Keeping in mind because we've never had this activity before, I'm hoping things will go at least moderately well – because if it doesn't - I may abandon the whole life skills exercise.

I place each of the thirty cards on the table in front of the students – explaining - here are some concepts for you to think about – ideas that may impact you – I'm not sure how – but I'm interested in your thoughts. One by one, each of the students responds positively – some even bordering on enthusiastic. I'm thinking – okay – why don't I build on their enthusiasm by sharing my motivation for the activity? - So I recount the story of Mrs. Nakayama – complete with my observation of the mismatch between parents' focus on life skills and teachers' love of music. Then 17-year-old Kyle interjects with a clincher I could never have anticipated. He says, "But life skills are what takes love of music to another level – aren't they? Without them, isn't there a chance love of music will never really go anywhere?"

I'm amazed at his insight. Because of course he's absolutely on the mark. By bringing life skills to the love of music, we strengthen what we do with music. We expand where we go with music. We enhance how we get there with music. In two sentences, Kyle manages to articulate why our life skills are so important to music studies – while simultaneously empowering me to keep going. It's quite marvelous!

Can I tell what's coming next? Not entirely. But I'm not worried about that. I figure if I can successfully introduce a group of teens to an activity exploring life skills in a musical context, all I need to do is take more steps.

My hope is that by now – you've started to recognize places in your teaching where life skills meet love of music – you might even have an idea who in your studio excels with persistence or accuracy or humor. And which student might benefit from knowing about thinking first or empathy or taking risks. You might even be thinking about what you'll take as the next step. A final reminder – if you're interested in examining my life skills cards or Costa & Kallick's 16 habits of mind, you'll find pdfs on my blog at merlinthompson.com. And if you want to let me know how things turn out as you exercise life skills more explicitly in your teaching, please be sure to drop me a line.

Until the next time – this is The Music Educator's Crucible and I'm Merlin Thompson. Cheers!