



LET'S ROLL: Ask Dr. Banjo

Teachers: Help Your Students More with DVDs

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(Note: Oct. 4, Thursday afternoon of IBMA week in Nashville, Homespun Instruction is sponsoring its third annual teachers' get-together. This year's focus is working with new technology. Teachers, please try to attend! These meetings present unique opportunities for us to meet and compare notes.)

When a student hires me to teach, that is, to direct their learning program, I'm sometimes awed by the responsibility. Time is such a precious commodity, and the student is not just committing to spending classroom time with me, but also to many hours practicing what I recommend.

When a student "takes off" and starts practicing a lot, it's exciting to see the results. Or if a student's practicing tails off, it's sad to see signals that their involvement with music has diminished, and that that nice instrument might soon end up in its case for the long term, like most instruments, alas.

When deciding what to teach a person, I try to be guided by knowing what he/she likes and will therefore practice. Surely, if music is intended as a way of having fun, then it should be possible to make a lot of the work a lot like "play". In doing what one enjoys, one gets good at it, and that's exactly how good musicians become good!

What are some of the most fun things about playing?

1. Learning to make sounds that emulate your favorite musicians
2. Playing with other musicians and having it sound good
3. Being able to play favorite songs

4. _____

What are some of the things that inspire students to practice more?

1. The prospect of playing with challenging musicians in the near future
2. Having just heard someone playing very well
3. Being hooked on some music you just want to hear yourself play
4. _____

As teachers, part of our job is to help our students connect with the fun and inspiring parts of being a musician. If they're inspired and having fun, they'll continue playing, and taking lessons! Their deepened involvement will provide them lifelong satisfaction... and line our pockets with well-deserved, ever-rising long-term lesson fees.

OK, that addresses the first part of this article's title, Help Your Students... Now, what about the part about "...More with DVDs"?

Teachers may have some ambivalence about students using DVDs. They might feel in competition with the teacher on a video. But given the enormous strong points of sight-and-sound recordings of well-played music, it is to a teacher's advantage to use these tools as effectively as possible – more effectively than students can use them on their own. Why shouldn't teachers use the best available resources? Music teaching in the future is sure to use DVDs increasingly, to serve students best.

Let's consider: what does a teacher offer a student?

1. Creates, administers a learning

program—what to practice, toward what goals

2. Demonstrates good technique, and content

3. Critiques the student's efforts, and tweaks the learning program accordingly

4. Helps the student discover new music to like and learn

The first and third functions above, structuring the learning program itself and critiquing the student's efforts, both require personalized attention, and cannot be done by any sort of recording.

But the demonstrating part of teaching, and the exposure of the student to inspiring music, can actually be done better by recordings. A good teacher direct students to the best recordings, including those that do the best job showing how to play.

The DVD is an amazing thing. It takes regular life and compresses it, the way good writing says more in less space than conversational remarks. The best DVDs allow a student, at the touch of a laptop button, to reference close-ups of the left and right hands, slow repeats done on-screen—that can be looped, and even further-slowed as necessary—and all with accompanying tablature or notation.

A teacher who directs students to the most appropriate instructional material (satisfying to play, with a suitable amount of challenge) and then help students absorb the fine points of what they see and hear, is of maximum value. This extra value can in some cases translate back to the teacher through sales to students of the instructional material.

A teacher with a laptop and a good library of DVDs can reference a wealth of content, and even allow students choices of what material to learn and whom to emulate. Once a part of the video is selected for study, the student has a clear guide for practice, and the teacher can provide focused follow-up, using the recording for comparison.

As the creator of the *Bluegrass Jamming* set of DVDs, I'm especially familiar with the benefits to students of practicing in real time with music played at manageable speeds. Playing along irons out the typical stops and starts of a closet player, and puts the demands of backup playing, timekeeping, and chord changing on the front burner, right where they are in

real-life ensemble playing!

Some of the most effective teaching I can do is when I listen to someone playing as part of a band-size group, with opportunities to help them with their timekeeping, rhythm playing, control of volume, backup licks, coming in for solos, etc. Putting on a Jamming DVD and coaching a student as he/she plays along, can work wonders.

Since most people take up an instrument driven by a vision of how they might one day play music in a group setting, teaching ensemble skills from the first lessons (think Suzuki) makes every bit of sense when it comes to motivation. That is why my "*Bluegrass Slow Jam for the Total Beginner*" is targeted to the ultra-novice, using lots of two-chord songs, only G, C, D, and A, and speeds around 70 beats/minute. That is the right level of challenge for beginning students. Part of your value to them is to present them with the right challenge at the right time. You can offer slow jam opportunities where you and other teachers guide the students into real-life jamming. As they learn to play easily and confidently with others, a world opens for them, and that instrument will keep coming out of its case, for years to come. These successes are not only theirs, but yours too for your part in their achievement.

Play-along videos are only a step toward real-life ensemble playing, but for the stages where new or closet players lack confidence, some private time playing along with a recording can do wonders. I hope you who teach novice bluegrass players on any of the bluegrass instruments will get hold of one of my jamming DVDs and imagine what it can do for your students. Then get in touch with me or Homespun Instruction and find out how you can order quantities for your students! Write to Pete at pete@drbanjo.com, and visit DrBanjo.com for lots of free instruction.