Student teaching is the culmination of a music education major’s college experience. Most student teachers have confidence in the knowledge and skills gained over the course of their college career. But beyond the content taught through that coursework lie the practical realities of teaching. What does my cooperating teacher expect from me? Will the students work hard for me? How does the copier work? Where do I eat lunch? Where do I park? As student teaching approaches, these considerations often cause more anxiety than any potential musical challenge.

The best way to face these uncertainties is with information. Talking with those who have been through the student teaching process—from every angle—can be extremely helpful. The following Q&A is intended to do just that—to offer information from a panel of experts who represent different perspectives in the student teaching experience. The questions asked by Nate Hutcherson, a music education major preparing to student-teach in spring 2013, were answered by Ruth Kurtis, a former cooperating teacher, Jonathan Morsinkhoff, a recent student teacher, and Michele Henry, a university supervisor. Anyone approaching their teaching semester will certainly have questions specific to their situation. We hope the following information will offer answers to some of the questions common to most student teachers.

WHAT IS THE MOST VALUABLE PART OF THE STUDENT TEACHING EXPERIENCE?

Ruth Kurtis (cooperating teacher): Learning what to do and what not to do, creating your own teaching style (by discovering what works for others and for you), becoming confident in yourself, and mastering content are most important. You will spend a lifetime learning and honing these skills, so enjoy the journey! I also caution that you have to have a high degree of honest introspection and use of common sense. As a cooperating teacher (CT), I don’t have the time to teach common sense.

Jonathan Morsinkhoff (recent student teacher): Balance being a teacher with being a learner. Although you are finally teaching students, you need to observe and learn from the cooperating teacher. While student teaching, seek to emulate the cooperating teacher’s methods so that students can get to know you and so you can learn new methods.

Michele Henry (university supervisor): It’s what I call the shifting spotlight—from you as student to you as teacher. Until this point, the focus has been on you as student—you improving your performance skill, you demonstrating your knowledge of theory and history, you displaying a beautiful conducting pattern. Suddenly, now the focus is on your students—their performance, their knowledge, their responses. It doesn’t matter if you do everything perfectly, if they don’t. You will spend a great deal of time figuring out how your students learn and what you need to do to best facilitate that learning. This change of mindset can be very challenging, but it can also be very rewarding.

WHAT DO I NEED TO DO PRIOR TO THE FIRST DAY OF STUDENT TEACHING?

JM: It is extremely important to meet with and talk to your CT. If you are teaching at multiple schools you will need to meet with each of your CTS—high school, middle school, and elementary. When you meet them, dress professionally, refer to them using “Mr.,” or “Ms.” titles from the start, and discuss
expectations—what you’ll be doing, what your CTs want you to do, and how you will fit into their program. If your university supervisors have given you a project or anything to complete over the semester, make sure to review that with your CTs.

MH: Do your homework. Find out all you can about the school, the community, the students, and your CT. If you have a chance to do some observation at the school prior to student teaching, you will be way ahead of the game once your official student teaching placement begins.

Also, you should go shopping. Even if you have several semesters until student teaching, begin assembling your professional wardrobe now. It can be expensive to buy a new wardrobe at once, so purchase a little at a time. If your closet reflects that of a typical college student, you likely don’t have many clothes appropriate for teaching. It’s amazing the difference it can make in your confidence when you are professionally dressed. (It also can keep you from being mistaken for a student in the faculty lounge!)

RK: Be open to a new definition of success (other than what you experienced as a student). Each community defines success differently. This may affect what directors believe students can achieve personally and musically, as well as the role of music education in a community. How does your CT define success? Is that different from the community or your university?

WHAT IS THE MOST IMPORTANT THING TO DO ON THE FIRST DAY OF STUDENT TEACHING?

MH: Be early! Your CT wants to know that you are reliable. Don’t be shy! Take the initiative to approach the students and other teachers; show interest in who they are. First impressions are lasting impressions.

JM: Your CT may or may not have you teach the first day. Every situation is different, and you may be required to teach a beginner class, sectional, or piece of music right off the bat. Whatever it may be, say “yes sir” or “yes ma’am,” and get it done. Also, before you go home for the day, always ask your CTs if there is anything you can do for them. This will show that you care about them, their program, and that you are willing to do whatever it takes to help.

RK: Be active in the classroom, take notes, make observations, and learn to think with the mind of a teacher. Ask the CT if they want you to be stationary, playing, or roving in the room. Be flexible. Much of teaching is planning and adapting to the moment, mood, and challenges at hand. Watch your CT and look for motivation strategies, pacing, how they disguise repetition, and what percentage of achievement is acceptable for the stated goals.

