

Lesson planning: friend or foe?

In the following extract from his book, The Virtuoso Teacher, Paul Harris presents his lesson plan for the 21st century.

The lesson is the Virtuoso Teacher's 'instrument'. And like the performer's instrument, it's a medium through which music flows.

Just as virtuoso performers constantly develop and refine their instrumental technique, so too can Virtuoso Teachers. A lesson is like a performance. Indeed a lesson is a performance. And we can continually aspire to give better and better lessons so that each one leaves both pupil(s) and teacher inspired, invigorated and mentally energised. (Yes, I'm serious. Even if we've given out loads of energy, we can still feel energised after some really lively teaching – we might feel physically exhausted but that's another thing!)

Lessons really do come in all shapes and sizes. They can take the form of a voyage of musical discovery and encounter, as pupil and teacher make one connection after another through seamless and varied activities in a boundless creative world. Or they may concentrate solely (but imaginatively) on a very precise technical issue. They might be full of instructions and highly structured, or they might simply be two (or more) people working together exploring and developing their shared enthusiasms.

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Lesson planning, in individual and smaller group lessons, became very popular around the turn of the century. It was felt too many teachers were following too narrow a curriculum, just teaching the instrument and a small number of pieces, with many of the 'other' areas of music education simply not being addressed. Teachers were not developing the 'whole musician'. But sticking to the plan had a down side – teachers became so concerned with staying on course (their bosses required it) that when the flow of a lesson seemed to be moving in a different direction, they found themselves uncertain in which direction to go. The natural flow of the lesson and the plan were often at odds.

This is true in so many different areas of teaching. Teachers and teaching organisations often put a lot of effort into planning: short term (the lesson itself), medium term (a school or college term) and long term (perhaps a year). Whilst there is no doubt that planning *in general terms* is a sound idea, it's important to develop lesson plans that are flexible and easily adaptable to the ever-changing needs and responses of our pupils. You can plan the teaching but you can't predict the learning, so the teaching plan (and the teacher) must always be flexible enough to go with the flow.

Lesson plans for the 21st century

Most good stories, films, TV programmes and, of course, pieces of music have a simple structure: they have a beginning, a middle and an end. So too do effective lessons.



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1 Warm-ups

We begin the lesson without any music *books*. It's a bit of a nuisance really that we use the word 'music' ('get out your music') to denote all those various written materials – from tutors and technical manuals to pieces of all shapes and sizes. For although we're going to begin without *books of music*, we're certainly not going to begin without lots of *music*!

So we start with some physical and mental warm-ups. These must be purposeful, not just time fillers. Removing as much tension as possible, in both mind and body, is the main aim. We'll all have our favourite exercises. Make a habit of always beginning lessons this way. Perhaps, for younger pupils, we might move on to some pulse games and then some sequential aural-based musicianship activities. The important factor is that the warm-ups are connected both to practised work and to new material to be introduced later. Explore ingredients. *Be musical*. Most importantly, make every activity one that pupils *will achieve with reasonable ease*.

2 The development section

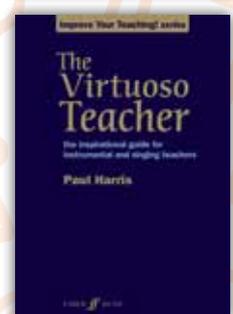
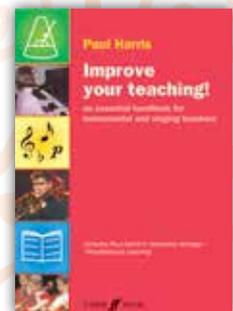
Here, taking these ingredients, we explore the piece further, experimenting, developing specific skills and musicianship and imparting appropriate knowledge and values, sometimes with, sometimes without the notation. We can use the Simultaneous Learning process at either end of its sliding scale: simply moving organically from one related musical area to another, or working in more detail. This again flows seamlessly into ...

3 The recapitulation

Here we ensure that what we have been teaching has been understood – through gentle questioning and applying what we've been working at in different contexts – but not through explicit testing! We also make sure pupils know what they are to do in their practice (the coda), though ideally this is alluded to continually throughout the lesson.

This more 'organic' and natural flowing lesson is rooted in the concept of Simultaneous Learning, which automatically gives pupils a very holistic form of music education. Any further detailed planning is virtually unnecessary as Simultaneous Learning generates its own lesson plan as you go along.

For further information about Paul Harris's Simultaneous Learning approach, read Improve Your Teaching and The Virtuoso Teacher, published by Faber Music.



Paul Harris has established an international reputation as one of the UK's leading educationalists. As composer and writer he has over six hundred publications to his name, and is in great demand as a workshop leader and adjudicator around the world. Paul's innovative teaching techniques, especially his concept of Simultaneous Learning, have found support all over the world and combine thoroughness, imagination and practicality; the defining qualities of his outstandingly successful work.

This extract was taken from Paul Harris's *The Virtuoso Teacher*, first published by Faber Music in 2012.

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