

What I Have Learned about Effective Teaching
(Effective teaching is essentially a "Show and Tell")

by
Parley L. Belnap

1. A piano background is almost a necessity.

At least moderate proficiency on the piano is most desirable before learning to play the organ.

Many professional organists continually play exercises and scales on the piano to keep their fingers in good form. Scales and exercises are executed better on the piano than on the organ and the finger gymnastic element of the piano is definitely beneficial.

2. One must have an opportunity to practice.

A baby-sitting exchange has provided several of my organ students with a perfect solution: Two have worked as a team, one tending all of the children while the other practiced at the church or had a lesson. This not only has helped mothers develop or maintain talents, but has provided them a special-dimension diversion.

A new or used organ at home is most advantageous:

My granddaughter Emily in Idaho recently found an organ with a full pedalboard for \$75 at their local Deseret Industries. It had some broken keys and a few other problems which her handyman husband fixed in no time. He actually traded out the broken keys with good ones from a seldom-used octave. What a boon this in-house practice possibility has been to Emily, who not only is extremely busy with three young children but who also loves the diversion provided by her ever-available practice opportunity. Her organ study has taken on a totally new motivation now that the practice element has been simplified and it is no longer necessary for her to go to the church at wee hours in the morning.

3. Carefully working out and notating fingerings and pedaling in the music is a most effective learning tool.

It is the most sure way to be able to use the same fingering and pedaling consistently.

Using the same fingerings and pedaling every time a piece is played has definite advantages: Not only does the mind learn the passages, but the kinesthetic sense learns as well. Kinesthetic sense is a physical memory of the muscles.

4. It has been my experience that it is easier to teach and/or learn the basics of organ playing from scratch than to correct bad habits.

It was originally my opinion that organ hymn playing should not be started until one had had about a year of organ study. I still have this opinion in general, but I have modified it somewhat.

Actually, the playing of many hymns involves some rather difficult organ techniques. Ideally hymns should not be played until these basics are learned, but this is often not a practical option. A competent pianist but untrained organist might suddenly be called as ward organist and he or she must make the best of it.

It really seems to be much easier to learn correctly at first rather than to try to correct bad habits later. Consequently then and ideally, a piece should not be played until the basic techniques required for that piece are learned.

5. When to start learning the organ

One of my fine students was a good pianist at age 10 when she very successfully started the organ.

One must reach the pedals with the feet before starting the organ, but extensions are becoming available now to allow a shorter person to play the pedals.

Adjustable organ benches are often found now in churches.

6. Help the student to be service-minded — to bless the lives of others with his or her talents.

Pacida was member of the church from the Philippines, working for a time in London as a nanny when we were serving there. She wanted to learn to play the piano because no one in her home branch in the Philippines could play. She really wanted to be able to play the hymns for the congregational singing when she returned home. Pacida had a small electronic keyboard in her room for

practicing. In the front of her Simplified Hymnbook, Pacide wrote this dedication in her broken English: "I have consecrated all of this, my performances, to thee, O My God." Her motivation was to use her new skill to be of service to the Lord and to other branch members. What a service-minded motivation to learn to play the piano!

Encourage students to be actively engaged in the cause of good organ playing. Help them see that passing their art on to others is a privilege—even an obligation.

7. The teacher should be approachable and should show concern for the student's temporal and spiritual welfare.

In this regard, one thing Marcel Dupre told me has remained as a guiding principle throughout my teaching years: He said, "If I cannot make a student feel comfortable at a lesson, I will never know what he really can do."

8. Invent ways to help financially disadvantaged but motivated people be able to study.

Tabernacle Organist Frank Asper had me repair orchestra music, clean his couch, and other odd jobs for some of my piano lessons. Otherwise my study opportunity would have been considerably shortened. Buying music and transportation to Salt Lake from my home in Hooper, Utah (west of Ogden) were major sacrifices for my family, not to mention the cost for the lessons.

Trading services with others can be beneficial to both.

10. The teacher should have the ability to look beyond a student's shortcomings and failings and see in him his potential. I have earnestly tried never, ever to discourage but always to encourage a student's musical progress.

11. Effective practice methods produce more effective learning. (See handout "Concepts and Techniques for Effective Practice" by Dr. Parley L. Belnap for a more comprehensive list.)

The "Seven-step method:"

I have used the "Seven-step method of practice" most successfully in my teaching and in my playing. Many of my former students have told me of their

success in applying this method of practice as they have later tackled new pieces on their own:

(1) right hand alone, (2) left hand alone, (3) pedal alone, (4) right hand and pedal together, (5) right hand and left hand together, (6) left hand and pedal together, and (7) all three parts together.

This Seven-step method" is especially effective in small sections and in especially difficult passages.

Marcel Dupre found it helpful to learn a piece by working on measures 1 and 2, then 2 and 3, then 3 and 4, etc. He thought that this method was helpful to his memory.

I am thoroughly convinced of the value of slow practice.

A piece should not be played up to tempo until all problem measures have been carefully worked out, such as using the Seven-step method in practicing these problem measures. And even after a piece can be played up to tempo, it should not be done often.

Playing mistakes over and over just reinforces them. Play a piece no faster than can be done accurately throughout and increase the tempo gradually with accuracy in mind.