TEACHING OBOE IN DIFFERENT WAYS

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ABSTRACT

Key words: Teaching, oboe, constructive, direct, demonstrative, Biggs, Tang.

In this thesis Teaching oboe in different ways I use the ideas by John Biggs and Catherine Tang from their book “Teaching for a Quality Learning at University”. These ideas talk about how teachers teach their subjects and how the students learn them. They talk about the three levels of teaching that I use to teach oboe. For this research I gave lessons to bachelor students or students that want to get a place studying music in higher education. Thanks to these lessons, I got many results which were very useful to understand better how students learn and what my own ideas about education are. Many times students have teachers who are playing in orchestras, but it is not so frequently that these teachers study pedagogy to make this kind of research about how to teach. This is the reason why I write about this topic: to improve myself as a teacher.
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Introduction

During my career I have had the opportunity to have many teachers, not just oboe teachers also I had teachers in music theory, music history, analysis, harmony, improvisation, etc... I have my bachelor degree in oboe interpretation and oboe pedagogy from the 
*Real Conservatorio de Música de Madrid*. Thanks to this great experience as a student, I could see many differences between styles, philosophies and thoughts about music education. I learned to play from my teacher’s own treatises then I got lot of different information about how to teach because they have their own ideas. This gave me a lot of opinions about how to teach and that’s why I really enjoy teaching so much.

As a professional oboe player in an orchestra you often have the opportunity to teach either in a Masterclasses or one to one situation. As my main goal as a musician is to become an orchestral player, I want to research about teaching as I believe it will be very useful to apply my findings to my own education. I decided to do some research and reflection on the different ways of teaching, which requires deep reflection about what we want to obtain with it. Pedagogy, as we understand it now, is changing due to the large amount of information we can source through books, videos, recordings and the great international tool, the Internet. Thanks to Internet we can talk to someone from anywhere around the world; we can know his/her ideas and methodologies without having to travel and spending a lot of time researching their methods. We can also watch live lessons in real time as they are being taught anywhere in the world. We can practically translate any book using the computer and this makes me think of another question: what do students need to know from their teachers if they can get the information for themselves? This might also increase my awareness of my own learning techniques and development.

Students usually tend to evaluate their own teachers. They have their own thoughts about them as a teacher and also, as a seep rate opinion’ an interpreter. Being the best musician does not always guarantee that someone is the best teacher. Why does this happen?

The purpose of this thesis is to discuss and reflect on different ways to teach oboe. Is there any perfect way to teach? What is it that the teacher wants their students to gain and what do the students want to gain from the teachers? How do teachers achieve their own goals?

In order to investigate that I adapted the ideas by John Biggs and Catherine Tang from their book *Teaching for quality learning at university* (2007) to oboe teaching. I gave several lessons to oboe students from the Academy of music and drama in Gothenburg, Sweden and in Spain using their ideas. I worked on areas of oboe
technique such as sound, intonation and scales, and used different teaching methods for different students, in order to compare them. After these lessons I, in this thesis, then discuss and evaluate these three ways of teaching.

There is a lot of research done on learning theories but I used the ideas by Biggs and Tang because they seemed most relevant to me in my development as a teacher.

Different ways of teaching

Biggs and Tang describe three common theories of teaching; they use different levels which they refer to as teaching ways (2007 p.15). I take the idea that they have in the chapter 2 called “teaching according to how students learn”. They speak about different levels of thinking about teaching. These ideas form three different styles of teaching. In this thesis I use these teaching types in the music subject. They make this separation between teaching and learning. In the first level they talk about what the teachers thinks about their student: “what the student is” I change to “direct teacher”; on the second they are more focused on “what the teacher does.” I renamed this “demonstrative teacher.” The third level they focus on is called “what the student does.” I have renamed this “constructive teacher.”

Below we can see examples that I created in order to explain how these three ways of teaching work. Each of the situations are made up by me, they are not real lessons.

