

Motivation Symposium

3. Rewarding pupils



Pamela Lidiard



Jenny Macmillan



Bronwen Brindley



Sharon Mark

Do you believe in the concept of rewarding pupils with more than a smile after they have done something well? If so, what do you provide?

Pamela Lidiard, (pianist, writer, teacher, deputy head of keyboard studies at Guildhall School of Music and Drama): The oft-repeated dictum is that teachers should be developing independent learners, working towards the day when they are no longer needed by their students. Encouragement - yes. Honest recognition of achievement - yes. But it is not healthy for students to rely on either their teachers or rewards to know that they've done well. I'd rather they were able to make their own assessment of how a performance went and find pleasure in a task well done. In fact, I would say that choosing the right task is the most important element. Giving students a high profile concert in a good venue, with interesting repertoire is itself the 'reward' that pre-assumes the strong motivation it nearly always receives from them.

Jenny Macmillan (Suzuki teacher, European Suzuki Association teacher trainer, writer): Never underestimate the value of a smile. Whether young or old, students feel a glow of warmth when their musical offering is appreciated. A smile, accompanied by genuine words of praise, is very important. There is always something good to be commented on, whether good posture, beautiful sound, crisp rhythm, neat fingerwork, accuracy of notes, varied dynamics, dramatic performance, or just that they've read the next eight bars of the piece. Try to be as specific as possible in your praise. The ensuing discussion on how the music can be

improved will be better accepted after praise has been received.

Bronwen Brindley (piano teacher and member of EPTA UK Management Committee): Of course I reward pupils with a smile but also with praise (and a private prayer of thanksgiving) when something I've taught them has worked and when they have done something exceptionally well.

Sharon Mark (EPTA UK regional organiser, Banbridge, teacher and writer): When pupils have done something well, it can feel natural to give them an encouraging smile – along with a few words of praise. However, contrary to what most of us think, studies suggest that praise actually hinders pupils from developing skills which are essential to becoming independent learners. After a period of experimentation, I realised that I tended to praise more because I needed to say it rather than because my pupils needed to hear it. The problem with simply saying 'well done' after a pupil has performed something well is two-fold. Firstly, non-specific feedback is too vague to be constructive; secondly, do our pupils really understand what it was they did to receive this sudden outburst of praise? After numerous futile attempts, telling Sam that he's finally 'got it' may leave him wondering what exactly he did differently that met with his teacher's satisfaction. The problem is that its common practice to talk at our pupils rather than working with them. Therefore, I find it helpful to talk less and ask more. 'How did you figure out...?' or 'What was the most challenging bit and how did you overcome it?' not only gives pupils a chance to participate in the fundamental practice of self-evaluation but

also gives us, as teachers, a valuable insight into our pupils' learning processes and musical perspectives. Ultimately, the key is to consider our motives: do we create a learning environment which fosters our pupils' sense of self-determination and musical independence, or are we making them become dependent learners by constant reliance upon our decisions and evaluations?

Do you give stars or the equivalent of 'grades' at the end of a notebook after each week as a means of encouragement for the regular weekly practice? Or do you have any other method, equivalent to a secondary class teacher's 'merit mark' system?

PL: This was something I never did when I was teaching school-age children, but I know several pupils were bribed by parents to practise daily, or pass an exam well enough to get the latest computer game! The problem I have with this is that the things that can be measured in this way are not always the ones that really matter. £1 for half an hour's practice will tend to focus the child's attention on the clock, not on the quality of what they are doing; the computer game will make them practise strategically, ie to pass the exam. The Editor will have to have a firm hand with my contributions to this symposium, because I again find myself typing that finding the right piece for them to learn, the right goal for them to achieve is what provokes regular practice.

JM: For young children up to the age of about seven or eight, I often use devices such as a tally on a piece of coloured paper (five points equals one sticker at the end of the lesson), a wooden jigsaw with pieces numbered 1 to 10 (we try to complete the jigsaw by the end of the lesson), or wooden stacking toys such as a policeman or a soldier (again, to be built up by the end of the lesson). The pleasure on the face of a child awarded two, or even three, stickers at the end of the lesson is a joy to behold. Or sometimes, if something is remarkably well attempted (it may or may not have been successful, but the child was trying), I will say "That was SO carefully done, you can have an extra sticker at the end of your lesson".

BB: I give stars only to the very young and then only occasionally when I feel they have achieved something special. Whereas grades and marks may work well in a classroom I prefer, when teaching individuals, to write something complimentary in their note-books and praise them to their parents or, if I'm concerned about an obvious

lapse in practising, to talk to them and to their parents and discover the problems.

