

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

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

Editor's Note: This is the third installment of a series of columns exploring various teaching options.

"Not good for students." "Will never be a part of *my* studio."

These are phrases I heard in the 1980s when electronic keyboard sales exploded. I remember their passionate rejection by many teachers. Thirty-five years later, keyboards have not eliminated traditional teaching on acoustic instruments, but have made lessons (and practice) more accessible, re-invigorated group teaching and broadened our market.

In the previous column (April/May 2014) we met four independent teachers who were supplementing their existing studios with online lessons:

- To provide transition when the teacher moved
- To continue lessons while the teacher was living temporarily out of state

Karen Thickstun, NCTM, teaches piano pedagogy at Butler University, directs the Butler Community Arts School and maintains an independent studio in Nashville, Indiana. In addition to music degrees, she has degrees in economics and business. She is MTNA Secretary-Treasurer for 2013–15.



Carolmae Katz teaches a young student via computer.

- To continue lessons during winter weather

- To provide access to a rural area

These teachers did not seek online teaching as a new revenue stream. They simply wanted to keep students playing, maintain relationships and provide superior customer service. As young teachers, they were comfortable with the technology; but online teaching is available to all.

Holly Jones

Jones recently moved to New Zealand after teaching in the United States for 17 years. Online lessons have not changed her teaching methods. She still teaches a monthly group class where the students meet together at one home, and students still enter festivals/competitions and give solo recitals. Students e-mail their theory assignments before the lesson; Jones e-mails assignments after each lesson. She still

teaches technique, sight-reading, theory and repertoire—"with fewer words and a lot of demonstration."

Her own children, ages 8 and 14, take online lessons and monthly master classes from a stateside teacher, continuing their progress without interruption despite the relocation to a rural area. Before moving, Jones observed her first online lesson taught by her children's teacher. She comments,

I'll probably never forget that first online lesson I observed and my mixed emotions at the time...on the one hand, appalled by the remoteness of the student on the screen...but on the other side, amazed at how well the 9-year-old student was playing, how cheerful she was, how motivated she was to practice, and her enthusiasm during the lesson.

Carolmae Katz

Katz has been teaching children and adults for more than 40 years. She added online teaching to her studio to create more flexibility for travel. She started with existing students who were "computer savvy." It worked so well she made online lessons an ongoing option. Even students who live within driving distance are choosing online lessons rather than fighting traffic.

Her learning curve was hands-on. She began by attending MTNA conference sessions related to online teaching. She bought equipment to get a few students started. Then she learned to build her own website and customized it for promoting online lessons. I like how clearly her website explains the equipment needed and what to expect (www.piano-lessons-live-online.com/equipment.html).

Katz now has more students online than in her local studio. When she travels, she teaches lessons as usual by staying at locations with a piano or renting a keyboard.

Pros And Cons

Based on input from teachers I interviewed, I compiled a list of pros and cons of online teaching. What strikes me is that online teaching requires little change in a traditional studio's procedures.

Pros And Cons Of Online Teaching

Pros

- No travel for teacher or student. No waiting area, parking or zoning issues.
- Can teach students in any geographic area, including rural areas and different time zones.
- Keeps lessons going during transitions when teacher or student moves, extended illness or bad weather.
- Builds student independence.
- Teacher becomes more articulate and demonstrative in teaching style.
- Exceptional teachers available to a wider audience.

Cons

- Must develop technical knowledge and comfort with equipment.
- Not the same experience (duets, games, peer interaction) or personal connection as home studio.
- Must adapt teaching style to explain concepts with visual demonstration and verbal explanations.
- May not cover as much material in the same amount of time; corrections must be verbal or visual and not while student is playing.
- Technical issues (connection issues during storm, power outage, sound delay due to slow Internet speed).
- Additional preparation (set-up time at beginning of lesson, plan ahead for new music).
- Family may perceive online lessons to be more "casual" and not take lessons as seriously.



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Business aspects remained essentially the same. Teachers used various payment methods—the parent sending a check to the teacher or directly to the bank or a third-party billing service. In-home lessons and online lessons were treated the same; rates and procedures were not adjusted. Studio policies included a few additions for online students—specifying minimum equipment, attendance policy requiring presence of parent and parameters for when online lessons can take the place of a traditional lesson.

All teachers reported a learning curve with the technology and a need to adapt their teaching style. But they also reported that their teaching improved! Their advice on getting started:

“For those with an existing studio, teaching online lessons is a valuable skill that adds convenience for teachers and students alike. One of the easiest ways to get started is to offer an online lesson as an alternative to cancelling a student’s lesson,” said Ryan Greene.

“You will never know unless you actually do it and try it several times.... It can be equal to ‘in person’ teaching if you want it to be. It comes down to positive attitude,” said Christie Sowby.

“Be sure a parent is present for younger students. The parent becomes the ‘in-person’ helper. Allow for extra preparation with new music and have clear attendance/payment policies in place, just as a ‘regular’ studio,” said Melissa Willis.

“It is a very rewarding experience! Meeting and teaching people from other places is quite enjoyable. Begin slowly to learn the technology because you will find students who depend on you not only to teach piano but to learn the technology involved,” said Carolmae Katz.

Online teaching can deliver a valued product, albeit in a different way and with the potential to reach new and diverse customers. Onward to a more musical tomorrow!

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