

CLASS TEACHING

Chris Fowler explains his approach to teaching guitar in a classroom setting...

Let's set a scenario: You're a well established teacher of the guitar. You teach mainly private pupils or in schools where you might teach one or two pupils at a time. Then one day your phone rings. It's the local adult education centre asking if you would like the job of teaching a 10 week beginners guitar class. Of course, your immediate reaction is to say yes. Well, it's a good opportunity to teach in a different environment, a new challenge. Then after putting the phone down, you suddenly have second thoughts – the vision of standing in front of a dozen or more pupils and delivering a class on how to play the guitar suddenly seems scary. You remember back to your schooldays and imagine your students aiming pea-shooters at you. Well, I hope this article can dispel your fears – at least a little!

Pre-Course Planning

It's important to find out roughly how many pupils will be on the course. (Then allow for some extra 'late bookers' who will turn up on the day.) Also try and get an idea of the standard of the pupils. Although it may be classed as a 'beginners course', people have very different ideas of what constitutes a 'beginner' (the same is true for 'advanced' classes). The centre will usually have a space on each student application form for students to write something about their ability. Ask to have a look through these well before the course starts.

Course Aims

Planning what you are going to teach on a course takes time. A good place to start is by developing a 'scheme of work'. This should include two main things: your aims (what you want to teach during the course) and your objectives (what you expect the student to know by the end of the course). Your aims for a beginners pop guitar course could be: "I aim to teach each student basic open chords and some simple strumming patterns, plus 2 or 3 open scales and give an introduction to lead playing". Your objectives could be "each student should be able to play a simple chord progression using open chords, play a simple lead line over a given chord progression, and be able to perform some basic songs". Grades can provide a useful guideline. For instance, if it's a rock guitar beginners course the RGT preliminary grade is an ideal starting point and you can use the syllabus to help you decide what goes into your scheme of work.

Lesson Structure

A lesson plan is simply a detailed write-up of what you are going to do in each lesson. Like your 'scheme of work' it should include two things. Your lesson aims (what you aim to teach in the lesson) and your lesson objectives (what you intend your student should know by the end of the lesson). I personally don't like to write full lesson plans before the course has started. Instead, I write the 1st lesson, and then after that has been held I write the plan for week 2 and so on. I suggest doing things this way because until you actually get your new class you don't really know how fast or slowly they will progress, and you may need to change the direction of the course to suit the particular class. Planning your lessons in stages also allows your class to be active in deciding the content of the course.

A typical group guitar lesson might be structured like this:

- A. Tuning, Warm-up exercises for the right and left hand
- B. Recap of work done last week – perform review material together in class in unison, this keeps the continuity throughout the course;
- C. Introduce new topic – maybe a scale, a piece, a new note reading study;

- D. Give students time to practice that new topic – go round and sort out any problems;
- E. Correct any errors to the whole class; then play together the new topic in unison
- F. Introduce some new chords and new accompaniments– explain and demonstrate a song that uses these chords;
- G. Give students time to practice – play in unison and then go round and sort out any problems;
- H. Finish off lesson by summarizing and giving final demonstrations. Restate the assignment before the next class lesson.

You'll notice from the above lesson outline that the lesson is structured so that you aren't always talking! Make your students active in their learning, it makes it more fun and gives you a chance to assess what they are doing and correct any mistakes. Another important thing is demonstrations. It's my experience that people learn more by seeing things demonstrated than by listening to descriptions. It also gives your students a goal; they want to be able to do what you can do!

The 1st Lesson

This is the hardest lesson to teach as you don't know your students or their true abilities. If it's a 'beginners class' don't be scared to literally take it right from the beginning. But before you teach them anything get them to introduce themselves to class and tell you what guitar playing they have done so far (if any). Don't forget to introduce yourself, tell them something about your guitar playing and teaching experience; blow your own trumpet a little, but not too much! Spend the first few minutes getting them sitting properly and holding the guitar correctly. These apparently simple things do take time to become natural, so don't expect it to come in the first lesson; these are long term aims. I find that for effective use of the time available, the best thing is to tune beginners guitars for them. You could show them a method of tuning, however tuning is a long term aim, so avoid spending half the lesson on it.

I always plan this first lesson (and hopefully all lessons!) so that students go away being able to play something at least vaguely musical. This way they'll feel that they have achieved something and they'll have confidence in you as a tutor.

Using handouts

When I first began teaching I relied heavily on giving written handouts. With hindsight my rule now is to only give a handout when it enhances what you are teaching, rather than just for the sake of it. If your students have books they are using in class, don't duplicate what is in the books – they will only wonder why they have spent money on the books. When I do use handouts I make sure they are legible and neat, and do them on my computer when I can to add a professional look to them. The main handouts I use are general advice ones at the start of the course, which include tips on tuning, posture, basic finger exercises, and how to read notation, tablature and chord diagrams.

Things to think about

Take time to think about your students' frame of mind. Many adult students find the thought of doing anything educational frightening; they may have bad memories of school and all that surrounded it. So be sensitive to their needs and never force people to perform in front of the class. Remember that some of your new pupils will never have held a guitar or a plectrum in their life before the course. It's all too easy to forget how difficult some basic techniques are for complete beginners.

If you're teaching a children's' class, approach the course in a similar way in terms of devising schemes of work and lesson plans etc. But you may find that you have to disguise their learning as a fun activity. I devise games that allow children to interact with each other, whilst also achieving learning. Whilst not pandering to fashion entirely, it's important that you make your choice of music applicable to the students interests. Getting your students to assess the course at the end will help your planning for the next course.

Final thoughts

Do all you can to make your lessons interesting and informative. Be seen as a musician who educates people, not just a teacher. Be friendly and approachable and offer advice about guitar buying and book buying. Most importantly, your students should look forward to your lessons and you should look forward to teaching them.

If the opportunity arises to teach in a class setting take it if you can – you'll learn a lot as a teacher and you'll always meet interesting people. Just don't forget to dodge the pea-shooters!

Chris Fowler passed both his grade 8 classical and electric guitar exams with honors by the age of 19 in the United Kingdom. He now has a degree in music from Surrey University and a PGCE teaching certificate, and he has also passed his LLCM(TD) guitar diploma. For the past two years he has been teaching guitar classes at the RGT Guitar Academy in Croydon. In addition to his classical guitar skills, Chris was recently appointed as a specialist electric guitar examiner for the RGT grade exams.
