

## **THE ESSENTIAL ELEMENT FOR EVERY MUSIC TEACHER: DEFINE THE PATH**

By Ward Dilmore

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Wilmington High School in Wilmington, Massachusetts has developed a tradition of international performance touring for their orchestra. Over 1,400 Strings Attached players and their families have traveled on European concert tours. The success of Wilmington's Strings Attached program can be adapted to any music program from band, chorus, and strings, to college orchestras and community choirs.

### **ENGAGING THE BRAIN**

The essential elements of its success require that a leader recognizes how the brain needs answers to two basic questions:

1. What do I need to learn this for?
2. What good will it do for me?

The leader must then provide a path of adventure where brain-compatible teaching can result in lessons that change lives.

Research in brain learning has identified these as the core questions that every brain asks when introduced to new material. We have been successful as a species because our brains are constantly seeking novelty, uniqueness, and innovation. Throughout the day, the brain is searching for stimuli. The unexpected event will then concentrate the brain's effort toward the new occurrence that has captured its attention.

When teachers provide an environment filled with resources that excite the senses, the brain's interest is awakened and these two essential questions will begin a filtering process that potentially leads to long term memory. Conversely, when a classroom is void of interesting experiences, the brain turns inward for novelty and shuts out the external world. Very little learning takes place.

The challenge for teachers in today's classroom comes from a rapidly changing multimedia-based environment that competes for a student's attention. Compared to a decade ago, when parents and children had few sources of information regarding the world aside from radio and books, today's students are finding a different landscape. Their school's resources are old fashioned, eclipsed by their home computer systems that are faster and more powerful. Even some of their smart phones provide a more rapid and deeper view into the world than the learning environment in many of today's schools.

Two decades ago, guest speakers, films, television, slide shows, and field trips made school a rich influence on the lives of students, and were their most important source of information. In high schools today, teachers

are struggling to change. Lectures and PowerPoint presentations can seem dull and not engaging for students who are used to much more stimulation outside the school.

In addition, students have a difficult time focusing because their attention spans are attuned to the tempo of the world of stimuli that has evolved in a culture where rapid delivery of information plays on their emotions. Compare the pace of the 1980's Mr. Roger's Neighborhood to the editing style of today's videos. Images changing every few seconds play on the emotions of a student. The brain, constantly searching for stimuli, reacts by being engaged by and absorbing this fresh experience. Teachers and schools can ignore our rapidly changing culture, but they do so at the risk of having classes full of unengaged students who are going to be asking the questions: What do I need to learn this for? What good will it do for me?

Engage the brain with variety and unique stimulation, and the portal to lifelong learning is entered. In order for information to enter the long-term memory, a sense of purpose must be attached to every experience encountered in any given day. A truly meaningful experience is one that is full of survival material, variety, and connections to already learned material. Puzzle pieces that fit neatly into prior experiences

are at the heart of every profound lesson we seek to teach. Guiding our students along a well-defined path, rich with lessons that open our eyes and create new neurological pathways, are the lessons that change lives.

### **DEFINE THE LEARNING PATH**

The question therefore becomes: how do I teach in order to satisfy the needs of every brain as it deciphers why do I need to learn this? And what good will it do for me?

The answer for music teachers is very simple: from the first day you meet your students, define a rich and meaningful path of learning. The premise is basic: A student who knows the purpose of a lesson will be eager to master material that is part of a great adventure. Fill the path with meaningful rituals and milestones, and a beautiful allegory is set in motion.

The brain research consultant David A. Sousa has stated: Teachers try to change the human brain every day. The more they know how it learns, the more successful they can be.

In Wilmington, MA, 450 students in grades 4-12 study stringed instruments. They are recruited in 4th grade with a clear definition of an adventure that spans nine years of their public school experience. The program is based in brain research and answers the essential questions that the brain asks. But it could be a music program of any type: band, chorus, harp ensemble, piano students, ballet.

The program began in 1987 with twelve students. Band and chorus, school sports, and dance classes filled a need for rich social, competitive, and artistic experiences for Wilmington's youth. Therefore, if band, chorus, and dance already provided an artistic outlet, how could Strings satisfy that artistic need in a distinctive way? If sports programs that were built on

competition and team pride were the backbone of after school activities, how could a Strings program satisfy the same need to compete, win, and be proud of a group? The major challenge was finding a way to incorporate the artistic, competitive, and team-based needs of these students, while providing a unique experience that answered the brain's two basic questions.

Wilmington's Strings Attached program took the core elements of sports programs: competitiveness, pride, and team building and blended these elements with the artistic goals of the bands and choruses.

