

Group Piano Teaching: An Interactive and Experiential Approach

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This paper aims to discuss the advantages of students learning in groups and the musical skills and emotional experiences which serve as a vehicle for lifelong music learning. It outlines the role of the group teacher and suggests methods and philosophy of effective group teaching. There is also some reference to the importance of effective parental involvement and good interpersonal relationships.

Introduction

Group piano education offers many advantages for both the teacher and the student. It is an efficient use of time as it allows several students to learn at once, even if they will not get the full immersion available in individual teaching. Apart from the musical benefits of group environment, it provides a platform for students to exercise their independent thinking abilities and improve social interaction, positive attitudes, problem solving and emotional skills in the process of their music education.

Group instruction provides students with an understanding of how their problems compare with those of other students and gives them an opportunity to explore alternative solutions suggested by their peers. Students in the group develop insights into different ways of playing a piece by hearing it played not only by a teacher but also by different students. Some students may feel inspired by the teacher's playing, but also may find it daunting. In fact, active listening is necessary in developing a student's musicianship.

The importance of listening to the performances of others should not be ignored. Winters (1986) argued that listening can develop in students the ability to relate sounds to symbols. Flowers (1990) and Zerull (1992) discussed various ways to enhance active listening. They pointed out that, when the ability to perceive the aesthetic components inherent in the music is increased, the musical knowledge and musical concepts will improve on the whole. From this perspective, active listening is necessary in developing a student's musicianship; hence it is an essential component of the music teaching curriculum.

In individual instruction the excitement of learning from other piano students can be lost. Unless students are given opportunities to perform with other students, they learn not from their peers but through imitation of a teacher who performs better than they do. While some students will find this inspiring, others may find it daunting.

Group piano lessons can be an ideal setting to enhance desirable behaviors for the development of the best possible social and emotional skills. Music experiences and discipline can be designed to develop and enhance the student's EQ (emotional quotient). According to McClung (2000), self-acceptance is an emotional intelligence skill that

teaches us to define ourselves in a positive light, to identify personal weaknesses and strengths and even laugh at ourselves when appropriate. Group teaching embraces these and some other emotional skills which are crucial to the musical success and learning of each individual, such as: managing feelings such as fear, anxiety, anger and sadness; handling stress: building group dynamics by learning when and how to lead and follow: resolving conflicts; and being responsible for one's actions and commitments.

Group lessons encourage active participation of each individual to reap the full benefits of his or her musical learning. Hoffer (1991) argued that by going through the effort of learning their parts in a piece of music, students will understand a musical work much more thoroughly than students who only listen to it. "Social loafing" occurs when individuals within the group feel that their contributions are no longer important or needed and their lack of effort can go unnoticed. Individual checking is necessary to prevent this (Gumm, 2003); however as Stocker (1981) points out, group dynamics help to solve the dilemma.

Making lessons effective

Lessons should be stimulating and effective, creating opportunities for experiential music learning. How can musical concepts be presented in a creative way and provide a stimulating and meaningful experience for the child?

Teachers are responsible for creating an atmosphere of enthusiasm, fostering good relationships among students, developing a well-structured curriculum and using creative ideas and teaching methods to present musical concepts in an interesting way. Advance planning of the content and structure of the lesson is necessary. It helps in the delivery and the flow of the lesson and maintains the level of interest and stimulation in the class. Organization and management skills are particularly important in group teaching.

The Model of Teaching which is favoured here is to impart music literacy through providing stimulating and interesting lessons, imparting the facility and knowledge without which it is impossible to perform with insight. It is important for the teacher to use varied teaching methods to introduce a musical concept or piece of music. Some teachers find they can make group piano lessons more stimulating by thinking of creative approaches and trying to deliver an interesting curriculum.

The Parallel Approach is the transfer of existing concepts to a different situation. In this approach, the teacher avoids having to repeat the same explanation, instead encouraging the student to using similar fingering in scales, broken chords and pieces with scale passages as well as in sequential passages. Such transfer of music concepts promotes independence and responsibility. In this respect, the teacher takes on the role of facilitator.

