The Frances Clark Center
Teacher Education Courses

Foundational Piano Pedagogy
Session 1: Pedagogical Truths and Consequences

By Craig Sale

Hello, I'm Craig Sale, and it gives me great pleasure to welcome you to this session called "Pedagogical Truths and Consequences from the Teachings of Frances Clark." When I went to the New School for Music Study as a pedagogy student, the first few lectures that Frances gave were very intimate and intense sessions, in which she conveyed the basic pedagogical philosophies, which formed the foundation of successful teaching. Now, I know that Frances shared these beliefs over the decades with her pedagogy students, so you will see common threads between this presentation and the readings in this session, which were written by former pedagogy students, Richard Chronister, and Elvina Truman Pearce. You'll see that each of us shares our experience with these principles. And although there is commonality, we have our own perspective, we make sense of these principles in our own way. And that is the intent for you, too, that you will take these principles and make sense of them in your own way through your journey as a teacher. And all along the way, these principles will remain a firm foundation.

Now, studying piano pedagogy with Frances Clark was not so much about how to do things, as it was about how to think about and how to view what we do. It was a very intense pedagogical way of living, rooted in basic principles of teaching that then led us to new ways to teach. And even though my study with Frances was decades ago, her teachings stay with me to this day, and remain at the core of my approach to teaching. Over the years, I have come to view each of these pedagogical points that she shared as a truth. Pedagogical truths, then, are short statements by which we can guide our teaching. And as we know, with each truth, there is a consequence, but it's not always a bad one. In fact, if these truths are subscribed to, the results are always good. We have successful students, and successful lessons. I believe that reflection is essential for the good teacher. And indeed, Frances Clark was the model of self reflection. She asked us to reflect on each day's lessons, and she would do this herself. Think about what was good in that lesson, what was not successful in that lesson, and most importantly, what really happened - not what we thought happened, but what really did happen. But this reflection that we do as teachers needs to always be followed by an action. And these actions are guided by the truths, which I'll be sharing with you today.

The first truth that Frances shared with us is that what we teach is music. Notice it's not what we teach is the piano. In fact, the instrument we're using to teach music is the piano. And so the technique related to the instrument comes into play, but we are teaching music. We're teaching musicians, rather than just piano players. Another way to look at this in a broader sense, is that for Frances, the process of learning here was more important than the individual product, the pieces a pianist might play. The goal for us as teachers is to develop the total musician.

Now, what does that mean? Well, the total musician is one who reads and understands notation. The total musician is one who plays - and this is where the technique and the performance skills come in. The total musician hears, and the total musician creates. For example, students should be able to communicate their own ideas with their own compositions. And of course, the total musician communicates with their music. We know that art is a universal language. It doesn't need words, and especially music - music can and does express ideas and feelings. Children need to communicate through their music, whether it's pieces of their own, or pieces which they are learning, they need to communicate through this music from the very beginning of their experience. And this is simply connected to having the student understand the meaning of the piece, and then communicating that with the sound they make. Speaking of communication, all art is communication. I believe that the art of teaching is the study of communication. So with each lesson we teach, we get new information about communication. For this reason, we can never, never really get bored in our work.

Now, the next principle is probably the most famous one that Frances had. And that is that we teach on the premise that there is music in every child. And then we set out to prove it. Now, this music that exists in the child is going to be apparent in varying degrees at the start. And we need to meet that student where they are, and work with them, believing that that music is there. Sometimes areas of ability are restricted, or obscured by other faulty areas, and we need to be aware of that. Practically speaking, there might be an issue with rhythm with a student, but it might not really be the rhythm. In other words, it's not that that child doesn't have a sense of rhythm, it could be that their technique isn't allowing them to express that rhythm. But in a broader sense, think about students with learning differences. I had a student, his name was Garrison, who had high functioning autism. And for the first couple years of his study, he really couldn't ever play a piece initially without having it be forte. Even with reminders and setting things up, it was always forte first. He stayed with me well beyond his high school years, into young adulthood. I have to say that he became a pianist who could play Chopin, and turn a musical phrase that would really touch your heart. And all this from someone who for years could really only initiate a forte sound. Also, think about today's children. They live in a society in which results come quickly and with little effort. And this passive experience for a child creates another layer for us to dig through. And that's the layer of passive learning. It has to get peeled back so that we can prove to the student their inner musical meaning. Music isn't something they click the button to get, but they can find it in themselves. So, consider the consequences of not believing this truth that we teach on the premise that there is music in every child. If we didn't believe this, Garrison, my student, would never have found his way to expressing ideas with music. Indeed, he would have had yet one more experience with rejection in a learning situation. Also, the passive learner would simply continue to not believe and not know their own abilities. But look at the positive consequences of believing that there is music in every child. Music is then possible for everyone in their own way. And also, students

