

Understanding evaluation: Lessons in Learning and Teaching

How a bunch of eight-year old musicians helped me be a more reflective college teacher

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Evaluating quality is never as simple as it seems, but why this is the case is sometimes frustratingly difficult to put one's finger on. Part of this stems from the intangible, often hidden parts of the assessment process and from the informal ways in which legitimacy is produced (and also reproduced) by the structuring of institutions and classification regimes¹. But it's also important to consider that all of us switch between a range of publics and identities on a daily basis. Partially because of this, social norms can cross-pollinate social contexts, professional domains, and ways of behaving². These less-considered facets of the evaluation process highlight the ways in which teaching and learning are inextricably linked.

As the author William Faulkner once famously said, "*The past is never dead. In fact, it's not even past.*"³ I'm a graduate student learning the very different but related crafts of research and teaching. But prior to this career, I lay proud claim to a former life as a musician. As Faulkner knew all too well, sometimes various parts of our lives bleed together in unexpected ways, and sneak up on one another without our knowing it. An old friend, also a teacher, had recently emailed me to ask an urgent favor: the high school where he teaches music was hosting the regional competition of the annual New York State School Music Association (NYSSMA) festival, and they were in dire need of adjudicators for K-12 piano auditions that weekend. Would I be able to help evaluate student performances? I'm glad I didn't miss the opportunity, because it reminded me what's important in my own classroom.

I should have said no.

My first reaction was, *Me? You really can't find anyone else?* But something made me pause to give it serious consideration. What actually ended up coming out of my mouth was to call me back the following week, but only if he couldn't find anyone else. When his eventual plea came, I should have declined it without a second thought. For one, despite an extensive background in music, I'm, well, not a music teacher; I'm a social scientist. Perhaps more selfishly, there was an important conference in my field this same weekend: big ideas sure to be flying around, job markets to permeate, networking to be done! Even though most of me said, *You're shooting yourself in the foot by missing your conference*, the part that eventually prevailed told me: *you've heard about several of these projects already; you're not going onto the market until next year; and if you missed anything, you can email the presenters for their papers.*

But I did genuinely want to help; this festival was one of many important parts of my training that ultimately led me to my career as an educator; the process of preparing a solo performance for someone who wasn't my music teacher, peer, or mom was an important part of my growth. Playing a role as an adjudicator seemed like a way to give back in some way what

¹ Espeland and Stevens 1998, Johnson et al. 2006, Lamont 2008, Zuckerman 1999

² Becker 1982, Bourdieu 1993, Mische 2008, White 1995

³ Faulkner 1951

had been given to me. I rationalized that while I'm not a music teacher, I am a teacher – even if it's a different field. After all, I studied piano performance for four years in college, served as chorus director and organist of a hometown church, and worked as orchestra management for several years in New York City before I decided I really wanted to be a social scientist. Hell, I just bought a banjo a couple weeks ago, and really have no idea how to play it, but do have a strong suspicion that it'll start to sound like music sometime soon.

For me this experience led to a meditation on the joys of learning and teaching and how they're eternally interwoven. I'm not qualified to generalize my experience to national trends in music education, but I'd be surprised if I what I saw can't be found in a whole lot of other places around America right now. There are also concrete ties to be made to the context of education as a whole. It's paramount to remind ourselves periodically of the social aspect of music education nested within the context of education more broadly: it truly does take a village, and everyone plays a part in these students' learning experiences. For this particular festival, it took many hundreds of people to make it such an overwhelming success – among them staff, volunteers, teachers, parents, and countless others. Each person connected to a student has played a uniquely important role in that student's life, and these roles are irreducible to one another.

I need to be clear that I have no illusions about my role here – I was a pinch-hitter brought in at the last minute because no one else was available. And that's fine; I was a very small cog in a big wheel, even though pragmatically speaking, these kinds of events tend to have a kind of semi-permanence because of the scent of legitimacy. The sponsoring organization confers a stamp of approval, and students who receive high evaluations at the advanced levels may be selected to perform in select regional ensembles. There are all manner of debates among educators regarding the value of such extracurricular rewards, as well as debates among scholars as to how such legitimization mechanisms function. All the same, NYSSMA shows little sign of going away anytime soon, though its strength is more apparent in some parts of the state than others.

