

Positive Behaviour Strategies for Music Learning

In line with PBL principles, classroom management in music involves teaching, practising and following clear behavioural expectations. Students learn what is expected and get clear feedback to know they are (and when they are not) meeting expectations. This approach maximises the time spent in musical learning.

Teaching and Practising Expectations

At the start of term the “Class-Yes” and the “Ready-And-Stop” are explained and practiced. These verbal signals and the related behavioural expectations and signals are regularly revised in on-going lessons.

Class-Yes. The teacher calls the word “Class” and students reply by calling “Yes” and looking at the teacher, voices, hands and bodies still.¹ The teacher uses a varied, sing-song voice and word repetition when calling “Class”. Students mimic the teacher’s voice and repetition when calling “Yes”.

Ready-And-Stop. This is a rhythmic verbal signal used to end musical activities. The teacher calls “Ready and Stop” in time with the last beats of a performance time. The goal is for students to all stop their playing, moving or vocalising on the word “Stop”.

When playing drums, a musical signal “the call” may be used to signal when to start, change rhythms and stop performing. The call is a specific easily identified rhythm and operates in the same way as “ready-and-stop”.

Songs to support expectations. The Singing Together repertoire includes songs geared towards teaching and reminding students about Positive Behaviour for Learning and “Social Thinking”.

Songs include:

- “How Are You, Are You Okay?” by Geoff Fox
- “Warami Ngallowah Mittigar” by Russell Baker

¹ http://www.wholebrainteaching.com/index.php?option=com_k2&view=item&layout=item&id=159&Itemid=125

- “In The Group” by Tom Chapin
- “You Can Bend” by Tom Chapin
- “Listen With All Of You” by Tom Chapin
- “School” by Monkey Mark

Feedback on Expectations

Students receive immediate verbal feedback and praise for following the behavioural signals. (Over time this feedback/reinforcement will fade and it will be sufficient to move quickly into the next instruction, allowing lesson activities to be the focus and the reinforcer.)

A quick review and practice of signals and expectations is used when student responses do not fit the expectations.

Students also receive feedback on meeting expectations through scoring on the “Rock-On/Sad-Note” scorecard (a variation of the scoreboard game²). A class “win” on the scoreboard may be linked with various rewards, such as “DOJO” points, in-class rewards or a small prize for each student from a surprise tin.

A range of consistent language

“*In music we **create** and **control** sound*”. One goal in music is to create sound in a structured and organised way. This statement summarises this goal and is used when teaching, practicing and providing feedback on behavioural expectations. The statement is also displayed in a simple visual in the music room.

“*Listening time – Try it together time – Performance playing time*”. Learning a song, a rhythm, a technique or a melody involves times for listening, times for attempting and times for performing what we have learned. These terms are used to help students recognise these phases of the learning process and the related behavioural expectations.

² http://www.wholebrainteaching.com/index.php?option=com_k2&view=item&layout=item&id=161&Itemid=128

Clear lesson structures made explicit for students.

The activities in each music lesson are written up in a three or four point plan on the board. These are numbered and read through after welcoming the class at the start of a lesson.

The plans also may include the language “listening time/try it together time/performance playing time” as a cyclical lesson plan.

Using plans such as this assists those students who are keen to play instruments or to choose a song to sing together. The students know that these activities are planned for and when they will occur, reducing the need to ask questions or make demands about activities.

Settling and focus activities

An approach to use with classes that may struggle to settle is to commence lessons with hands-on drumming activities, focussed on heavy, slow beats and varied sound textures. These activities fit with the content of lessons that are exploring rhythms and musical timbres. They also provide students with musical “heavy work” to assist in settling and focus.³ (If drums are not available, other “heavy work” musical activities might be adopted, such as drumming on the floor with hands or clap sticks, working in time with each other or with recorded music that has a strong beat.)

In previous terms the “Premack principle”⁴ has often been used, holding the most enjoyable and engaging hands-on activities to the end of the lesson. While effective for many students, I think there are several weaknesses in this approach.

- The Premack approach implies that other activities such as listening, discussing and singing are somehow less desirable activities, thus devaluing these important musical activities.
- The Premack approach sometimes leads to less time engaged in exploring instruments, creating sounds and performing music, which are key components of a music program.

³ <http://www.sensory-processing-disorder.com/heavy-work-activities.html>

⁴ http://www.intropsych.com/ch05_conditioning/premack_principle.html

- Observations of those students who have greater difficulty with self-regulation suggest that this approach is not working for them. However, these students have often joined in more effectively once instrumental playing has begun, and have appeared more settled and focussed for a period of time after playing an instrument.

In response to these observations, lessons may commence with call and response drumming activities, and the exploration of a range of sound textures on djembes. A range of fun sounds (giants, fairies, woodpeckers, galloping horses, cat scratches, door knocks, pitter-patters, and whispering wind – many sourced from my African drumming teacher, John May ⁵) are named and performed, the syllables of familiar songs are played as rhythms and students are encouraged to find and name new djembe sounds. These drumming sessions finish with a strong slow beat together or a very gentle whispering texture on the drum skin.

Observations indicate that this approach has been assisting less settled students to increase their engagement in the music lessons.

⁵ <http://www.handheartfeet.com>