

Online Music Lessons

Action Research – Follow Up – Teaching and Learning

A study of teaching and learning in online music lessons



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Introduction

This document brings together reflections from the Southampton Music Services Instrumental Teaching Team, captured at our virtual training day in June 2020.

As we have progressed further down the path of delivering music lessons online, their reflective and adaptive practice has seen them carefully considering how their teaching strategies must change to reflect the online learning environment.

Each time we teach, we must decide what can be done the same, what must be adapted, what new things can be done, and what needs to be set to one side.

We have focussed our reflections on six key areas, not because they represent the entirety of what happens in a music lesson – because that is an impossible ask – but because by focussing on these areas, we hope to deepen our understanding of some of the key activities that go in to a successful online music lesson.

Our hope is that, by capturing our work in progress, we can help others to think

We continue to learn together.

Matt Brombley
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Key Findings

1. **Adapting physical and face-to-face activities and resources to meet the needs of the online learning environment**
 - a. Finding digital equivalents (for example, PDF or other digital scores)
 - b. Presenting by “screen sharing” rather than on a whiteboard or paper resources
 - c. Sending digital files and resources both ahead of, and after, lessons
2. **Finding new opportunities to perform and share**
 - a. Playing together in online lessons is still challenging, so alternative approaches need to be found for performing and sharing music, including:
 - i. Recording performances
 - ii. Performing to friends and family
 - iii. Muting one side of the “Meet”
 - b. These new performing opportunities also present new opportunities for feedback and reflection, particularly, for young musicians to self-reflect and self-evaluate
3. **Students are motivated to develop new skills, with a greater focus on student-led learning**
 - a. Some previously relied upon strategies are more difficult in the online learning environment, particularly those which require face-to-face contact, or synchronous interaction
 - b. Students are identifying musical skills they need to improve to be successful in this new environment
 - c. Students are relying more on their own assessment of their learning and music-making
4. **Music teachers are responding with teaching and learning strategies which support a more student-led approach**
 - a. Each music lesson is not the end of a musical journey, but the start of one: they are an opportunity to build on previous learning and support a further week of music-making and learning
 - b. Questioning is therefore more open ended, and encouraging young musicians to self-reflect and self-evaluate
 - c. Digital resources and repertoire can be used in a responsive rather than prescriptive way – supporting the individuality and creativity of each young musician



Context

In March 2020, the UK experienced significant changes to social contact as a result of the COVID-19 viral pandemic.

From the start of March, schools began to impose restrictions on visiting staff, including music teachers,

From Friday 20 March, schools were closed, except to provide care for children of key workers and vulnerable children.

From Monday 23 March onward, Southampton Music Hub began to provide instrumental and vocal music lessons online, via video chat.

In May 2020, Southampton Music Hub released an [evaluation report](#) into the first four weeks of setting up lessons.

This report follows on from that learning with a specific focus on teaching and learning within online lessons.

