
Musing on a Career Teaching Music in the Private Sector

By Ben Wahlund – www.blackdogmusicstudio.com

These are ideas that I've compiled in no particular order while sitting in a comfortable chair at the end of a long day. I may change my mind tomorrow, but these are the thoughts at my fingertips now (BW - 11/12/13).

Your career is only that – a career. Life is much bigger than your career. Invest time and energy appropriately.

Band Directors hire you because they need your help. Don't bother getting upset by what they know or do not know. It is your job to gently usher them to different arenas of ideas while still implementing theirs.

Families hire you to make time for their lessons, just like you expect them to carve time out of their busy schedules for lessons with you. This is a pact you share. Do not cancel lessons flippantly. They need you to be consistent. Besides, you may be the only consistent thing in a student's life.

Every time you cancel on a lesson with a student you betray their trust a little more and another teacher looks more inviting.

Always be prepared for lessons. Students are amazing at sensing if teachers know what they're doing.

Never use sarcasm with students. In addition to being risky it betrays your main source of income – trust.

The best advertisement you can hope for is a terrifically gifted student who works hard, studies with you and runs around being awesome because of the work you do together.

As far as building a studio is concerned, most of my colleagues worry about "getting" students. The really good ones are concerned with keeping them. Retain students, don't just recruit them. *The best way to do that is to actually teach them.*

Save money. Save money. Save money.

Get a job – any job – as soon as possible so that you can make artistic and professional choices that serve your dreams, not your needs.

Find a mentor – hopefully, many of them. Emulate them and don't be scared to ask for help.

Surround yourself with healthy, intelligent people who share your values.

Know the difference between a friend and a colleague.

A career is a marathon, not a sprint. Make decisions with short, medium, and long term goals in mind.

Moderation does not mean mediocrity.

Making money is only good if you use money to do good things.

For everything you add to your schedule consider what you will need to remove.

Keep growing! Read books. Listen to good music. Watch intelligent movies. Above all, attend concerts. Scheduling and purchasing tickets well in advance will help you get out of your house “the night of”.

Practice – seriously, **practice**. Nobody is going to want to study music with a mediocre musician.

Don't lie. Ever.

Learn and practice empathy, patience, sincerity, and reliability in everything you do.

Actively listen to people. Don't just wait for your turn to speak. In fact, consider “reading up” on how to listen better.

Remember that everyone you meet has something they can teach you.

Treat people exactly how you know you are supposed to treat them, regardless of what kind of day you are having.

Other music teachers and other activities are not competition. They are part of the same team you are fortunate to be a part of. The people who designed *Grand Theft Auto V*, bake crystal meth, and dream up the horrible programming on television are your competition. If other teachers are doing their job well, they will elevate the work you are doing – increasing the value of what you have to offer to the community at large.

Many of my most important meetings ended up over dinner or drinks. Learn good etiquette in a number of situations.

I think there are only two types of “good debt” – college debt and mortgages – even though they're both pretty scary. Do everything you can to avoid buying things on credit. If you have to, know how you will pay things off when you do. Credit cards are toxic.

People love to say, “It's not what you know. It's *who* you know.” I suppose it is true to a point, but in the end it matters that you actually have a skill set or product to share with people.

Most people I've met appreciate an honest person – with all of his or her flaws – over some one living a lie.

When it comes to your career, prepare to work. It is not always going to be fun and certainly not always artistically engaging.

Brevity is the essence of wit. Don't use fifty words when five will do.

Answer e-mails and phone calls quickly and professionally.

Make sure you know what a word means before you use it.

Dress well but don't break the bank doing it. If you're working a lot you'll probably ruin a lot of clothes. Don't be scared to shop at Target, J.C. Penney, etc. The only people I know who care about the name brands of clothes generally irritate me anyway.

Guard your free time jealously. Don't be scared to say “no” to things.

I believe that there is a spectrum of “R”s to be considered when it comes to free time. First, I recover. Then I rest. Then I finally relax. Sometimes I never get around to actually relaxing until two or three days of down time have passed.

Once you have established a healthy business, schedule vacations – *actual* vacations – and budget money and time for them beforehand so that you’re not regretting it afterward.

Give your students Halloween candy and holiday gift bags of pencils, etc. It’s nice to do and they’ll be more likely to give you even better gifts back.

Schedule time to write “thank you” cards and do it.