SM: There is little doubt that stars and grades will motivate pupils. However, time and again numerous studies suggest that **rewards simply motivate pupils to get rewards**; stars and grades will not develop an enduring commitment to learning. Its worth considering whether traditional methodology and the typical controlling, teacher-directed style of delivery contributes to pupils' apathy towards the regular weekly practice. Visit the Musical Futures website (www.musicalfutures.org.uk), download their teacher packs, and you'll stumble across the rather shocking, though perhaps unsurprising, statistic that approaches to learning are currently ineffective for 92% of instrumental learners. Music plays a vital part in the lives of today's youth, yet to what extent do we allow them to draw upon their 'rich and in some ways sophisticated musical knowledge'? (Folkestad, 2006) For me, the solution is to tap into pupils' musical interests and learning styles – for example, allowing them to play some of 'their tunes' by ear. In my experience, music making for pupils will suddenly become meaningful and worthwhile (even though it can be scary to allow pupils to do something which we don't feel entirely competent with ourselves, such as playing by ear). However, pupils do value the opportunity to see their teachers learn!

Words of encouragement: Do you have any memories of particular moments when you were genuinely moved by what a student achieved? What did you say at the time?

PL: Yes, I have many such memories, but there is no one way to express this afterwards. Choosing the right moment to give feedback on performances is important. There is so much pressure on young performers today and the atmosphere can often be competitive - however hard we work against this. Generally I feel that immediately post-performance is the time to stress the positive aspects of what they achieved and more detailed comments can wait until later.

JM: In a recent lesson, a hard-working 11 year old played a piece with real feeling. She totally put herself into the music. I commented on it and she told me that her violin teacher had said the same to her earlier in the week. We shared our joy!

BB: There are so many of those wonderful moments – they are the reasons we teach! A phrase perfectly formed, a ►

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hard touch in a newish pupil transformed into a singing tone, mastery of a technical problem, a moment of revelatory interpretation – each individual provokes a special, spontaneous response. I think they were summed up for me in something one of my Grade 8 pupils said a few days ago: “You see, when I go into a room with a piano I just want to sit down and play”. How can we relate what we say at these moments?

End of term treats: Do you believe in any collective activity as a means of a ‘treat’ at the end of term or the end of the academic year that you do together?

JM: The social aspect of learning the piano is very important in my teaching group. Towards the end of each term all my pupils perform in a concert, followed by a party to which everyone brings something delicious to eat. We also have a Christmas party, hosted by a pupil’s family (different each year), so all my pupils and families feel involved – they form a mutual support group.

BB: At the end of every term – no. During the summer term I sometimes hire a coach and take as many as possible (plus a parent for the smaller ones – obligatory!) to a Last Night of the Proms concert, where they can sit behind the orchestra, facing the conductor, and feel a part of the excitement going on around them.

Do you believe in giving Christmas and birthday cards, or presents to students?

PL: This raises the whole question of a teacher’s personal relationship with students. I remember that some research was done which showed that one of the strongest factors that influenced both the length of time that children continued with lessons and their success with their instrument was a good relationship with their teacher. I feel very strongly that the one-to-one lesson for school children can be immensely important in all sorts of ways - it may be the one time in the week when the child has one person giving them their full attention. The relationship with college students can range from being a parent figure to a colleague, but in all these situations there is a fine line leading to emotional blackmail that must not be crossed. I return to my *idée fixe*: of course we want them to value our advice, friendship and support, but not to *need* it.

As for gifts – I often give music to students, but more often find I am on the receiving end of presents, the generosity and thoughtfulness of which can often be very moving! I have two wonderful Chinese students at Guildhall who are determined to wean me off coffee, bringing me boxes of healthy Chinese tea whenever they catch me with a latte!

JM: I give a tiny Christmas present (eg a music pencil or notebook) to each child and a card to the parents.

BB: Christmas and birthday presents (and card) – yes. Small ones.

‘Carrots’: Do you believe in the idea of offering a concert or an exam/festival entry to a student if he proves that he can do ‘X’ before the closing date of entry or not?

PL: No.

JM: This is an interesting question. My gut feeling is no – I wouldn’t put pressure onto young children like that. The child and I agree in advance what will be prepared for the next performing opportunity, and it will be a piece that is already good and we can now study further to make even more musical. However, pupils know when the next concert will be, and many may well motivate themselves to work hard on their current piece in the hope that it can be selected for performance.

BB: If “X” incorporates all the necessary determination and stickability then “yes”! However, encouraging someone to take part in these when we know they are ready and confident is quite a different matter from hounding them into taking part where they are very reluctant to do so. Confidence is all-important when taking part in concerts, festivals and exams and the simple ability to perform “X” may simply not be enough to ensure a happy student.

