

It's ^{all} ~~None~~ of Your Business

Think Outside The Home: Teaching Options And Opportunities Part 2: Online...And Onward

A student moves out of state or to a rural area.

A parent's job takes the family away for a year.

A student has an extended illness.

These situations typically lead to the loss of students in our studio. Sometimes the student quits music lessons entirely. Teachers also face these situations and give up cherished students. Are online lessons a viable solution?

Businesses are constantly evaluating different ways to get their product to the consumer. Besides the traditional retail store, a product might be offered at a kiosk in the mall, in a catalog, on a webpage or on consignment.

If we define our product as "a high quality music education" and not "a home studio experience," then our product is not limited to *where* it is offered. Our product may need a bit of redesign and adaptation, but remains a valued product.

I interviewed several teachers about online lessons using video conferencing or video chat software (mostly *Skype* or *FaceTime*). Most teachers/students were utilizing common, easy-to-use equipment—laptops or iPads with built-in or portable web cams.

Melissa Willis

When Willis moved to a new state, she was unable to adequately place all of her students. She says, "I took a 'leap in the dark'—*Skype* lessons were the only option to keep them playing." Three years later, most have graduated, but two are still doing online lessons with her. She also does *Skype* lessons with an adult student who winters in a warmer location.

Willis shares some of the challenges: There are several things that are obviously "easier" to teach in person—pedaling, different touches on the keys. I find myself wanting to "reach through the screen." Hearing nuance of sound/touch is also difficult. I drove back to Iowa a year after leaving and wasn't sure exactly what I was

going to hear. They all sounded better in person than they did on the computer.... I'm a teacher who writes a lot in my students' music; I miss doing this and have to explain to them what to write; this makes them more independent, but takes extra time.... I also use manipulatives and games in lessons, especially with elementary students. It is frustrating not being able to "grab something off the shelf" to teach a new concept or help a struggling student.

Advance planning is essential. "I can't simply lend students my copy of a piece until their copy arrives.... This is particularly challenging when I'm playing several selections and allowing a student to choose; they have to wait to get their music, which takes away a bit from the enthusiasm of getting started on the new piece."

Christie Sowby

When Sowby learned her husband was accepted to graduate school in Boston, she found an ingenious way to keep her Utah studio running for a year. Students went to her parents' home for lessons; she hired her brother as "studio manager." He kept the studio clean, set up the equipment and greeted students. Some students took lessons from their homes, using laptops propped on chairs. The time

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Melissa Willis, left, teaches a lesson via Skype; and Ryan Greene, below, teaches a student online.



Ryan Greene

Greene teaches an elementary student in rural South Dakota entirely online. He uses a laptop with a web cam on a USB cable. This allows him to move the web cam around so the student can see close-up views of his keyboard and hands. And because Greene travels during the semester, he can teach his online student from any location that has an Internet connection.

Utilizing basic technology that most students already own, online lessons are a current reality and viable business alternative to traditional home lessons. The teachers in this column have thriving in-person studios; online lessons have enhanced their studios—allowing their product to reach consumers in a different manner...and allowing students access to lessons when they might have quit. ■

To be continued in next column (August/September 2014): How do teachers handle billing and studio policies for their online students? Do the pros outweigh the cons? Advice for getting started...

zone difference meant some students could have lessons at more desirable times. When two students moved to Taiwan, no problem—she taught in the morning in Boston, while her Taiwan students had evening lessons.

A key factor in Sowby's success was advance preparation. Prior to the move, she acquired equipment (two iPads attached to mic stands using iKlips; iPads connected via *FaceTime*). She did "trial" online lessons—15 minutes online from separate rooms in her studio, then the rest of the lesson in person. She increased the online time each week until reaching a full online lesson.

Another important aspect was monthly master classes by a professional teacher Sowby hired. She also made it back to Utah three times during the year and held live lessons. Sowby comments on the growth of her students:

They learned how to describe music and form better because they were looking at the music more and had to make sense of it without me pointing. They learned to listen for themselves—including sensitive pedaling, articulated notes and shaped phrases. I was always asking them questions to make sure they were doing what they needed to—and they learned how to do it on their own.

For assignments and notes, she typed during lessons and sent e-mails to her Utah printer or the student's mobile device.

Sowby reports that 90 percent of her studio stayed with her. She even started a new student solely online. "You have to know what students should look, sound and be like when at the piano—even when you're not there in person." (Read more about Sowby's experience at <http://the-teachingstudio.blogspot.com/>.)

Rebecca Baker

When horrendous January weather threatened to disrupt lessons for weeks, Baker offered online lessons to her current students. She was surprised by how many families accepted the offer. For parent and teacher, this was a positive alternative to multiple make-up lessons. She quickly realized she would need a policy for when families could request an online lesson to prevent parents from taking advantage of the option. She also realized there were other situations where online lessons would be mutually beneficial; for example, when a parent wants to bring a child with head lice to a lesson rather than forfeit the lesson (yikes!).