

## The Four Seasons of Teaching

By Aubrey Faith-Slacker

I recently spent over a year living in the south of Mexico. It was an amazing experience, but as one might expect, time flew. I think that it was much more than just the fact that I was having fun, learning a lot, and working hard. As someone who moved there from the Midwest, I was used to experiencing seasons: Sleepless Summer, Hardworking Autumn, Hibernating Winter, and Springs Full of Possibilities. While each place, person, event, and project have their seasons, I was not in tune with the seasons in Oaxaca (changes of seasons are seen more in the blossoms on the trees and the amount of rain), so I wasn't able to intuit when it was time to push, and when it was time to rest. Without having time for rest built into my year, that endless summer was exhausting.

Back in Chicago, and hunkering down over the winter, I read about a business model that reflects the changing seasons and talks about how that cycle can be applied to projects, work with clients, and education/training. Coming out of my eternal summer and facing a real midwestern winter with all its canceled plans, hearty stews, and indoor board games, I began to realize how important it is to properly allocate time and energy to give ample space for creativity and reflection, while also leaving space for new ideas and opportunities. We can design our time, expectations, and to-do lists to be effective in every phase.

### Business Model of Seasons

A quick scope of seasonal thinking as it comes to business, projects, and productivity will help us understand how our own projects (teaching, performing, composing, running festivals and institutes, etc.) can be broken down into seasons as well. I'm going to start with winter—by the calendar year, the hardest season for me to find joy. Winter is a time of culmination, plowing, and planning. During the winter, we need to develop an idea of what needs to be grown, prepare for the next cycle, give attention to lessons learned, and live off the reserves of the fall harvest.

For me, this reflective time—the “winter” of my teaching—happens in June, July, and August when schools are out of session and my teaching hours as well as my expectations slow down. I teach fewer hours during these months, leaving more time for myself, my home, and my community. I'm able to reflect on the past school year, write student evaluations, assess what went well, and plan events for the next school year. I'm living off my monetary reserves from the harvest season of teaching, and even my students are focused on and enjoying extra and fun projects at the piano—using the skills they've amassed during the school year to satisfy their artistic desires.

When we intentionally plan for this time, the “winter” of our projects won't be wasted away but respected for the role those months (or weeks, or moments) play in a project.

Next up is spring—the season of new beginnings and planting seeds! This is when we plant (start, talk about, sign up for) as many new opportunities as possible. We have the freedom to take risks, as we haven't committed too much and won't see results for a while. This is exciting since anything is possible! When the school year begins again, (the “spring” of my yearly teaching project), I might try out something new in my studio policy. I might present my students with ideas for a whole slew of challenges, festivals and competitions, exploring new ways of loving jazz, composition, sonatas, and more. I might have new decorations, new stickers, or even a new format for lessons. Who knows? It's pretty exciting.

When we reach the summer stage of our projects, things are beginning to manifest and take root. We are starting to see the products of our wild and enthusiastic planting, and while some ideas may be going very well, others may not have really taken root. We need to make critical choices at this time about what to nurture and what to let go of. We need to have clear communication, stay focused, and move forward in a “business as usual” routine and attitude. For me, the “summer” stage will be time to check in regarding my own and my students' goals, time to remind everyone of expectations, narrow our focus a bit, and enjoy some bounty—recitals, soirees, and concerts!

The fall of a project is often neglected in terms of intentional design. Autumn is our time of realization and harvest. It is time now to pay attention to how things have gone and to enjoy the progress we've made. We pick our fruit, distribute the bounty, save our seeds, and consider change going forward. Fall can often be overwhelming in its abundance and activity! And then before we know it, it is winter again.

### Applying Seasonal Thinking as Musicians and Teaching Artists

Let's get a little bit more practical for a moment. A big part of designing for the seasons of a project is to consider what kind of thinking you need to approach each season with. For each project you develop, encounter, or are a part of, I invite you to consider what kind of energy and what type of thinking you need to approach each new season of your project successfully. (Reflective thinking is very different from brainstorming!)

I'll share with you a strategy I learned years ago that works well for me: I learned to organize my to-do list in a way that would serve all different types of me. The energized, the

creative, the tired, the mechanical, etc. To this day, I keep a “low-energy to-do list” for those times when I’m not feeling creative, productive, energetic, or efficient. That’s when I read articles in the *ASJ* that I haven’t gotten around to, or re-alphabetize my teaching library, or practice upcoming student repertoire that I haven’t played in a while. I also have a “creative thinking” to-do list, a “social” to-do list, as well as an “energetic” to-do list. Can you see how this might work to guide your focus and drive in each season of your project?

For this article, I used the example of a school year of teaching, but all projects have a seasonal cycle of varying lengths, and because they may not all align, it is important to recognize the seasons of any project you might engage in. A season might only be a few weeks, or maybe it is several years, depending on the project.

What projects are you working on? Are you a regular performer in the exciting midst (spring) of choosing new repertoire? Are you working in community outreach and you’re focused right now on building trust and strengthening relationships that are mutually beneficial (summer)? Perhaps you’re a teacher trainer or institute director and you’re reflecting on your institute teaching and deciding what you’ll do differently next year (winter). You could be working on small projects (writing an article), or huge projects (starting up a

school or developing a community). Take a moment to reflect on what happens, what is expected, and what needs to be focused on in each season. I also urge you to prepare for and respect the winter of each project by giving yourself time and space to let it all sink in by resting, reflecting, and letting yourself let go. It is only by making sure we have space in our lives that we invite new things in, and start a sort of spring all over again.



**Aubrey Faith-Slaker**, a Chicago-based Suzuki piano teacher trainer who began her Suzuki studies at the age of four, is MTNA certified with a BM and a MM both in piano performance and pedagogy from the University of Illinois and Southern Methodist University. She has maintained studios in Texas, Wyoming, Colorado, and Mexico giving teaching in both English and Spanish. Aubrey is a Royal Conservatory of Music founding teacher in the US with her students participating in regular assessments, festivals, and competitions. Aubrey mentors new teachers in pedagogical and business practices, presents locally and at teaching conferences, and is a Suzuki Piano Pedagogy instructor at Roosevelt University. Having studied Music Therapy in grad school, Aubrey continues researching and exploring music as a means of healing. Aubrey travels between Chicago and Oaxaca, Mexico bringing her Suzuki experience to new teachers and families while continuing to be amazed at everything there is to learn.

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