

The Back of the Book: Where it All Begins

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Give a man a fish and you feed him for a day.
Teach a man to fish and you feed him for a lifetime.
- - Lao Tzu¹

Recently, as a student performed from his method book, he came across a note he thought he didn't know: F-sharp. He stopped. "F-sharp?" Mike asked. "You've known that note for quite a while!" I assured him. In fact, there were at least a dozen pieces he'd already mastered that had included the note. And, we backtracked through the book to prove that he had played F-sharp many times before. Still, Mike was stumped. It just wasn't coming to him, as these things happen. "Where can you find the correct fingering?" I asked. He looked at me as if to say: you're the teacher, let's get this over with—just *tell* me! "There's a place where you can find the correct fingering for F-sharp, or *any other note* on the saxophone for that matter," I hinted. After a brief pause, Mike said in a deflated tone, "The back of the book." So inconvenient it seemed, to spend precious seconds turning to the last page, where one customarily finds a fingering chart. When he found F-sharp, he exclaimed, "Oh yeah, I *do* know that note!"

Curiously, this scenario repeated itself on three more occasions during this particular lesson. Next, it was C-sharp, which while less familiar, had been introduced into his repertoire a few weeks earlier. Mike looked at me as before, but I didn't give in. "Where can you find the fingering for C-sharp?" "The *back* of the book," he replied with an irritated sigh, but sure enough, despite the undue manual and mental labor involved, he got the answer he was looking for. Now, when G-sharp and D-sharp appeared on some new pieces I asked him to try, he flipped immediately to the fingering chart without asking for my help. Mike was learning to fish!

I changed the subject, "Now, what if you come across a word you don't understand?" "Well, you can look it up in the dictionary, but...that's like a whole *other* book!" he said, emphasizing how much extra work this would entail. I got out *Webster's Third New International Dictionary*, which actually does take some strength (it weighs nearly fifteen pounds), and said, "Let's look up saxophone." As we approached, we came across the picture of a "sarrusophone," a saxophone-like instrument played with a double reed invented by Sarrus, a 19th-century bandmaster. Going no further, I asked, "So, who do you suppose invented the saxophone?" "Mr. Sax...?"

The role of teacher is to challenge students how to find answers on their own. We must guide them toward self-sufficiency. Ultimately, if I do my job well, my students need not return. For everyone is his or her own best teacher whether or not they know it just yet. I attempt to instill awareness of this fact, so that others may enjoy a lifetime of mindful nourishment.

¹Chinese philosopher [6th cent. B.C.], reputedly the founder of [Taoism](#). It is uncertain that Lao Tzu [name translates as "old person" or "old philosopher"] is historical. His teachings were compiled in *Tao-te ching* [Classic of the Way and Virtue]. Its parables and verse, written in incantatory language, advocate passive and intuitive behavior in natural harmony with the Tao, a cosmic unity underlying all phenomena.