

Teaching adults

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Introduction

This resource explores the topic of teaching adult students. For the purposes of this resource, I'll define adult learners as those who are not learning in a formal educational context, ie school, university or conservatoire settings. Therefore, I'll be exploring this subject primarily in the context of the private teaching practice and amateur music making outside educational institutions.

Why a separate resource for the adult learner? Earlier in the year, the excellent BBC World Service *CrowdScience* programme focused on learning new things as you get older, with reference to musical instruments (you can download the programme here: www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/w3ct1pqb). Exploring differences between child and adult learners, it was noted that adults' brains are not as quick at acquiring new information as children's brains are, since younger brains are made to absorb as much information as possible. Adult brains still generate new connections, but they have to work harder. However, adults have many skills as learners that children are yet to develop, and these skills can give them many advantages when it comes to learning an instrument. Adults know themselves better as learners, and are able to ask if they don't understand something that's been communicated to them; they are generally better able to take direction; and they have a greater understanding about how to work to longer-term goals.

Adults bring a broad range of life and learning experiences to the study of an instrument and, in order to maximise their learning, we need to understand how we can utilise these wide-ranging skills. In addition, adults have a variety of motivations for learning an instrument, and it's important to understand these as their teacher. In this resource, I'll explore questions of motivation, learning styles, teaching strategies, practice techniques, building a community, and lesson content. I'll also reflect on the way in which our consideration of these aspects can inform our practices as teachers.

Intrinsic motivation and background

One of the most interesting and meaningful aspects of teaching adults is learning about their motivation for either taking up, or coming back to, an instrument. Indeed, it's crucial to our teaching approach. In a recent series on her popular website *The Cross-Eyed Pianist* (www.crosseyedpianist.com), Frances Magdalene Wilson questioned adult pianists about their reasons for taking up the instrument, the challenges of practising and much more. A selection of responses offers some of the most frequently cited reasons – the desire to be able to play certain pieces, and to acquire the technical ability to do so; and a regret at having given up instrumental lessons earlier on in life.

'It is just wonderful to be able to play pieces that you've loved listening to all your life.'

'At the end of this period of rather ad-hoc and chaotic learning, I felt I could play the piano (just) but now realised that I did need to find a "real" piano teacher.'

'Here I am, 45 years later, regretting I had not stuck at the awkward childhood piano lessons my parents had funded.'

Adults who come to a teacher will often be from very different backgrounds. Many adults have learnt as a child and want to return to the instrument many years later. Some are coming to the instrument for the first time and have different motivations for so doing. Others are excellent musicians, who have followed a different career path but are keen to maintain their music. Adult learners generally have a high level of intrinsic motivation, and as teachers we need to respond to this from the start of their learning journey.

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Developing a good initial relationship

‘I never have time to practise, I work full time running my own business, but manage five or six hours a week.’ (www.crosseyedpianist.com)

Understand your student’s strengths and aims

Before first meeting your new adult student, it’s important that you find out whether you’re the right person to teach them, and their goals play a large role in this. Via email or by a phone call, try to establish what they need and want from a teacher, and what they already know. Perhaps encourage them to think about what strengths they have in other areas of their life that they might bring to their study. This will enable them to immediately begin to connect the skills they might draw on, skills that they already possess – such as good organisation or analytical skills, for example – to help them develop their instrumental or vocal technique.

Set clear expectations from both sides

It’s also important to set out what *you* expect, as a teacher. Instrumental study is different from many other activities that we take part in – such as exercise classes, for example – in that it demands commitment outside the lesson time. In order to really progress as a beginner, make it clear that trying to set aside several practice slots each week, even if they’re only short, will be essential. If a student is more advanced, and keen to take on a higher grade exam or diploma, then make clear the necessary amount of practice at the outset.

In some cases, you may have an adult student who just wants to play music during the lesson time – perhaps improvisation or duets, or the opportunity for an instrumentalist or singer to play with piano. Perhaps the student is interested in weekly lessons, or perhaps they would prefer them to be on an ad hoc basis. The main thing is that expectations are clear from both sides, and this is easier to establish right at the beginning of the relationship.

Extrinsic motivation

As mentioned above, adults tend to have a greater level of intrinsic motivation than children. In general, they have made a conscious decision to seek out a piano teacher and thought about why and what they want to learn. Children (and adults) learning within an school, university or conservatoire usually have many opportunities to share their music, and to perform – by taking exams or taking part in music festivals, for example. However, adult learners outside institutions can often be studying in isolation.

