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THE PIANO ADVENTURES® TEACHER

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From the Editor

BY MARIENNE USZLER

In a cleverly titled book, *The Pen Commandments*, Steven Frank gives advice to beginning writers. "Show, don't tell" is one of his "basic principles." This is certainly not an original maxim, but it is basic, and it is useful. Although this suggestion will undoubtedly aid writers, it's an even better motto for teachers—and, I would add, especially for music teachers.

We all nod in agreement. Of course, it's better to demonstrate than explain. Of course, a beautiful sound is worth a thousand words. Of course, imitating a model is more motivating than following verbal instructions. That's the theory.

But what's the practice? Too often, I'm afraid, it's the opposite of what we profess to believe. We tell, define, explain, and describe far more than we play, demonstrate, give examples, or inspire. We teach an art in which sound is the ideal by talking about, rather than making and reacting to, sound. It's like reading recipes to someone who hardly ever tastes food.

It all comes down to a simple, natural fact. We learn best from personal experience. The "light bulb" doesn't go on until we connect a fact or an idea to something that already has meaning to us. The root word for education comes from the Latin *educare* which means "to draw out." You must know what the student *knows* before you can build on and expand that knowledge. No point in counting or explaining rhythmic notation until a student really *feels* pulse, or groupings of pulses. No point in circling slurs or phrase marks on the page until a student *feels* and *hears* the difference between a bumped-off and a tapered release. No point in using words like rich, deep tone until the student *hears* and *appreciates* beautifully resonant playing.

If you've been checking out the Family Tree column in this newsletter, then you're aware that the old piano methods all began with pages of rules and definitions that were to be "learned" (memorized) before hands ever touched the keyboard. Concepts were defined before there was any reason for a student to fit them into an already existing frame of reference. It has taken method writers a rather long time to design materials that more closely follow natural learning principles. Now that methods and materials are more in sync with how learning is sequenced and reinforced, it's easier for a teacher to help a student process this information effectively.

But, make no mistake. Our job as teachers is not to use materials in order to tell students what's this, what's that, or what's next. Our most important role is to find out what *this* student knows and feels in order to help *this* student make a personal translation from marks on the page into gestures and sounds. We must be show-ers, not tell-ers.

The holidays will soon be here. Once the presents have been opened, the special treats eaten, and the fun with family and friends enjoyed, the coming of a new year will spur us all to think about making those changes we know we should. In 2004, let's all resolve to *show*, not tell.

A note to pedagogy teachers: We'd love to hear from you about how the newsletter fits into your classes and activities. We'd also love to hear directly from your students. Stimulating them to get involved in the larger piano-teaching community is a good way to help jump-start their teaching careers.

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