

The 100 Gig Challenge: Extraordinary Engagement through Service Learning

A few years ago I challenged my students to a tall order: play 100 times (or more) collectively in chamber ensembles in their community throughout the school year. What began as a service learning project aimed at getting our students to embrace chamber music and share their music with the community suddenly became something much more: as students played at nursing homes, middle and elementary schools, homeless shelters, hospitals, churches, stroke recovery centers and other community events, a sense of purpose in each and every musician took on a life of its own.

How it started

Years ago I took a group of brass players to a nursing home to play Christmas Carols for the residents during the holidays. After we finished, an elderly man who had been listening approached the kids and me. He explained to us that he had been a teacher at a local high school for over 40 years and he was impressed that a group of high school students would give up a weekend morning to play at a nursing home. He explained that his wife recently had a stroke, losing the ability to speak. He teared up as he told us how the music really moved her and he wanted to thank us for taking the time play. The kids and I were all moved to tears from his heartfelt gratitude.

Music that makes a difference

That experience flipped a switch for me. I couldn't believe how such a remarkably simple act could unleash such a dramatically emotional reaction for both an audience member and the performing musicians. One of the kids later reflected on the experience in a senior college entrance essay. "At that moment, it didn't matter that I had gotten up early on a Saturday morning in the middle of winter to play for people I didn't know. It just felt so incredible to affect someone in that way and to know I had made a difference."

The power of small groups

I had always known the importance of having students play in chamber ensembles. It's an experience that forces you to be accountable for your own part, it requires a greater depth of listening, it provides you with almost limitless opportunities to infuse your own unique musical stamp on the music, it sharpens communication skills – both verbal and nonverbal, and the list goes on and on. The York Band Program had included a 5-week chamber music program in its curriculum for decades. This original format divided kids into chamber ensembles of about 4-5 students, required them to pick one piece of music, rehearse and then perform it at an evening concert at the end of a 5-week period. But up to this point, it didn't matter how I preached about the virtues of small group playing; the kids just weren't buying into it and engagement levels were low.

Performing in the community changed everything

A sense of purpose and extraordinary levels of engagement were emancipated once kids could see how their music from their small groups could make a difference in the lives of people in their community. Once we started to see how motivated kids were by playing in these scenarios we began to look for more opportunities for them to share their music. We took more groups to the nursing home, sent a jam session band to a homeless shelter (a way to engage many of the percussionists), regularly sent groups to middle school and elementary band rehearsals in the district (also a great way to engage our percussionists), arranged a recurring performance at a local hospital, sent groups to a local assisted living center and stroke recovery center and we started a monthly chamber ensemble concert at our local library. As more and more groups had successful experiences at these gigs, it got easier and easier to get kids to say yes to playing.

A learning culture based on student-led performing started to emerge in the band program and I began to feel that I could step back from the process, allowing the kids greater amounts of ownership. Some of the groups started lining up their own gigs. Some groups were regularly rehearsing outside of school without being asked and others started buying their own music. When I told these groups that I would be glad to purchase new music for them, they responded by saying that they wanted exclusive rights over their music – they wanted to build their own library of tunes.

Stoking the fire

The match had been lit, and I decided to fan the flames by adding a game to the process. In the Fall of 2015 we started the 100 Gig Challenge. We created a “Gig-o-meter” chart in the band room to keep track of the number of gigs. I explained to the kids that two or more performances in the community by any group, would provide them with an opportunity to participate in a celebration at the end of the year – if the challenge of a hundred gigs was accomplished. The kids bought into it. By the end of the year we had surpassed our goal by nearly 30 gigs. The following year we set the goal at 150 and surpassed that by 15. This year we’re working toward 175.

