

What I Have Learned About Teaching from Taking Lessons Again

by Dennis Winge

Some time ago, after 40 years of playing guitar, I decided to increase my rhythmic vocabulary, so I bought a book that my drummer friend recommended. He said, at the time, that it was “dense, but accessible.” Well, I found it to be more dense than accessible, so I asked him to help me go through it.

When I tell people about my taking lessons from a drummer they think that I am learning to play drums. That is not the case at all: he simply helps clarify rhythmic concepts and I apply them to guitar. And, as we found, there is quite a bit of preparatory work to do before I can digest the contents of the book easily.

In the course of taking lessons, I have learned, or been reminded of, the best ways to teach my guitar students. I think both teachers and students can benefit from hearing the things I have discovered or re-discovered because it can only lead to improving your relationship to the teaching/ learning process, whichever side of the coin you’re on.

1. **Keep it simple.** This is perhaps the biggest one for me: I like to be told exactly what to do and how to do it. New ideas and concepts can seem very abstract, or even if they seem clear, there always seems like an infinite number of ways to apply the concept. In the first few lessons, I was getting overwhelmed with possibilities for this new and exciting world I was being introduced to, so I just had to say to my teacher “You decide which is the best path for me. Just tell me what to do and I’ll do it.” Now we have a great rhythm going, no pun intended. He tells me just a few very specific things to do every week and I do them, and it gives me a feeling of accomplishment.
2. **Balance aural and visual.** I also record examples of the exercises we do, which is in addition to the teacher writing them out. I frequently do this with my own students; they take out their phone and record (video or audio) them playing the example. And, it’s them playing, not me, for 2 reasons: to help them really internalize it, and to reinforce that since they did it in the lesson, they can do it at home.
3. **Balance information with implementation.** If gathering information were enough, then any of us could learn all we need to know via the internet or the library. Teachers show students how to apply what they learn in real-life situations. This is absolutely critical and in my opinion cannot be overdone on the part of the teacher. In Kenny Werner’s book “Effortless Mastery” he says (paraphrasing) “the masters you love haven’t mastered everything in all your books; they have simply mastered a few things and really made them their own.”
4. **Less is more.** From that point of view, the teacher doesn’t have to do more teaching, and the student doesn’t have to do more learning. They simply have to explore how to integrate new concepts deeper. Have you ever crammed for a test and then a week later couldn’t articulate the simplest parts of the material to someone else? In our information-driven society, both teachers and students fall into the trap of ‘more is better.’ Often I think of myself more as a personal trainer than an information-deliverer.
5. **It’s all about consistency.** Obviously, Rome wasn’t built in a day, and neither can

your goals be reached in a few days or weeks. It takes months, years, and even decades to really master certain musical concepts or skills. And, if you think that's bad news, let me tell you that this is the best news you'll ever hear when it comes to learning music: Everything you learn, you earn, and own, with pride, for a life time; and, it just keeps getting better and better: the music, the way you feel, and the way you make other people feel.

6. **Build slowly and trust.** We started simple, (although at the time I didn't think it was simple), and over time, slowly, I can see how all the exercises I am doing tie in together. The role of the teacher is to have a master plan, and the role of the student is to trust that the details of the things that are being asked of you are the right things and that they are part of that master plan, which you won't be able to understand even if he tells you in advance what it is.
7. **Results are guaranteed.** They say there no guarantees in life. Well I propose that as long as the following ingredients are in place, there is no way you won't succeed as a student. It is virtually impossible not to play the way you want to play if:
 - the teacher genuinely wants the student to succeed
 - the teacher has a master plan for the student
 - the student trusts the teacher
 - the student does what the teacher says to do
 - the student sticks with it

That's actually a pretty direct formula, right? Can it really be that straightforward? Well let's go back to point #1: keep it simple.