

Jack Powers' Internship

A journaled and lived experience

Introduction:

For my internship, I took 4 weeks to teach my 3 brothers how to play a song of their choice on instruments that they were not familiar with.

For context: Alex and Luke are both 17 (identical twins), and Patrick is 12.

Alex and Patrick play drums,
Luke plays French horn.

11/15

For our first meeting, I wanted to give my brothers the opportunity to decide what they wanted to play. I took a more informal approach mostly because they're my brothers, but I was also heavily inspired by Diane Downs' teaching with the Louisville Leopards and Bruce Mack's teaching with his students in "When Fried Eggs Fly". I started our meeting by asking them what kind of music they would be interested in playing. I was kind of surprised at how quickly they agreed on Christmas music. The debate came when we got to deciding what song to play. The twins wanted to play Trans-Siberian Orchestra's "Carol of the Bells" and Patrick was dead set on Mariah Carey's "All I Want For Christmas Is You", he also specified that it was important that he played xylophone for that song. I tried not to give a whole lot of input into the conversation because I wanted them to feel like they picked it on their own. I had to chorale it a bit because Luke's instant response to Patrick's suggestion was "That's stupid". I reminded them that we needed to come to a conclusion together so I gave them some ideas of things to listen for that might help them make a decision. We listened to both songs and I pointed out things about instrumentation, different parts, and how those things might influence what they decide. They half-listened to my rationale, but the twins really won Patrick over after Alex pulled up the music video for the Trans-siberian Orchestra song. It is hard to deny that the music video is pretty cool.

Once they settled on the song, we discussed who would play what instruments. I told them that any instrument in the room was fair game. I emphasized that they didn't need to have any experience on the instrument and that I could catch them up to be able to play whatever the song called for. I'm really glad that I gave them this choice because Alex and Luke suddenly became much more interested. Turns out that Alex has always wanted to try guitar! I'm so glad that this will give him a chance to try that out. Luke is very shy, so he quietly moved over to the piano and told me that he'd be willing to give it a try. Patrick was still dead set on the xylophone. I figured I should play bass to fill out the low end, and we convinced our Dad to hop in on drums. My Dad used to play drums when he was in high school (he's actually the one who got me into drums!) so we figured we'd just bring him in as our special guest for the last meeting. I let them play around on the instruments they chose for the last 10 minutes of our meeting so that I could show them some basic technique. I'm also really glad that I did that because it's going to give us more time next week to get right into learning the song.

We closed out by talking about what dates/times would be best for everyone so that we could set our meeting dates in advance. I'm glad we did this, because honestly, it was pretty hard to actually get them in the room to start our meeting today. I think that is partially because I didn't set a specific time, I just told them we should meet in the afternoon. Because of that lack of organization, I basically needed to bug them to get them to show up today. Once they left, I did feel bad about the fact that they only actually played on their instruments for a few minutes before they left. If I planned a little better we could've figured this all out sooner and I could've had an arrangement for them to play today, but I felt that it was important that we had time together to decide this in a more structured way than just asking them random questions during the week. Speaking of planning, I'm going to start putting together an arrangement of this song right now. I was prepared to transpose this to an easy key for keyboard instruments but it happens to be in A minor anyways! Super convenient. I'm really excited to get to work with my brothers on this. They genuinely seemed interested once we got going, so I hope that translates to our music making! :)

Edit: I'm looking at this entry a week later and I'm realizing that I probably went a bit overboard on detail. After rereading the assignment, I'll make sure that the subsequent entries are less 'vivid' and more focused on the reflection. I would edit this down a bit, but I figured that it was important to conserve my initial thoughts.

11/25

Everyone was on time today! It seemed like that was partially because I reminded them about it a lot, but they were also genuinely interested in trying out their new instruments. I showed each one of them a little bit of their parts, and while they worked on it, I would show another one of them something else. This worked really well with the twins because their parts were pretty challenging. I gave Luke the difficult task of playing the chords with his left hand and playing the melody with his right, and picking notes on different strings in time was enough to be a formidable challenge for Alex. This gave each of them enough stuff to practice while I worked with the others, but Patrick was a different story.

Patrick didn't want to stop playing Roblox. When I could get him away from his phone, I showed him the intro and asked him to practice but he really wasn't interested in doing that. I knew that Alex and Luke definitely wanted to learn more so I was tempted to just let Patrick be, but I really wanted to devise a way to get him to be more engaged. On the spot, I figured that giving him some responsibility might help him feel like he is doing more, so I rearranged the intro so that he was the one who started the whole thing. Now, if we wanted to play the song, we need him to be locked in and ready to play. I stressed to him how important his part was and that definitely got through because once we started playing together, he was focused!

The first time we played the intro together, there was this really great energy in the room. It felt really great that we were all playing something together that, honestly, sounded pretty cool! I want them to eventually use their ears instead of counting so I just gave them cues for the different sections today. We ended a little bit early today because I genuinely did not expect them to pick up their parts as quickly as they did. I didn't get to planning out how we are going to do the next part yet, so I quite literally ran out of content. I guess this is a sign that I should be doing a better job preparing for these meetings!

12/2

I anticipated that memory was going to be more of a problem than it actually was. In my planning, I thought that I would give them a full 5 minutes to warm up, but Patrick had no interest and the twins just played through the tough sections a few times and then they were good to go. We did a quick run of what we did last week so I could determine if we needed to go back for anything but I was pleasantly surprised at how well their memory held up! This was great, but I also prepared for 10 minutes of review so now we were way ahead of schedule and I was worried that I was going to run out of content again. I made up for that by using that extra time to talk about expression and the general mood of the piece. I think they got the idea because the next run we did was definitely better, but it didn't seem like it was sticking with them too much. I think they were just less focused today than they were last week.

