

SSU NAFME Chapter Meeting- Christa Durand



While you are at SSU:

Take advantage of anything you can learn how to do.

I think there are limits to how many units you can take per semester now, but there used to be no limit. I spent 5 years, and 30 units a semester taking anything that SSU offered that might help me or that I was interested in. Some suggestions might be recording technology, composition, psychology (learn how people work), business classes (maybe to run your own studio?), language, other arts, dance, drawing, etc...

When I graduated one of the main ways I earned money through singing was recording demos for other people. That was not a required or even encouraged class for my major. I connect with many of my most "difficult" students by combining music with drawing, or dance, etc... to help them feel comfortable and by connecting music to life.

Go to events and lectures to get varied viewpoints on the arts and teaching the arts. Be informed and inspired.

SIGHT READING

Being good at sight reading is probably the Most Valuable thing to make your life easier as a professional performer or educator. Think of it this way: If I have a gig that pays \$100 for one hour of performance time, and I can either sight read the music or go through it once and then perform it, then I just made \$50 an hour - 1 hour to practice and one hour to perform. But if I need to spend 9 hours rehearsing it then I just made \$10 an hour (9 hours practice plus 1 hour performance). Being able to sight read and play, sing, or conduct proficient will cut down on your practice and prep time, making your musical activities more lucrative per hour. (I wish someone had told me that in college)

Personal Life:

Make Time for Life

As a person who manages their personal life poorly, I am definitely learning from my mistakes. Make time for life. It's easy to get fixated on practicing, and also a musician's life can be a lot of hustle, or a lot of extra time at the school you teach. It's a lot of your life doing music stuff - which we love, but be careful of too much music and music admin.

Make time to see the art, go on the hike, have dinner with friends, participate in politics. These things can renew your body and soul, and inform your art. Your art can get stale if you are in a vacuum, it needs more input, more feelings, memories made. As an educator, the more things in life that you know about, the more you can connect with students that are a variety of ages and from a variety of backgrounds. AS an educator, you will also need this renewal time so that you can keep being patient and kind with your students, and not burned out and frustrated.

You need to be the best you so you can give to others.

Make your students do the work:

All of life is a learning experience. Children and teens need to learn a variety of life skills, including teamwork and personal responsibility. Don't be that teacher cleaning all the instruments before school starts, have your band kids help you the first week of school. Don't be the teacher doing the whole fundraiser, guide your students to plan and facilitate it. They will put more into your music classes if they have a stake in it, and you will spend less time outside of school doing set up and clean up.

This also applies to private lessons. Let that 5 year old turn the music book page, even though it takes 2 minutes- they are learning how to turn pages. Let that 7 year old discover notes and label them in their book themselves even though it takes half the lesson, they are also learning how to write. Go at your student's pace so that they can do the majority of the learning, because they are learning hand eye coordination, and many other things during your lesson that are important too.

Making Connections:

Connections with Students:

You are more likely to retain students if you can make a connection with them. Learn about who they are, let them tell you their stories, ask about how that concert or even that math test went last week. Ask them about their goals. Every January I ask all of my private students what they would like to learn, or if they have a particular goal for the year. I also come prepared with my goals for them. Think about more than just learning music, maybe goals could be: Play in 5 recitals, or learn this breathing exercise so you don't get as nervous.

I even ask my little ones 5, 6 years old. Their goals can tell you a lot, like “I want to draw on the white board more”. It helps to give you information on what direction to go as a teacher.

Connections with Parents:

Let them know how awesome their child is. Most people want validation that their child is awesome, or that they are doing something right. I don't mean this in a simpering way, but a real, honest way. “I was so impressed that Jill learned this scale, hey Jill, let's show your mom this new scale we learned today” “Josh and I always have a lot of fun, he is very clever” It is especially important for parents who are not musicians, because they don't know what is going on, and need education too. “I am impressed that Bobbie participated in the recital even though he was nervous, recitals can be really scary” “I could really tell that Betty practiced well this week”

Connections with other musicians, studios, schools:

When you settle into a community, build your reputation. Be proficient at your instruments, but also be kind, courteous, be on time, fulfill your obligations, communicate well and fully. As people see that they like to work with you, and that students like to work with you, you will get more referrals.

Pro tip- even when you talk to someone on the phone, follow it up with an email or text so that there is always a record.

“It was so nice to connect with you today, I will be at the stadium at 6PM on Thursday night by the East Entrance.”

That way, if you got any of the info wrong, they have a chance to correct you, and if you fulfill everything that you understood to be true they can't say that you didn't do something. I do this with colleagues, employers, employees, parents, and students. Also thinking about our discussion tonight on communicating with studio owners. If you need to convey something like “I think this student would be a better fit for another teacher” make sure you follow up with an email, and also if you are giving a deadline like “I can teach this student for 3 more weeks and then they need to move” definitely put that in writing, so you can refer to the date that you told them. (Sorry, family full of lawyers)

Be professional about your skills:

When you transition to being a professional, the time for false modesty and self depreciation is at an end. You are now a model to your students, and someone who needs to be honest and confident. Learn to take compliments, especially in front of your students. If someone says, “that piano solo was beautiful” don't tell them how you missed a note, or how some famous person did it better. Look them in the eye and say thank you. If you were a car

salesman and someone congratulates you on a car sale you wouldn't go "aw shucks, that wasn't so great" or you were a dentist and someone said "great job with that root canal procedure!" you wouldn't say "aw shucks, that wasn't so great".