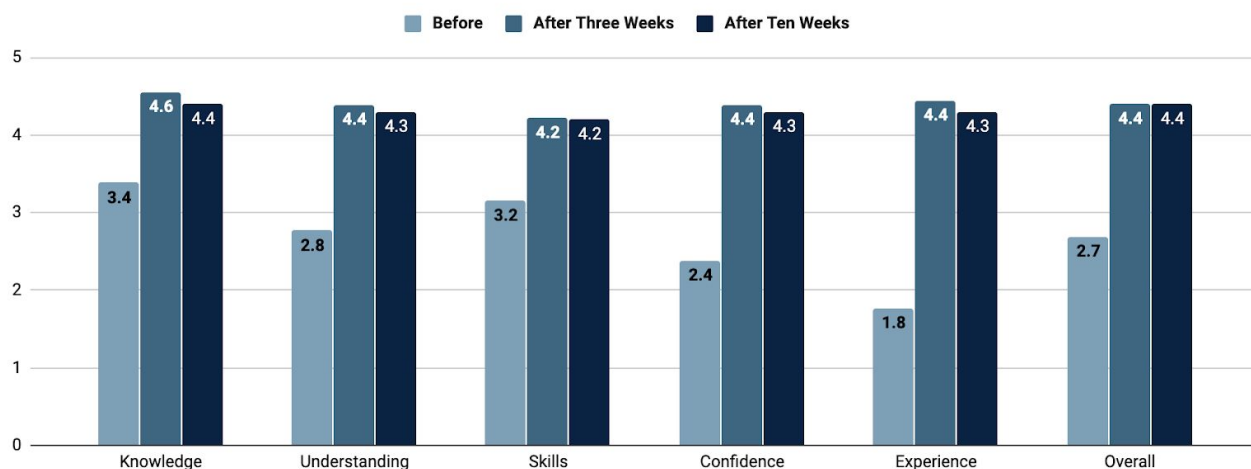


Teaching and Learning

Overall Impact on Staff Knowledge, Understanding, Skills, Confidence, and Experience

Staff were asked to self-report on whether they had the knowledge, understanding, skills, confidence and experience they needed to teach music lessons online, with 1 being “strongly disagree”, and 5 being “strongly agree”.

	Before	After Three Weeks	After Ten Weeks	Overall Change
Knowledge	3.4	4.6	4.4	1.0
Understanding	2.8	4.4	4.3	1.5
Skills	3.2	4.2	4.2	1.2
Confidence	2.4	4.4	4.3	2.1
Experience	1.8	4.4	4.3	2.6
Overall	2.7	4.4	4.4	-2.7



After ten weeks there are significant increases in all areas, with a small decrease in some areas between three and ten week. Whilst not statistically significant, this is something to watch over time, as staff experience expands, so may their awareness of gaps in their knowledge, understanding and skills.



Comments and examples

"I have become more confident with the online lessons and since the last evaluation have gained confidence to try out new techniques."

"My online teaching skills have improved because of the amount of lessons I am giving."

"Skills of teaching online have increased immensely; no longer nervous about pressing the Video Call button!"

"I have discovered elements of teaching that are more difficult online and have developed ways of coping with those difficulties."

"I have developed a range of resources and skills to work online"



Warm up activities

Warm up activities are not just about transitioning musically – warming up the relevant parts of the body for music-making – they are also about transitioning into a learning environment and the learning relationship. At their best, warm up activities are responsive to the whole person entering the lesson, not just their musical experience from the week gone by.

Examples of successful continuation of previous activities:

“Older pupils are responding well to the tradition of using scales to warm up.”

“Discuss what has gone well in their practice and building on that.”

“Keep routines, students often prefer a routine as they know what to expect and when.”

“A simple warm up which works well online is copycat: playing short 4 beat patterns using notes learnt and asking the pupil to copy. Then getting pupils to make up patterns for me to copy. This has had a positive impact as pupils really need to focus much more than they would if physically face to face.”

Examples of adapting previous activities:

“I am getting my students to self reflect and decide what they would like to improve on within their own playing and tailoring warm ups accordingly. They end up with a bank of warm ups which they can choose from and equally adapt themselves.”

“Some pupils may not have touched their instrument for the week, so we begin with their favourite note, they play it as beautifully as they can; progress to 3 notes. Then they choose 3 random notes and I look away whilst they play them. I have to copy back what they've played (sometimes this is embarrassingly tricky, but they think it's funny when I mess it up!). Then I play back to them, and sometimes they are allowed to look, or I help them with the first note and they figure out the rest. It's a fun game, and at least gets the instrument to their mouths, and increases their confidence too, before tackling any pieces.”

“Group warm-up activities becoming individual has meant that the shy students who would normally do the best to blend in have had to give the answers too and found that they are good at it! Also being on their own has allowed them to express themselves without feeling embarrassed.”

“The order I do things has changed slightly. I now often include the main teaching point as a warm-up so that it definitely gets done and it can take as long as it needs.”



"Because of the current difficult situation I always start the lesson by asking how things have gone in the last week. I try to ascertain the student's general sense of well-being so I know how to approach the lesson. If they are stressed or down, should we play a familiar piece that they enjoy to give them a sense of achievement and boost their mood, if they are feeling generally positive and up for a challenge, should we try something new, or more difficult."