Alex and Luke really exceeded my expectations with their playing so I decided to really challenge them by giving them a unison 16th note run together. Alex definitely seemed overwhelmed at how quickly he needed to switch strings, but he said he really wanted to get it and he asked if he could practice with my guitar after we were done. This really showed me just how effective a good challenge can be at sparking someone's interest! Such a cool thing to see. On the other hand, Luke seems to have some hidden talent for piano because he was able to get the run with no problems after practicing it for only a few minutes.

I really felt bad that I couldn't be working with everyone at once more but the things that they were learning were so instrument specific. Alex and Luke could practice while I wasn't working with them, but it was so easy for Patrick to just slip back into playing on his phone. Because of that, I tried to visit Alex and Luke in short burst and then I would come back to Patrick

and play with him while they worked on the new stuff that I showed them. I wasn't really sure what to do with Patrick because he could play the parts that I showed him, but he couldn't focus hard enough to play them correctly more than once. Call and response worked best with him, but there really wasn't a good way to do that in the song with him. Playing his part with him did seem to help a little bit so I think I'll do that from now on.

I wish we had more time to put this together, but I didn't want to take up too much of their time today. I think burning them out is the last thing we need.

12/9

Since last week, Alex really got into playing guitar! He has actually been keeping my guitar up in his room because he likes figuring out songs by ear. Naturally, Alex was the first one to get in and set up today. Patrick and Luke were slow to come, but they were definitely more excited than last week because they knew that we were going to be playing with our Dad today. I figured it's important for me to mention that this now has a little more emotional weight than I thought it would be before. My Dad told us earlier this week that his melanoma came back and it's looking like it's going to be worse than last time. This has obviously been a lot on us, and we've been trying to spend as much time with him as possible. I'm really glad that we got him involved in this because I can tell that he really had fun playing with us. I know we all appreciated this chance to make music with our Dad.

We warmed up like we did last week. Patrick did the same thing he did last time, where he played his part incorrectly a few times and then went back to playing Roblox, but this time I hopped in and warmed up with him. I tried to phrase it so it didn't seem like I was calling him out, so I said something like "hey, this section is really fun, play it with me!". That totally worked! I planned on rehearsing a little bit before my Dad joined us but he walked into the room 20 minutes earlier than I thought he would. I was pretty worried about just sitting down and playing it through for the first time without going over anything, but surprisingly, it didn't fall apart! Patrick definitely needed some reminders of where the right notes were but his memory came back to him pretty quickly. At this point, Alex, Luke, and Patrick were able to count through it all pretty successfully on their own (with the occasional head nod of approval from me) but I realized I was going to need to count out loud for my Dad, who was just joining us for the first time. I now wish that we had found a way to include him in our last rehearsal as well, because it would've been much easier for him to line things up and feel comfortable with it all. Unfortunately, as much as that would've been nice, he has been working a lot and also dealing with frequent trips to the doctor lately, so there really wasn't a way for us to do that with him last week.

We played through it all a few times to get it in my Dad's ear and then we did a 'live performance' for our Mom! (which you can watch here: <https://youtu.be/MvYTXQvbsGg> It's a shame the piano was so far away from the camera, Luke really killed it!!) My Dad wanted us to keep playing it even after we recorded that because he was sure that he could get a take where his drum solo was just a little bit better. I do wish we were able to include him more because it was a lot of fun to play with him like that. After listening back to the video, I'm really proud of the work they did, but I feel like I probably could have pushed Patrick a little bit more than I did. I guess my initial response to his disengagement was to give him less to do, but I think giving him less to do actually made it harder for him to stay engaged with it. My Mom was really impressed with everyone's skills on their new instruments. This definitely put us all in a bit better of a mood than we have been for the past week.

Reflection

It's been two days since we did our performance with my Dad so I've given myself a little bit of time to reflect here on how all of this came together. First of all, we enjoyed the experience so much that we're now talking about learning another song like this! Patrick isn't super into the idea, but the twins, our Dad, and I are now talking about trying to learn how to play Pink Floyd's "In The Flesh?". I'd like to still keep Patrick involved by giving him something else (something more challenging) to play but if we're not playing Christmas music, I'm not sure how into it he will be. This has really shown me just how much music making brings people together. While I have experienced this in school settings and with my rock band, I never thought of how great it would be to bring my family closer together. And honestly, we really needed an experience like this right now to give us some quality time together that will take our mind off of things.

Something else that really makes me happy is just how much Alex got into playing guitar from all of this! I was in the car with him earlier today and we ended up talking about the songs he wants to learn next and how he wants me to show him some more chord shapes. Getting to watch that spark ignite in him has been super inspiring for me. I know so many people who wish they picked up an instrument when they were younger but didn't. Starting anything is really intimidating, but with the right encouragement and direction, it can be a lot of fun. I'm really glad that I got to be a part of Alex's discovery of this instrument and this experience gets me excited to facilitate experiences like this to more people in the future!

This has also seriously strengthened my belief that playing music that is relevant to the students is always the way to go. Letting them pick out the song and the instruments that they wanted to play was the best decision I made on this project, it really made a difference. It's one thing to read about education through popular music, but it's so much fun to actually do it! In the future, I plan on implementing popular music in my classroom as much as I can because I have seen first hand how much it can bring people together.