

Lesson planning for visiting instrumental teachers

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Introduction

Planning can be the most daunting aspect of teaching, particularly if you have many students with a diverse range of needs. Approached in the right way, however, understanding flexible and realistic methods that work for you can make planning a positive force to help you become a better teacher.

Good planning can give a sense of being calm and in control, able to cope with the unexpected, and feeling confident about liaising with parents, carers and employers about your aims and outcomes for your students. You will have different templates, advice and protocols depending on who employs you. I'll refer to some examples in this resource, but we'll mainly focus on general principles and specific tips that can help in most circumstances. VMTs usually work in shorter time slots and smaller spaces than classroom music teachers, and, although there is a lot of crossover, can require different approaches.

Planning will usually involve creating overarching **schemes of work** covering a double term or year and individual **lesson plans** for each session you teach.

Creating schemes of work

Make sure you have a clear sense of what the scheme of work (SoW) covers, who it's for, and how it will be delivered, ie the scheme title, instrument, number and length of sessions, and number of pupils, for example:

- ▶ **Beginning the clarinet (Pre-Grade 1 pieces and skills using the lower register), 11 sessions x 30 minutes, 2 pupils (shared lesson)**

If you're creating your own SoW template, think about moving from large to small. Start with overall **aims and objectives**, then specific **activities** and **details about the topics** covered.

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Doing and learning

Make sure you clearly outline what you will be *doing* in the sessions and what the student will be *learning*. These are often different things, and they need to be considered separately.

Consider carefully what the student will *learn* through the activities. It shouldn't just be about reaching a certain page in a book, passing an exam or playing a certain number of pieces. That is the *doing*. The *learning* is being able to understand how to play long notes beautifully, what a key signature means, how to practise effectively, or what a syncopated rhythm is, how it relates to ragtime style and how to play it.

Make sure you cover a variety of learning objectives in the SoWs. Think through the interconnected skills and understanding needed to progress as a musician, and skills that apply beyond music.

For instance, learning how to play a piece successfully may involve:

- ▶ Learning how to read notation
- ▶ Learning to copy back phrases by ear
- ▶ Learning teamwork and ensemble skills
- ▶ Understanding aspects of a style or genre
- ▶ Learning how to control tone and tuning
- ▶ Improving technical skills and physical coordination
- ▶ Understanding musical elements (dynamics, articulation, structure, etc)
- ▶ ... and many other things!

Try to tease out and identify the skills and learning that will be covered in the scheme. This will give you a clearer sense of what you're trying to achieve, and help to identify specific areas that need more attention. It will also enrich the student's experience and motivation ('Look at all these different skills I'm learning!') and give parents, carers or schools tangible reasons to continue booking lessons.

Progression

The SoW should be a map to guide you through from starting points to ending points (eg moving up to Grade 2 level pieces; or progressing from being able to play three notes in the high register to ten notes; or widening knowledge of jazz styles).

There should be clear, measurable progression, with clear, incremental steps from one stage to the next. Sessions should build on previous ones, giving plenty of time to explore and have fun with surrounding areas of knowledge as the student progresses to the main SoW goals.

Collecting evidence

You may want to include a section in your SoW to identify evidence of whether the student has achieved the objectives. Be imaginative and flexible about how you collect evidence. This isn't just a mark they get in an exam. It could be the ability to talk about a piece to show understanding of style and structure, or to perform as part of a concert or recording you make in the lesson to send to parents. It could be to take part in musical call-and-response game, or demonstrate a particular skill during the lesson. The important thing is to document the evidence to show that the learning has happened.

As mentioned, this gives you clear evidence to include in reports and refer to when planning the next sessions and SoWs for that student.

Other details

Here are the other aspects that you need to consider for your SoW:

Meeting individual needs: include any pertinent information about the pupils that will feed into lesson planning or ideas for differentiation. Make sure you're aware of special needs and disabilities that can help you tailor the planning to suit the pupil.

Prior knowledge: list anything the students must know before the SoW, and what they have done previously.

Resources: list what you need in order to deliver the SoW effectively and help you get organised for the sessions.