Nate Hutcherson (2013 student teacher): Reflect on what you thought about student teachers in your own classes, and think about how students will see you. I remember really liking the student teachers who were not shy but rather sought to build relationships immediately.

WHAT DO I CALL MY COOPERATING TEACHER?

RK: It really depends on the CT’s personality and what boundaries they want to set. Start formally by always using “Mr.” and “Ms.” titles in the classroom. You may become more informal when the CT offers to be referred to on a first-name basis, but do this only in non-teaching situations.

WHAT SHOULD STUDENT TEACHERS CONSIDER IN DISTINGUISHING THEMSELVES FROM THEIR STUDENTS?

JM: Student teaching is a cool role that you have only once, so take advantage of it! Be the teacher—you need to have a level of separation and distance from the students in attire, actions, and behavior. Make sure you are learning as much as you can from your CT and that you are taking advantage of being in front of real students every day.

WHAT ARE MY CHANCES OF TEACHING INDEPENDENTLY IN THE CLASSROOM?

RK: It’s very likely! My personal plan is to establish an increasing transfer of time and responsibilities to the student teacher (ST). Once they establish momentum in rehearsal, I allow them to teach independently and simply leave my office door open to monitor the classroom from a distance. Many cooperating teachers will troubleshoot discipline with nonverbal means while the ST is on the podium. This means that the ST may yet need to establish those boundaries for themselves. Some CTs may plan to leave the classroom occasionally to give you a real-life experience. They may monitor by having a video camera or recording the rehearsal for feedback purposes.

HOW SHOULD I HANDLE LESSON PLANS?

JM: You have to plan, plan, and plan some more. When it comes to making a great first teaching impression and getting the students really involved with learning, the more you plan, the better it will go. Make sure you take the time to plan your lessons and include more material than you plan to teach.

MH: Each school and each teacher will have their own requirements and habits for lesson planning. While at that school and with your cooperating teacher, you should follow those practices for any plans you have to submit officially, even if you have another method of planning for your own use. You may not see your CT create similar hardcopy lesson plans. It is often the case that veteran teachers do not write out detailed lesson plans in the same way that new teachers should. After gaining substantial experience, it becomes less necessary to write down every step of the process—particularly for a piece of music you are teaching for the tenth time. However, this doesn’t get you off the hook now—plan!

HOW DO I GAIN THE RESPECT AND COMMAND OF THE STUDENTS?

JM: Work on engaging the students and being positive at all times. Be willing to teach in many different ways, and use many teaching strategies including visual, aural, and kinesthetic. Letting students take the lead at some points can
help create personal ownership within the classroom.

**RK:** Because I tend to have intense rehearsals, I allow the students to interject humor, as long as they can pull back to the focus of the rehearsal. I believe that one of the most challenging skills we teach our students, regardless of the content area, is how to listen.

**HOW CAN I GET THE MOST OUT OF THE STUDENT TEACHING PROCESS?**

**MH:** Take advantage of every opportunity. If your cooperating teacher asks if you’d like to do something, the answer is always yes! Then do it right away. Even better, be proactive. Rather than waiting to be asked, ask what you can do. And even better yet, notice what needs to be done, and do it before being asked.

Student teaching is your full-time job—it’s certainly true for your cooperating teacher! If your cooperating teacher is working, you should be working. You are expected to be present for all the same duties and activities—faculty meetings, parent-teacher conferences, bus duty—all of them.

**WHAT FURTHER SUGGESTIONS WOULD YOU OFFER FUTURE STUDENT TEACHERS?**

**JM:** One important thing I learned was to have extra sets of clothes in my car—both casual and dress clothes. You never know what can happen in a school day, so be prepared. Also, be patient and manage your time carefully. There may be days you’ll be at the school for 12 hours or more. You need to be flexible and remember the love and passion for teaching that you have.

**MH:** Be willing to be mentored. The reason you are there is to learn from someone with more knowledge and experience than you. Know that you are going to make some mistakes—don’t be defensive and don’t make excuses. Always be professional. Take copious notes. Keep a notebook available at all times. Write down phrases, words of wisdom, strategies, and other ideas that you encounter. This will become one of your most valuable resources.

**RK:** You don’t get credit for saying or teaching the right things unless you see the positive result in the way the students respond and perform. Let your barometer of success be student-driven. Be clear with your intentions and goals. Work for an environment of trust and team. Don’t let fear of failure keep you and your students from achieving the most. Students will achieve only to the degree that you challenge them.

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Ruth Kurtis is a retired orchestra director who supervised numerous student teachers during her 33-year career.

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