
Finding the Perfect Pace:

Tips for Teaching with Beginning Piano Methods

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In this webinar, Sara Ernst will present best practices for developing motivated and confident young pianists in the first years of lessons. The pedagogical principles discussed will aid teachers in individualizing a course of study to the young learner.

Pedagogical Principles

Intrinsic and extrinsic motivation: *I want to play piano.* Method books provide children with a feeling of progress and success. Students enjoy the increasing difficulty and feeling of accomplishment when completing pieces and levels. They also enjoy playing the music and the fun activities.

Self-efficacy: *I can practice!* Students are most inclined to complete piano assignments when they feel prepared and ready, knowing what and how to practice. Uncertainty and confusion can lead to fear of failure and an inability or lack of desire to practice. As Richard Chronister wrote: “a student cannot practice what he does not know. A young student does not practice in order to learn. He practices to solidify and to give himself facility with what he already knows.” (p. 26)

A rich environment: *I enjoy learning and playing.* The role of the teacher is to provide a lesson environment that is full of enjoyable, musical, and artistic activities that prepare learning and practice. The teacher guides the student’s experiences, new concepts and skills over time, with an acute awareness of when a student has generalized prior learning and is ready for the next concept.

Preparation-Presentation-Association, Chronister’s Stages of Learning

Preparation for new learning occurs during the lesson, is guided by the teacher, and is crucial for a student’s later success, motivation, and confidence. Preparation is described by Chronister:

“The first stage in nature’s teaching is to place the new learning reasonably and naturally into the student’s environment . . . without any need for remembering, without any fear for forgetting.” (p. 33)

“We continue guiding each step, allowing the student to do everything along with us. We take no chances on incorrect experiences. . . . If the student has had the correct experience once, he has begun to *learn*. As a result of several lessons, he will *know*. . . . He will know because he absorbed the learning naturally.” (p. 39)

Once the teacher observes that correct responses are engrained in the student, the teacher can formally present the concept in the method book. With continued placement of the new learning in the lesson and practice routine, the student will associate the concept (it’s name, symbol, meaning, sound, technical approach), and it becomes fully known.

The Zone of Proximal Development, Vygotsky

Teachers expand a student’s learning by moving just beyond the student’s current place in the curriculum. Prior learning, or what is known, expands into what is unknown, and during this time, the student relies on the greater capabilities of the teacher. As Kennell defined in his article on music instruction:

“The Zone of Proximal Development was conceived by Vygotsky as the area just beyond the student’s existing capabilities. It is a region that becomes accessible to the student only through the assistance of a more competent teacher.” (Kennell, pp. 7-8)

In-Lesson Experiences to Guide the Student and Inform the Teacher

To lead the student into a new “zone,” the teacher uses a sequence of guided activities over multiple weeks. The teacher is continually reducing the amount and type of guidance, assessing the student’s understanding of the new material, until the student demonstrates success, ease, and confidence. Only then is the student ready to learn music with this new concept and to practice it independently.

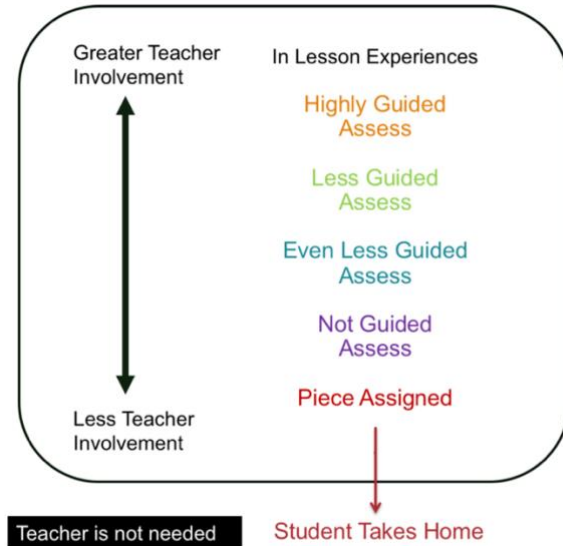
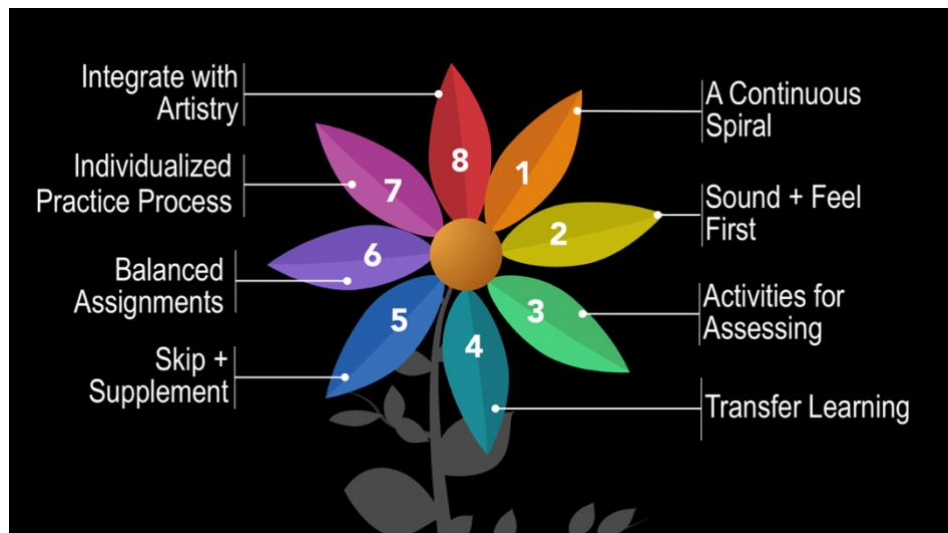


Diagram modeled from Kennell, Figure 4, p. 10.

