

I have encountered numerous situations where the first step for many music teachers is to reach for the exam book or syllabus as a teaching tool. Although exams are motivating, the exam syllabus is only part of the picture and should not be the only focus in lessons (see blog post [are music exams problematic](#)). It is often difficult for teachers to break this routine due to what has become a 'tried-and-tested' way of teaching; notwithstanding the difficulty in teaching when there is much misinformation about what learning music requires, demands from parents and students, and time and money constraints to name but a few. If you do go down the exam route, as many do, there is still plenty of scope to teach around the syllabus while covering it, and to develop your student's musical ability.

Although people teach music for various reasons, some things are important for every teacher to consider across the board. This document is intended to offer a brief guide to those new to teaching music or those thinking about teaching music.

1. What is your teaching philosophy?

A teaching philosophy focuses you on and reminds you why exactly it is you are teaching, what it is you are setting out to achieve through teaching, and how to go about it. Whether or not you make this available to your students, it is still important to have one. By creating a teaching philosophy, you reflect on and consider your beliefs about and approach to teaching, which will help you structure your lessons as well as assist you in any conversation you may have with students and/or their parents, where applicable.

2. Have a conversation: do you and your student's expectations match?

If you expect your student to practise every single week and make progress, but your student expects to turn up to have chats in the lesson and only then to do work, both of you may come to dislike the lessons. Having a conversation either before or during your first lesson is crucial in order to establish expectations (see guidelines on creating your own formal or informal [questionnaire](#) to facilitate this discussion).

While we may think certain things are obvious (practising to make progress for example), this is not necessarily the case; some things need to be explicitly stated or demonstrated. Clear communication at all times is important. Think of it in terms of going to a nutritionist, a financial adviser, or a personal trainer; their services are generally employed because the customer has a specific focus. Depending on that focus, their plans and expertise will be adjusted to suit the customer's needs. Without a conversation to establish expectations or goals, there would be an element of guess work on both parties' behalf, with little sense of how to achieve to achieve them, leading to confusion, and frustration.

3. Remember: each student is different!

When you are new to teaching, it is easy to have a plan or approach that ends up being the **plan** or approach for every student. Remember that each student will be different in terms of learning ability, interests, engagement, age, background etc. Create a plan to match the

student's needs; don't expect the student to match your plan. Also, take into consideration your student's personality, their strengths, and their weaknesses. You are not just teaching music: you are teaching music to a person.

4. Assess what they already know

Every student will have some awareness of music, be it clapping back a rhythm, tapping their foot to a pulse, singing back a note, showing awareness of the direction and shape of music, whatever it is, there will be something they know about music. It's important to tap into this knowledge and use it as the starting point to build and develop rather than to assume that they are starting from zero or letting students feel like they are starting from zero.

5. Develop the fundamentals

I have found that many teachers focus first and foremost on pieces of music that are on an exam syllabus. Although pieces carry the majority of marks, aim to think of them as the place where all aspects of music come together. For example, aural, theory, pulse, rhythm, tempo, coordination, sight-reading, note reading, an understanding of the character, style, history, technique, improvisation: they are all present in some shape or form in the pieces.

Aim to work on each of these groups, while connecting the dots between them. For example, when playing scales, you can work on coordination, rhythm, pulse, tempo, theory, dynamics, touch, and improvisation. When practising sight-reading, think of the key, spot scale-like patterns, consider the pulse, rhythm, touch, dynamics. Use the time signature in sight-reading as a starting point to explore that pulse further, explore the rhythms, include dictation using the same key and time signature of the piece, play spot-the-difference games where the student looks at the music and you make changes to it. When you get to the exam pieces then, your student will be in a strong position to consider it from many angles and not just as notes on the page to be learned.

6. Teach how to practise

It's tempting to say, 'go home and practise that for next week', but students need to learn how to practise. This is best achieved by including/referring to practise in lessons. For example, if working on developing rhythm, you could talk through the approach, demonstrate it, do it together, while explaining that the same approach should be taken during practise at home. Students should have a notebook or a plan that you also work on together every week. Depending on the student, this may include asking them to keep a practice diary where they reflect on tasks, challenges, and how they were overcome. This way the student is deliberately practising rather than passively going through the motions. Students of mine who have engaged in practice in this manner have developed their concentration, as well as their motivation – they see that it leads to progress – and it has helped them to take ownership of their musical development.