



Hearing with your Hands : Teaching Percussion to an Exceptional Student

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Abstract

Hearing with your hands is a personal account of the authors experience teaching private percussion lessons to an eight year old child with a hearing disability. The author describes the ideas and methods used to create a successful program where the student was able to learn in a fun and exciting environment. The author has also included a listing of techniques he used during those lessons.

Throughout my time as a percussion teacher for the music conservatory at the University of Lethbridge, I have been fortunate enough to teach a wide variety of students. One of my most memorable experiences has been when I taught a student that I like to call "exceptional". This students' name was Suzie¹, a young girl who was hearing disabled. I have listed the case study below and the strategies that I found the most effective in hopes that fellow music educators will be able to utilize these techniques for their own students.

Suzie was born without the ability to hear. She has learned how to read lips and has been regularly meeting with a speech pathologist. She is able to vocalize most sounds and is quite easy to understand. Recently, she has had a neurosurgical procedure which has helped her to better understand human speech. The procedure consists of placing electrodes on the brain which connect to a small box which converts audio sounds to electric signals. When talking to Suzie, she describes the signals as "buzzing sounds". Throughout her life, she will be able to differentiate between vocal sounds and the buzzing sensation she experiences.

One of the first things I did was to gear our lessons towards hand percussion. After all, it was the easiest route in order for her to understand what I was trying to convey to her. I started by getting her to produce loud and soft sounds by showing her a relation between distance of my hand to the drum and dynamics. I then decided to make her reproduce certain sounds by playing a simple "Simon says" game. We talked about how she interpreted them and set up a program that her and mother could do together at home. This consisted of a call and response game that they could play at home which would reinforce what was taught in the first lesson. I also used familiar songs like "row, row, row your boat" so that we could copy the rhythms on the drum to get her playing right away.

During the next lesson, Suzie and I went over what she had learnt the previous week and I started to teach her how to read music. I explained to her that drumming used notes in order to tell us what we had to play. We used animals and simple sentences in order to come up with musical phrases. I have included what sentences I used at the end of this paper. By using something she was interested in, I was able to create a connection with her and keep her interest level high. During later lessons, I would periodically take out the animal sentences and we would just read the rhythmic notation.

After a while, I invented a game in which we would write out different rhythmic phrases and try and "stump" one another. I would use this game to not only help foster her composition and comprehension skills, but also as a way of positive reinforcement. If Suzie won, her self confidence would maintain itself at a high level which, in turn, kept her motivated to practice with her parents. I remember when she won for the first time; I had given her a metronome for a prize (the metronome had been bought by her mother). We then used the blinking light to teach her how to keep time by concentrating on the light while we played our rhythm exercises. I have found this game to be a major success and I continue to use it now with all my students.

One of the great things about hand percussion is that it can branch out from music into things like physical fitness and social studies. This leads into learning about different cultures from around the world and some of the customs associated with them. One example is African dance. After teaching Suzie about a particular song, we were able to step away from the drums and learn a traditional dance that went along with what I was teaching. I found this to be beneficial because it did a couple of things. First, it broke up the lesson just enough to help keep her attention focused on what we were doing. Second, it allowed her to develop an internal sense of rhythm and a deeper understanding of the world she lives in. I found that after a couple sessions of dance, she was much more interested about the drumming because she wanted to make a bigger connection with what she was learning.

Using the techniques mentioned above, I was able to create a successful percussion program that helped foster creativity and raise self esteem. In all my lessons, I was able to maintain a fun, safe and exciting environment that was beneficial to both the student and teacher. I made it clear that both parents were welcomed in my lesson and encouraged them to be involved in order to better understand what their with their daughter learning. I did this by giving them a "parent sheet" with the information she learned that day so that the parents were aware of what they could work on at home.

During my time with Suzie, I also learnt quite a bit. The most important thing I learnt was how to develop a program that was set to the students' individual needs. I also learnt how to convey ideas and concepts by using body language and physical actions and not just verbal direction. By dealing with the parents on a constant basis, I was able to better my communication skills. Finally, I was able to learn the valuable art of patience. All of these things have made me a better teacher and I look at those times with Suzie as an invaluable lesson that will stay with me on my way towards a career in education.

Words Used to Help Teach Rhythmic Notation

Word — Corresponding Rhythm

"Shhhh..." — note rests
Cat, dog, pig... — one quarter note
Panda — two eighth notes
I like the... — syncopation (syn co pa...)
Alligator — four sixteenth notes

Note:

These words are based off Suzie's love for the Calgary Zoo. A music teacher can make up any list of words from any topic to help get their students interested.

About the Author

Tristan Galinski is a Music Education major who originally comes from Hamilton, Ontario. He has a diploma in Jazz performance from Mohawk College and a member of the Cadet Instructors Cadre (a component of the Primary Reserves charged with the development of the Canadian Cadet Movement). Tristan is currently doing his first Practicum Semester and looks forward to a career in education. He considers Lethbridge his new home and hopes to work in the city when he graduates.

Endnotes

1. The students name has been changed for privacy reasons