

It's ^{all} ~~None~~ of Your Business

Towards a Higher Definition of Professionalism

Wowe a great deal to Beth Klingenstein for the many business columns she has written for the AMT. Her knowledge, research, and insights have contributed greatly to our profession. Thanks, Beth! In her last column (April/May 2007), Beth provided a list of essential elements of a professional studio. If you haven't read it, I urge you to do so. It is an excellent summary of professional tasks that we should embrace, and then revise and enhance as we start a new year of teaching. All are equally important; this column will explore only the first one, "Professional Attitude."

"Excellence is not an act, but a habit."

This quote is posted on a studio door down the hallway from my office. When thinking about our profession and our studios, I find it useful to substitute the word professionalism for excellence. Professionalism is something we need to practice every day. It is something we should live and breathe, and it is as vital to our business as our studio policies and documents, credentials and teaching materials. A high degree of professionalism requires careful thought,

self-assessment and awareness and disciplined practice.

Professionalism is a topic that young teachers find hard to define; experienced teachers may take it for granted. Parents can't always define it either, but they know when something bothers them. Within the past three years, I have had parents of transfer students cite reasons for leaving the previous teacher that reflected solely on the professionalism of the teacher rather than the teacher's credentials or quality of teaching. Reasons included: interrupting the lesson to check on dinner cooking in the next room (yes, really, this still happens!), changing the scheduled lesson time too frequently, always running late and chatting too much during the lesson about non-musical topics.

The Simple Things

At the beginning of each school year, I hold an orientation/training session for the 50-plus teaching fellows that I supervise. These are college students who are teaching in the Butler Community Arts School; they have education (pedagogy classes), knowledge (of their instrument), and some teaching experience. What they often lack is an understanding of what it means to be a professional teacher. Many things that contribute to a professional attitude are not complex, time consuming or expensive, so the substance of my orientation focuses on "the simple things." Here are some examples:

- Start and end the lesson on time. Parents of over-scheduled children, which are many of the

parents we now deal with, expect and need us to stay on schedule.

- Stay organized. Don't use lesson time to hunt for documents or music. Deal with business issues between lessons or call the parent later. Have lesson materials nearby and ready to go.
- Maintain a consistent teaching schedule. Be very choosy about when and why you ask a parent to reschedule a lesson.
- Stay focused on the student. Don't let yourself interrupt the lesson to answer the phone (except for emergencies) or talk to the parent for an extended period of time. I often have to smile ruefully to a parent and say, "I can't answer your question now; it's Johnny's lesson time. May I call you tomorrow morning?"
- Speak in a professional manner at all times (in the studio, on the phone, in the community). Choose your words deliberately. "Tuition" conveys a different commitment than "monthly lesson fee." When answering questions about your studio policy or business, *clarify*; there is no reason to apologize or justify.
- Consider how your answering machine message sounds to potential students and parents. Be sure it identifies you as a business, especially if you are teaching in a home studio. I like the message of a local teacher in my area; it starts out with "Hello. You've reached the music studio of Sally Smith, and the home of Sally and John Smith...." The studio answering machine message is not the place to spotlight cute children's voices or songs.

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- Maintain a professional dress code. You don't need to invest a lot of money; but please avoid jeans and sweatpants. In my home studio, I always try to dress exactly as I would for my position at the university.
- Maintain a professional studio environment that has clear boundaries from the rest of your home. Treat it like a business office—display your credentials; keep materials organized and ready to use. Be clear about expectations regarding parking, waiting area and the use of other areas in the home.
- Maintain a welcoming, open environment by inviting parents to observe or be a part of the lesson and by keeping windows/doors uncovered whenever possible.
- Stay true to yourself. Know what you are capable of teaching; refer students to other teachers when you reach your limit.

We may take some of these items for granted, but parents do not. They expect our highest attention to these details. And by making these a part of our daily work habit, we create a higher professional image for ourselves and for the profession as a whole.

Beyond Personal Integrity

I also talk a lot about integrity with young teachers, referring in this context to more than personal integrity. Veteran teachers, as well as rookies, are encouraged to review their studio operation periodically and assess if *professional* integrity standards are being maintained. Here are some examples:

Integrity of the lesson: Does your 8:00 P.M. student receive the same enthusiasm as your 3:00 P.M. student? Does the lesson time belong to the student?

Integrity of the studio policy: Do you enforce it consistently and fairly? Does it accurately reflect your teaching philosophy and curriculum?

Integrity of the curriculum: Does it still meet student expectations and goals? Is it adaptable and flexible?

Integrity of your qualifications: (education, professional credentials, memberships): Do you seek improvements? Do parents know your qualifications? What assessment tools do you have in place for your students and for yourself?

do business. Every teacher with a home studio is a CEO and can represent our profession in the community. Does the local school music teacher know who you are? Does the owner of the local music store know who you are? How about the local arts council, music festivals and other service or civic organizations? Do you know your city council representative?

One local teacher in my area is a small business member of the Chamber of Commerce. She is active in the Kiwanis Club. She regularly sends press releases to the local newspaper about her students' recitals and

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Beyond the Studio Walls

In the business school I attended, we were often asked by the professors, “Do you believe that if you are the smartest or work the hardest, that you will _____?” Depending on the class, the end of the question would be something like “get the job you want” or “get the clients you want.” By the way the question was asked, we knew the “correct” answer was no. Over the course of a two-year curriculum, a business model emerged that suggested that the most successful professionals, in any field, are capable of looking outside of themselves and their particular job. They cultivate and nurture relationships with other professionals, community organizations, clients, suppliers and the general public.

Despite the few bad apples that make the headlines, most CEOs are positive role models, actively participating in the community where they

workshops she attends. Granted, with a small town newspaper her press releases get picked up more often than in a large city, but the same approach could be used with neighborhood association newsletters or township newspapers.

Daily Devotion and Practice

To reach a higher level of artistry, we expect our students to practice *daily* with consistency, dedication, attention to detail, self-assessment and awareness. We must demand these same characteristics of ourselves as we go about our daily business if we are to achieve a higher level of professionalism.

“Excellence is not an act, but a habit. The things that you do most are the things you will do the best.”—Marva Collins