

Teaching a successful guitar group

Paul White

Throughout my musical career, one of the main areas I've found to be a constant source of learning, encouragement and inspiration is playing and performing music with a group of people. Within a musical group, age, ability and any other hang-up that might arise from working with other people can all become irrelevant. Taking 30 minutes of group work can accomplish more than hours of private practice, since it allows a musician to try out things they've learnt, while also establishing some of the fundamentals of music – like rhythm and structure – in a way that's never satisfactorily done at home.

Another key thing is that it's fun! Learning a part and then being able to play it with other musicians is what most of us play an instrument for – but it's unfortunately something that rarely happens rarely when you're a secondary education peripatetic teacher.

Setting up a guitar group

Key benefits

Benefits to the teacher

As a peripatetic teacher, you spend an awful lot of time sitting down (well, guitar teachers do!). Group work means that you can stand up, put your guitar strap on, and walk around a bit, interact with students and join in with the music making.

Working in a group also means that you can give yourself a change in mindset from the usual one-to-one teaching, and work in a completely different way. You can put into practice the techniques that you've been teaching, and you can be involved with the process of learning to play a piece of music as a musician rather than as a teacher.

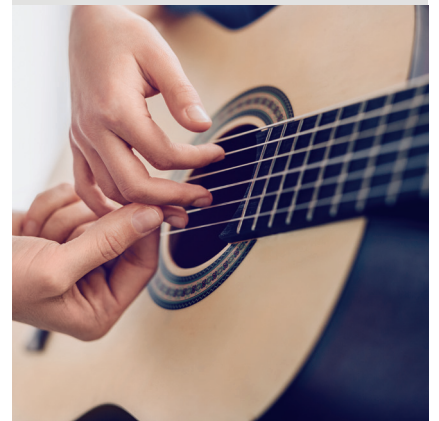
Working like this also breaks down barriers between student and teacher, and allows students to see you as a musician in your own right, not just a teacher. Similarly, students can feel like they're musicians rather than simply students, since they're performing in a group of musicians, which can be a great encouragement to them.

Benefits to the students

In a group, students find themselves in a situation that requires them to have a good grasp of some of the fundamental areas of music:

- ▶ **Rhythm and keeping time:** it's paramount in group work that everyone can play in time and can count effectively. Playing as a group will do wonders for students' ability to play in time and count beats and bars. It also boosts their confidence when they can hear their part locking in with an overall arrangement.
- ▶ **Chords:** students will learn new chords and strumming patterns, and put them to use in a 'real work' environment.
- ▶ **Melody:** students will learn melody lines of varying difficulty levels, played at different areas of the guitar neck.
- ▶ **Structure:** can a student follow their part and recognise key sections in a piece? Do they understand how the most common musical structures work, and can they follow what's going on and make sense of it?
- ▶ **Improvisation:** guitarists generally love to play solos and improvise, so it's a good idea to put in a section where students can have a go at improvising. This also allows them some creativity and expression beyond what they'd normally be asked to do.
- ▶ **Harmony:** use pieces where there is a harmony line, or some way of incorporating harmonic movement in different guitar parts. Students then get to learn how they can harmonise a melody line, and what notes they can use over different chords.
- ▶ **Opportunities for live performance:** there's a whole range of performance opportunities for guitar groups. Schools are usually very helpful and willing to incorporate groups into school concerts, and may even offer new avenues for live performance. A guitar group can work at a loud plugged-in rock

Paul White is a guitar teacher and session musician who works for Hertfordshire Music Service.



event or a quiet acoustic event, and everything in between, which greatly increases the range of events where the group can participate.

Benefits of working in a group

Apart from the musical areas I've mentioned, there are many other key skills – such as team work, leadership and problem-solving – that are developed through group working. This method also requires students to think on their feet in a way that they wouldn't have to in normal one-to-one teaching situations. And it rewards them for being proactive and learning their parts properly. These skills can develop into helping others with their learning, and taking on leadership responsibilities within the group as confidence grows. In this way, guitar groups can often take on a life of their own, becoming ensembles that students organise and take responsibility for themselves.

It's often the case that a student's playing improves most when they take themselves out of their comfort zone and work within a new situation, thereby stretching their abilities and knowledge. Having to figure things out on the spot and not let a group down really concentrates and focuses the mind, and makes learning your part so much more important – and ultimately rewarding. This type of experience is something every musician should go through as often and as early as possible: it really is one of the best ways to improve.

Practical matters

Before you start your guitar group, there are a few practical things to consider:

- ▶ **Timing:** you generally won't get more than 30 minutes for your group. If you break it down, that means:
 - ▶ Five to eight minutes to set up (bring amps in and plug in, set up classroom chairs and music stands, and tune up).
 - ▶ Two minutes for a short introduction and plan for the lesson.
 - ▶ 15 minutes of playing time This roughly equates to running through a piece four times, with a short time in between to help individual students and offer advice and instruction. In reality, you will rarely run through a piece four times unless you're planning for a concert: normally you'll need to work on a piece section by section to make sure each part is working correctly first.
 - ▶ Five minutes to pack away.

