

The Cheshire Cat

BY MARIENNE USZLER

When Alice was searching the byways of Wonderland, she asked the Cheshire Cat a question reflecting equal parts of frustration and curiosity. "Would you tell me, please, which way I ought to go from here?" The clever cat gave a cryptic answer. "That depends a good deal on where you want to get to." No quick "Turn here" or "Straight ahead." Alice first had to state a goal. Only then could specific directions make sense.

But Alice persisted. "I don't much care where." To which the Cat again replied pointedly, "Then it doesn't matter which way you go." Alice quickly interrupted with a lame "So long as I get *somewhere*." The Cat was not about to let Alice get away with such a vague choice. He stated the obvious. "Oh, you're sure to do that if you only walk long enough."

Piano teachers sometimes feel like Alice. They'd like a quick clue (How can I get students to practice?), feel trapped in a rabbit hole (Is there life beyond teaching beginners?), or discover themselves teaching without enthusiasm (I wish there was a teaching vitamin.). They, too, would like to ask, "Would you tell me, please, which way I ought to go from here?"



What often happens at such times is that teachers look around for a Cheshire Cat. There must be some expert, authority, colleague, or master teacher who can point the way or offer solutions. That may well be the case. A spirited workshop, an inspiring lesson, an eloquent book, or a friendly chat room conversation may stir up the teaching juices or stimulate new ideas. We all need to reach out to the larger teaching community at times.

But Cheshire Cats willing to point in this or that direction are not always around when you need them. Consider the words from Alice's Cat. There's a great deal to learn from that inscrutable feline. The Cat's comments all prodded Alice to refine her own thoughts. To set a goal. To be specific. The desire to go "somewhere" was not enough. Why shuffle along an unmarked path to an unknown destination?

Help Yourself

The thread underlying all this is—help yourself by knowing yourself. One of the easiest ways to learn about yourself as a teacher is to make audio- or videotapes of your teaching. Then listen and/or watch yourself. It's not easy to be objective, but the effort to do so is already the first step forward.

Do exactly what you would do with a student. Focus on only one aspect. Make it your goal as you watch or listen to the tape. (Watching or listening without a specific focus is like Alice saying she'd like to get "somewhere.") Here are a few help-yourself ideas.

Goal: I could make better use of teaching time.

- Make a timeline. Note exactly how much time you spend on each type of activity: technique, presentation of new material, review, giving practice advice, polishing pieces, sight reading, rhythm drills, chatting ...

You might be surprised to learn that you over-emphasize one aspect of the lesson (working on technique, for instance), or that you find yourself always getting caught up in details. If you can pinpoint a particular behavior, you can take steps to change it.

- Listen to what you say. Do you talk too much? Could your comments be more on-target, shorter, or more varied? Are you encouraging, or mostly picky? Are you the only one who speaks during most lessons?

Just knowing that you spend too much time explaining or commenting on everything alerts you to catch yourself in the act during actual teaching time. Negatives can be turned inside out easily. "That's not the right rhythm" could be "Let's look carefully at that rhythm." A single word—bravo, better, oops, hmmm, impressive—sometimes carries more weight than a two-minute critique.

Goal: I need to recharge my teaching batteries. I'm in a rut.

- Do you follow the same routine in each lesson—review, technique, new material, polishing pieces and so on?

Begin the lesson with something off-the-wall: ear-training games, rhythm games, sight reading, playing a duet, improvising. These needn't take much time—maybe only two or three minutes—if you have planned the activities beforehand.

- Do you ask questions? Which types of questions do you ask—questions that require specific answers, or questions that challenge the student to choose or solve a problem?

Questions with specific answers (How many sharps are in this piece?) are useful, but limiting. Try questions or suggestions like “What if ...” “Could you imagine ...” “Suppose you ...” or “Why do you think that ...” Stimulating students to get involved in the learning process energizes both of you.

Goal: I need to revamp how I give practice advice.

- How much lesson time do you use to give practice advice? Do you feel the time is wasted if you use it in this way? Do you give *specific* practice advice? Do you have the student demonstrate that she understands the point of the advice and knows what must be improved before assigning practice?

The student needs to make a *connection* with whatever is studied. This may mean inserting some fun pieces to wake up the student (and you). Play pieces for your students. If they never hear exciting performances of the music they play, how can they acquire aural models on which to base their own performances? If CDs or MIDI disks are available for the pieces, use them as motivational tools. Find three pieces that feature primary blocked chords as accompaniments (or whichever teaching point you’re trying to make). Play these pieces for the student and let him choose which to work on.

Do-It-Yourself Group

A further word about Cheshire Cats. If you belong to a local teacher’s group, consider a new type of agenda. A group of Winston-Salem teachers decided that they would be their own

Help Yourself to Practical Teaching Hints

Books by Marianne Uszler

Play It Again, Sam ... What, Why, and When to Repeat

“This is a gem of a book.”

Louis Nagel, *American Music Teacher*

That’s a Good Question ... How to Teach by Asking Questions

“It packs a powerful punch pedagogically speaking.”

Patricia Powell, *American Music Teacher*

Time Flies ... How to Make the Best Use of Teaching Time

Published by the FJH Music Company

- A smooth introduction for those just beginning to teach
- A shot-in-the-arm for those who might feel burned-out
- A reminder to the experienced teacher of further challenges

Focus on giving *specific* practice advice. Outline a practice plan, for instance. “Practice your pentascales ten times each day. The first two times see how quickly you can find the patterns. On the next three tries, check for good hand position. Spend the next three times looking and listening for “sticky fingers.” Round off your practice by playing each pentascale first loud, then soft.” Such a plan beats “That needs more work” or just “Practice your pentascales ten times each day.” A thoughtful plan shows students *how* to practice.

Goal: I need to find some way to motivate students. The lessons seem listless.

- Does the student enjoy playing this material? Do you ever give students a choice among several pieces, any of which might accomplish the same purpose? Does the student ever hear his piece performed beautifully?

“experts” instead of inviting speakers to each meeting. They agreed to read specific short books, then discuss their own opinions and ideas on the subject. They also drew up a list of topics they felt were of general interest to the group and agreed to give these topics the same personal-input treatment. In that way, each teacher comes to a meeting prepared to give as well as take. Personal involvement replaces passive listening.

Your Own Way “Out”

Despite your misgivings, you already know the answers to many of your questions. How do you find them? Take time to sift through the flurry of thoughts swirling in your head, narrow the focus, pinpoint a behavior, attitude, or skill, and decide to improve just one aspect of your teaching. The Cheshire Cat will purr as you step along the path *you* have chosen. ■■■