The classroom

At orientation, judges were told in no uncertain terms that the festival exists as a source of encouragement to students. It was our job as adjudicators to be helpful, and regardless of the content of a student's performance, our comments and interactions should be ultimately. We were to keep our verbal comments brief to allow students to focus on their playing, and to adopt an impartial demeanor. If we needed to deduct points, we should do so with comments justifying our decisions. I didn't have to wait long to know that I had made the right decision because the very first student that I evaluated – a 10th-grade girl – came in, sat down, and played the *exact same piece I had played as a junior in high school* more than fifteen years ago.

This young woman's audition was a bit unpolished, but her execution of the piece was more than competent, and she had clearly put a great deal of time into mastering some of its subtleties. My own experience of auditioning with that same piece has had deep ripples in the pond of my life. I actually don't remember the particulars of my audition at all, save that it went well, and so in the end it remains a positive experience for me. I eventually used the piece as my audition selection to get me into college; I also played this piece with a broken finger before an orchestra audition, and wouldn't you know, they liked my gumption and I got the part (I'm hoping they didn't just feel sorry for me, but that could be the case, too). If we trace the path-dependencies in our life to look back at how the decisions we made might branch to where we

are today, I could easily see my role in evaluating this young woman as me coming full circle in a sense, just as perhaps my evaluator saw something of her musicality in her efforts.

I ended up interpreting our rubric of “being humanistic” with wider latitude than may have been advisable. There were a number of moments that I took full liberties to connect with the students and attempt to communicate some of my joy of our shared humanity. But this could be more difficult in practice than in theory. In meeting the students, I shook their hands, asked them their names, gave them mine (“Mr. P” for the youngest ones), and told them I was happy they came to play for me. I asked them to adjust the bench so they were comfortable, and sometimes asked if they knew anything about the composer of their piece. But students varied in confidence levels, and many refused to look me in the eye when I was speaking to them. Even those that did look at me didn't dare crack a smile, even if I made a joke to try to put them at ease.

There was the student who played his scales while looking at his fingers the whole time – when he had done his “official” scales, I asked him to place his hands on the first note of that F scale, and to close his eyes, and to play the scale again. “Without looking?” *Yes*. And wouldn't you know, he played it perfectly. Many young ones would look to me at the end of their audition, even before they had finished playing their last note. These students were not playing their music, they were playing for the adjudicator, or their teacher, or maybe their parents. And there are some distinctions to be made there. A number clearly had rhythmic and note accuracy, but didn't understand what “feeling” meant. (How do you teach “feeling”?) Two in particular played pieces marked as “joyous; majestic; triumphant”. When they were finished I asked both to imagine the happiest thing in the world: *Maybe it was a place? Or a friend? Or a pet?* One of the students, a reedlike young girl with blond hair in third grade said, almost in a whisper while her eyes widened, “My bay-bee bro-ther,” enunciating every syllable, and then smiling broadly, exposing missing teeth. The other student, a bit older, said without hesitation, “a good score!” (From this student I eventually elicited “my cousin's house”...) I told both to keep that happy thought in their mind, and then to play the first four bars of the song again.

Some students would come in visibly nervous; and so I would tell the students that we were going to close our eyes and take 3 deep breaths together, through our noses, very slowly. I counted one (*deep inhale – whoooooo – deep exhale – whoooooooooo*) and repeated. I then asked them to open their eyes, explaining the relaxation angle to help them to perform even better. Some genuinely seemed more at peace with the world. Others, when I said, *You can begin whenever you're ready*, they would start before I could get the words out of my mouth. Maybe they just wanted to be done with their solo, or else had been told by their parents to do whatever the adjudicator said to do. In any kind of student enterprise, there are always the booster parents. Or overbooster parents, the ones who strap their student to the front of the rocket and punch it. Whether it's an organized sport, music, dance team, ad infinitum, some parents will always be there “motivating” their kids, and you really empathize for what they might be going through (mainly the kids, but also parents). Other parents take an involved but hands-off attitude (my case, and while I benefited from it, it certainly doesn't work for all); and some parents are too hands-off. In rare cases, complete nuclear families came to present their child at the door to their audition room, while others wandered in with no parent in sight. Some parents would expectantly peek through the door's window during their child's performance, disappearing when they sensed me notice them.