learn problem solving skills, because of their active participation in their own learning.

Now, the next truth that Frances shared, and really became quite a focus of a lot of our work, was that our problem is words. And she added that when we do use words, they must be relevant and efficient. So, a lot of our preparation for lessons was considering the words that we would use. But there's more than that. There are alternatives to words. Think for a moment about what some of the alternatives to words are that we have. The most obvious one that you might already be thinking about is demonstration. And this is so absolutely true. So much can be conveyed through a model demonstration. Another thing that comes to mind for me is singing. That, through singing with the student, or having the student sing, or the singing for the student, also will convey a lot of musicality that would be inaccurate. If we tried to just say it in words.

I will also add that touch can also be an alternative to words. Now, of course, this should only be done in situations where you have approval, and permission to have some sort of instructional physical contact with the student. But most obviously, instead of constantly saying to sit up straight, just a little touch on the small of the back will bring the student up, and you can stay focused on what's at hand in the lesson. So, there's posture conveyed with touch. We can convey relaxation. There's much about technique that we can share through sharing touch. Movement at the piano, helping the student move, and just simply a hand on the shoulder, letting them know that we care.

Another way that we can communicate without words, is through gesture. Imagine a slur for smoothness. Other things, so many things we can do with gesture. And another one that I like to share is that facial expression. Think about the character of a piece that you can show with your face, or intensity. There's so much that we can can show through our face. You probably have your own ideas, too. And those are important. But you also might be thinking, well, but how can I convey a musical concept without words? I mean, isn't it best to just see the sign and then explain it? If you see that F in the music, and you tell the student that means to play loud, and then you work on playing loud. But on the contrary, we learn through our senses, and we learn concepts through concrete experiences.

I want to share an example of how this can be done. We first have to assume that at this point the student has experienced playing smoothly and knows the sign of a slur. I might ask the student one day to put their thumb on Treble G and play back to me finger one, two, three, and they would play it back. And we would discuss that sound - that it was smooth a, sign that they were familiar with, and that it would be shown with a slur, like this. Then, I would ask the student to play back to me. And they would answer. And then, we would talk about that sound. Because it wasn't smooth at all. Was it? How would you describe that sound? Then, they would probably say something like bumpy or jumpy, hoppy, anything. So, you say yes, that's right.

Let's do it again with a slur. Now, let's do it with that hoppy sound. And then we go back to this sign. And we say well, you know, we can't use this sign to show that, because this means smooth. But what we can do is we can take everything out of that sign except for the little bit left above each note. And then we have these dots, and that can be our jumping sound. Play at once again. And then we will give it its name, which is, "staccato." The process that we used followed a natural order of experiential learning. First, we began with the sound, the student first began with a familiar sound. But then the first experience with staccato, was with that new sound at the piano. And then, they experienced what it felt like to make that sound happen at the piano.