Direct teacher

On the first level Biggs & Tang wrote about teachers who show all of their thoughts in the subject that they teach. The responsibilities of learning go to the students who have to take notes, be motivated, attend to the lectures, etc... I called this teacher “direct teacher”. Normally, direct teachers start the lessons asking for students homework such as studies or technical exercises suggested in the previous class. This is a made up example to demonstrate this kind of teaching:

- Teacher: For today we have to play the scale in C major and G major in this tempo.
- Student: (he/she starts to play).
- Teacher: This change of note is not right. You are rushing. Play that part again.
- Student: Ok (he/she plays again and he/she makes the same mistake).
- Teacher: Go down in tempo and play again. When you feel secure make the tempo faster.
- Student: (he/she puts the metronome on at a slow tempo and the scale goes well, after that, he/she change to the original tempo and he/she makes the same mistake). My fingers are lazy today. So sorry.
- Teacher: The thing that is happening to you is that the index finger moves slow.
- Student: (he/she plays the scale again and it´s getting better)
- Teacher: Leave this here, look at the finger and next week bring me the same scales.
- Student: Ok...

In this kind of teacher we can see that teaching is based on the observation of the mistakes and the teacher corrects the student who doesn’t need to think about the mistakes. I can say that this student doesn’t make any reflection, only he/she needs to repeat all the things that the teacher says.

**Demonstrative teacher**

On the second level Biggs & Tang talk about teachers who’s view of teaching is based on transmitting their own way of playing. They use their own experiences and understandings as teaching techniques. The students have to think and learn for themselves because these teachers are more focused on their own performance, not on how students learn; I call them “demonstrative teacher”.

Teacher: Before to play the scale, do you remember what we talked about in the previous lesson?
Student: Yes, the index finger moved slowly.
Teacher: What did we say about how to move the finger faster? Do you remember what I told you?
Student: Yes, it had to be arched and move only this part (he/she points to the phalange).

This solution chosen by the teacher is certainly a reflection of how the teacher plays and they think it could be useful for the student. However, the size of the hands and fingers of student might be different from the teacher’s, and then other solutions might be needed. The student’s reflection is limited to observation and imitation of what the teacher does.

**Constructive teacher**

Finally, on the third level, Biggs & Tang show us one teacher who “are not focused just about facts, concepts and principles to be covered and understood, but also to be clear about:
1 What it means to ‘understand’ content in the way that is stipulated in the intended learning outcomes.
2 What kind of teaching/learning activities are required to achieve those stipulated levels of understanding” (Biggs & Tang 2009/1999:19).
“The constructive theory talks about how learners use their own activity to construct their knowledge or other outcome.” (Biggs & Tang 2009/1999:52) For me this teacher helps the students to reflect on their mistakes, which gives students the ability to be able to correct themselves.

Teacher: Let's start to play a scale.
Student: (he/she plays and has the same mistakes as the previous student)
Teacher: How do you feel about the results? Do you like it?
Student: This change of note was wrong (the student is already thinking about what is bad because the teacher asked him/her a question).
Teacher: How can we fix it? Where do you think that there is a mistake?
Student: Let me play again and I’ll tell you (the student plays, maybe slower than before and he/she stops when the mistake happens and he/she starts to move the index finger slower than before). This finger is bad.
Teacher: And then, what can we do to fix it? Do you think that the solution is in your hand, in your fingers?... (The teacher usually knows what is wrong and he/she makes questions to guide to the student to reflect and to find a solution)
Student: I think if I put this finger like this (more arched) the movement can be faster than before and I can play the scale better.
Teacher: Very well, work on this for next week.

This teacher wants his/her pupils to be autonomous.

Lessons

In this part of the thesis I am going to give excerpts from the lesson that I gave to the students during these last two years. I gave around fifteen lessons in this period. In this time I worked with five different students. Three of them are Swedish and two are from Spain. The ages are between nineteen and twenty three years old and their level of studies are between one year previous to go to the university and last year of their bachelor degree. These lessons are imparted according to the three ways of teaching described above. I decided what kind of teaching way I would use with each one of them before the lessons. I always used the same method for the same student. My decision about what kind of teaching way I used was taken depending on the time that I had with them. I recorded the lessons and I transcribe them. I translated into English the lessons taken in Spanish and corrected my English in the English lessons.

All of these students allowed me to use these lessons to write this master thesis. Their names will be anonymous.

Now I separate different important oboe techniques and we will see how I give these lessons to the students. First of all I always work with the sound because I think it is
the most important part in the technique to practice. This is because it is also the easiest thing to lose when you practice fingering, diction, etc...

**Sound**

Direct teacher

In this lesson the student (St) and the teacher, myself, (T) use Mozart oboe concerto, 2nd movement during the lessons.

The student starts to play...

(T): Ok, nice. Can you play with a more lovely sound? Don’t play it rough, try to make as much legato as you can.

