The Business of Instruction

Tips for Instructors

By S. Downs Admittedly, I do not know a great deal about piping. There are some of you who have forgotten more about piping than I may ever know. I humbly concede this fact and I admire those of you who are giving back to the piping community by providing instruction especially if you do so for free or at reasonable rates. An area, however, in which I do know something about is job interviews, partnerships, and service. What?! That has nothing to do with piping, you say! Well, I disagree. Hear me out. When a potential student approaches a pipe instructor requesting lessons, the first thing passing from the instructor's mouth should not be the rate for one hour of instruction. This reminds me of all the poor lost souls in the computer store. The first thing the salesman usually asks is "How much do you want to spend?" That question does nothing to qualify the needs of the client (student) nor does it qualify the salesman (instructor). The only thing it does establish is if the buyer is thoroughly uninformed and willing to part with his cash. Here is where the "job" interview part comes into play. I would like to suggest that the pipe teacher and student enter into a dialog where some of the following items are discussed before any decision is made on the part of either person. The Instructor needs to find out why the student wishes to learn the pipes. What are the students expectations? Does the student have any piping goals? Does the student have some passion or great desire for the pipes? Does the student have any music skills or prior music instruction? This may help the instructor determine if the student has a passion for the pipes, is willing to make a commitment, and how much effort will need to be put forth. The Student needs to find out the the experience level of the instructor. What experience has he had teaching students? Is the teacher certified (Tutor's Certificate) to teach by the College of Piping? Does the teacher have references? Has this person won any competitions as solo or with a band? What grade band does he/she play for? What grade piper is the instructor? Ask if you can speak with current students. Ask to sit-in on one of the sessions. Remember, it's your money. Even if this is the only instructor around for 300 miles, the choice is yours. There may be alternatives. Partnership: Now it is up to both parties to agree on some terms of the relationship. The Instructor should promise to be at the scheduled practice. Not playing some impromptu gig on a scheduled tutoring night. Make a commitment to be candid about strengths and weaknesses. Make a commitment to keep the student on track. Be willing to discuss the possibility of missed goals. The Instructor needs to address the goals and expectations accordingly. If I told you that I want to play a tune for my sister's wedding which is in two months, then I expect that you as a professional would tell me why this mat not be possible. I would also expect you to tell me how many lessons and how much practice time will be required for me to obtain realistic goals. The Student needs to ask questions to qualify the abilities of the instructor as well as to determine if the price of instruction matches the ability of the instructor. I hope this is clear. You don't want to pay $20.00 an hour to someone who is not fully qualified to teach. Sure, they have been piping 15 years, but can they teach?! If the person has an attitude, then I would suggest skipping this person quickly. If your piping goals have a shorter than normal time-line, be prepared to pay more or even be willing to negotiate a bonus to the instructor if a six month or twelve month goal is met. Of course, you must practice, show up for instruction and pay on time! Service: This part is really simple. Keep your agreement, keep focused on the objective, and communicate with each other regularly. This is by no means a comprehensive guide of what should occur in a successful teacher/student partnership. My goal here is to hopefuly inititate dialog between the student and teacher, adjust expectations, set goals and move forward. The student is measured by his ability to play well. How is the teacher rated? I think one way is to have your written goals and objectives. If you are not meeting your piping goals, and you are doing what your teacher asks, then it may be time to find out why. - Shawn Downs 07/31/01 In honor & memory of Mr. Dave Turpen

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