

“Tell me and I forget, teach me and I may remember, involve me and I learn.” (Benjamin Franklin) Do you agree?

“Paul, can I borrow this,” asks Thomas innocently. We are in a guitar lesson and this is a little off topic but Thomas knows I’ll answer anything. Thomas is five and has a tendency to walk around the room surveying my belongings during the lesson. We are surrounded by guitars, recording desks and microphones. My DVDs are tucked away in the corner with Thomas, guitar still in hand, pouring over them. The DVD he has picked up is a Pixar film, which has a beautiful score but would not be well suited to playing on guitar. I ask Thomas if he has a favourite film or T.V. programme giving up trying to control the direction of the lesson. His face contorts with the effort of thought, the light of an answer dawns and his eyes light up. Still holding my DVD he exclaims, “I like Sponge Bob’s square pants!”

A quick YouTube search brings up the theme tune, which Thomas recites along to with glee...

“Are you ready, kids?
Aye, aye, captain!
I can't hear you!
Aye, aye, captain!
Ooooooooooh

Who lives in a pineapple under the sea?
Sponge Bob Square Pants!”

A quick listen gives me the key and it’s positioned around the Ionian mode shape....also known as the major scale. We have used this scale before...”guess what,” I say. “What?” replies Thomas. “You know this scale!” “Really?” “Yes,” I reply with a smile. He knows the song sounds hard but he now wants to learn, and he knows I believe he can do it. He puts down my DVD and we begin.

I had started the lesson hoping to continue where we had left off the week before. However, a five year old moves on rather quickly and keeping them involved can often feel like a race where they are always ahead. Thomas had in fact picked a far more interesting song and one that followed on from previous lessons seamlessly.

Five years later I had to say goodbye to Thomas as his teacher and friend. I did so feeling some responsibility in knowing that he believed having holes in your socks are acceptable, drinking red tea is a requirement to any good lesson and that guitar is the coolest instrument in the world. I suspect none of these things would have been true if I had tried to ‘teach’ him. The caveat I would add to Benjamin Franklin’s insight is that to be ‘involved’ is a two way process. I was just as involved in Thomas’ lessons as he was in mine, so who learned more I am unsure.....but I know we both had more fun in discovering where each person’s involvement would lead than the term education could ever convey.