

Not Pulling Strings

Chapter Eight

Socrates and Guesswork

I have used the Socratic method of teaching a great deal in the past. The theory of this approach sounds convincing, but the reality is disappointing. The idea is that the student will discover within themselves knowledge and understanding if the teacher asks leading questions; these help the student think in the right direction, and to come up with the answer without being told. Sometimes this works as planned, but more recently, I have become rather discouraged with it as a way of teaching. What happens is that the student usually assumes that you are leading to the right answer in a roundabout way. So he tries to get it with an inspired combination of intuition and guesswork, reading clues from your questions, manner and tone of voice. This reminds me of a psychic reading by a fortune teller at a fairground. It starts with a few general observations, and if the line seems encouraging, more specific ones until, with your help, your area of interest (which you wanted to hear about in the first place), has been pinpointed. So all the student has to do is sit back and you are bound to tell him in the end anyway. The Socratic Method will not work in an environment where the emphasis is getting a predetermined right answer that will satisfy those in authority.

I was always aware that children guess answers. Sometimes they are lucky and their guess is correct, but this leads only to a dead end. A correct guess is worse than a wrong one, because it gives a misleading impression of understanding. Recently I have become more aware and have been surprised at how much guesswork goes on, it is much worse than I thought, I would estimate about three quarters of the answers are guesses.

If you know the answer to a question, you will give it. If you do not, the most constructive thing to do is to say so. However, some common teaching approaches seem to demand some answer, any answer, to satisfy the questioner, so the students become fortune tellers. Most teachers have experienced giving an explanation, and thinking the student has clearly understood it because he answers the questions correctly. A week later however, it become obvious that he does not know at all.. Guesswork is the culprit. The right answer to satisfy the teacher at the time has become a substitute for understanding.

It is difficult to admit to not knowing or understanding. Hard for both student and teacher. Sometimes the only honest reply to a question is, 'I don't know.' This is an exciting starting point, not an admission of failure and it is the only response that leads forward. To get a child to admit that he does not know the answer to a question is extremely difficult. Children tend to guess if they do not know, or sit in thoughtful silence, looking as if they are searching for the answer. This is an unhappy situation, and the direct result of an educational ethos that demands a right answer, or failing that,

any answer. In fact being willing not to know is the key to discovery. As long as you think you have got the right answer, you are unlikely to go looking for, and therefore have the chance of discovering anything new.

Witting and Unwitting Answers

Knowledge about musical facts may be simple, but playing an instrument is not. There are many possibilities for error: wrong notes, wrong timing, poor technical habits, to name but a few. The player has to use many skills at once - some will still be at the stage of conscious incompetence.

If a student does make a mistake, the first thing to establish is, did he know it? If it was a wrong note, did he mean to play it? If he did not, what went wrong? An isolated slip? The right hand on the wrong string perhaps, or the left hand in the wrong place. Suppose he did mean to play it. He may have misread the note, or thought it was located on the guitar in a different place to its actual fret.

Rhythmic mistakes are much more difficult to pinpoint. He may be unclear about note values, or the pulse may be wayward. Very often the difficulty of moving the left hand to a particular note or chord will cause a hesitation. In this case it is not really a timing mistake at all, but a technical one, corrected by analysing the left hand change and increasing the speed and accuracy of the finger movements.

I found that students nearly always have the idea that they are wrong when I ask about timing mistakes in lessons, although they may not know specifically how to do it right. They may not say anything at all about it unless I ask them. Many students have difficulty with rhythm. I remember working with one on the melody of the Catalan folk song 'El Noy de la mare'. This piece has a recurring rhythm of dotted crotchet followed by quaver. My student was playing this figure either as equal crotchets or with a shortened quaver. In the past I might have tackled this in a number of ways. Perhaps with a metronome. Perhaps with a demonstration and a full-scale explanation, complete with a diagram of how long notes last relative to each other. However this time, I thought I would try something different. As he looked unhappy I stopped him and asked what was wrong.

'These dotted notes are too short, and the quavers are too long,' he said. 'My timing is terrible, I know I should count, but I never can.'

'OK,' I said. 'If that is what you think, make the dotted crotchet longer and the quaver shorter, and see how that turns out.'

He went ahead and played it again more accurately.

'How was that?' I said.

'Better,' he replied. 'But I am still rushing the dotted crotchet.'

'Try it again and see how it turns out if you make it longer still.'

I never said he was right (or wrong), and I did not say exactly how much longer it should be. He played it again, this time correctly, and what was more, he knew it was correct. I wondered what I had done to help him. Really nothing at all! I had only given him a

chance to use his own power, he could become for a moment his own teacher. I wondered why he had not done so in the first place. He had all the resources he needed already. I think he played it correctly because I was not putting pressure on him to get it 'right' and he had space to connect the music with his own sense of rhythm. My instructions were so vague, he could hardly go wrong. I managed to reverse the usual situation. Before this he was trying so hard to be right that his attention was on the possibility of making a mistake, and he duly made it. He assumed he did not really know what was right, but I did, and so relied on me to tell him. Having permission to be wrong is a release to find what is actually there without being distracted by anxiety or pressure. Getting the timing right was certainly his goal, and mine too, but above and beyond this, my overall teaching purpose was for him to gain competence and confidence in music.

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