Sometimes your lesson plan will tank … ‘Plan B,’ anyone?

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It takes a great deal of self-confidence in one’s own teaching abilities to abandon a lesson plan and not just any lesson plan but the lesson plan you submitted for a teaching position, no less.

A number of years ago I was in a position to hire a new elementary string teacher. I had screened a number of applicants and decided to invite two candidates to do a live teaching demo with an elementary string lesson group. A small panel of teacher/administrator observers was asked to also attend the demo.

The teacher candidate appeared as requested and presented me with multiple copies of her lesson plan. I had previously frontloaded the candidate with some information about the group she would encounter. A quick glance of the lesson plan showed it to be well structured and with tangible outcomes. So, off we went.

The lesson began with a textbook introduction and we watched the candidate interact with the kids in the group for about seven or eight minutes before something unique happened: the lesson abruptly stopped. Huh? The teacher candidate came over to me and whispered: "Would it be okay if I change my whole lesson plan in order to address some basics with these kids?" Wow, I thought, absolutely!

This was definitely a first for me as a music administrator, and the moment has stayed with me ever since. The moral of the story here? To quote the great Scottish poet Robert Burns, "the best laid plans of mice and men often go awry." Oh, and yes, we hired this candidate!

The need to be flexible

So much of what we are taught about being successful as a teacher is that we must be organized in planning. While I wholeheartedly agree that good teachers are by nature organized souls, I would also like to believe that we teachers also need to be good at diagnosing the effectiveness of the lesson we are teaching on the fly. We all have heard that we must first know our "audience" (those we teach). Well, what happens when the lesson you planned for starts to bomb?

Sizing up your kids and knowing instinctively what works and what doesn’t work in teaching them is a good early goal. Some may argue that you should always challenge, push the envelope and aim high. I do agree but I also know that sometimes you just need to go back to basics, too. We know that each new school year brings a new crop of kids and that we never know what their capacity to learn will be until we have done a little experimenting.

The late night comedian and talk show host Johnny Carson taught me a very good lesson years ago. While watching Johnny’s opening monologue each night, it was almost inevitable that he would on rare occasion, really tank. I’m talking about a real stinker here. At that point, the pianist in Doc Severinsen’s Tonight Show Band would launch into a cheesy rendition of Tea for Two and Johnny would abandon his monologue and start to tap dance to entertain the audience.

I’ve been there. Maybe some of you have been there, too? We can’t always be successful with our “audience” but we’re sure going to try, aren't we? But, I digress.

Prepare that Plan B

The challenge for music educators is getting to know what works and what doesn’t with different groups of kids (ensembles, classroom music, etc.). This is where a teacher needs to know when to switch gears and, yes, even go back to the beginning, if necessary. Teachers should always have a “Plan B” and be ready to implement it as seamlessly as possible when it is clear that it’s time to change course.

The best teachers I have observed over the years rarely find themselves in a situation where they need to drop their lesson plan completely. Some have mastered the ability to “tweak their plan on the go,” while others will simply reinforce what has been previously taught (learned) through an extension of their original plan.

Another thought: just as much as we assess our students, we must also routinely assess the effectiveness of what we do as educators. Forget for a moment the process of teacher observations conducted by an administrator. Instead, focus on reflecting on lessons that worked/didn’t work. Why did some lessons work and/or fail? Did kids fall short of the desired outcome, meet your expectations or exceed expectations? (P.S. Not that my vote matters here but you ultimately want kids to exceed expectations.)

When kids feel good about accomplishing/exceeding the goals you set for them, this sets the stage for continued growth. Who among us wouldn’t want a class full of kids who are self-motivated to learn?

In the end, whether you are a teacher in training, new teacher or seasoned veteran teacher it is very important that we all become adept at analyzing the potential of our kids (individually and in groups). For some among us it means that you need to stop treating music education as a “one size fits all” pursuit (don’t get me started).

The lessons of failure

Sadly, some schools today do not allow kids to experience failure. We know that kids must learn the consequences of having failed if they are to learn to rebound and do better. The same holds true for teachers. It is okay to fail sometimes. Don’t beat yourself up over a failed lesson, or poor selection of music for your group. Instead, seize the moment to be introspective and to be honest in gauging what works and what ultimately, does not work. You must be willing to dust off and implement your “Plan B” or perhaps be just like Johnny Carson and start tap dancing.

Happy Music In Our Schools Month!