

Capitalizing on Your Clients' Passions to Energize Your Studio

Notes from a workshop session by Wendy Stevens, NCTM – August 27, 2005

What would you, as a music teacher, love? Think about it. The list is limitless. From prepared students to supportive parents to ever ready resources, we can quickly compile a long list of what we would love. Would you feel more excited, more energized, more committed if you could have what you love at every lesson?

Now, let's turn the question around a little bit. What do your students love? Have you ever thought about this? Try asking them. The answers you get will be very revealing. Now ask yourself, would your students be more excited, more energized, more committed if they could have what they love at every lesson? Undoubtedly the answer is yes! So, how can I, as a music teacher, incorporate my clients' passions into how I run my studio and how I teach their weekly lessons?

As music teachers, we are service providers to a unique pair of clients. We must realize that we are not selling tangible goods, but rather, an experience. And we must sell this experience to two clients:

1. The student – the one who experiences our service
2. The parent – the one who pays for the student to experience our service

What do students love? Let's divide them into age categories: 7-11, 12-15, 16-18. For this particular study, the focus will be on the 7-11 year old category. The following chart will summarize the responses of Wendy's students and their parents when asked what they love.

What do children LOVE?		What do children HATE?	
Coloring, drawing	Learning—but unknowingly	Being bored	Losing
Mysteries	Showing off knowledge and skills	Sitting still	Being different
Pretending	Contributing	Being ignored	Punishment
Making up their own stories	Answering questions	Being left out	Being singled out (positively or negatively)
Being creative	Presents	Waiting	Being disciplined (practicing)
Body noises	New activities	Failing	Getting hurt
Making their own decisions	Other kids	Lectures	
Acting silly	To laugh	Being pressured (time)	
Having their ideas used	Recognition	Hygiene (cleaning up)	
Activity	Rewards	Repeating a song they don't like	
Playing games	Acting like grown ups	Being forced to do what they don't want to do	
Asking questions	Being treated like grown ups	Church clothes	
Surprises	Helping	Not being asked to contribute	
Talking	Jokes, riddles	Bossy people	
Attention	Chocolate chip cookies	Being in trouble	
Animation	Winning	When their mom is not happy	
Energetic people	Compliments	When their teacher is not happy	
Activity	To be outside		
Spontaneity	Exploring		
Touching things	Seeing their own improvement		
Experiencing things		Being laughed at	

How many of these things that students love are in a typical music lesson? Let's examine a typical music lesson:

1. Greeting, questions about week
2. Transition
3. Scales – make corrections, assign new one
4. Let student select piece to play first
5. Ask what they think, correct mistakes, assign new piece
6. Continue until time runs out
7. Tell student you'll hear next week what you didn't have time for today
8. Student leaves

Those in the 7-11 year old category don't need the self-evaluation method of teaching as much as they need exciting activities that incorporate the things they love. Let's look at some ideas for incorporating some of the top things students love into a lesson:

1. DRAWING AND COLORING

- * theory book work
- * draw picture to represent piece
- * write answers to questions on a white board
- * use binder with a clear cover, insert a staff, use dry erase markers to write on it
- * send home a pack of markers with a special assignment

2. MYSTERIES

- * Mystery dinner at end of summer, menus are “coded,” students provide background music
- * magnifying glass at piano to help students look more closely at their music
- * assign students to come up with mysterious sounds to play on the piano
- * mystery note drill – teacher closes eyes and calls out intervals and direction to see if student can identify mystery note
- * twenty questions with musical terms and/or symbols

3. PRETENDING

- * when performing, handle nerves by pretending they are the best pianist in the world
- * on a digital piano/keyboard play a pre-recorded piece and have the student pretend to be playing it
- * swap roles; let the student pretend to be the teacher
- * when playing the music of historical eras, pretend to be dressed in the appropriate clothing

4. MAKING UP STORIES

- * use a story to aid memorization
- * describe the music with a story
- * write lyrics to pieces that don't already have lyrics

5. BEING CREATIVE

- * make up a new ending to a piece
- * create a rain storm on the piano
- * learn how to improvise step-by-step
- * play chord progression any way other than straight quarter notes
- * make up a sound effect for a favorite animal, have teacher guess what animal it is the following week
- * try to play the sound of a specific color

6. BODY NOISES

- * use body noise to do a rhythm pattern
- * with a group of students, perform a rhythm ensemble using only “skin music”
- * if playing a piece about an animal, somewhere in the piece insert the sound that animal makes

7. MAKING DECISIONS

- * select what to do next at the lesson
- * decide whether to keep working on a piece or move on to something else
- * determine what dynamics to use in the piece
- * encourage them to select and learn music on their own
- * have the student set their own goals

8. ACTING SILLY

- * in a group setting, let the observers create distractions for the performer
- * in a group setting, let the students illustrate how *not* to give a performance
- * read and poem and have the student improvise fitting music
- * instruct the student to yell the words or counts of a piece
- * have a student meow the rhythm of a piece

9. HAVING THEIR IDEAS USED

* conduct a weekly or monthly poll questions that students can give responses to. Try this question: “If I were in charge of my piano lesson, I would...”

Other poll question ideas:

What goals would you like to achieve by this time next year?

What is your favorite thing to do during your practice time?

What kind of recital pieces would you like this year?

If you could change one thing about piano lessons this year, what would it be?

What is your favorite piece that you have learned?

Why did you like it?

What is your favorite candy?

What color of highlighter tape should we use next?

What is your favorite subject in school?

What was your favorite part of the Christmas recital?

How much did you enjoy the [insert event]?

How much do you doodle at the piano?

Do you like to compose?

How often do you read your assignment book?

Try incorporating one idea at a time into your studio. The idea is not to give students full reign, but rather to energize and motivate them by using what they love in their lessons.

Our second group of clients that we must discuss is the parents – the ones paying for the lessons. What do they LOVE in a service provider?

1. A good deal
2. An excellent and thorough service
3. A professional service
4. A convenient service
5. A service provider that keeps up-to-date with the latest developments

We need to “market” ourselves to our current parents. Parents are constantly evaluating whether music lessons are worth their time and money. It is vital that we maintain communication with them and let them know how much we are putting into their child’s music education.

Try including a corner in your newsletter titled, “What [insert name]’s Been Up To.” Include things like: adjudicating, looking for Christmas music, composing a piece, planning a recital, what music I’m practicing, etc. Go ahead, brag about your studio! Emphasize what you offer and provide that parents are looking for.

Finding out what your clients love could radically change your studio and your teaching. What harm can it do to start doing at music lessons what students love?

Check out these great resources:

Selling the Invisible – book by Harry Beckwith

What Clients love – book by Harry Beckwith

The Paradox of Excellence – book by Weissman and Mosby

Fast Company – business magazine with lots of marketing tips