

Life Lessons Through Music

At his guitar lesson at ChiME Joe plays a passage and makes a mistake. He immediately proceeds to play the passage again, slightly faster - to make up for the time lost on stopping and restarting, naturally - and makes the same exact mistake. If Joe was practicing by himself, this scenario would likely repeat many times. In fact, many parents of instrumentalists might confess that they've witnessed this very situation play out in their own homes, possibly quite often. Thankfully, Joe is in a lesson under the watchful eye of his teacher, Mr. Mike, who stops Joe in his tracks and redirects his efforts.



"Let's stop and think for a minute," says Mr. Mike. He then proceeds to ask several key questions. "Do you know what went wrong? Can you point to the exact spot where your mistake is happening?"

Under different circumstances, yes or no questions can become traps, and many teachers avoid asking them (can you imagine the answer to: "Do you want to repeat this passage 20 times for me, Joey?"). In this case, however, the question allows the teacher to assess the student's understanding of the problem. A "no" answer doesn't mean resistance; it points the teacher in the right direction. Even if Joe doesn't know exactly where the mistake is, Mr. Mike can lead him to eventually discover the answer.

Notice also the purposeful wording in Mr. Mike's questions. He didn't say, "Do you know what you did wrong?" Instead, he depersonalized the mistake. The point is not to make the student self-conscious that he did something wrong but to get his awareness to a difficult spot that causes trouble and then to put him in charge of finding the solution, which fosters ownership and accountability.

The lesson continues. After the problem has been identified, Mr. Mike asks the next logical question: "What are some solutions we can use to fix this issue?"

Students don't have all the answers right away, and it takes a while to learn to find a possible fix. At first, parents and teachers model the habit of looking for possible solutions, and over time students acquire the skill as well. After several solutions have been brainstormed, Joe and Mr. Mike check if any of them actually work and identify the one that works best. Joe rolls the dice to see how many times he will play the passage correctly. Before moving on to a different piece of music, Mr. Mike briefly touches on the idea of using a similar problem-solving process in other situations in life. And on goes the lesson.

This typical lesson situation points to so many skills that can be learned through the process of instrument study. The one mistake Joe made was an opportunity for his teacher to help him grow musically but also to develop his character and life skills. These are a long-term benefit, an investment that will continue to pay off no matter what career Joe chooses to pursue. Through the small segment of that lesson, Joe learned to take the time to stop and think before choosing a response or a course of action. He worked on identifying the problem, brainstorming solutions, and testing them out. He was encouraged to see things from a different perspective. He got a taste of the discipline that it takes to actually stop and find the problem, to take the time and think of possible solutions, then to practice the spot multiple times. He engaged in critical thinking, problem-solving, and creativity. He exercised patience as he persevered through the process. Joe's guitar lesson gave him many lessons for life.