(St): Ok, (He/she plays again and the sound is still open, a bit less but unstable)

(T): Well, you have to put your embouchure rounder and push the air out from your mouth. Try to focus more the air and play with more vibrato.

(St): (He/she plays it another time and the sound is better at the beginning but after a while he/she starts to go back to the quality of the sound that he/she had before the explanation from the teacher)

(T): (I talk during the student’s performance). The sound is opened, focus more, more vibrato.

(St): (He/she starts to get nervous and he/she loses the control of the reed with his lips. He/she plays again)

(T): Can you put less reed inside your mouth? (The student does it), Can you see that the sound it’s better?

(St): Yes, yes.

(T): Then you have to use put less reed inside your mouth, make the sound rounder and push the air out from the mouth and don’t forget the vibrato.

(St): Ok, I will practice like that. (The lesson didn’t finish here but I write only this because it is all that I need to explain how I teach in a direct way)

... 

(T): Ok, Then see you next week. Have a nice week and practice more.

(St): Ok, See you

**Demonstrative**

In this lesson I worked with J.S. Bach oboe and violin concerto, second movement.

(St): (He/she starts to play and the sound stops when the first big interval appears). Sorry, I will try again.
(T): Ok, don't worry. Can you push the air a little bit more in this jump? Look, put your hand in front of my mouth. What am I doing?
(St): You are blowing a bit more.
(T): Yes, I am. Can you do it? Can you also put the embouchure rounder like this? (I point to my mouth) Don't smile when you play, otherwise the sound will be opened, try both and look what happens with the sound.
(St): Ok. (He/she tries to play with a “smile” in his/her mouth and then he/she tries to with a rounder mouth). Yes, I can appreciate the difference between both.
(T): Also, can you put the reed in your mouth like this? (I start to play) Can you hear the quality of the sound?
(St): Yes, it is less bright and more beautiful. (He/she plays the same and the result is better)

... 

Constructive

In this lesson, the music that the student plays is the Sonata by Poulenc.
The student starts to play and I ask him/her questions after the performance.

(T): What do you think about your sound?
(St): I think that the sound was quiet thin and the sound needs more bottom.
(T): What can we do to play with more bottom in the sound? Why is the sound not stable? Where is the problem?
(St): (He/she tries different things and these are the conclusions) I have to open the mouth more and have more pressure in the diaphragm. (He/she tries to fix what he/she thought was the problem). Yes, the sound is better.
(T): Then, can you play again in the same way and try to feel what happens with your body and your feeling about the sound?
(St): Yes, of course. (He/she plays and he/she is still trying to explore different things until he/she stops) That is how I like the sound; it is more stable and rounder. (He/she continues playing and one bigger interval appears). Oops, I cut the sound.
(T): What did we do wrong? What do we need to do to solve that problem in this jump?
(St): (He/she starts to play and to explore different things in his/her mouth, diaphragm and pressure of the air). Well, I think I have to push the air more inside the mouth, just in this interval and put my finger closer to the keys
(T): Very nice!

... 

Intonation

Direct

I shall continue with one of the lessons before explaining.
The student plays the Mozart oboe concerto, first movement.
(St): (He/she starts to play and I interrupt them just in the first scale)
(T): No, no. This is not in tune.
(St): (He/she repeats the performance)
(T): No, it is still out of tune. Can you open your mouth more and think this octave flatter?
(St): (After few repetitions) Is it good now?
(T): Yes, you get it. Practice that at home. We can continue.
(St): (He/she continues playing when I stop him/her in the next bar after the long ‘C’) 
(T): This ‘G’ is out of tune again. Continue playing and we’ll see what’s going on.
(St): (He/she continues with the first page and it is out of tune)
(T): Ok, It is not bad but you have to play more with the tuner and check all this not because the intonation is not perfect.
(St): Ok, I will do it.

Demonstrative

In this lesson the student plays Dutilleux sonata for oboe and piano, first movement.

(St): (He/she starts to play and the tune was not bad but not perfect)
(T): Ok, it is good. These notes were a bit out of tune. This is how they have to be (I start to play). Can you hear this interval? (I choose one of them) Play under me and listen to me. (The student plays this interval with me and he/she tries to solve this problem investigating what to do with the pressure of the air).
(T): Now it is good.
(St): Yes, I think so.
The rest of the lesson continued in the same way, the teacher shows the intervals and the student tries to repeat the same after him/her or without the teacher, the teacher also sometimes sings the intervals.