8 Tips for Using Beginning Method Books



1. A Continuous Spiral

Using any method series, a teacher can create a master list that outlines conceptual growth of the major curricular elements including: rhythm, reading, technique, musicianship, and theory. This can be used as a reference guide in lesson planning, to orient the teaching to preparation of upcoming concepts. The

teacher can move through the preparation and presentation of the material based upon the learner's mastery of new concepts. When ease and confidence is apparent during the presentation stage, the student can be presented to pieces from the method book. Once association is evident, the teacher can begin preparing the next unknown during the lesson. Mini-drills, such as those listed below, use a limited amount of lesson time, but yield significant results if done every week:

- Reading flashes (short sight-reading activities)
- Staff flash cards or apps, magnet boards, drawing notes on staff paper
- Pre-made rhythm cards
- Drawing and creating rhythms
- Keyboard theory through warm-ups

2. Sound and Feel First

The core of the curriculum is playing the piano, specifically music and performance, and hence any unknown concept should begin with an introduction to its sound and how it feels. Symbols and names are easy to understand as a representation of a familiar sound and feel, which results from preparation activities. New technical skills, theoretical concepts, rhythms, and staff principles can all be learned initially through aural and kinesthetic experiences that do not rely on reading notation. When an ease in aural response is evident, symbols, definitions, and names, can be introduced. When a physical ease is evident in new techniques, pieces (to be read) from the method can be assigned. A regular use of the activities below ensure the lesson is filled with learning through music and performance:

- Rhythm, call and response, in sequence over several weeks: exact imitation (clapping, drumming, chanting), improvised imitation, exact imitation with counting provided by teacher (syllabic), exact or improvised imitation with counting provided by student
- Single-hand or sung melodies, call and response: exact imitation, improvised imitation
- Improvisation over a teacher's accompaniment
- Rote warm-ups and repertoire to prepare and learn new techniques

3. Activities for Assessing

The goal is for the student to fully associate the new learning, being able to use it beyond the original activities and pieces in which it was presented. The teacher can assess the progress; can the student accurately respond to the to the new learning, in a different context, without my assistance? If not, the teacher needs to return to preparation-based activities. A student's successful, independent use of the new learning in the musical activities below, is a good indication of association:

- On-own or self-study pieces (optional pieces in the method book, see #5)
- Sight reading
- Ear training, especially dictation

4. Transfer Learning

Through use of questions, teachers can guide students to transfer their learning to subsequent method and non-method pieces. By using repertoire from outside of the method series by different composers, the student is provided with even greater potential to solidify learning through experiencing various contexts and musical styles. Furthermore, teachers can augment the material presented in the method by having students learn technical patterns in all keys and by including skills such as harmonization and transposition. Composition projects can be tailored to transfer new learning into playing, listening, and writing, and this yields a strong potential for generalization.

5. Skip and Supplement

Most method books are filled with more material than students need—especially those who practice consistently. In order to skip and supplement effectively, the teacher can determine the priority of each piece within the method as essential, optional, or challenge, or mark as an alternative needed. The child who moves through presentation stages quickly may only need essential pieces. The child who takes longer with concepts may not be ready to approach the challenge pieces. This also provides a framework to supplement music with purpose, swapping out pieces from the method with music the child would particularly enjoy (such as holiday, popular, movie music).

6. Balanced Assignments

The habit of giving formal, written assignments is important for student and teacher. Preparing the assignment in advance is the time for the teacher to strategize how to use the pieces in the method in relation to the preparation of concepts and skills. For the student, the assignment can clarify what needs to be practiced at home. A practice check-off can help the child and teacher see the routine and home progress. A balanced assignment includes:

- Warm-ups and Technique
- New music: Prepared and Self-study (although not weekly)
- Review music with goals for artistry
- Performance pieces
- Writing and Activities (improvisation, sight-reading, composition)

7. Individualized Practice Process

While the assignment may clarify what to practice, students need to know how to practice. Providing young beginners with a learning process that evolves over time, will yield confident learners. These steps can be tailored to the individual, considering factors of personality, and strengths and weaknesses. Some students are eager to play and do not fear mistakes, whereas others may be more cautious. Some may need specific steps, yet others can assimilate multiple steps into one. Using these steps every lesson will help the child develop a process for independent learning, which can transfer nicely to self-study pieces.

8. Integrate with Artistry

It is of paramount importance that the lesson is filled with artistic sound, from speaking rhythmic drills with musical inflection to playing all warm-ups with beautiful tone. All method pieces must be modeled by the teacher, demonstrating artistry at the piano with frequency. Part of the student's "zone" is the different ability in artistic sound from teacher to student. Every presentation of a new piece must incorporate basic musicality (dynamics and articulation) from the first lesson. The goal of review pieces is to expand artistic ideas (phrasing, tone, touch), and with performance pieces, students can be encouraged to even higher potentials.

References

- Chronister, Richard. *A Piano Teacher's Legacy*. Ed. by Edward Darling. Kingston, NJ: The Frances Clark Center for Keyboard Pedagogy, 2005.
- Kennell, Richard. "Toward a Theory of Applied Music Instruction." *The Quarterly* 3, no. 2 (Summer, 1992): 5-16. Reprinted in and retrieved from *Visions of Research in Music Education* 16, no. 3 (Autumn, 2010), <http://www-usr.rider.edu/~vrme/v16n1/volume3>.