Then, they created with a teacher a new sign to represent that sound. And then the final part of the process was naming it. Now, names are important for us, so that we can then talk about these things with our students. But they're not the same as understanding. And that is key. A teacher and a student have to experience a word together in order to be able to use it, and communicate with it. Indeed, teaching is all about creating a situation which enlarges our common experience with our students. And the use of "sound-feel-sign-name" to present new concepts does this. On the left of your screen, you'll see two separate spheres, one for the teacher, one for the student. And these are the spheres of their experience. On the right-hand side, you see what we want to do in teaching, we want those spheres of experience to overlap. And that overlapping area is where learning will take place with the student. Understanding only happens in the areas where we have had the same experiences, or to the degree that our experiences are similar. An example of a consequence of not doing this is in a student that I had, she was a very young, very, very bright young girl. And she came back after a holiday break. And her father said, "I hope it's okay. But I went ahead and taught her this piece." He showed it to me and it was a very simple quarter-note setting a Beethoven's Ode to Joy. The only thing in it that concerned me was the use of an F-sharp. But it was okay, we hadn't gotten to sharps yet, we had way more things to do yet in our method book that we were using. What was very interesting though, was that several weeks later, we did preparation activities for sharps and flats. And yet, when we got to the presentation of a sharp in her very first piece, and actually the sharp in that piece was going to be a C-sharp, she moved her hand and played an F-sharp. And that's because that is where she'd had the meaningful experience, is with that F-sharp in that Ode to Joy. So, the fact that she and I hadn't really had our own experience together in preparing for this led to a misconception. Fortunately, we were able to rectify that very, very easily and quickly. Experiencing a concept has to precede the definition, in order for that presentation to be positive and significant. And that was the problem that I had with this student, it was that the experience of the concept wasn't there before the definition, she had it defined as F-sharp. But, there is a positive consequence when you do this. And that is that the student truly and deeply understands the meaning of that sign. And I believe that this is where musical playing in young children begins. The result is meaningful performance at any level.

I want to share another example of creating this common experience. And that is that when a teacher performs, they're doing this same thing for those students who attend and hear their teacher play. Because common ground is then established for future discussions about performance. There's modeling of performance that takes place, and there's very important exposure to repertoire that takes place.

Now, the next principle is we have taught only what the student knows. And you might think, well, of course! But, not really. Because we may often think that we have taught the student, but we really cannot be sure that we have taught them until they have demonstrated it themselves. Too often, we think that something is learned, because we covered it in last week's lesson. And then we continue onward, while the student has not yet demonstrated their mastery of that concept, and the consequence for us, is that the concept is going to remain a challenge for them for a long time. For example, it could be a rhythm that will need to be reviewed every time they encounter it. Or, it could be a basic theory concept that's going to need review, as other theory concepts try to build upon that one that's not there. We don't just want students who know, we want students who know that they know. The best example I have of this is a young child who came in after a few months of study, and and she said, "I'm just so excited." I asked her, "Well, why? What are you so excited about?" She said, "Now, I think I could read anything." To me, that was the definition of ownership. She now knew how to read music, and she knew it. And I believe that this sense of ownership, creating this is one of the most important ways in which confidence is built in young children.

Learning cannot be forced. We have to follow the student's readiness. And this goes back to that the idea again of meeting the student where they are. So, what this means is that preparation activities are essential. It's the only way we will know that they are ready, and we cannot proceed until these preparation activities are successful. If after doing preparation activities with eighth notes, a student still cannot clap back, or play back rhythms in steady, confident eighth notes, they're not ready to go on yet. If we do go on, the consequences going to be that a year later, you'll find yourself saying, "Well, you know, Joey still has trouble with eighth notes." Preparation activities guide us in evaluating the student's readiness. And this very important aspect of preparation is going to be discussed in much greater detail in another session of this course.

Another principle that Frances shared is that we go from the known to the unknown. The best example of that was the one I showed you earlier when we went from the known sound of a slur to the new, unfamiliar sound of staccato. Or here on the screen, you'll see how if the student knows quarter notes, eighth notes, ties and of course pulse, that then learning this new sign of a dotted quarter note followed by an eighth can be an easy experience - using known elements to move into a previously unknown one. This, of course, is all connected to learning, serving the future, which comes straight out of the writings of Jerome Bruner. Some examples

of learning, serving the future, where we take something that we know and then go into further unknowns. One is the concept of major scale construction. If the student knows how to construct a scale, and sees it as one concept that can be applied to any major key and leads to understanding of these other keys, and of course, to the understanding of key signature. Likewise, intervallic reading. Learning to read intervallically leads to great ease in transposition, and even reading of transposed sections.