Constructive

For this lesson I use Bach oboe and violin concerto again, second movement.
(St): (He/she starts to play)
(T): How was the tuning in this first bar?
(St): I don’t know, I didn’t think about that. (The student only pays attention to the notes and the air but he/she forgot the intonation between intervals)
(T): What we can do to know if the intonation is good or not?
(St): I don’t know, maybe we can use this piano and listen to it. Can you play these two notes? (He/she points to the notes in the intervals)
(T): Yes, of course.
(St): (He/she plays these two notes slowly until he/she finds a solution) That’s it!
(T): Awesome! What did you do?
(St): I opened my mouth more on this low note because it was sharp.
(T): All right. What other exercise can we do it to solve this problem? Do you have a piano at home?
(St): No, I haven’t. But I have this tuner machine. It can make a long note as a pedal and I can check the notes with the vibration
(T): Ok, nice idea. Can you try now? (I want see how the student tries this in order to know exactly how he/she works at home)

...
Scales

In this part of the oboe technique I use the oboe treatise called *Camino del virtuosismo* by Juan Carlos Baguena & Francisco Salanova. We will use the same book for all of the students, but we can use another books such as *Études pour Hautbois vol.3* by Salviani and *Etüden* by Luft aswell as many others. Also, we will see that I use the same scale for all the students.

Direct

(T): We are going to play D major. Tempo 100 per Beats Per Minute (BPM).
(St): Ok, I will start. (The student starts and he/she has some problems when he/she changes the first octave)
(T): This is not very clean. Can you play this part slower?
(St): Yes, 80 BPM. (The student starts to play and it was much better but in a slower tempo)
(T): Ok, brilliant. Can you come back to the previously tempo?
(St): (He/she starts to play and he/she has the same problems as before)
(T): I think that your index finger is very slow and that’s why the ‘C Sharp’ doesn’t sound clear. Can you move it faster?
(St): Ok.
(T): Play just these two notes slowly and get faster.
(St): (He starts to play ‘B’ and ‘C Sharp’) It’s getting better.
(T): For next week this should be clear. Work with these exercises and also put some rhythms to the scale like (this):

![Scale](image)

(St): Ok. Many thanks. See you next time.

Demonstrative

(T): We are going to play D major. Tempo 100 BPM.
(St): Ok (He/she starts to play and he/she has the same mistakes as their colleague)
(T): This is not very clean. Can you play this part slower?
(St): (Until here the lesson is the same as the direct student’s. He/she starts to play and it is better but I interrupt him/her)
(T): Ok, This is perfect but I think that this index finger should be more arched like this. (I show how he/she has to put the finger over the key)
(St): Ok, I will try. (He/she starts to play in the first tempo. At the beginning it is good but as the scale is been played, he/she loses the control of their Index finger and it starts to be unclean)
(T): Well, that doesn’t matter. We can finish the scale and you will practice like I showed you at home during this coming week.
(St): Ok. (He/she finishes the scale)
Constructivism

(T): We are going to play D major. Tempo 100 BPM.
(St): Ok. (He/she starts to play and he/she has the same problems as their colleagues due to the difficult fingering technique)
(T): This is not very clean. Can we play this part slower (the same as before but now I add more things) and think about what is wrong in the finger. Why do you think this problem happens?
(St): Yes, I can. (He/she starts to play and he/she is focusing in his/her fingers and how the movement is and if they are together or not. We can see that because he/she is playing very slow and he/she is moving all the fingers carefully with different strength and feeling the keys very well)
(St): I think that these fingers (he/she points to the index finger in the left hand and also others fingers in the right hand fingers n. 3 and 4) are not together and the movement in the Index finger is a bit lazy.
(T): Ok, what we can do to fix this problem?
(St): (He/she starts to think again about the problem and he/she explores different movement in the fingers to solve the problem). I have to arch this finger more and move the hand like this (he/she makes a semicircle with the wrist) and I have to feel that all the fingers are arriving together at the keys.
(T): Ok, Can we try that?
(St): (He/she starts to play and at the beginning it is difficult but as the scale is been played the scale is going better). Oh! It’s difficult but it is better.
(T): Ok, work on that and let’s see how it is the next time.
(St): Ok, See you!
DISCUSSION

Direct teaching

The direct teaching style is very useful when students do not have the ability to develop their own concepts or they don’t know how to analyse their own work as the teacher solves all of their problems for them. Having said that we could say that this is the best way to teach, but it all depends on our goal. When the students learn in a direct way, they need continued supervision from their teachers because they don’t think for themselves. This means that students might forget what they have learned, because it is not deeply integrated in their own concepts. I could see by analysing my direct lessons how the students assimilate the concepts and I could see that even after a while these students still did not have the capacity to think about how they played and I had to repeat all of the things that I had said in the first lessons.