"I do a lot more play and response. My main focus is just to get them playing and enjoying it."

"A better focus on rudimental playing has arisen due to the need to perform warm ups without teacher accompaniment."

Examples of new or emerging activities:

"Both myself and the student are able to both sit at a drum kit which wasn't possible before lockdown. Simple copying warm ups are now doable using the full kit rather than one drum each!"

"I have been teaching students how to tune their own guitar using an app on their own smartphone or tablet.. This may take a while at first, but that is ok, because it is a new skill, and once they can do it, they can tune their own guitar before the lesson, rather than having to start with this together."

Examples of continuing challenges:

"Tuning up a guitar by ear is hard – especially with latency."



Listening

Whilst variations in audio quality can add challenges to listening activities within the online in the lesson, the more direct connection between the teacher and the learning taking place at home can be built upon with links sent in the chat, or over email, and can see an increase in engagement with musical listening and learning between lessons.

Examples of successful continuation of previous activities:

"I play a phrase wrong and then play it again right and get them to identify what was wrong the first time, then play it again for them to copy."

Examples of adapting previous activities:

"I can also share my computer sound and help them listen in the lesson which sometimes isn't possible in a school setting due to internet restrictions etc."

"Pupils have to concentrate fully when listening, either to my live demonstration or recorded music, which is a positive. There are not the distractions online that there can be when they are face to face, particularly in a group. This has changed the way I ask questions to a degree as I have found that the "distance" of online means you need to be much more specific with what you are asking."

"It is extremely useful being able to share examples of music easily in order to expand my pupil's musical knowledge. I also have a few pupils taking digital exams this term and have been able to easily share the piano accompaniment with them from YouTube."

Examples of new or emerging activities:

"I email links to parent's of relevant performances of pieces for pupils to watch – it helps them learn the pieces much more quickly"

"Links to suggested listening are much more likely to be actioned."

"I have been making tutorial videos based on pieces I am currently teaching. I direct pupils to those for help with their learning; I have also videoed myself playing piano pieces and sent them to pupils' parents to aid their child's learning. Feedback for these has been extremely positive from parents, as it helps them support their young musician, and the progress has been clearly observed each week. One child came back and learned a piece in just a week, whereas it probably would've taken them longer before."



Examples of continuing challenges:

"Very little playing together, now we have to take turns. I demonstrate if necessary, then watch students try for themselves."

"Immediacy of delivery and feedback has reduced, often resulting in less of an impact of less comprehension."



Musical and Instrumental Development

Young musicians are taking greater ownership of their musical development. From instrument care and set up, to identifying specific musical skills that need to be developed, they are rounding out their musical development. Where in-person contact had previously allowed for teachers to quickly do things for their young musicians – tune a string, clap a steady beat, follow the notation with a finger – online, young musicians are having to do many of these things for themselves, and taking greater ownership of their learning as a result.

Examples of successful continuation of previous activities:

"I've been able to use many of the same instrumental activities as before."

"I have found that an overwhelming number of my pupils have been turning to music during this difficult time. As a result, I have seen a lot of my pupils flourish in their progression, more than they would have done if they were in school. They seem to be getting even more enjoyment from their playing too."

Examples of adapting previous activities:

"Some students have needed more assistance with pulse so it helps with rhythm. I found myself asking students to use a metronome both in the lesson and in their practice."

"Use of the metronome, the students feel more confident using it now. They are improving their reading skills, as they have to write down their own fingerings and annotations for the pieces."

"It is tricky trying to sort something out that isn't right so I am having to come back to things in a way I wouldn't normally because I am more limited in how I sweep a pupil along."

"Students have had to tune their own guitars. I now find they have tuned them before the lesson, or the parent has, using the tuner they have now acquired."

"I have had to really consider the way I present tasks that enable musical development so that they are accessible online, for example employing a greater range of techniques to explain new information, such as the introduction of different time signatures, new rhythmic patterns etc."