Because they would be learning the universal language of music, Wilmington Strings Attached students naturally and effortlessly became ambassadors for their town and their country. Pride in their accomplishments began to develop with their mastery of music through years of technical studies. As a team, Wilmington students advanced along the path toward the day in High School when they would ultimately venture forth as ambassadors, rich with lessons that provided seamless stepping stones into the real world. These are students who saw more than slides in a Power Point presentation. They experienced the spirit, sights, smells, sounds, language and food from Vivaldi's Venice, Handel's London and Dublin, Mozart's Salzburg, Chopin's Paris. History was alive and vibrant, active, dynamic, and rich in profound and unforgettable moments. Their brains were stimulated by new experiences that flooded their senses. And they returned to their town rich in the experiences and proud of their efforts.

### **ESTABLISHING A PLAN AND CREATING A TRADITION**

Wilmington's String Orchestra students have known, from the first lesson they had, that every lesson would take them deeper

into a world that is theirs to savor. In 4<sup>th</sup> grade, the stepping stones began as the Strings players performed on Valentine's Day for the High School orchestra. The ritual became known as The Arch of Bows, and its purpose was to teach the new members the value of team effort and to define their first step on a musical pathway. Team effort required a non-competitive atmosphere among the students; therefore competition between them was replaced by competition to attain a high standard of performance.

As the High School members acted as "living music stands," the 4th graders performed Beethoven's Ode To Joy in unison. Their parents stood behind them to show support for their efforts. Every student and parent knew that their path would culminate in a concert tour of Europe by the time they reached High School. Every lesson, every hour of practice, every fundraising effort from the first day focused on the ultimate goal: to become a team of musical ambassadors.

At the conclusion of the Arch of Bows ritual, each new member walked between two parallel rows of High School Strings students with bows raised – as their name was chanted. At the end of the Arch, they were presented a bronze medallion and thus began the second phase of their journey.

With seamless transition from elementary to Middle School, students rarely contemplated leaving the program. Therefore, as soon as the Arch ritual was completed, the new members prepared for their team auditions to become European musical ambassadors, a distinction that is earned.

In grades 6 or 7, the members were taken to Lake George, NY for an overnight adventure. They were well aware that this was a test of their musicianship and their

ability to travel with maturity and precision. Wilmington students checked into the Holiday Inn on day one and donned their uniforms (blue jeans and a souvenir t shirt with their Strings logo: Wilmington Strings Attached). A cruise ship that accommodated all 300 participants, including 100+ students and 200 parents, set sail for a performance audition/dinner cruise. With two independent judges adjudicating their performance, the 6/7 String Orchestra performed two memorized pieces. Parents, students, and judges all knew that a successful performance, resulting in a combined score of at least 85, would result in a specific concert tour in Europe. The ship was solely for Wilmington students and their families. They did not compete with each other; they instead built their organization through harmony and mutual respect. They did not compete with other orchestras. As ambassadors, they rose or fell on their own cooperative spirit.

The prize is a phenomenal overseas adventure. There have been two tours of Italy, two tours of France, England, Austria, Ireland, and in 2013, another tour of Ireland, and 2015, a tour of Italy. The distinction is earned through hard work, practice, and discipline. But most importantly, the path is clear and has been followed from lesson one. The European concert tour is not an add-on, not an after thought, not a field trip for a fortunate few. It is built into the curriculum. It is a collective effort of students and parents that evolves through years of progress toward the sense of purpose that is the DNA of the program. It answers the brain's two basic questions: What do I need to learn this for? What good will it do for me?

For the successful orchestras, the Lake George experience results in a return from their audition to Wilmington as heroes. Police and Fire department members clear the

roads and turn out every fire truck to welcome them home. Hundreds line the streets as the newest generation of musical ambassadors return home and follow in the footsteps of their predecessors. Then, the preparation for the ultimate point on the path begins: preparations for Europe.

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Since the 6/7 members are aware of their specific goal, ie. A Vivaldi Concert Tour, or A Mozart Concert Tour, the preparations for their High School journey have been underway since 5th grade. Fundraising, community service, and press coverage has been on-going.

Parent involvement is absolutely essential. It is the backbone of the path. Parents who support a dynamic program can help raise awareness of the goals of the musical organization, show the administration that the program is a valued component in a community, can help raise necessary funds, and can participate in the adventure themselves. Strings Attached Parent Support (SAPS) has been in place for years. The group maintains a bank account for general funds, meaning money to be devoted to Strings scholarships for graduating seniors and scholarships for Strings students traveling to Europe. Additionally, every student has an “account” which tracks their participation in fundraisers and disperses the money to the tour company when the students travel. SAPS has given generously to Toys For Tots, Wilmington Food Bank, Local Heros, and donates money when emergency needs arise in town, such as the loss of a home or loved one. The group

meets monthly, in the evening, and has an agenda which consists of a financial report, music teacher's report, fundraising programs underway, future fundraising plans, scholarship reports, and other essential business of the group.