As you can see, you won't have much time to get stuff done, so planning is very important to get the most out of each session.

It's also important to think about when in the school day you want to run the group. Your head of music will normally help you with this, but I've found it's usually best done at lunchtime, allowing a short time for students to get their lunch beforehand or afterwards. I wouldn't recommend running an after-school club as there are usually too many other things going on, and you're likely to have a lower turnout unless the group members are very committed. Running the group at lunchtime also serves to break up the day for the guitar teacher.

Other issues to consider are:

- ▶ **Set-up:** it's best to work in a circle with everyone facing each other, because it's easier for the teacher to see what everyone's doing, and also for the students to see you for cues and direction. This may not be possible due to the location of plug sockets, the shape and size of the room, and anything already in it, so be prepared to compromise.
- ▶ **Space:** you'll need a fairly large space, so a practice room will generally be too small. You'll also need to consider volume levels, although at lunchtime you're less likely to disturb other people.
- ▶ **Planning:** this is crucial to the success of group lessons. It's important to have the whole piece arranged into parts, and each part printed out with time to spare, so that you don't waste time during the lesson. You'll also need to be flexible and adaptable: each student is unique, and you may find that your carefully planned arrangement doesn't work for all of them. You may even have to adapt parts to fit students' needs and abilities on the fly.

Preparing for the group

Choosing pieces of music for a guitar group is a relatively straightforward process, and there's a wide range of pieces that work well within a group format.

The most important thing to consider when choosing a piece for the group, however, is whether it contains enough material to be shared around the group without anyone feeling underused or bored. Most standard pop songs fit the bill, since they contain the essential ingredients of a melody line,

chords or some kind of harmonic progression, and a bassline. It's important, however, that the song has clear sections and that these sections feature different melodies and chords, otherwise things will get very repetitive and interest will quickly wane.

Don't limit your search to just popular music: other genres, especially jazz, are equally suitable, and there's of course a wealth of classical pieces written for guitar groups, or pieces for solo guitar or larger classical ensembles that are easily adaptable.

One of my favourite places to look for material is in film and television music, as these sorts of pieces are usually instantly recognisable and popular with students – and with audiences too.

To go about preparing the music for your group, think about how you can arrange it to fit different students' abilities. In addition, always try to use different forms of notation to suit different students. For instance, some students may read tablature but not music notation, and some may know some chords without being able to read notes. If you can write out the music in a number of different ways, it not only helps students who need those different notations, but also creates different ability levels from the start, thereby making your job a lot easier.

In terms of setting out the music, start with a bassline, chords and a melody line, and go on from there. The bassline could be written in many ways: as a written part in music notation, using tablature, or even as a chord chart with rhythmic indications. Likewise, the chords may be written in a chart with some rhythmic directions for strumming, or they could be written out with more complex notated chord positions for more advanced students. The melody line can also be written out using tab or standard notation depending on students' abilities and on what you want to achieve. Sometimes you may want to focus on reading and get rid of tab altogether. If that's the case, it may also help to come up with a method to help recognise the notes on the guitar more quickly. Colour-coding notes on a staff can help students recognise them, and whole-group reading drills can also help students work on their reading skills.

Example pieces

'Jessica' by Dickey Betts, performed by the Allman Brothers

► Listen to the original piece here:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yRDIVub5EeA>

► You can find the score for it online here:

<https://guitaralliance.com/justacoustic/songs/jessica/jessica.pdf>

'Jessica' is immediately recognisable as the theme to TV series *Top Gear*, so your students will probably already be familiar with it. The melody also has a harmony guitar part that follows it in 3rds, and a straightforward chord movement that's suitable for Grade 1 guitarists.

Also key to this piece are two large improvisation sections, both of which feature simple major chord movements that are relatively easy to solo over (a major pentatonic scale pattern would work fine) and simple enough for rhythm guitarists to play.

This piece also requires students to recognise and learn its structure, which is fairly complex for a pop instrumental. Having large improvisation sections also requires either very good counting skills, or an alternative way of finishing each solo. If you choose to have solos that are not of a fixed length, the group must find another way of getting into the next section of the song: it can be led by the soloist or another group member who cues the group out of the solo. These kind of questions provide great opportunities for students to problem solve and show leadership qualities.

'Cantina Band' by John Williams, from the film *Star Wars*

► Listen to the piece played by a gypsy jazz group here:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IFkIU7NWVEA>

► You can find the score for the gypsy jazz version in the Django Fakebook online here (on page 30):

https://geosci.uchicago.edu/~archer/jazz_band/sheet/fakebook_django_2008.pdf

When I was thinking of using this piece myself, I was concerned that *Star Wars* was maybe getting a bit dated, and that students wouldn't know or like the music from it. But I was completely wrong. Most of the students I have attempted this piece with recognised it immediately, and even those that didn't enjoyed it the first time I played it to them. It has a fun, jolly-sounding melody line and strong hooks that tend to get stuck in your head for days.