Tips for an effective scheme of work

- 1 Use bullet points and be as concise as possible. Keep only the information you need.
- 2 Be realistic about what you can achieve during the scheme timeframe. Give generous margins for different levels of progress and changes of focus or unexpected tangents.
- 3 Make sure it's clear what you and the student are aiming for with a few clear goals (eg to be able to set up and care for the instrument, play a scale fluently in the lower register, play a Grade 1 level piece without stopping, or to compose, perform and record a short melody).
- 4 Don't be afraid to repeat activities or structures so long as this keeps a sense of forward momentum. It can be effective to establish a routine or repeat activities to reinforce learning or see how the student has progressed.
- 5 Think about the journey through the SoW. It's crucial that you balance the need for **variety** (not just playing the same three pieces every week through the year) with a sense of **step-by-step progression**, building on skills from week to week.
- 6 If you're aiming to prepare the student for an **exam**, build in the steps to do this. Give plenty of time to cover all the areas of the exam and peak at the right time. Remember that you have to apply for the exam in advance, so aim for the pupil to have most of the skills and pieces ready *a term before* they are taking the exam. This relieves stress, it allows time to focus on areas they struggle with and gives opportunities to do non-exam related fun activities during the term to enrich the learning.

Creating lesson plans

Lesson plans are the week-by-week implementation of your SoW.

Long-term and short-term planning

Your planning should involve a flow of dialogue between longer- and shorter-term aims. The aim is to connect what you want your pupil to achieve through the year or term with what you do in the lessons.

Long-/medium-term planning -----> **Short-term planning**
(eg a year or double-term SoW) <----- **(eg a 30-minute lesson)**

This way of planning can be seen as working in two directions:

- 1 **From long to short:** the longer-term aims must shape each lesson, placing it within your wider objectives. This gives momentum and helps the pupil feel like they're moving in a clear direction and making progress.
- 2 **From short to long:** what you discover in each lesson should shape and plan for the longer term. This doesn't mean re-writing the long-term plan each week! It's about tweaking or adjusting focus if needed. You may need to cut or add activities to reflect how the student is progressing and any unexpected outcomes: they might be particularly inspired by a certain piece, style or activity, go off the idea of doing an exam, or need more help in a particular area.

Study plans

In my own teaching work, I use online study plans – I use SpeedAdmin (www.speedadmin.com), but there are other companies that offer similar facilities. This is an integrated way of sharing lesson notes with pupils and parents each week, as well as keeping records and planning sessions. For each lesson there is a 'Study' (essentially a lesson plan), giving information about the lesson and the work covered, what to work on next at home, and links to videos, recordings, books to order, exam entry details, etc. After the lesson, I share it with the pupil and parents, adding encouragement and feedback where appropriate.

The work I set the pupil(s) feeds into what I plan for the following session (also guided by the SoW for the term). I often make a few notes during or at the end of the session to help plan the next session(s) to make the process more efficient.

Individual studies or lesson plans can be saved in a study library and reused for other pupils, with added tweaks.

Timings

The most common trap to fall into, particularly if you have less experience with a particular SoW, is including too much in a lesson. It's always tempting to aim to cover lots of areas, to race through pieces, topics and activities to keep the students engaged and continually achieving.

In my experience, you usually need **one main activity or focus** on for each lesson. This main activity can involve several different skills or learning objectives, with other activities built around it, leading logically from one activity to the next. Leave plenty of space in your timings as there will *always* be unplanned things that crop up to eat up the time (a broken string, a Disney piece that a student is *desperate* to play you, or another student struggling to remember what F sharp is, and so on).

It's usually better to go narrow and deep into a particular area of knowledge, rather than wide and shallow. Trying to cover too many things may leave a student bewildered and unsatisfied, unable to understand any of the concepts or master any of the techniques properly.

Give time at the end of the session to recap, evaluate and discuss what the student(s) will work on during the week for the following session.

Examples: the good and the bad

Here are two brief lesson plans with lesson notes to be sent to pupils following the lessons. They include similar content within an intermediate Grade 4 level clarinet scheme of work.

