

# Smartest Thing I Ever Did – Using Smiley Face Stickers

by Matthew H. Spieker

Editor's Note: This article appears as one of a series written especially for *Ala Breve* by experts in the field of music education.

Holding students accountable in a middle school music program is an on-going challenge for music educators. In collaboration with another music colleague, in a middle school setting, we developed a communication tool that helped students, parents, and teachers keep track of individualized goals, progress, and achievement. We discovered that small steps—accompanied with positive feedback—contributed to engaged students, satisfied parents, and clear, daily lessons.

Several years ago I was privileged to work with Scott Schlup; he directed the bands and I directed the orchestras. This rewarding work was due, in part, to having a creative colleague who enjoyed the challenge of pursuing new ideas as much as I did. Such an energized environment shaped us both into mature directors and impacted the quality of our instruction.

## Pass-Off Cards

Among the creative, unique ideas we tried was a smart, practical management tool that helped us implement the curriculum. Concepts developed in my previous position and refinements added by Scott massaged the idea that eventually became known as a “Pass-Off” card, (see Figure 1). In addition to their ability to communicate, hold students accountable and show progress, the cards supported individualized learning plans.

Pass-Off cards were printed onto cardstock using school colors to represent the different ensemble levels. Cardstock was important for two reasons. The heavier paper could withstand repeated handling and use during an entire semester, and it conveyed to students that this was an important document. On the first day of class, Pass-Off cards were presented to the students with their handbook, method book and other materials. One side of the card included expected first-quarter accomplishments and the other side included second-quarter skills, thus making the Pass-Off card good for an entire semester.

The Pass-Off card became a snapshot of a student's progress throughout the semester. The teacher, student, and parent(s) handled the Pass-Off card every week, making it a weekly progress report, an important

communication, and an accountability tool for all interested parties. Most importantly, the cards helped students celebrate their accomplishments and plan future work, making them accountable for their music learning.

Cards were collected on Mondays and returned to students on Tuesdays. Progress made during the previous week was recorded in the computer and then marked on the card with a “smiley face” sticker if a student earned full points, or a number of acquired points for lesser achievements. There is something encouraging about filling out a card with these visual reminders of a job well done, and the middle school students seemed motivated by a smiley face.

Figure 1

## Becoming a Musician

I emphasized to students the importance of acquiring points as a way to accomplish music skills. Everybody started with nothing and the goal was to build up their grade. I often compared this to acquiring musicianship skills. As musicians, we start the journey with little in terms of talents, but through hard work and dedication we acquire the necessary skills to become accomplished. This adventure does not happen overnight. Nobody is born with great skills, but rather every good musician commits himself or herself to work daily and repetitively on those skills until they become accomplished.

As a young man, Shinichi Suzuki (1898-1998) studied violin in Berlin, Germany. When reminiscing about those early days, he often wrote about his lack of ability. Despite many

months of hard work, Suzuki felt he made no progress and eventually decided he was without talent. “Without talent, trying so hard, every day – ‘it’s not worth it,’ I told myself. I felt that I had no ability, and wanted to die” (Suzuki, 1983, p.35). Suzuki eventually learned this thinking served as an excuse for avoiding work. He later writes, “Every child can be educated; it is only a matter of the method of education. Anyone can train himself; it is only a question of using the right kind of effort” (p.36). The Pass-Off card served as a tool that helped keep students on track and use the “right kind of effort.”

## Practice

The first section on the Pass-Off card displayed nine lines for the nine weeks of practice the student was to complete for the quarter (see Figure 2). Students were required to commit a minimum of 30 minutes per weekday and 30 minutes over the weekend resulting in three hours of weekly practice. If a student didn't accomplish the three hours, then points were awarded incrementally based on how much they practiced. The information letter to the parents asked them to keep a record of their student's daily practice, and to only give credit for actual daily practice. Bunching together all three hours of practice on Sunday afternoon defeats the purpose of the critical, daily discipline of practice. Students earned points based on the total amount of practice for that week and smiley faces were reserved for more than three hours. Parents had to sign the card every week acknowledging they had seen the card and their child had practiced for that time amount. Next to the specific week of practice, I asked students to fill in skills I wanted the class to accomplish that week. Sometimes, I would have students identify their own issues such as technique they needed to work on or Pass-Offs still to be completed. Individualized learning was a built-in element of the plan.