"I use screen sharing a lot, this works better than in class as you can really direct the student's attention."

"Not being in the room has meant having to make expressive movements bigger."

"I've had to become crisper in my explanations - and decide whether playing to them is clearer or explaining is a better bet - sometimes one, sometimes the other. It has all had to be more stream-lined."



"I am doing more call and response, and alternating playing, rather than relying on playing together which is harder in the virtual space."

Examples of new or emerging activities:

"The positive impact is that students are not relying on me to show them everything, often they have to work things out for themselves and this is increasing their resilience."

"I'm finding a number of my pupils are practicing more than they ever have and are trying out more things, working ahead in a book or working out songs/tunes they like. This is then translating into them pushing forward with more interesting and challenging pieces."

"Some of my pupils have been forced to learn about recording/content creation earlier in their career or to a higher standard than they otherwise would, for example, recording drum parts for church music each week."

"Reading notation has improved in one student particularly, and she now spends more time out of the lesson motivated to work out notes."

"I can screen share from a notation app, meaning we can create and edit digital scores together, adding markings etc, and then I can share a PDF after the lesson."

"I can screen share PDF music in a reader app, adding annotations, and then share that after the lesson."

Examples of continuing challenges:

"The problems of tone and not being able to assess it especially with the younger pupils."

"Lack of playing live, with others, for example a piano accompaniment, is still challenging."



Wider Musical Understanding

The music played in lessons is part of a wider, ongoing musical journey. Teaching online has made the connection between the learning and music-making take place in the lessons, and the learning and music-making taking place outside of lessons, even closer. This is partly about the more direct connection into the home, and with parents, but also about the way young musicians are taking more ownership of their learning too.

Examples of successful continuation of previous activities:

"I have asked some of them to do a small research about one of the pieces: composer, when it was written, period of the music."

Examples of adapting previous activities:

"I managed to teach a young Year 4 pupil to pedal during an online lesson! Very excited about this, as it was a challenge for us both. I moved my laptop positioning to my feet and hands, and demonstrated - lots of times - and we took it really slowly, step by step. When he came back this week, he'd nailed Ed Sheeran's 'Perfect'."

"I haven't felt able to do as much on notation as I would normally, so we've done a lot more aurally and I have supplied notation but also given finger numbers and encouraged memorisation more than usual. I don't want them feeling 'I can't' just because of the notation."

"Students have had to become better at finding their way around a musical page without someone to point to where they are or where they are about to be going."

"Moving the lessons online has really helped a lot of students with their understanding of notation. In school I usually point at the notes but now they have to actually use their eyes and do it themselves which naturally strengthens their reading ability."

"Students are more aware and want to understand where the music has come from or originated from so that they have a contextual understanding. They are more adept at doing this research for themselves and in doing so diving further into what interests them."

Examples of new or emerging activities:

"The ability to send clips and links helps to add context, although you often need to be careful of the content of the videos and any ads."

"Young musicians generally have a much greater ownership of their music making."



Performing

The online environment adds additional challenges to performance — particularly performing with others synchronously — but also opens up a new world of possibility, with performance opportunities coming through virtual concerts and video recording. These new avenues of performance motivate increased development of performance skills, and also provide an opportunity for greater self-reflection. Virtual performances outside the lesson serve to remind us that music lessons are not the end of a musical journey, but part of a much wider cycle of learning and music-making, of which the virtual lesson is only one part.

Examples of successful continuation of previous activities:

"I'm still able to listen to pupils play and perform to me in online lessons."

"I am letting students select the songs and pieces we learn, that way — especially now, music can continue to be an expression of themselves and their understanding of the world around them."

Examples of adapting previous activities:

"A video screen is harder to hold a student's attention when modelling, especially when they think you can't see them. You have to give more direct feedback during a student's performance as body language is less clear via a screen."

"I have been challenging my pupils to find new audiences in their families and friends."

"I have been actively encouraging my pupils to partake in virtual ensemble projects. This is having a really positive impact on the pupils and allowing them to stay connected."