Maintain a studio e-mailing list by updating quarterly. Use that list to distribute a studio newsletter.

Budget about \$500/year for solo and ensemble literature to use with students.

Only write honest letters of recommendation – and do so promptly.

Organize your sheet music now – even if it is only twenty pieces of music and a Mitchell Peters book. You will have filing cabinets full of paper before you know it.

Figure out what you believe about copyright laws and live by it for your students to see.

Never swear in front of students or their parents. It betrays a lack of control and vocabulary.

Pack your own lunches and make your own coffee or tea. Starbucks adds up – a lot!

Bear in mind that the *appearance* of impropriety is often as bad as or worse than a given impropriety.

If you are ever torn between dressing up for something or not, dress up.

If you do not have space for a student in your studio refer him or her to best teachers you know.

Do everything you can to show up to rehearsals exceptionally well prepared.

If you don’t think you can remember all of your students’ names in an ensemble, just make name tags for them to wear until you do.

Knowing and using students’ names is a *very, very* important thing.

A responsible sense of humor can take you far.

Do not gossip and try not to be around people gossiping. It will always hurt you and others in the end.

Get comfortable singing, playing piano, and improvising.

If you are not good at drum set get good at it.

Develop good music notation software skills (e.g. Finale/Sibelius).

If you are working at a school, be prepared to submit to background checks and wearing I.D. badges.

A music education degree is actually worth something – even if you are not looking to work as a certified staff member at a school. I think it is totally worth the extra year of university classes if you want to teach.

Music Theory, Ear Training, Music History and Conducting classes matter. “Gen Ed.” classes matter, too. Don’t just “get them out of the way”. Psychology, Business, History, etc. are a huge part of what makes up the society you are trying to improve with music. True intelligence involves connecting ideas from different disciplines.

I don't know any great music teachers who aren't, first, great musicians.

Use appropriate grammar as much as possible. People will not pay attention to ideas clouded with poor grammar.

If you own your own teaching space, make sure it looks like a temple of learning and treat it that way.

Have an idea of what you want to teach students before walking in to lessons together. In fact, if you have an idea of where you would like them to be years from now it helps a lot more. Every student is different. Because of this, they will all need different approaches.

Learn how to make really good posters. If you don't know how, ask someone who does to show you what it takes.

If you are going to put up a website, make sure it is exceptional – even if it means saving money for three years to hire someone else to do it. Bad websites can kill a person's career.

Know how you intend to use digital social networking – as a professional tool or a personal one. Craft your friend lists appropriately and behave that way.

I am still trying to decide if competitions are all they are cracked up to be.

I have heard it said that it is better to be owed a favor than money. I am still not sure, but favors should not be treated like commodities.

Don't get clever on your taxes. Stay honest and no IRS harm will befall you. However, deduct every legit expense you can on your taxes. Set aside a safe place where you put business receipts. Save about 30% of your income for tax expenses. Learn about quarterly tax payments and whether or not they are right for you.

Make a point to pay your bills in a timely fashion. If it helps, build bill payments in to your schedule.

Try to smile as often as possible.

Punctuality matters.

Eat healthy.

Exercise.

Get a hobby or two.

Develop a consistent sleep schedule.

Above all, see to it that the world is a better place because of the work you do – every day.

Ben Wahlund (www.blackdogmusicstudio.com) is a Grammy nominated, award-winning music educator, composer and performer who lives in the Chicago area with his wife and three dogs. Mr. Wahlund serves as the Director of Percussion at the College of DuPage (Glen Ellyn, IL) and music education faculty at North Central College (Naperville, IL). Wahlund also conducts the Chicago Youth Symphony Orchestra Percussion Ensemble, is Program Director for the Birch Creek Summer Music Performance Center's Percussion and Steelband Session, and enjoys teaching many successful private students in his home studio - Black Dog Music Studio. Additionally, Ben is a percussion specialist for Naperville, IL School District 203 where he directs the NCHS Drumshow - a high school percussion ensemble concert that draws over 2,000 paying audience members in one weekend. Ben Wahlund performs as part of the ¡The Screaming Norwegians! Percussion Duo, the Harlem-West Ensemble, endorses Innovative Percussion Sticks and Mallets and Sabian Cymbals, and his compositions are performed around the world (published by Bachovich Music, HoneyRock Publications, and Innovative Percussion).