Figure 2

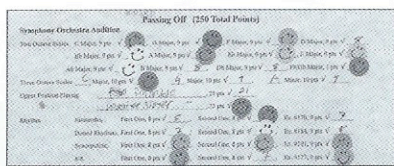


## Skills

The next section on the card, called Pass-Off, reflected skills the student was expected to learn during the quarter (see Figure 3). Listing the basic curriculum elements also kept me on task with my instruction. Young teachers tend to focus on literature with the goal of having good performances, which makes sense, as often that is how a teacher's success is judged. Effective teachers have good concerts, but this is the result of thorough teaching of skills rather than repetitive rehearsing of sheet music. Master teachers rehearse skills—especially foundational ones—with a constant, concise, and systematic approach that allows students to transfer those skills to the literature, and they do all of this with an intense sense of urgency (Brand, 1990; Hamann & Gillespie, 2013).

Pass-Off cards were given that name as credit was assigned to the student after he/she showed mastery of a skill. The reward on the card was a smiley face sticker. For many students, this mastery was demonstrated during class when playing that week's Pass-Off. For students not demonstrating mastery during class, there were other opportunities to prove themselves. Pass-Off simply meant they needed more practice on the skill. This process provided an opportunity to discuss how musicians learn at different speeds, which we emphasized as normal and expected. "Test" or "Playing Test" terminology was never used because a test suggests a one-time event of success or failure while the rest of the class marches on. Pass-Off means "keep working and show me you can play it later." Before school, lunch, and after school times were often busy, but became valuable one-on-one times with students needing extra support to master Pass-Off skills.

Figure 3



## Written Assignments

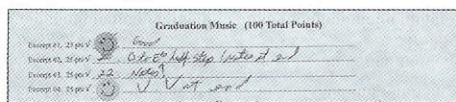
Written assignments were designated on the next section on the card. In my classroom this often meant music theory assignments, usually theory worksheets to be completed throughout the quarter and, naturally, smiley face stickers were put on the card when a student received a grade of an A. Other topics could also occupy this space such as history assignments, reflective writings on

performance (theirs or others), reading assignments, etc.

## Other Issues

Different classes have different needs throughout the semester of which the Pass-Off card accommodates. My younger students were allowed to play in graduation, but only as an honor given them for hard work throughout the year and if they could play the music. The Pass-Off card reflected a section labeled Graduation Music (see Figure 4). Under this labeling were lines, "Excerpt #1, Excerpt #2," etc. I didn't label specific excerpts as different ensemble sections had different difficult passages. If a student didn't acquire full points, I would make quick remarks about where to focus their attention. These comments helped focus their practice and reminded me each student's individual improvement needs. The excerpts section proved useful for regular concerts as well and in some classes was a regular section on the Pass-Off card.

Figure 4



Chamber music was an important aspect of my program as well. Most of my classes went through a chamber unit in the third quarter, culminating in a performance at Solo and Ensemble. Specific concepts were delineated and assigned a set of points. These concepts included rhythm, intonation, musicality, group grade, and final performance (see Figure 5).

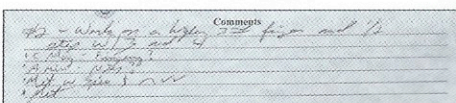
Figure 5



## Information

The final section on the Pass-Off card gave information including concert dates, reminders of assignment due dates, extra assignments or practice ideas, etc. I simply labeled it "Comments" (see Figure 6) and used it to be information specific for that student. When the class size is large this section helps me to remember specific issues for each student.

Figure 6

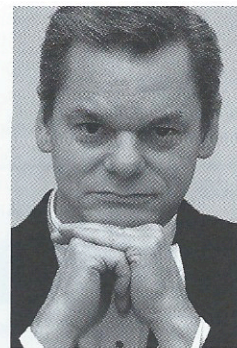


## Engagement and Accountability

Engagement and accountability are common educational buzzwords. We expect teachers to keep children involved and parents informed. I agree. A teacher's responsibility is to be engaging and accountable, but it can be challenging to do this every day. Pass-Off cards do both. The German's have a saying, "Zwei Fliegen mit einer Klappe schlagen." Translated this means to kill two flies with one swat. Pass-Off cards accomplish exactly that and this is why I feel it was one of the smartest things I ever did. Truthfully, the smiley face stickers only helped.

## References

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Matthew H. Spieker has been a music educator who has taught all levels of orchestra and general music in U.S. school districts of South Carolina and Colorado, and internationally at the John F. Kennedy Schule in Berlin, Germany. He now works at the University of Arizona teaching violin, and music education courses and he conducts the Philharmonic Orchestra.

Dr. Spieker guest conducts honor orchestras and lectures at music education conferences through various organizations and events in Arizona, Colorado, South Carolina, and in cities abroad including Brussels, Vienna, Geneva and Beijing.