

# **Implications of the Teaching Reform on Music Educators of Québec**

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Good morning ladies and gentlemen. Allow me to introduce myself: I would like to say it is a great honor for me to address you at this conference. I have given this a great deal of thought and have decided that the best thing I could share with you about my experiences are the challenges we face as music educators in the province of Québec, Canada.

So what have I decided to talk to you about? The State of Music Education in Québec, Canada. Let me take a few moments to paint you a picture of what music education is like in Québec. You might be able to recognize certain elements that make up this portrait. I have the impression that we in Québec are not the only ones to face these challenges, and I hope that in the sharing of these respective experiences, we might just find some consolation and maybe even some mutual encouragement in this sharing. Who can say? Teaching has always been, and always will be caught between a rock and a hard place, namely between national norms for teaching and local initiatives, between the cultural push for excellence and the integration into the educational system of young students who experience all sorts of difficulties (social, economic, emotional, behavioral, physical and intellectual, to name but a few). On top of this, since the year 2001, we, the educators of Québec, have been living with an enormous governmental project known as: The REFORM.

This teaching reform puts the accent on what have become know as the “9 compétences transversales”, or in English, the 9 transversal skills (competencies). These are (and they may be found on the web simply by doing a search for les compétences transversals:

1. Exploiting information
2. Problem solving
3. Exercising critical judgment
4. Putting creative thinking into action
5. Establishing effective work methods

6. Exploiting information and communication technologies
7. Actualizing one's potential or bringing one's potential up to date
8. Cooperation, and finally, last but not least
9. Communicating in an appropriate manner.

This sometimes appears to me as the expression "Thinking outside of the box" as so often heard in the business world, now being applied to our students. Another aspect of the REFORM we are dealing with is the accent placed on "apprentissage par projets" or learning by doing projects. Our young students are now required to develop three musical competencies, namely: appreciation, interpretation and creativity. It is now up to the teachers to elaborate their own situations of learning and evaluation (the famous "SLE" in the new lingo). Now I'd like to stop and say that the powers that be that dreamed up the reform, implemented it before anyone was ready and before any usable material was published. You see, in Québec WE have something called bureaucrats! This, in principal, looks great, and it certainly looks good on paper, but unfortunately this pedagogical regime does not allow us to explore all possibilities.

In the best of worlds, specialists in music education meet with their groups (often made up of more than 30 students) one hour per week. In this framework, how is it expected to be possible for teachers to incite and inspire the creativity of 8 year old children who are experiencing music for the very first time, and then, how can they be evaluated? Evaluation is a point of controversy in Quebec of late... that is to say, should we use the number system (1 to 5) as most elementary and high schools now do, the percentage system or simply give letter grades (A to F) as was the tradition. Our universities have found the "perfect" solution: we calculate grades using percentage which are then converted into letter grades for the grade transcripts, and at this point converted into numbers (1 to 5) in order to calculate the student's Grade Point Average. Oof! The REFORM has inspired a certain amount of insanity when it comes to evaluation. I know of a professor who is teaching her students to evaluate high school musicians overloading them with too much criteria! I am not exaggerating when I say that there are at least 20 criteria in the evaluation this professor is recommending, points beginning with articulation and tone, and continuing down to the most miniscule criteria imaginable. My argument to this professor is that we are trying to create art and inspire creativity. The making of

music is not a math contest where the person having the most points wins! The quality of a musician can be and should be, for the most part, be objectively based on the overall quality of the interpretation. Too many criteria will do more to stifle the young student's creativity than to stimulate it, as was hoped by the REFORM.

Another problem: the arts (music, plastic arts, theater, dance) are now required course curriculum on the high school level. This seems like a great victory for education in the arts, except for the fact that students may change disciplines on a yearly basis, changing from theater to music to dance at will. It has therefore become quite a challenge for teachers to form ensembles of an homogenous level. That is to say, a teacher is now faced with the problem of making music made up of groups of young students, some of them playing their instrument for the first time put together with students who have been with the music program since their entry into high school, and then again mixed with students who have played music since elementary school. This *mélange* mix-up phenomenon has become known as the great non-continuity. The best way I have found of dealing with this non-continuity in a group situation is to somehow incite the more advanced students into helping and working with the less advanced students breaking down into ad hoc sub-groups. I have had quite a good deal of success with this, and it is quite fulfilling for the students participating in this activity. As a quick aside, this non-continuity has made some of my own personal philosophies of teaching even more important in today's world, namely, an idea that one of my early colleagues and mentors consistently brought up. The idea is simple: Understand the level! What a panoply of wisdom in those can be found in those three words. Understand the level! This may seem so obvious, and yet it is so often ignored. If more teachers would take the time to evaluate realistic possibilities for students, challenging them enough to inspire them and not bore them with easy repetitive material or frustrate them with material beyond their capacities, to make the learning fun. Imagine the possibilities if this were better understood. Another colleague added an addendum to this idea that understanding the level will keep the students happy.

For myself, a professor in music faculty where have of the students are in music education and not performance, this latter aspect is critical. My

philosophy of teaching with these students is to make their instrument a fun experience and not a chore. Why? Because I want them to be playing trombone for pleasure 25 years from now! I also teach a brass pedagogy class for students who are going to be teaching brass instruments to high school bands. I often deal with groups of 20 or more for two hours a week. How do I deal with this? I don't overburden them with more material than can be covered in that time. I give them the basics, a system very succinct which I call, "This is what you need to know!" and this system usually directs their curiosity into exploring the field more in depth. In order to prepare for this course, every year I try to teach at least one music camp with young brass players on the high school level, and this teaching usually done in groups. I'll leave this subject with ideas I've learned from teaching in groups:

1. Your ideas need to be concrete and basic. I have always firmly believed that less material covered in a quality manner will stick with the student longer than tons of material just for the sake of getting through it.

2. You need to present your ideas in an efficient and clear manner, and

3. It always helps to use a sense of humor. I am firmly convinced that humor is a useful tool in the learning process. So develop it and use it! In other words, be funny and use it to your advantage. (If I get a laugh say, "I can see you're learning!" But I digress.)

And as always, teachers must go to battle on several fronts in order to defend the space which has been allotted for music in the school's curriculum and to obtain budgets and adequate materials for teaching, all this while adapting to the *Renouveau pédagogique* or the Pedagogical Renewal (which is the title of the REFORM). The FAMEQ (Fédération des Associations de Musiciens Éducateurs du Québec) or the Federation of the Associations of Musician Educators of Québec) is fighting to re-establish continuity in the pedagogical regime of Québec high schools. In their magazine and during their conventions, teachers share their teaching experiences as they slowly conform to the spirit of the Pedagogical Renewal which we are going through.

In spite of all these challenges, miracles still do happen when we succeed in finding what is essential: the joy of music making as a collective experience. It is this miracle which continues to incite a young mind's curiosity towards music and its importance as well as its necessity in our society. Insofar

as I am a professor at a Music Faculty, namely l'Université Laval, where at least half of our students are destined to become music teachers on the high school or elementary school level, I sometimes have certain misgivings and worries for my students as well as for the future of the profession. But, whenever I have the opportunity to attend a concert in our school system, I experience an overwhelming feeling of pride in seeing my former students create this magic in their own concerts. With their own young students, the next generation, so clumsy and yet so passionate, to my ears they are making the most beautiful music in the world. As one of the most important instrument makers in Brazil, Weril, would say and I agree: Toque com emoção! Muito obrigado!