You may need to include further sections, for instance resources needed, but these examples focus on core lesson activity planning. The first is significantly more effective than the second and would almost certainly lead to a better lesson for the student.

Example 1: a well-planned lesson

Well-defined and measurable learning aims	Name:	Date:	Session no. in term:	Instrument:	Duration of session:
	_____	16/3/22	7/11	Clarinet	30 mins
Realistic, detailed timings	Learning Objectives: Improve fluency in E flat major. Understand dotted rhythms in 6/8. Start Finzi Forlana.				
	Time	Activity	Notes		
Broken down into activities that progress from one to the other, ie preparing for <i>Forlana's</i> 6/8 & E flat key	5m	WARM-UP: E flat major scale 1 octave MAIN ACTIVITY:	Discussed Db = C# More on enharmonics next week.		
	10m	▪ Dots & ties in 6/8. Clapping exercise			
	5m	▪ Improvise short phrases in 6/8 using Eflat maj scale + dotted rhythms			
	10m	▪ Work on Finzi Forlana first section (to bar 17) Discuss 'Forlana' style (6/8 Venetian dance) Set HW: [FORLANA YOUTUBE LINK]			

'Notes' section used to identify unplanned outcomes to add to next session

	Date	Lesson notes
Begins with positive, specific feedback	16/3/22	Great work today. Excellent, fluent improvising! We discussed dots and ties in 6/8 and ' Forlana ' style (6/8 Venetian dance). Db = C# This week: Improvise short phrases in 6/8 using E flat major scale. Work on Finzi Forlana first section (to bar 17) Watch this performance: [FORLANA YOUTUBE LINK]
Separate, manageable tasks to complete at home		

Begins with positive, specific feedback

Example 2: a poorly planned lesson

No clear learning aims, just a list of topics	Name: _____	Date: 16/3/22	Session no. in term: 7/11	Instrument: clarinet	Duration of session: 30 mins
	Learning Objectives: Forlana, D major, Autumn Leaves & Aural Tests				
Unrealistic amount of work to cover in 30 mins, with too many unrelated areas	Time	Activity		Notes	
	30m	Finzi Forlana. D major scale and arpeggio. Autumn Leaves and improvisation. Practise Grade 4 aural tests A, B and C.		No practice on D maj Send exam entry letter	

'Notes' section confusingly used both for outcomes and tutor reminders

Date	Lesson notes
16/3/22	Practise the pieces and work we did in today's lesson. Revise all your other pieces for Grade 4. Practise your scales and arpeggios, D major especially this week. Dynamics, tonguing, slurring, tempo and rhythms. [EXAM ENTRY LETTER DOC]

No feedback and too much work given

Confusing instructions. Unclear what the list of musical elements refers to

Send exam entry letters etc in separate notes or emails to avoid getting missed

Time well spent

The first example of a well-planned lesson involves a little more detail, but is still concise and would not take much longer to plan if done efficiently (eg learning objectives copied directly from the SoW, and a fixed template layout of WARM UP and MAIN ACTIVITY). It's also a good stand-alone lesson to introduce the 'Forlana' piece, and could be replicated for other students starting this piece. The poorly planned lesson is unlikely to be able to be used again as it just lists unconnected activities.

The lesson notes from the first, good example are mostly a copy and paste from the lesson plan, which would be efficient and link with the lesson better. The second, bad example lesson notes would take a similar time to write, but are more generic, turgid, unrealistic and lack positivity.

Livening up a lesson plan

Make it fun! Think about what the student enjoys about playing their instrument and making music. Plan activities that have elements of playfulness, communication, sharing ideas and using physical space.

Find effective ways to start the session – preferably a warm-up that's related to what you're doing in the rest of the session. It's good to begin with something quick and practical, getting the student to feel confident.

When choosing repertoire, consider what would motivate the student to practise, for example a piece they're likely to know, or one with a catchy melody or interesting rhythmic feel.

Think of engaging 'ways in' to a new piece – for example listening to a performance of it and describing how it makes them feel, learning a main riff by ear with call and response, drawing the structure or thinking of the story it's telling.