Therefore, considering and presenting external opportunities for wider musical engagement is part of your role as their teacher. It’s definitely worth establishing whether searching out different contexts in which to play with or for other people is something that you and your student might find beneficial. Below, we’ll look at some different avenues you might explore.

Exams

‘Exam nerves can be quite daunting for adults, and of course the time factor is often key for the working person. I took up exams in middle age and there are biological challenges, such as less flexible joints, that can be a real difficulty when mastering scales and arpeggios.’ (www.crosseyedpianist.com)

Exams tend to be a first port of call when it comes to extrinsic motivation opportunities for children. If you teach an adult student who’s interested in taking an exam, it’s worth considering the different exam boards that are now available, as different board requirements will suit different students.

For example, following the quotation above, it may be that your student struggles with, or is less keen on, learning a lot of the scales and arpeggios required for the ABRSM examinations. However, some adult students are keen on gaining a stronger understanding of music theory and may be keen to incorporate scales and arpeggios as part of this journey. There are other examination boards, such as Trinity College, where the technical requirements include fewer scales and technical exercises, which may suit some students better.

For those students who struggle with nerves during performance, you might consider an exam board that accepts recordings – for example, the performance exams that the ABRSM began to run during 2020, and which they’re planning to continue to run in the future. In addition, the exam board Music Teachers’ Board (www.mtbexams.com) was established to work solely with recordings, in order to minimise the stress of performing in front of an examiner.

Music competitions

Many music festivals now have adult non-competitive classes, alongside more competitive open classes. This can be a great way of gaining the experience of performing, as well as receiving feedback from another professional musician.

Community groups

A powerful form of extrinsic motivation can be making music with others. A local orchestra, band or choir is an obvious example, but many students or teachers also set up their own workshops or clubs, in order to perform for each other. An adult student of mine has a group that holds what it terms 'Uncomfy Concerts' – a helpful and liberating recognition and acceptance of the nerves that can be involved in performing to others!

As teachers, we can also set up our own communities. Over lockdown, I ran a series of webinars for my adult students, to improve knowledge and engagement, and to enable a sense of shared experience. In each of these webinars we explored specific subjects in more depth, with a presentation, questions and discussion. We covered subjects such as effective practising, and also invited other teachers in to talk about a range of subjects. A shared experience is well known to be helpful, and to hear others talk about their struggles with practice, motivation and learning an instrument later on in life was clearly beneficial to all, especially when working in isolation during lockdown.

There are also many courses that cater for all levels of student. Dartington Summer School is an excellent example (www.dartington.org), as are Jackdaws Music Education Trust (www.jackdaws.org.uk), Benslow Music (www.benslowmusic.org) and Pro Corda in Suffolk (www.procorda.com), and there are many more besides. In addition, orchestras quite often run outreach programmes for adults as well as children. The Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra, for example, runs days for 'rusty musicians' across the region, offering an opportunity to play alongside members of the orchestra and give a performance. Many other orchestras run their own schemes around the country.

Learning styles

One of the advantages of teaching adults is that they probably already have clear ideas of the way in which they learn most effectively and their learning preferences, both of which are also worth discussing early on.

The privilege of being a one-to-one teacher is that you can respond to the individual and their preferred learning style, while also balancing the development of skills that the student may be less comfortable with. For example, some students find it difficult to read music, but have very good aural skills and memorise quickly. It's helpful to use and encourage their aural skills in learning their instrument, but also to continue to develop sightreading and note-reading skills.

Here are some further examples of ways in which you might use your teaching in the context of different learning styles. Having an awareness of these will allow for a holistic approach to your teaching. Perhaps you could develop a questionnaire for your adult student prior to lessons, to ascertain how they feel they learn most effectively, as a starting point?

Kinaesthetic learning

Movement to music is a very powerful way of learning to feel pulse, time signatures and tricky rhythms. While always checking in to make sure your student is comfortable, don't be afraid to set tasks that you also use with children! I tend to introduce the activity and then offer the student the opportunity to try it out then and there, or later at home – whichever they prefer. (Incidentally, this is something I would also do when teaching children). You might play something such as a waltz or a march and ask them to move in time, but you could also recommend recordings that they could use at home.

Practising fingerings away from the instrument – piano pieces on the tabletop, for example – is a good way of feeling comfortable with a piece before you play. In addition, the student will be hearing the piece in their head, thereby developing their aural skills.

