



LET'S ROLL: Ask Dr. Banjo

It's About Fun and Results...As Soon As Possible: Recommendations from a Lifetime of Banjo Teaching

Pete Wernick

The following ideas have served my students well since I developed them in the 1960s and 70s. They have been presented in my “*Bluegrass Banjo*” book (1974), my ten Homespun instructional videos, and over 150 music camps I’ve hosted since 1980. The student evaluation forms I’ve used since the late 1980s give clear evidence that they work.

These ideas are about how a total beginner should be started. My ideas on later stages of learning, and even *what else* should be shown to beginners, won’t fit in just one column, and if you’re interested, head over to *DrBanjo.com*, click Instructional, and look under The Doc’s Prescriptions.

Warning: The ideas I’m about to present are not in step with most ways people teach bluegrass banjo, and I will speak bluntly though I hope not too disrespectfully of the more common modes, which I honestly feel are holding back a lot of students, and in fact leading to many of them actually quitting the instrument. I will admit to being pretty emotional about this issue, since it pains me deeply to think of people who truly want to play banjo, but who are then led down blind alleys by people who (while completely well-intentioned) are taking their money and often leave them feeling “non-musical” and “untalented.” This should not happen!

The big problem as I see it is that most banjo teachers (and in fact most teachers of bluegrass instruments) are generally stuck in the mode of “learning songs” *a la* classical music teaching. That method trains people to be closet pickers, fun I’m sure, but a dead end when it comes to really learning to play bluegrass banjo. Jam skills are more fundamental to music making, and they lead to more fun. *Jamming is fun...and fundamental.*

In sum: *A student should learn first the basic skills needed to play simple and enjoyable music with other people. Teachers should help their students join with others to make music. Learning*

soloing can follow soon enough, but it’s best done in the context of real jamming, and not just memorizing what someone else has worked out. The critical skill is *knowing how* to create a solo, whether on-the-fly in a jam, or when there’s time to work it out more carefully between jams.

“Learning instrumental pieces” makes good enough sense for classical music, but does not correspond to how bluegrass music is played. For the sake of a quick reward (proper execution of a few single pieces—that may or may not happen), a more appropriate ground-up method is not attempted.

Soloing is not appropriate to learn first. Learn to crawl before you can walk, walk before you run. A student’s impatience to “learn ‘Foggy Mt. Breakdown’” should not determine their learning program any more than a second grader eager to hit the road should be taught to drive a car.

Rhythm playing should come first. Its basics are readily learned. Rhythm playing is what we banjo players mostly do... When playing with others, we play rhythm behind singing (mostly) and also behind other soloing instruments. Banjo solos take about 10% of the time in typical jams or bluegrass band performances. One can participate in jams without soloing. Playing rhythm can (and should) be practiced while singing—a useful skill. When it’s time to learn soloing, a good rhythm sense is part of a strong foundation.

What is Wrong with Rote Methods of Learning Banjo

Learning solos note-for-note, whether from a page, or having someone telling/showing each note, is *not* the way “real” banjo players learn or develop solos.

Trying to learn bluegrass banjo by rote is comparable to trying to learn Japanese by phonetically reciting poems in Japanese... or painting by the numbers. It’s mimicry, not real learning. To really learn to play bluegrass banjo and not just isolated “solo” pieces, it’s not enough to reproduce

someone else’s work. An understanding of how the style works must be developed.

For the sake of a student’s early sense of accomplishment, I think it’s okay sometimes for a teacher to teach a simple song or two—*as long as it doesn’t take too long* and distract from the more fundamental skill-building: chording, following chord changes while keeping time, and as soon as possible, rolling while doing the above.

Most new players find solos-by-rote hard, and play them slowly and haltingly. Even those closet pickers who learn to pick smoothly often have persistent timing problems because they never have to play in “real time” and be responsible to other pickers for correct rhythm. Timing problems, the inability to jam, and struggling with rote-learned solos may go on for months or even years, wearing down the student’s optimism as they struggle to learn a few pieces that amount to only a few minutes of music.

I suggest they focus instead on skills such as simple right hand rhythm patterns, making easy chords, and learning to follow simple chord progressions in real time. Once a person can do that, making music with other people, or even a play-along recording, becomes possible. The rewards are endless. Also, this type of learning provides a solid foundation that will help the student learn how to solo.

If a teacher can actually facilitate their students jamming together, or with the students of a fellow teacher, an unbeatable motivational situation is created. A student who learns to jam is unlikely to ever quit playing. Being able to jam leads to motivation to go beyond the basics, and it engenders an optimism in the student that in time, many things are possible.