The Goldilocks effect

Gigging in the community, while it is tremendously useful as a way to facilitate outreach and provide a valuable service to our town, is only a part of the magic that lies within this experience. The gigs have a unique engagement “sweet spot” – providing just enough pressure to motivate, and yet not too much as to cause excessive performance anxiety. This elegant use of “just the right amount” of anxiety is where the the real magic happens. The subtle pressure before the gig creates a sense of urgency and purpose for their rehearsals. The gentle pressure during the performance, which stems from the vulnerability that is inherent to small group (one on a part) playing, is the key ingredient in building bonds of trust and interdependence between the students. I’ve watched students celebrate with a fist bump after they’ve navigated a difficult piece of music at a gig. Or celebrate with knowing smiles and head nods to each other after they’ve self-corrected a missed entrance within the music. This interdependence, trust and shared sense of purpose is the stuff that great organizations are made and we’re just beginning to reap the remarkable benefits of these experiences.

What are the benefits?

Our large ensembles' intonation, balance and sense of pulse has dramatically improved. Students play each of their parts with a greater sense of commitment and purpose. The students are seeing themselves as co-collaborators in the music making process. Our rehearsals are more efficient because students are more aware of subtle differences in phrasing and articulation. Students have a better understanding of how to listen for the active lines within the music. They're much more aware of non-verbal cues – which allows me to do less talking and more conducting.

School-wide and community benefits

Our community loves the band. They see our school kids bringing beauty to their community throughout the year.

The benefit of students learning how to take control over their own musical experience

Students learn how to locate a gig, recruit members for an ensemble, select literature, rehearse and perform. They also gain a keen perspective on how the malleability of small ensembles allows music rehearsals and performances to fit into their busy lives.

The most important benefit

Illustrating the power of music to connect and profoundly affect people in remarkably wonderful ways. The perspective of playing in these scenarios shows students that there is always an audience who desperately needs to hear the music they can provide. I think that this helps to promote the idea that students should keep playing throughout a lifetime. One of my favorite quotes from the book *Art and Fear* (by David Bayles and Ted Orland) states: "... artists quit when they lose the destination for their work – for the place their work belongs." These gigs provide the destination for their music – they provide a sense of purpose for music making that transcends the walls of the classroom.

Recommendations for getting started

Music

Literature is the cornerstone that all great musical organizations are built upon. I have created a list of music that has worked well for us on our Music Outreach Website. Not all of the titles are "great" literature, but these pieces have been good starting points for our students.

Start in reverse

It sounds counterintuitive, but we always start with setting up the gig first. A fixed date on the calendar helps to create the short, mid and long term goals, opens an opportunity for kids to connect with a shared sense of purpose and it adds a sense of urgency to help guide and focus rehearsals. Setting the gig also helps me to get engaged with the process. If you start a small group and wait for them to get good enough to play before

you set up the gig, it'll probably never happen – there are just too many other factors in our kids' busy lives getting in the way. Setting a date makes it a priority.

Framing the opportunity to the kids

When I set up a gig I'll call an assisted living center to ask if our band program can bring a group or two to perform for the residents (I've never been turned down when I make an offer to have kids play in these settings). Within a few minutes we'll work out a couple of performance opportunities. Once I have the date/dates set, I go back to the band and let them know that a local assisted living center is looking for some music for an informal performance for their residents. It's really important that I frame the request as if it's coming from the outside organization and not me. I've discovered that if I'm just the messenger, relaying information regarding a special performance opportunity, the kids seem to frame the opportunity as an experience that is special, outside of the school and the curriculum – it falls outside of the “oh, the teacher is asking me to do one more thing,” category. This helps to foster a feeling of independence and autonomy. I think students see these opportunities as a “grown up” activity – like it's a “professional” gig. It's something that an adult might be asked to do and it just happens to be an opportunity that they are uniquely qualified to do.