"Some pupils have done video-call performances for Grandparents but I'm finding that even those who haven't done that are often being heard playing far more often by their parents. They are gaining confidence from their parents acknowledging their improvements and are then likely to want to perform more."

Examples of new or emerging activities:

"Preparing for, and performing in online concerts have made students strive for a higher level of attainment as they want to get the (near) 'perfect' take."

"Students are also now not scared to perform to their parents as they're present during the lessons. At the start of lockdown I had lots of parents say how they didn't know their child was that good as they'd never actually heard them play!"



“Building a safe ‘virtual’ space in which the young musician feels comfortable to perform is vital, particularly for singers, for whom learning to project their voice in a home environment can feel very strange at first. I am embedding this building of confidence in amongst other activities, rather than drawing attention to it and making it worse!”

“Students sometimes get lost when playing along with backing tracks. Previously, we might have played just parts of the music together, instead, I am using just short sections of the backing track to build up the whole song piece by piece.”

“Whilst it is hard to play together and both hear each other, I have been muting the student and having them play along with me. Whilst I can’t hear them, they can still hear me, and can play along just fine. I haven’t heard their performance, so instead, I have them self-reflect and evaluate their own performance.”

Examples of continuing challenges:

“Performing together is still a challenge – it is the first thing we will do when we can be together in person”.



Creativity

Creativity is an important avenue for self-expression, and music can help us to make sense of the world around us. From opening up repertoire choice, through to composition, using music for these purposes is even more important in current times, and the online teaching environment provides new possibilities. Whilst playing and creating with others, in a synchronous form, is harder in the online environment, tools like screen sharing of notation apps mean that new ways of creating together can be developed.

Examples of successful continuation of previous activities:

"I have tried to keep my lessons as similar to a face to face lesson as I can to try and provide consistency and normality for my pupils."

"Setting creativity between lessons works well, playing to a backing track is difficult for the teacher with latency."

"Creativity during warm ups, choosing notes and putting them together."

"I have a pupil who struggles to read notation, so she often uses practice time to compose her own ideas and looks forward to showing me during lessons. This maintains engagement and positivity in a child who is extremely lacking in self esteem and confidence."

"I started the whole online thing by asking each of my younger pupils to make up their own tune using a limited range of notes that fitted their current technical ability. This went down really well: they improvised a phrase at a time and I wrote it down for them and then sent them their tune in their practice notes to get really good over the next week."

Examples of adapting previous activities:

"I have tried some improvisation and have found students are not quite so inhibited as I am not quite so close as usual."

Examples of new or emerging activities:

"Creative activities are enhanced by digital tools. I can screen share and transcribe music learnt by ear, or created on Sibelius and then send a digital copy after the lesson."

Examples of continuing challenges:

"Lack of playing with others, in groups has meant they have no one else other than a teacher to share ideas with. Sharing music with their peers has been lacking over these past weeks."





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Assessment

Hearing and seeing clearly can be more difficult online. This means young musicians are increasingly having to rely on their own judgments, and teachers are responding by opening up their questioning, and supporting the development of self-reflection and self-evaluation skills. Digital tools like chat windows and email can easily bring documentation of progress to the online environment.

Examples of successful continuation of previous activities:

"Assessment continues as very much verbal feedback and positive as a paramount feature."

Examples of adapting previous activities:

"It is easier to keep record of the student's progress through online lesson notes which are emailed directly to the parent. This opens up communication and ensures that the parent sees what you have done each lesson- something that does not happen when using the white book as they often get lost!"

"Without exams this term, I have encouraged pupils to play all their pieces in a concert for family/friends. It has given them focus and a purpose for their practice."

"As I cannot hear them so clearly in the lesson, I am asking them to assess themselves much more."

Examples of new or emerging activities:

"Recording their own performances on video helps for self-assessment."

"A positive is the ability to capture performances easily. I have used this to get the pupils to self assess, asking them to film themselves playing a piece on a daily basis and then send me which they think is the best one!"

"Having the parents more involved really helps to set and maintain targets."

Examples of continuing challenges:

"It is somewhat harder to assess certain aspects over a screen, particularly tone quality."