Not to say you can't personally take a note in your brain "I missed that note, I should practice it later", but not one else needs to know, and they don't care. Be proud of yourself, be honest with yourself. Teach your students that making mistakes is ok in the class and in performance.

Separate your self esteem from your music. You have value outside of your technical ability. As an educator, are you a good teacher? Are you effective? Are you inspirational? Are other people making music with more skill and more authenticity because you were there to help them?

Set your ego aside:

Unfortunately, I, and I think some of you may have had experiences with teachers or conductors where you have had them be grumpy because things aren't as perfect as they want, your piece has mistakes, or the group is not gelling yet, and they yell or shame you about it. That is their ego. Some people say they just want excellence, but you can achieve it without acting that way. (I am on a personal mission to eliminate abuse from the arts) A few years ago, one of my students was in a children's chorus where their teacher said if they weren't all perfect by the next class she was going to cut their heads off with a rusty hacksaw. The mom asked my opinion if that was inappropriate (her kid was having nightmares about it)! BTW that is completely unacceptable.

You can achieve excellence by giving people the tools and the motivation to be awesome. Teach them how to practice, teach them how to breathe, teach them how to emote. Teach them that actions have consequences: "If we don't get this right, this is how it will be in the future concert". Take them aside and let them listen to the group and give their feedback - they will hear that the flute section is a measure behind everyone else.

It's a difficult tightrope because as a teacher (even without ego) you want concerts to go well so that students are proud of themselves, so that parents are happy so that they keep encouraging your students to come back, and so that your program or your studio gets a good reputation - either to attract more students, or sometimes for more funding. Many programs do not get attention and financial support unless they are excellent, so there can be pressure to be perfect. But there is no such thing as perfect. There is excellence, and heart connection, and making your audience feel.

Be where your students are, not where you think they should be.

Figure out where your students are physically, mentally, emotionally and be there with them. Push them to learn and grow at their ability and in the space they come from. If you have students on the Atistic Spectrum, or who have dyslexia, or ADHD, it is your job to be creative with them, to come up with a plan that helps them learn and succeed. Find out why they love music and what they are going to get out of it.

Work around their unique way of life. If they need to leave a lesson to wash their hands 4 times a lesson, or take the time to color the bars in their scores multi colors, or if they need to be the person who helps pass out scores in class, or stand up while playing their instruments because they can't sit still, work with it. Examine why something has been and see if you can work around it, maybe it doesn't need to be that way.

How to get students to practice?

Remember that people need to be taught how to practice. Something that is ingrained in you by now, is something completely new to your students. I like students to keep notebooks to write in what they should practice, and also I walk them through what practicing looks like: "I warm up with this, and then work on this, and then if that part is hard, do that 10 times in a row..."

In the private lesson world, the only person affected by a student not practicing is themselves. I have learned to be ok with whatever happens. Some kids are completely self motivated, you make them a list of things to do that week and they love playing so much they just do it. Some kids are extrinsically motivated by getting a reward for practicing, like a sticker on their practice journal if they complete all the tasks. Some kids are motivated by nothing and the only time they touch their instrument is in their lesson and the lesson becomes 90% practice session and 10% learn a new thing.

Again, ask yourself, does this person want to change what they are doing? If yes, give them the tools to learn and succeed. But if the answer is no, if they are perfectly happy with their progress each week, let it be. Be wonderful and fun and supportive and help feed their soul.

In the group setting if someone is not practicing, then it will affect the group. There's always practice charts signed by parents, but I like to be more real. Try discussing how this group is a team, and how you are all working together to create art. Figure out how the group can support people falling behind. See if classmates can help this person with small group practice. If nothing works, maybe find other roles for that person, or even give them more to do. Teach them to conduct, or maybe they are a great speaker and they will introduce all the songs for the concert and give some history.

Music Education is a Calling and a Career

Arts educators are called to do something very special. We are bringing soul to humanity. For this reason we all go the extra mile. We spend the extra time with and for our students to help make their experience the best it can be. Try to keep that balanced with not letting schools or parents or gig producers take advantage of you. Speak up when you are not ok with something, educate people. Sometimes it's simply that they don't know that you can't do what you do without a certain room or piece of equipment. Some administrators are trying to take advantage of you. Speak up calmly, firmly and confidently. (and always follow up with an email!) Make sure you are paid for your time (most of the time). You will often be educating people in a society that doesn't know what you do is a job. You have the best job in the world, but it is a job that needs to be respected as such and treated just like you are an engineer or a dentist. Don't sell yourself or your vocation short, because other people will.

As you step out of the micro focus of academia, start looking at the larger questions:

Why do I do what I do?

Why is music and the arts important?

Why should people learn this?

I wish you all well, and thank you for choosing this beautiful vocation!