Cultivating Autonomy

Once the group or groups have emerged, I've found that it's really important to do as little of coaching as absolutely necessary at first. Matthew May in his book, *In Pursuit of Elegance: Why the Best Ideas Have Something Missing*, frames this engagement technique as if you're asking someone to finish a jigsaw puzzle for you. If you do too much of the puzzle for them, the task will seem too simple and the engagement will be inhibited. If you do too little of the puzzle, the task may seem too overwhelming – and again, the engagement levels will be inhibited. Your goal is to help or coach just the right amount – just enough to inspire and facilitate the elements needed for achieving the goal without squelching the natural autonomy that wants to happen within the group. Your job is to make sure the goal is clear, it seems achievable and yet leave an element of mystery as to how the goal will be accomplished. Specifically, the process consists of providing a picture of what the gig will look like (where they'll play and how the audience will react), provide appropriate music as a resource and provide a space and time for students to fill in the gaps with regard to the skills they need to develop to meet the goal. I'll give the groups several pieces of music and ask them to find and work on the easiest pieces first. We set aside one rehearsal a week for our 9th grade and middle concert band and two days a week for our top Symphonic Band for small group rehearsals. About a third of the groups from our program regularly meet outside of the school day for additional practice in their small ensembles and almost all will find outside rehearsals as their gig approaches.

FRESHMEN BAND MEMBERS REFLECT ON THEIR FIRST GIG IN THE COMMUNITY

I want you to think about the aspects of teaching and learning you feel are the most important.

Here's a list that I came up with:

- Highly engaged learning that is driven by a sense of purpose
- Learning that is clearly relevant to the student
- Learning that encourages students to learn from mistakes
- Learning that fosters students supporting and communicating with each other
- A learning culture that nurtures “grit”
- A learning culture that utilizes gentle pressure – just enough to evoke a sense of urgency and commitment to the work that needs to be done but not too much as to evoke anxiety
- A learning culture that pushes you to the edge of your ability
- Learning that is immersive – commands your attention and uses emotion to propel you forward
- Learning that is directly connected to the skills you want to build
- Learning that derives inspiration from the work of older more experienced students
- Learning that allows the learner to receive a stream of accurate information about their performance
- A learning environment that fosters trust
- A learning environment that fosters a sense of fun
- A learning environment that extends outside the classroom
- A learning environment that is student-led

Now, watch this short video - <https://youtu.be/WOKITq3-JH4> - and see how many essential educational concepts are illustrated in a conversation of young students reflecting on their first chamber ensemble gig. The students are freshmen, new to the chamber music experience and their groups have had no more than 6 rehearsals.

Lighting the match of motivation and engagement

The book *Drive* by Daniel Pink has helped me to define how I engage kids in the learning process. Pink stresses that we all need three elements to be engaged and motivated—autonomy, mastery and purpose.

- **Autonomy:** the freedom to have choice over what we are doing
- **Mastery:** the ability to understand how to become better at something
- **Purpose:** connecting with an idea that goes beyond ourselves

We've experienced tremendous success over the past five years with our chamber music program. Despite their busy high school schedules, the students are willing to set up gigs for their groups—and show up. It demonstrates to me that a culture rooted in these ideas helps to emancipate stores of energy and commitment.

When talking to some of our older, more experienced chamber ensemble members, Pink's elements of engagement are abundantly clear—but check out a video recording below, which captures some great insights from some of our freshmen students after their very first chamber ensemble rehearsal—the elements of engagement and motivation are already visible there too.

<https://youtu.be/tPp3AEYjv8>

(abbreviated and loose transcript of my favorite quotes from our freshmen after their first rehearsal as they relate to Pink's elements of engagement and motivation)

Autonomy:

- It's fun to be able to look through the pieces and pick out the music that looks interesting to you
- It's cool with how we could play a song by ourselves – even though this was the first time we got together

Mastery

- It's going to help us to cooperate better
- You have to keep your own time – you can't just rely on others in your section or the director
- Learned our limitations – certain songs look way too difficult to play now.

Purpose

- It's fun playing together, getting to know each other and see how the instruments sound together
- We're building friendships... which will make the band even better