Frances had one of her favorites, the great fallacy. And the great fallacy is that teaching is telling. She loved to say in her way that tellers belong in banks behind bars. So again, this goes back to the issue of words, and that words don't do it all. Teaching is not just telling. But, she did say that we can tell the unessentials. And that's an important thing for us. So when is it okay? What is unessential? Let me share just a couple examples of that. Once, I was doing a preparation activity with a group on sixteenth notes, and we were doing playbacks. In the lesson, I asked them to everybody to find a D Major five finger pattern, and then play back to me. Well, to my horror, I had probably four different positions in these students, and none of them were D Major. And so I did absolutely the wrong thing, and ditched my work on sixteenth notes to launch into a review of major five finger patterns. In that situation, it would have been perfectly fine, it would have been much more wise, to simply say, third finger on F sharp, and then continued, because the essential thing was the preparation experience with sixteenth notes that I wanted them to have. The unessential thing really was the position. And then of course, I should make mental note that I needed to do some serious review work to see why that happened.

Another example is with the younger student, just learning notes and finding positions and so forth on the piano. It might be that in presenting a new piece, or doing some work on a piece, there's an aspect that is something that really needs to get focused on - a move at the end, or something like that. And in your lesson plan, that's really all you have time to show them. So, when they go to find their position, and if they're still slow or struggling with finding positions in that case, it's okay to tell them, "Oh, you'll need your right hand third finger on B, and your left hand second finger on D. Now, let's look at this point here." We have to know the priorities in what we're working with, and then the unessential things can be told.

Frances believe that everything we teach falls into three headings, musicianship, technique, and practice skills. And these three areas have to develop simultaneously and have to develop at the same rate. If they don't, there are some severe consequences. If the student has good musicianship, and good practice skills, but for some reason has a faulty technique, they are a player with a physical handicap. Or, if they have a good technique, and good practice skills, but they lack in musical understanding, we have a student who plays more like a typist than as a musician. If we have a student with good musicianship, and good technique, but poor practice skills, then we have a student who makes slow progress. Frances strongly believed that

our job is to simplify and not to complicate for the student. And key to this was knowing in a piece or in an activity, what is easy about it and what is difficult about it. For the teacher to know what's easy and what's difficult, it will help the student because it will help us address with the student what the problem is. Is it really a reading challenge in this piece? Or is it something rhythmic? Is it a technical challenge? Knowing why, then, it is easy or difficult, will also then tell us how to address it. Nothing should be difficult for a student in their week of practice, if we act to adequately prepare them for that practice. One way that we succeed in simplifying things for students is to have them experience effective practice based on what's easy and difficult. In the lesson, and then of course, we make assignments for home practice based on that experience in that lesson.

Now, we'll find that much of this is based on what is the same and what is different. We have to understand sameness and difference and its importance in learning. Sameness and difference tells us what and how to practice. It tells us what's difficult, it tells us what's easy. So, consider form. That will tell us what to practice generally, because if it's an ABA form, the B section will probably get less practice than the A's, if they just play the whole piece. Also, because that the section is different, that will, in effect, just make it a little more challenging.

Sameness and difference can also tell us how to project the meaning of a piece. From the earliest levels, the contrast and sound between loud and soft are related to what that piece is about. So, the difference in sound, or the difference in articulation. But think about a much more advanced student working on a sonata, that where the movement is in sonata allegro form. Sameness and difference in sonata allegro form. Well, the development section is different. It changes things from the exposition. What does that mean, in your interpretation of this piece? Likewise, when you get to the recapitulation, that return to the familiar material, what does it mean? Is it a relief? That you're back to that? Or is it unfortunate that you're back to that same thing? Or are you as a listener and a performer, are you transformed, so to speak, after having gone through the journey of the development section?

For Frances believed very strongly in this statement that we start with the whole and then we go to the parts. It's a good solid view of learning. And we need to consider ways that this can be done. How can this be done with a new piece?

