



The New Curtis Curriculum

LEARNING BY DOING IN THE CLASSROOM

BY PAUL BRYAN

Working at Curtis offers daily reminders of what brought me to 18th and Locust Streets in September 1989: opportunity. I was lucky to have the opportunity to study trombone with Glenn Dodson, who influenced my playing and shaped my musical thinking. I had the opportunity to rehearse and perform with fellow students from whom I would learn as much as any teachers. Most important, Curtis’s small enrollment offered me the necessary performance opportunities to “learn by doing”—an approach as ubiquitous 25 years ago at Curtis as it is today, though the phrase had yet to be formally coined.

I can’t envision any performer disputing the benefits—even the necessity—of the opportunity to learn by doing. No teacher instructing a performer, composer, or conductor would expect a student to come to lesson after lesson; sit and be lectured on how a piece should be played, written, or conducted; and expect that, as a result, the student would master the technical requirements and musical concepts involved. Of course a student might

acquire some knowledge about the piece in this way, but real learning—the mastery of general technical concepts as well as minute musical details—takes place when a student actively participates in the process of practicing and performing a work.

A student does initial work on a piece of repertoire and brings it to a lesson. A great teacher gives the student feedback but, more importantly, involves the student in identifying ways





If we believe that acquiring the skills to learn repertoire in the future is important, we need to look more closely not at *what* we are teaching, but *how*.

in which his or her performance can be improved. The student's active participation in this analysis and in practicing the solution is the key to retaining the teacher's expert feedback and applying it in the future. Students who participate in the teaching process gain a real understanding of technical and musical issues to be solved, and learn the skills necessary to teach themselves new repertoire in the future.

There is no ability a teacher can impart to a student more important than making them capable of independent, life-long learning—and this applies as much to learning in the classroom as to learning in a one-on-one lesson as a performer.

Since 2010 Curtis has been engaged in a comprehensive, three-year curricular review, and new liberal arts and musical studies curricula to be implemented this fall are the result. At most institutions, curricular renewal focuses on content—what information should be taught as part of a school's courses. However, if we believe that acquiring the skills necessary to learn repertoire in the future is far more important than being taught any single piece of music, we are required to look at curricular revitalization from a very different perspective. We need to look more closely not at *what* we are teaching, but *how*.

SKILL-BUILDING OR INFORMATION-GATHERING?

“For a skillful student of any discipline, knowledge is almost always readily accessible. The acquisition of skill, on the other hand, requires consistent, deliberate practice over time,” writes Robert A. Duke of the University of Texas at Austin, one of my favorite speakers and authors on human learning. “The development of skills is the meat of learning. The imparting of skills is the meat of teaching, yet much of students' time in the classroom is spent gathering information, information that is seldom applied in meaningful ways to solve problems, accomplish goals, or illuminate interesting ideas. And much of teachers' time is spent conveying information with the hope that students will eventually put the information to some useful purpose. But hope is not much of an instructional strategy.”

Acquiring skills, as described by Dr. Duke, is a process that requires the student to be an active participant, to work on a skill repetitively, and to be given the guidance needed to make improvement. This is exactly the kind of learning I described above—the kind that is going on, quite naturally, in Curtis's studios and rehearsal halls. I believe that the methods and means used to teach performance can and should inform the way our classroom instructors and courses use content to develop skills.

Our need to develop the new skills required of a 21st-century musician is ever more urgent. Being a great performer is no longer enough, as my fellow alumni will attest. Musicians must advocate for themselves, their ensembles, and their art form like never before. They must engage and speak to students and audiences, research possible sources of funding, present master classes, make informed use of information technology and



Classroom learning at Curtis (left to right): students in a Poetry Workshop session; Daniel Shapiro leads a musical studies tutorial; Peter Shapiro leads an Italian conversation with students; Paul Bryan's conducting class PHOTOS: PETE CHECCHIA

social media, and write grant proposals and program notes. To be effective advocates, they must develop their ability to think critically, formulate well-defined ideas, and communicate them clearly—as writers, speakers, researchers, and teachers.

The challenge for Curtis's new liberal arts and musical studies curricula is to provide students with the opportunities necessary to form the skills they need for lifelong problem solving and learning.

IN THE CLASSROOM

Some courses more easily lend themselves to skill development; others, not as much. Solfège requires students to listen, identify, transpose, and dictate. In practicing those skills over and over, students are active participants and receive feedback and error correction needed to make improvement. Music history, however, is most often associated with content—time periods, composers, and important vocabulary and terms. Of course, this content is required, important knowledge; but the content becomes more meaningful and useful when it's learned through assignments and activities that involve skill-building.

To that end, in the new curricula, faculty will be required to change or refine their assignments and classroom work to integrate project-based learning, oral reports, student-led discussions, library tutorials, and online research practice, as well as opportunities for critical thinking. A music history seminar could require a student to present his or her research project in the form of oral program notes given from the stage during a concert; while in Foundations in Reading and Writing, students might be assigned to write a press release or post a Moodle blog comparing a composition by a Curtis composer to a piece in the standard repertoire.

The members of Curtis's distinguished performance faculty don't just teach the notes, rhythm, and selected stylistic markings in piece after piece; they instruct their students in ways that lead to the acquisition of long-term, applicable skills. With the help of my colleagues, Jeanne McGinn and Jonathan Coopersmith, and the faculty of the liberal arts and musical studies departments, students' efforts in the classroom will now have the same goal: prioritizing the development of lifelong skills as they learn by doing.

Today's students, like that young trombonist from Oklahoma who in 1989 found himself on the threshold of a new life in music, will benefit from the new opportunities at Curtis. The new curriculum applies the lessons we've learned as lifelong musicians and creates dynamic opportunities for our students to learn and grow as performing artists—in classrooms, practice rooms, and on whatever stage they find themselves—ushered forward by their bright futures. ♦

Paul Bryan is the dean of faculty and students at Curtis.

The challenge is to provide students with the opportunities necessary to form the skills they need for lifelong problem-solving and learning.