For every student who seemed a bit young, or were blindsided by the competition environment, there were also the few who blew your mind. These were the students who just

“got it”, and displayed the mastery that comes with an understanding of music as a cohesive piece. One young man barely came up to my thigh, and walked in with a big smile, a loose-fitting suit and tie, and sat down. He then handed me his music for his (most challenging) Level 6 piece instead of putting it up on the piano, and told me that he would be playing it from memory. I raised an internal eyebrow, and asked him to begin when he was ready. The kid played the living daylights out of the thing. When he finished, I couldn't restrain myself, and gave him a round of applause (which I'm guessing judges explicitly advised to be impartial are *definitely* not supposed to do. Oops.) He further demonstrated his potential by proceeding to almost perfectly execute his sight-reading portion. I closed our time by putting on my suit jacket, and said to him, *I have to put on my jacket so I can be as professional as you are*, and shook his hand and thanked him for playing for me. That one might have gone over his head – but he was smiling and having a hell of a good time. And I thought that was just fantastic.

Lessons

Being impressed as a teacher is always a bit uncomfortable; does it tip us towards favoritism? Is favoritism justified? After all, sometimes the most exceptional students don't end up doing the best for one reason or another. In treating any student like this young man with the phrase “exceptional” we drift into rocky waters, a danger in venues like this competition (or really any kind of academic evaluation environment; stretch this as far as you will). There are commonalities in the educational enterprise at any level: we see students who have natural gifts and demonstrate great facility and enjoyment; those who enjoy what they're doing but their technique lends itself to craft rather than an art; those who obviously hate being there, and were forced into it by some outside force; those who don't really know what's going on. Obviously there are a range of students, and any typology fails to capture many of them, but it does push us towards recognizing the individuality of our students.

It's a danger to put the most “talented” of this bunch on pedestals to the exclusion of the others. Not only does it violate issues of equity, but doing so can harm the student and reify the notion of solitary genius. This isn't to say that these students shouldn't get enthusiastic encouragement from us as teachers. As one teacher friend tells his students: “I'll be your biggest cheerleader, I want you to know that – but I'll also be the first one to put my foot in your behind. And it's a big foot.” Or something along those lines. I guess you can't say that to a second grader, or even with some college students, but you can probably make the appropriate translation.

The process of evaluation is also a poignant reminder of how we all have something more to learn. Hence, even when I gave a high score, and especially with the little man in the suit, I made sure it was accompanied by impartial comments about what the student needed to do to take it to the next level. This begs a further question: *who are the comments for?* In the grade school setting, they're obviously *about* the student's performance but *not always for* the student. They're perhaps more often guidance for the teachers – and especially with the youngest kids, for the parents. In the college setting, the comments are *always for* the student, and *about* the student's performance, but are often subsumed beneath the ultimate grade given.

Which brings up a delicate situation when shaping one's comments – are you writing, unfiltered, for the student her/himself, who will be grateful for the feedback and learn from it? Maybe with the older ones, yes. But it could be for a hyper-vigilant (née overbearing) parent, who will note a “problem” in the audition by way of a “minus” in a certain category of

evaluation, and proceed to drill the life out of that kid on that point, making it a thoroughly horrible learning experience. At any level of education, some students take agency to determine their own best practice habits of their field, but many never grasp that discipline. On the student side, everyone has a bad day, and especially in performance situations; on the evaluator side, the same caveat holds. Can our comments be plain wrong and mischaracterize the student's efforts? Most certainly, though we hope those distinctions are minimized with experience.

Getting back to the festival, I restricted my comments to the audition itself, but every now and then, thoughts about the larger ramifications of the evaluation drift in. How about when two brothers audition one after another, playing the exact same piece. What then? (How might *that* conversation play out at the dinner table about how everyone's day went?) And other thoughts linger, for one the fact that I, as an uncertified music teacher, landed on this evaluation panel (fundamentally because of my early training, more proximally because of a diverse social network). That ringers were needed because of a lack of qualified music educators sends a strong signal about the state of music education. Or maybe it says something more positive about the particular abundance of young musicians on the horizon, and it's a promising sign of things to come. I hope the latter; and if so, I hope they can find enough teachers to help them grow.

If you're a teacher, what I've written here about my particular experience probably isn't terribly surprising. And no matter our profession, we're all implicated in evaluative processes, and may have served on selection committees of this sort or others. Teachers are fortunate to be able to have these kinds of challenging and rewarding moments many times over as we meet new students, and also as we grow with former ones. As teachers measure time as educators, these moments are what comprise our terms, years, and careers. That said, putting myself in another kind of teacher's shoes was a valuable interdisciplinary experience. If I learned anything, it's that it benefits each of us to be thoughtful and reflective about our roles in our learning environments and to embrace that shared humanity. For me, I was fortunate to be able to return to my roots and repay old debts I hadn't thought about in years. And I was reminded that as much as we try to partition our lives and identities, time is neither as cyclical nor as compartmentalized as it sometimes appears to be.

Recommended resources

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