However parental involvement which includes stimulating and supporting practice is vital to a child's music education. Davidson (1995) argued that parental commitment to

assisting, encouraging and supporting the child in the early stages of learning was a more important predictor of successful outcome than any specialist knowledge on the parent's part. In this way, parent, teacher and students work cooperatively with close agreement with the respect to objectives and outcomes of education (Creech and Hallam, 2003).

Partnership and developing a good relationship with parents are so essential in support student's learning. It is, however important to ensure that the parent has a good understanding of the progress of their child, teacher's instructions and materials taught, and also takes an interest in their child's music development.

Absence can cause problems in group lessons, as the entire group cannot be rescheduled to accommodate individual students. Therefore there must be commitment on the student's part to attend lessons regularly (Skaggs, 1981). Parents should be encouraged to help students keep this commitment.

Principles of Group Piano Teaching

By being interactive, group teaching employs some teaching skills, approaches and methods which are different from those used in individual instruction. What are some of them?

Effective group teaching requires a good understanding of how to use group dynamics and cooperative learning in an engaging way in a well-structured music curriculum. Group dynamics involve interaction and through student's participation in activities which help them learn, discover and explore new music concepts. Cooperative learning encourages students to learn by working together.

For some students, peer pressure plays an important role in shaping the attitude and perspectives towards learning and practicing (Johnson, 1991). As a result of the interest generated by group discussions, students are stimulated to develop not only their musicality, but also their social interaction and cooperation among their peers. (Chronister, 1976).

Some basic teaching concepts such as receptive and discovery learning must be understood. Receptive learning relies on the teacher providing the facts. The amount of information and sequences is directly controlled by the teacher. (Burkett, 1982) This is a fast way of relaying information to the student, but it restricts freedom to think creatively and independently, as the input of information depends largely on the teacher's knowledge. In the beginning stages of teaching, a receptive way of learning is very appropriate, as students require correct musical instruction to give them a sense of direction and understanding. New concepts can be effectively introduced by using this method.

Discovery learning is based on responses to the material being presented. (Burkett, 1982) This manner of instruction develops the thought processes of students, as it encourages them to discover solutions to problems through independent thinking. Through

participation in activities and discussions, the discovery approach opens up a range of possibilities and refreshing ideas unknown to the students. Intentional mistakes, for example, drawing a bar that does not have the right number of counts among other bars, can be used as a teaching tool to stimulate and challenge them to think, exercising their musical knowledge to solve problems (Foo, 2005). However students need to be taught the necessary musical concepts, through receptive instructions, before using the discovery approach.

In group teaching, the teacher assumes a leadership role and management skills. The teacher must be sensitive to the development of any tension or hostility arises during lesson, which may hinder the learning process. Unresolved conflicts will hinder the progress of the entire class. The teacher must maintain control through effective leadership and encourage cooperation that involves every group member in a productive sharing of authority. The environment will then be conducive to students performing for one another and receiving constructive criticism from their peers and the teacher. Such opportunities in class performance can build confidence and character in the student.

Lifelong learning-essential skills developed through music lessons

What are some of the lifelong lessons that can be learnt in music education?

In 2003, MTNA identified some of the essential skills for promoting a lifelong love of music and music making (Payne, 2005). They include:

- Ability to internalize basic rhythms and pulse
- Ability to read- musical literacy
- Ability to hear the notes on the page
- Ability to work creatively – improvise, compose, harmonize and play by ear
- Ability to understand basic elements of theory, form and harmony, etc.
- Ability to respond to the interpretative elements of the composition to express the emotional character of the music
- Ability to conceptualize and transfer musical ideas
- Ability to work independently and to problem-solve
- Ability to perform comfortably individually and with others in a variety of settings

Good teaching strategies provide and inculcate lifelong learning skills in students by helping them to listen, concentrate, be responsible, transfer musical concepts, solve problems, exert self-control, handle disappointments and develop emotional skills, As a result of effective teaching techniques, students are likely to move from dependence to independence, developing skills needed for nurturing a lifelong learning of music.

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