Auditory learning

As mentioned above, some students excel at aural skills and, just as is the case for children, this can mean that they memorise easily and do not need to develop note-reading as much as other students. If you have students who struggle with aural skills, however, then encourage them to sing their pieces. You could also record their pieces for them, if the pieces are in earlier grades (and therefore less readily available on YouTube or Spotify), so that the students can listen to them at home. This is an integral part of the Suzuki approach to learning, which traditionally develops very strong aural skills. As noted above, mental practice is actually very helpful to improve aural skills, since you can ask the student to read through their pieces and to hear them in their head. This can be convenient for a busy commuter, as it can be done on a train or bus!

Visual learning

There are so many ways in which we can support our students through visual aids, and I feel they are sometimes underexplored. I often ask students to photocopy pieces, in order to then make liberal use of highlighter pens. For students who are interested in a more analytical approach to learning, colours can be used to show the different themes of a work – the harmonic structure, for example, or the desired voicing of a chord. For students who are having difficulty with the physical side of learning a work, highlighting the string to be used when learning a stringed instrument, the playing of black notes on the piano, places to breathe, or particularly difficult fingerings can be beneficial and speed up the learning process.

Social learning

Social learners may benefit from more regular lessons and may recognise that the external motivation of being part of a community, such as playing in a band or orchestra, will be an integral part of their learning. For all students, but especially adult students who may not take part in music making with others, duets or improvisation during a lesson is a great motivator. In addition, it can improve sightreading and the development of a strong sense of pulse, add variety to the range of music you can play, and be hugely enjoyable in itself.

Lesson content

Repertoire

Adults have a wider range of exposure to instrumental and vocal repertoire than children, and will often have an idea of what they want to learn. There's a balance to be struck here. Perhaps a piece they've chosen is a little too difficult for them. However, if it's not intended for performance and there's a lot of motivation to learn it, it may still be the right piece to have a go at. Alternatively, could you suggest a piece by the same composer, or in a similar style, that may match the technical ability of the student better, and also provide a launchpad to the harder work? Once you have an idea of the kind of repertoire your students are interested in, you can suggest pieces which might stretch them further, both technically and musically.

When discussing repertoire, also consider together whether your student prefers to focus on one piece at a time, or prefers a range of pieces to be worked on simultaneously.

Resources

Most teachers have preferred tutor books for beginner learners, but you may have to search a little further to find a resource pitched for adults, depending on which instrument you're teaching. Bear in mind also that your student may not mind a book aimed at children and that you can adapt these resources to your student's particular needs. As we've seen, there is potentially a large variation in prior knowledge and desired learning outcomes, so you will probably find that you need to mix and match a little with resources, in any case.

Theory and music history

You may find (in fact, you almost certainly will find) that adults have a greater desire than children to understand the musical theory and historical context of their pieces. I've certainly known some adults to feel out of their depth when they don't have a clear understanding of the musical theory underpinning their pieces. In your lesson preparation, consider a listening list to illuminate the piece they're working on, or technical exercises they could work on that would help their musical and theoretical understanding. Of course, this is something that we're hopefully incorporating into children's lessons too, but it's something with which adults will have different levels of need or want to engage. Perhaps your adult students will be interested in working on theory exams alongside practical work.

Teacher/student relationship

When working with adults, I find that asking for their input on a regular basis leads to more productive lessons. Before starting the lesson (as well as referring to your own lesson plan, or a previously discussed agenda), ask if they have in mind particular material they would definitely like to cover, or any specific questions, or things they have found challenging. This will help to further focus and manage the time you have together. Asking lots of open questions during the lesson will maintain the energy and keep the student involved in their learning. Questions such as 'Could you show me how you've practised this?', 'How did you feel that performance went?' or 'In what ways would you like to further develop this piece?' will lead to more fruitful discussion than simply offering advice.

Aligning your teaching effectively

One of the important things to remember when teaching adults is that the initial motivation for learning the instrument must align with the teaching activities, goals and outcomes, in order to maintain a sense of satisfaction and progress. This is a series of fluid, but very important relationships, and one that you should keep checking in on. Goal setting can be another way of focusing learning and maintaining motivation. Set short-term, mid-term and long-term goals, whether they be the learning of a piece or even a phrase, becoming confident with keys and scales, the completion of an exam, a performance to family and friends, or taking part in a concert.

Conclusion

In engaging with adult learners, you'll find a rich, varied teaching practice awaits. By harnessing and connecting the skills and knowledge that your students already possess in different areas of their lives, you'll maximise their potential at their instrument or voice. By engaging the student in the direction and content of their learning, and aligning your teaching activities to the desired outcomes, you'll increase their motivation to persevere – and enjoy many absorbing conversations besides.