



## The Eight Most Common Mistakes Music Teachers Make

By: Deborah Skydell Pasternack

### **1. Teaching songs and activities that you don't love.**

Maybe it's a song you found in a textbook, or an activity presented at a conference. Or maybe it's a lesson the previous music teacher used to do with the kids. In any case, it's something you think you "should" be teaching. If you don't love it, you won't be having fun and neither will the kids! Make sure that you look forward to each part of your lesson so that you are having a great time. Go through your curriculum and be ruthless—get rid of anything you dread or find unappealing. Then go on the hunt for great new stuff!

### **2. Taking it personally if the kids don't like the music you're presenting.**

You start singing a song you really love, and you hear, "this is boring." or, even "noooo! I hate this one!" If just one or two students have this attitude, you'll have to practice being unaffected emotionally as you say something like, "not everyone likes every song, and that's fine, but you need to keep negative opinions to yourself. Kids who like the song can feel insulted when you make comments like that." However, sometimes an entire class doesn't like a song or piece of music you've picked. Most likely, it's not the song itself, but the way in which you presented it. It can be tough to salvage a song once a class has a bad attitude towards it, so you might consider dropping it until next year. Then, with a new group, use a fresh approach to introducing the song. Chances are, if the kids enjoy the process of learning the song, they'll like the song itself. On the other hand, the song just might not be right for your current population of kids. In that case, you'll have to put it into retirement and enjoy it on your own. But you can do so knowing you gave it your best shot.

### **3. Allowing the kids to walk into class talking.**

Many teachers have an uphill battle getting the class on track before it has even started. They allow the kids to walk into the room and sit down while chatting. Then the teachers have to struggle to get the kids' attention and redirect their focus to music class. Instead, grab the kids' attention from the very first second of class. Some teachers like to greet the kids at the door and introduce an activity right in the hallway. The kids then come in singing a song, or echoing the teaching vocally or with body percussion. If you are unable to meet them at the door (if another teacher complains about noise in the hallway, for example), have them line up inside the classroom close to the door and proceed from there. On the other hand, some teachers like to have kids walk right into the room, sit down, and work on a short assignment written on the board (an approach that works best with older kids.) Whatever you decide to do, have a predictable routine so that the kids know what is expected of them.

#### **4. Teaching only new material in a class period.**

Your class will go much more smoothly if you review some familiar material in addition to teaching new skills, concepts, and songs. Allow the kids to build on what they've previously learned. Otherwise, they'll have trouble making connections from week to week. Practicing familiar material can also be relaxing and give the kids' brains a little break so they don't get tired during class.

#### **5. Setting expectations too high or too low.**

This can be a tricky one to get right. If you use material that's too young for your sixth graders, you'll get eye-rolls and behavior problems. But if you use material that's too challenging, you'll get blank stares, boredom, confusion, and . . . you guessed it, behavior problems. Figuring out just the right level of challenge for your classes comes from experience. Over time, you'll keep what works and scrap what doesn't. Don't blame the kids, and also don't be too hard on yourself when you don't get it right. Just keep trying things out!

#### **6. Moving from one activity to another abruptly or after a long, empty pause**

Transitions are key! Start something new too suddenly and the kids will be confused. But pausing while you rummage around for your puppets or notes gives the kids a chance to become bored in an instant. They will immediately find a way to entertain themselves and you'll have to work hard to pull them back in. Instead, plan out exactly how you will transition smoothly from one activity to the next. Find something in common between the two activities and use it to create a link. For example, you might find a rhythm, melodic interval, or topic from one song and point out how it's also found in the next song.

#### **7. Too much talking, not enough music making.**

You may not even realize how much of your class time is spent NOT making music. The only way to know for sure—and it can be painful—is to video yourself and watch it back. You'll see exactly where you gave too lengthy an explanation, or perhaps stopped too long for classroom management issues. After watching the video, figure out how you can make your words more concise and practice at your very next class.

#### **8. Being a "music teacher island".**

It can be hard to feel like one of the team if you're the only music teacher in the school. You may have to work extra hard to get to know the classroom teachers and other specialists, but doing so really pays off. Not only will you be happier at work, but others will more readily accept your rehearsal and concert requests when the time comes. It can also help you get your ideas across about assemblies and school productions where other teachers are involved. Rather than asking teachers out for coffee, foster trust and good feeling throughout the year by offering to help whenever you possibly can! Everyone is busy and overworked, and offering to help is the best way to forge a friendship. Help teachers change their bulletin boards, take a lunch duty if someone can't make it, or offer to write a cheer for the PE department. In fact, if you need the gym for your concerts and rehearsals, it's especially important to do whatever you can to help the PE teachers! It's an inconvenience for them to give up what is their classroom space, so try to do a little extra for them. And don't forget the maintenance staff! They have to work extra hard to set up and break down for a concert, and you may need things fixed in your classroom from time to time. Obviously it's never a good idea to try to be friendly with anyone just to get favors, but good working relationships make everyone's lives better.

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