Demonstrative teacher

If I have to analyse or think about all the teachers that I have had during eighteen years, I can say that the demonstrative teaching style was the most common style used by them. This style of lessons produces a student that they will be a replica of the teacher, with the same technique, same sound and almost the same way to make music as well. The teacher is the model for the students and the students will do everything that the teacher says. That doesn’t mean that this way is bad, but the teachers should be great players and great musicians on stage. The basic problem in this style of teaching is when students change the teacher and they have a new demonstrative teacher. This situation produces a mess in the mind of the student as they have to change their technique which they have learned to adapt to the new teacher. I experienced myself this need of adjustments both as a student and as well as when I was teaching for this thesis. This imitation produces the habit inside the students to imitate how their teachers play. This personal reflection by the student includes exploring how to produce the same sound, then developing their ears to imitate their teachers sound.

Constructive teacher

This way of teaching is based on auto-reflection by the students and how they search for the solutions to their problems found at the beginning of their studies. The lessons are slow and if you use this method for long durations of time it can produce mental exhaustion resulting in distraction from the students task at hand. Due to this, lessons shouldn’t be very long at the beginning of an individuals studies. One
point in favour of this teaching style is that the students reflect upon their playing themselves and as a result means that they don’t need teacher supervision and they can practice better alone than their other colleagues (direct or demonstrative). The solutions to their problems are also more deeply embedded inside of them. For me, this kind of teaching seems similar to video games from the point of view that when children first use a video game for the first time; they don’t use the manual and they start to play and to think what they have to do to pass to the next level and continue the game. They eventually become a master of the game by gaining new abilities and improving their technique, most of the time without any help.

As I could see during the lesson that I taught, the students that received the lessons in this style learnt easier and deeper than the others and this is produced by their auto-reflection and their own mental work.

General reflections

In conclusion, I think that the best way to teach depends entirely on the student’s ability to learn by theirselves through creating their own concepts and gathering information. It also depends on how each individual develops for themselves and makes use of these concepts they have developed. All teaching requires a special adaptation for each student because not all students assimilate and adapt their concepts in the same manner. Although students can find all of the information, for instance on the Internet, all students need a teacher with experience who knows all of the techniques required to play oboe. This teacher would have all of the tools that the students need to make music. The teacher has to also have prepared a program of studies which of course will vary depending on how much time they will have with each students.

From birth, humans have two ways of learning, one is repetition and the other one is the researching and development of innate abilities. For example, children learn to talk by hearing and repeating words each moment. Also, when children are born, they explore their own linguistic abilities by crying and shouting to call on their parents and get all that they want, such as food, being held, playing, or other forms of attention. Although we cannot decide exactly which method of teaching is the correct way to teach, we can say that learning in a constructive way is deeper than the direct and demonstrative way. This is because children discover their own solutions to their problems and teachers insist that they investigate in order to develop the students self-learning rather than through the direct or demonstrative way. The demonstrative way also produces a kind of own investigation in the student but it is based on hearing or visualising a teachers performance and repeating it. This means that the demonstrative students have more limits in the range of exploration in their own knowledge than constructive students.

I only gave a few lessons to each student and I could appreciate that constructive students assimilate knowledge better than the others and that they pay more attention to their performance than the direct or demonstrative students. But what happen when students learn in a hurry because they have auditions, concerts, exams, etc?
The pressure which they are put under makes it difficult to pay attention to technical thoughts as the musical aspects of playing dominate their practise. This means that students are more focused on developing how their piece sounds rather than ensuring every technical passage is learnt properly. As a result of this, students make more mistakes as they did not investigate how technique and music making work their selves. This is “bad-learning” and is really hard to correct. The only way is to think about the mistakes, how they were produced, why and how to correct them instead of learning well from the very beginning.

These thoughts about teaching work better for me, but I believe that everybody can take these ideas for their own development as a teacher.
References