Include a variety of tasks that involve different skills and physical/mental activity. This makes the session more dynamic and interesting. It's also a way (particularly in group lessons) for students to find something they can achieve and enjoy. For example, one student may really struggle with sightreading a new piece, but love to improvise a backing part or enjoy describing the style of it.

Some pupils respond well to games, quizzes or tests. If so, include lots of those in your lesson plans. You could plan out a series of tests week by week to tick off being able to play each arpeggio without a mistake, or start each session with a rhythm game that covers a different time signature each week.

Could you make your lesson notes more visually appealing and easier to understand? Use text colour, short bullet points, emojis, media links or diagrams to inspire the student to read them and put them into practice.

Tips for fast and effective planning

Be realistic

Think through when you're going to plan and how you can maximise that time. Be realistic about how long planning is going to take, and how much time you have available to spend on it.

Integrate

You may use a variety of formats, methods and digital/paper resources – perhaps there are different ones for different pupils or schools. Using just one integrated system that works for all your teaching can help save you time.

Find a planning system that works well for you and doesn't involve a lot of duplication of work or anything overly complex. Your planning documents should be easy to access, read and update, with a sense of *consistency* across all your teaching.

Connect the dots

Try to maximise the time you spend on planning by making sure it's streamlined and connected. For example, the weekly lesson notes for the pupil should form part of the planning process and record keeping. Could the lesson notes you send the pupil and parents be the same as your lesson plans, or copied and pasted? Your lesson plans should feed into reports you write through the year.

Think carefully about what you can duplicate for other students. Your SoWs will probably be used for several different pupils (perhaps using a basic template scheme with some tweaks to make it bespoke for each pupil). Lesson plans can also be used for multiple pupils, particularly very structured ones focusing on a particular skill, eg a 30-minute lesson teaching a beginner how to improvise for four bars using a particular scale over a backing track.

Label and organise lesson plans clearly in a library or folder, so you can find them and use them easily.

Get into a routine

Could your planning be done at the same time each week? Try to allocate a specific time period and stick to that. Use timers or 'pomodoro' techniques to make sure you do it efficiently.

Establish protocols

Find or create easy-to-use frameworks and duplicate where appropriate. If you find yourself swamped with planning paperwork, it could be that you need a step back to refine your approach. Observe yourself for a typical week to note down how and when you plan (give accurate timings). Go back over the week and identify how you could streamline tasks and be more efficient. Are there things you could do that take a bit of time in the short term but will save much more time in the long term?

Include planning in the lesson

This can work well for feedback and lesson notes, but also for medium- and short-term planning. This always needs to be done with the student in mind, usually as a plenary at the end of the lesson. It should never detract from the effectiveness of the lesson or involve you doing tasks while the student is not engaged.

Don't just sit in the corner planning the next lesson while the student plays a piece to themselves. Instead, make it an *active* part of the learning. You could include the student by asking: 'Which piece/section do you want to focus on this week? Let's make a note of that.' Or: 'What do you think you will be able to achieve this term? Let's agree a plan together.' Or: 'You've done really well today! Tell me everything you've learnt, and I'll write it down.'

This *includes* the pupil in the process, reinforcing what they've done in the lesson and what they will do in future lessons. It's an important way of cementing their learning – it makes them aware of and in charge of what they're aiming for, and establishes a partnership between tutor and pupil.

If done correctly, this is a win-win, improving learning *and* saving you time outside of the lessons.

Record-keeping

Finally, make sure you keep good, up-to-date records and information on your pupils. Think about how you will need to access this. Will you need to know what grades they've done and when, what ensembles they're in, any medical conditions or behavioural issues? Keep a record of what exams they take, when, with what board and the result.

There are data and GDPR issues with this. Liaise with your employer about any rules you should follow. In general, you should only keep the information you need. Delete information for ex-pupils, keep information securely on as few devices as possible, and protect it with passwords. If you want to keep records of past exam results and achievements longer term, this can be done by removing the names of pupils, or just keeping initials.