MOTIVATING STUDENTS DURING TEACHER ABSENCE

One of my biggest challenges as a freelancer with a large private studio was keeping my students motivated during my longer absences. I invented a variety of activities to help with that.

ANONYMOUS COMPETITION

By creating a long term series of challenging exams and instilling some fun and non-stressful competition into it, my students were able to look forward through a “no lesson” period of a couple weeks. This “anonymous competition” was voluntary, but I really pushed it. Whenever I knew I wasn’t going to be able to teach for a while, I would announce to the participating students that I’d be testing them on their next level when I returned.

**Colorful Wall Chart**- Every student picked a secret code name. As each level exam was mastered, a star was placed in a box on the chart. The students could see their progress, but not know who the others were.

I had a variety of prizes students could choose from (cool looking pencils, erasers and stickers for the younger students up through Dunkin Donut gift cards for the older ones.)

**Level exams**- I put together exams that I felt appropriate for my school age students.

Level A- Scales from memory, must recite key signatures, one octave, any tempo- C, F, B flat, G Major. Note Hold- B natural on the staff for 5 seconds minimum. Two very short memorized melodies.

Level B- Scales from memory as before- all scales from level A plus D and E flat Major and G chromatic. Triads- memorized, one octave, any tempo, must recite the key signature, no major hesitations- C, F, B flat, G Major. Note Hold as before- for 8 seconds minimum. Two slightly harder and longer memorized melodies.

Level C- Scales now played as eighth notes at a minimum of quarter=40. D, E flat and F Major for two octaves. A, C, G, B flat for one octave. G chromatic to D above the staff. Note Hold- B natural above the staff for 12 seconds. Triads- as before, add D and E flat Major. Two harder, longer, memorized solos.

Level D- I continued to add Major scales and Triads, increased the range, increased the tempo, introduced minor scales, extended the chromatic scale range, gave extra credit for vibrato on final notes, required a crescendo and decrescendo on the note hold, added a simple single tongued exercise in rhythms and increased the rhythmic difficulty of the memorized melodies.

Levels E through M- you can see the pattern. By Level M the exam was intense, the range was up to super high D, all the Major and minor keys were covered, double and triple tonguing were required and everything was memorized including one movement of a sonata or concerto. Due to the length of the last few levels I did allow for future retesting on only the failed sections.

STUDIO RECITAL PREPARATION

A huge lesson scheduling issue developed when I began playing with the Glimmerglass Festival in the summers. The orchestra was in residence for about 10 weeks and the festival was 80 miles from my home in Syracuse. Depending on the number of operas I was needed for (up to four, three on average) I might only have one day off per week to teach, which was impossible considering the size of my studio. Therefore, I enlisted the help of a pianist friend and came up with the following arrangement. (This was voluntary for my students. If they didn’t want to participate they simply received lessons every other week.)

**Alternating Lessons and Coaching with piano accompaniment**- Each week, I would teach only half of my students. The other students would receive a coaching on a solo from the pianist on a day when I was gone. My students paid the pianist directly. The pianist used my studio and piano. The following week I would flip which students did what. At the end of the summer I held an informal studio recital in my home.

**Small flute ensembles and larger, conducted flute ensemble**- This was another summer activity that would culminate with a performance in the same studio recital. I was lucky enough to have a gifted older student who was willing to coach the small ensembles, conduct the larger group and take care of the scheduling. When she graduated from high school she still coached for me since she was home for the summer. She was paid a lump sum with a fee I charged the participating students. The groups played in the end of summer recital. Not only did the ensembles give my students valuable chamber experience, it was also fun and led to friendships within my studio.

ASKING ANOTHER FLUTE TEACHER TO HELP

This could be dangerous, because some of your students might like the summer teacher better and jump ship, but I had very few problems that way.

Sometimes I would have students that had auditions coming up in the following fall/winter or other imminent and important performances. Or perhaps the family summer schedule didn’t allow for lessons on the only day I could teach. In those cases, I would ask flute teachers in the area if they would teach those students for the summer.

ENCOURAGING STUDENTS TO ATTEND SUMMER FESTIVALS

Besides recommending the festivals we all think of, call the music departments of the schools your students attend. Sometimes there will be a one or two week band camp or once per week lessons or rehearsals during the summer your students could take advantage of.