Well, I already mentioned that actually, with formal analysis, finding A sections, B sections, where changes are, the Rondo form, sonata form - that begins to look at the whole. With the youngest student, just looking at the title of a piece, oh, this is about an elephant. How do you think that's going to sound that puts their head into the idea of what this piece is about as a whole. And of course, an obvious way to start with a hole is for the student to hear the piece. But think about the musical alphabet, and how it appears on the keyboard. In this case, rather than starting with Middle C and figuring out the alphabet, from there, now what we would do is

we would start at the lowest key on the keyboard A, and we'd go up every key on the entire keyboard, saying the musical alphabet.

Intervals can be viewed as a whole, if you look at that concept of relationship, and that is understood. Rhythms, especially subdivisions of rhythms, we don't experience a sixteenth note, we experience a group of sixteenth notes, usually within a measure in a particular meter. Now, the positive consequence of working this way, is the sense of understanding that is created in the learner. All of the parts are going to make sense in the context of the whole.

Another principle that Frances shared is this one, that we comment on improvement before what needs improving. In other words, we start with the positive and then go to the constructive. Imagine yourself as a student, and you've been working on a piece, a new piece, and you take it into your teacher, and you play it for them. And if you get through the whole piece, when you finish, they say, well, let's look here at the development section, there were some issues with tempo. And I think we need to take care of that right away. Or imagine it happening a different way. You play the piece for your teacher, and they say, you know, you really have the idea of this whole piece, I think you know what Beethoven's talking about here. And that's going to, it's going to be a wonderful piece for you. Now, there are some issues with tempo, which I'm sure you're aware of. And we should probably look at those. Which of those two scenarios makes you feel ready to work? Most likely, it's the second one. So, we understand how important this is, and yet it is very difficult for us to do as teachers, because we are monitoring everything in a student's performance for us of things that we might need to work on. And it's especially challenging if something goes wrong at the end of their piece, so that when they finish, even though you've got lots of good things you thought about, you're kind of left with that jarring moment at the end. But we have to force ourselves to start with this positive statement. However, our statement at the beginning, in order to be of value, has to be honest. And that can be challenging as well. I think it's very important also for us to train our students to do the same. And this is best done in a group situation where they're sharing feedback on a piece, that when they share with other students, they have to start with the thing that's improved. The idea is that they will take this into their own self evaluation. We need to stop fostering negative judgment, and we need to build constructive feedback.

Finally, Frances love to talk about Alfred North Whitehead, and the rhythm of education. Whitehead had three phases in this rhythm of education. The first is "romance." Romance is when a new piece or a new idea is first encountered, and it's so exciting. You just heard this piece and you're going to learn it, and you just love this piece, and can't wait. Or, the student's just learned about staccato, and they think is the most fantastic sound in the world. But this is always followed then by a working phase called "precision," where you have to learn that piece that you loved. It doesn't sound so good until you learn it. And there's a lot of work to do. Or, that student has to learn more how to play their staccato, how to make that staccato

happen. Precision, then, is followed eventually by generalization - when that new sound is just a normal thing for the student, or that piece now is learned. You really own the piece, and you feel comfortable, completely comfortable playing it. Now, the usual process in learning music we find starts with a brief period of romance. And then we get to work. And we stay there for a long time. And then finally, at the end, we have generalization. And usually that ends with the performance of the piece. And then you're on to something new. This happens with learning a piece. This process can also sometimes happen in a lesson where there's something new that happens, but the bulk of the work in the lesson is work, it's precision. And there might be a little bit of fun with review stuff. I'm going to suggest that our practice often falls into the same rut of being stuck in precision. Precision is wearing. It's important, but it can be wearing. It can challenge motivation for students. And so I'd like to suggest that our lessons should follow more of this model, where there's romance, and then a bit of precision work, and then something familiar with generalization, and then some precision work, and then romance again, just in and out in flux throughout the lesson. This can be a tremendous model for the students on how to practice this way.

There are so many truths here to guide us, and many of them have very crucial consequences. So, I don't think anyone can say that teaching is easy. All of these truths must be a part of our teaching from the very first lesson. Therefore, teaching beginners is far from easy. We have a great responsibility as a teacher, and we will fall short. We will make mistakes. But, if we reflect on our teaching, and if we respond with actions based on pedagogical truths, we are meeting our responsibility. We meet our responsibility as teachers, not through perfection but through reflection.