The program has earned the respect of the school administration. School administrators yearn to have their name drawn as the chosen administrator to travel all-expenses-paid to Europe with the students and their parents. Local civic organizations are equally supportive. Rotary members contribute, and are given ensemble performances at their meetings, and local nursing homes are treated to small ensemble performances that yield beneficial results in terms of goodwill.

Pride also comes in the form of very public events. We aimed high and now, two weeks before departure of their European concert tour, the students are picked up during the school day by limo caravan in front of their high school and are given a police escorted trip to the Massachusetts State House. There, they perform on the Grand Staircase and are received by their Representative and Governor and are given letters of commendation and citations from the State Legislature. Wilmington students' portfolios are filled with letters from Massachusetts Senators John Kerry, Edward Kennedy, Scott Brown, Governors Deval Patrick, Mitt Romney, and Boston Mayor Thomas Menino.

At the State House, they also receive Letters of Introduction to be presented to European leaders, such as the Lord Mayor of Dublin, Mayor of Paris, Lord Mayor of Huddersfield, England, Mayor of Lucca, Italy, and Highest Reverend of St. Stephen's in Vienna. It is here, at the State House, that they truly are made aware of their stature as American Ambassadors. With their parents in attendance, their

final dress rehearsal is not only a culmination of years of preparation, it is yet another step on their path and helps answer the questions: What do I need to learn this for? What good will it do for me?

### **TRAVEL CHANGES LIVES**

Lives are changed on the European tours. History is alive in the present. Self-confidence, self-worth, pride as Americans, and an initiation into the community of Citizens of the World is the result of years on the students' path, a seamless and never-ending journey into themselves and out into their world. When they return to the USA, they are very different people. The students and their families are closer than ever before. They have depended on each other and have found a strong bond has developed from their mutual adventure that began in the 4th grade. They are more mature, more aware, and able to accomplish great tasks that benefit themselves and promote harmony and a respect for their world—once only the stuff of books and pictures, now theirs to savor in their rich memories and in a dynamic and promising future.

A high school student has defined her concert tour of Europe as the moment when she was transformed from a Wilmington High School sophomore into a mature young woman, a citizen of the world. She felt she could accomplish any task, now that she stood atop the Eiffel Tower and discovered a part of the planet that was previously unknown to her. Her world expanded outside of her as well as inside her. She had a greater understanding of life's challenges while pushing her self-imposed boundaries to an almost limitless potential.

Her parents glowed with the pride that a parent feels when they witness an accomplishment unlike any they had ever dreamed of. Deep and lasting bonds develop between parents and their children when

they sit in St. Stephen's Cathedral in Vienna and feel the spirit of Mozart and Beethoven mixing with the music that their son or daughter are performing.

Whether it is a performance by a chorus, band, piano ensemble, ballet troupe, or string ensemble, an understanding of the timeless nature of life occurs as parents and students feel the flow of energy from one generation to the next, and live the pride that comes from great accomplishment through teamwork between parents, students, and schools. The path is real. It is rich in meaning. It takes place in the world outside the classroom. And during the performances half a world away, the questions are answered inside the minds of each participant. The answers are understood, and are transformed into memories of a lifetime.

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Ward Dilmore is a teacher, musician, and composer. Mr. Dilmore has taught K-college and is presently teaching over 400 Strings Attached students in the Wilmington, Massachusetts public schools. He is a graduate of Interlochen Arts Academy, where he performed in Carnegie Hall; the State Department, Washington; and Orchestra Hall, Chicago.

Mr. Dilmore's Wilmington High School Strings students travel every two years, performing in European concert halls. To date, they have performed in France twice, Italy twice, Austria, England, and Ireland. Next year, they will return to Ireland and in 2015, to Italy. He has taken over 1,200 students and their parents to Europe.

Mr. Dilmore is a regional Emmy-nominated composer for television (ABC, NBC, Showtime, PBS, WGBH, Chevrolet, Gillette). He has composed four ballets. His score to the motion picture *Coaster* was awarded the Blue Ribbon at the American Film Festival.

Ward Dilmore has a fifth album being released on May 30, 2012 on iTunes and Amazon.com. He records on his 35 acre farm in Hampton Falls, NH.