I approached the piece in a gypsy jazz style with the classic root – 5th bassline, 'la pompe'-style chord part and usual jazz head-solos-head structure. The melody line here is mostly around Grade 3 level,

although it does have some trickier parts towards the end that may need rearranging to keep within the Grade's boundaries. In terms of chords, it would normally be played with barre chords to keep within the gypsy jazz style, but it also works well with open chords for those who haven't yet grasped barre chords. The improvisational side of it also involves using minor scales, specifically a harmonic minor scale, something that's fairly unfamiliar to most pop guitarists and therefore a great thing to learn.

'Hold Back the River' by Iain Archer and James Bay, performed by James Bay

► Listen to the original song here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mqiHoZSkMgI>

This was a song that the musicians in my guitar group chose for themselves – teaching should always be a two-way process. If the pieces they are suggesting have all the correct elements, there's no reason why students can't start choosing songs for themselves.

'Hold Back the River' is a fairly straightforward song with a repeated melodic pattern that works very nicely on guitar. The song is ideally suited to lower-ability students, but it has enough in it to still be challenging and rewarding to play. For this song, I added harmony parts and divided the melody part into different octaves to lessen the repetitive nature of the composition, and to provide a greater challenge to the students.

Working with the group

Now that you have everything in place, you're ready to start your first session with the group.

Working within a group requires a different style of teaching to that of one-to-one lessons, as you have far less time to spend with each student, meaning you'll have to adapt your methods accordingly. The best and most obvious way to get things moving quickly is to use the students' individual lessons to help them learn their parts in advance. In theory it should then just be a matter of putting everything together in the sessions. Sometimes, however, you may not teach all the students in a group yourself, meaning that different students may be starting at different points.

Chorus, bassline then melody

As a rule, start with the main chorus part, and build it up using chords first, followed by the bassline, and only adding the melody last when everything is locking into place. Depending on the piece of music, you might also want to wait until the group has learnt the whole song in chords and bassline before starting to add the melody, so that you can play the song with the correct structure and therefore learn the melody in the actual order in which it's to be played.

Always lead the group by playing along with them at first, and work through each section so that everyone can play it in a loop. (If it's too much to loop a whole chorus, then choose a smaller section.) If anyone's struggling, wait until the rest of the group is functioning and can play the section in a loop before helping that person individually. It's crucial to provide students with a 'real-world' experience, and for that reason, let them try to figure things out for themselves by listening and watching others before stepping in. Listening skills are crucial for all musicians, so take any chance you can to work on them. And although it's important that nobody feels left behind, you don't want to hold up the rest of the group. So if the group can loop a section while you help an individual student with their part, that's of benefit to everyone.

Once everyone is comfortable with the chords, work with the bass player on the bassline. If you don't have a bass player, let another student play the part on guitar, or even switch someone over to bass if there's an instrument available at your school. Guitar students are usually happy to have a go on bass, and as a guitarist it's important to have some ability on both instruments.

When the bassline and chords are locking together, add the melody line. This is often the most difficult part to play and requires the most work. For that reason, demonstrate it section by section first, and then play it along with group, helping with fretting and reading problems as you go. Once everything is working together, move on to the next section and repeat the process. In no time you should have all the sections up to speed, and they can then be put together into the correct structure. With some pieces, you might put the song's chords and bassline together in the correct structure before adding the melody, as I mentioned earlier – it all depends on the specific piece.

Improvisation

Once everyone is comfortable playing the whole song, the final elements to add are the harmony parts and improvisational sections. As with the melody line, demonstrate the harmony parts first before playing them as a group.

For any improvisational sections, allow each student to have a go at taking a solo if they want to, and don't be afraid to join in with the soloing: it gives students ideas to use in their own solos, and also helps them get the correct style for the piece. Try using a jazz approach and trade licks in groups of 16, eight, four or two bars, depending on the piece and how difficult you want to make it!

By now, everything should have slotted into place and you should have a functioning guitar group. Once the piece is sounding good and everyone is comfortable with their parts, it's a good idea to change everything around so that everyone can have a go at playing all of the different parts.

Take a step back

It's now time to take a step back, and to let the group's musicians play by themselves. Let them count themselves in, and try to not get involved unless you absolutely have to.

At this point, it can also be helpful to record the piece so that everyone can hear what they're playing and work on any parts they may need to at home. If there are particular sections that individual students need to work on, these can be looked at in more detail in their one-to-one lessons. Each group lesson, the students will hopefully grow in confidence. And as they grow more comfortable, you will have more time to focus on individual students and fine-tuning the piece.

Although this is certainly not an exhaustive guide to running a guitar group, the hope is that it provides some good ideas and a basic framework of how to go setting one up and running it. The most important thing is to have fun with the group, and embrace the opportunity to work with a group of musicians. After all, that's one of the reasons we went into music in the first place – isn't it? **MT**