Motivation is Number One

Stoking motivational fire in the student is the centerpiece of good teaching. A motivated student with an appropriate practice program will go places. Motivation means practice, and practice means progress, creating more motivation. Every student begins with a motivational head start: They have a banjo, and want to pick—so they will do as they’re told, at least for a while. A teacher can feed that fire or squander it by asking for a lot of effort with minimal reward. A student who doesn’t get traction

right away may already be wondering whether “I just wasn’t cut out to be a musician” or “maybe I just don’t have the talent.” There’s a good chance that sooner or later they will quit, as *most do*. But if the student is having fun and seeing growth, they’re hooked.

The Importance of the Social Situation

What if someone told you they loved baseball and were a second baseman, and just bought a good bat and a mitt, and you asked them what team they play on, and they said, “Oh, I’m not on a team. I don’t get in any games. I just go to the batting cage and have a machine that throws me ground balls.”

Most beginning players make music exclusively by themselves. Often the only person who hears them is their teacher, or a family member. But that’s not the bluegrass way! *Bluegrass is a team sport*, built around songs and singing—not instrumental banjo pieces.

Most teachers do little or nothing to prepare their students to play real bluegrass, but there’s a wonderful world of bluegrass they can enter easily enough. In fact:

“The first rung of the ladder is very close to the ground.” Playing two-chord songs using just G and D7 while strumming is so very easy that anyone from 5 to 95 can be shown how. Don’t know many two-chord songs? Yes you do! On *DrBanjo.com*’s home page, under Favorite Pages, click *List of 80+ 2-chord songs*. At the top of the page it points a person to developing ear skills by saying “Listen for where you think the chord changes.”

At IBMA’s seminars for school teachers about bluegrass in the classroom, I was asked to run the “Learn a song on the banjo” session, an hour-long time slot. But instead of playing “a song” we actually played about 10 songs in that time, though the first 15 minutes was spent teaching them to tune up their (provided) Goodtime banjos, using clip-on tuners! Most had never handled a stringed instrument before, but some got hooked, just from that session. We had fun!

How to Get a Student Up and Running Playing Real Music Right Away

Teach a person play banjo in a group using just ultra-easy techniques:

1. Use two-chord songs, either G and D7 (key of G) or C and G (key of C) to accommodate different singing ranges. Use the list of 2-chord songs from *DrBanjo.com*.

com.

2. Easiest right hand (simple one finger strum or T/IM “boom/chick”, whatever works, then later a TITM roll).

3. Easiest left hand (simple chord forms near the nut, no F chord or F-shape chords at first).

4. Familiar songs (preferably ones that the student actually likes).

5. Slow tempos. 70 beats/minute is slower than most songs are sung, to allow for slow chord-changing, but fast enough to have a bit of momentum.

6. Somebody to do the singing. Ideally this would be *the student*, but experience shows they much prefer when someone else does that.

Start Jamming—Right Away!

No special technique is needed for the right hand. Just brush the strings with the thumb or any finger, on the downbeats. A more skilled student could try a simple boom/chick pattern: thumb on the 3rd string on the downbeats, the index and/or middle on the offbeats.

No need for written music of any sort. It’s better to get them listening and watching (skills needed for jamming). They get the chords by following you.

Just have the student watch your left hand carefully, and change back and forth at the right time. These are 2-chord songs—it’s hard to mess them up!

The point is that, with a teacher leading the way, a student can actually be making banjo music *immediately*, in the first few minutes of trying. That has got to be a good feeling!

I spin out this initial blast of success and fun with *a vision of the future*:

You’ll learn one more chord (C, using three fingers) and this will open up a *whole world* of music, such as at least 80 percent of the repertoire of Bill Monroe, Flatt & Scruggs, and the Stanley Brothers—for starters. All that’s needed is someone to sing the song, and the banjo can play along. If the student is willing to sing, or even hum while looking at a songbook, there’s a clear path ahead.

Next will be learning rolls and adding them to chord changes. One TITM for each downbeat. Show how it sounds played slowly, then gradually increase the speed. Have the student strum lightly on each downbeat, and synchronize your roll to the strum. Now trade: Student does TITM, you strum.

For extra motivation, you can whet the student’s appetite by doing a slide on the 3rd string with this roll, like the B part of *Cripple Creek*. Do it up to speed, and make it sound great. (You’ll see them smile.) Vince Gill wrote a beautiful song about his dad, a judge, and a music lover, called *The Key*. Over the sound of a simple banjo roll, he sings how his dad taught him: “Three chords on the banjo is the key to life.”

For the full article, “Teaching Beginning Banjo Players,” and others about how to teach banjo, visit DrBanjo.com