SM: Carrots’ illustrate the use of power rather than reason and when pupils are manipulated it becomes impossible to build a trusting teacher-pupil relationship. Rather, the practice of allowing pupils to set their own deadlines and take responsibility and control of their own learning can foster their sense of self-determination – an element which many studies have highlighted as essential to effective, independent learning.

Withdrawing something: Have you ever taken something away as a result of a student not achieving what he had promised to do? (eg entry for an exam, etc). If so, how has this affected your working relationship with the student?



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PL: Hmm. I'd like to see this put differently. If a student has in some way shown that they are not ready for something, then it would be irresponsible for a teacher not to withdraw them from that task. I don't see that as 'punishment' as such, but avoidance of problems further down the line. We should never set students up to fail. In fact, this highlights the whole problem of 'rewards' ...

JM: No, never. I believe this would be incredibly damaging to the student's self-esteem. I'm talking about young, primary-age children here. There could be a place for dealing with older pupils (later teenagers) in this way, especially if they indicate they wish to continue seriously with their musical studies, and you feel they are not giving all they could to their practice.

BB: Very rarely, with the full approval of parents, I have withdrawn a student from an exam; not as a punishment but simply because I know that, for a variety of reasons, he or she will not be ready in time. I have a firm belief that there is no point in taking an exam unless the result fully reflects the ability of the candidate; it is a waste of time for everyone concerned. I have found, on those rare occasions, that the relief felt by all concerned spurred students (and parents) on to more concentrated effort for the next time.

How do you react and relate to pupils who have parents who tell them that if they pass an exam or practice for so long, they will be given a brand new bike or whatever as a 'reward'?

JM: I would react with horror, especially if something as substantial as a bike. That puts music practice on a difficult materialistic level. A reward of a visit to a musical, ballet, opera or concert is significantly more appropriate. Or a new CD, possibly related to the music currently being learned, eg by the same composer, or from the same period or country.

BB: I feel this is a pact between parent and offspring and that I shouldn't intervene. Usually, they get their bike anyway!

SM: When I first started teaching, I tended to teach as I was taught without questioning conventional practice. More recently, I have come to realise the importance of reflecting more deeply on issues – such as motivation. I came to realise that when I referred to 'motivation' what I actually meant was compliance, something which fails to foster an enduring commitment to real learning. As a piano teacher, I feel that it is my responsibility to educate the parents of my pupils. I explain that the 'reward' in itself is not objectionable but rather the practice of using something as a reward. In this instance, there is the underlying threat of punishment 'IF' the child fails to meet the conditions set by the parent. Moreover, a child promised a reward for practising is being given every reason to stop practising whenever there is no longer a reward to be gained.

Have you any other thoughts on the idea of rewards – concrete or more intangible – that we should or should not offer our students?

PL: Success is its own reward, although what constitutes 'success' will be different for everyone, from being able to channel nerves into positive energy to truly finding that sense of 'being in the moment'. This is where good teaching can do so much to build self-confidence by giving each student the piece or concert opportunity that will stretch them but be

within their abilities to do well.

JM: Learning and playing duets with other pupils – perhaps older, or with someone for whose playing they have great respect – is very motivating. But I would offer it along the lines of "You have done well this week, therefore I'm going to suggest you and Susie prepare a duet to perform at our next concert" rather than "If you can play this piece by next week, then I'll let you play a duet with Susie".

BB: For the average, and even the highly talented and motivated student, I feel that continually showing them how much progress they are making, however small, is the best reward. Looking back at what they were doing a year ago and comparing it with what they are achieving now; playing a piece at a concert that they know really very well, even if it's a grade below their present standard; making recordings of their pieces to play to admiring grandpas, absent dads or mums; learning to play their grandmother's favourite tune and comparing the playing of that piece with the ones they recorded last year – all these little things amount to encouragement and aspiration which inspire confidence that they really can play the piano.

SM: When considering pupil motivation, it is useful to distinguish between extrinsic and intrinsic forms of motivation. Offering rewards to pupils for their learning amount to extrinsic motivation – where the pupil's behaviour is governed by the process of compliance. On the other hand if pupils' learning experiences were to draw more upon their musical interests and preferred learning styles, rather than being teacher-directed, studies indicate that learners develop a sense of self-determination and experience learning as intrinsically motivating. However, creating a learning environment which fosters pupils' sense of self-determination requires teachers to work *with* pupils – and such an approach makes significantly more demands upon the teacher than simply telling a pupil what to do. ■



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