

What Happens When Students “Take a Break” from Lessons

by Dennis Winge

Generally, students decide that they want to stop regular lessons with a teacher for one of 3 reasons:

1. An interruption in their life has occurred in which they can no longer take lessons, either geographically (such as when they move), or financially (such as when they lose their job)
2. A feeling of overwhelm, in which they decide they cannot keep up with the lesson content, and that they need time to ‘absorb’ all the material that has been given
3. They are not happy with the teacher or the lessons in some way

Regarding the first reason, there is not much to be said if a student experiences an interruption, although at times the student and teacher may agree that the student can visit on an irregular basis if they continue to visit the area from which they are moving and would like to continue lessons in some fashion.

Regarding the third reason, it can and does happen that a remark is made, or a policy has changed, or there is simply a situation that irritates the student. In an ideal world, the student would tell the teacher what that reason is, and then the teacher could try to amend the situation and make it up to the student, but in the real world most students would prefer just to quit and avoid any such potentially confrontational conversation. In most cases, therefore, the situation and the relationship both end relatively abruptly.

However, the second reason is the one in which students have the biggest misconceptions about. First of all, when a student decides to take a break because he/ she has “too much to practice” and wants time to absorb it all, it is most likely a reflection on the teacher, not the student. The biggest mistake music teachers make is piling on the lesson content too quickly. The teacher must manage the rate at which the student is learning by helping them to implement (really know how to use the material) as well as integrate (to tie in newly learned material with other content the student already knows.) These things are relatively easy to do but few teachers even think to do them, unfortunately.

When a student quits, it’s often a case of “the best laid plans of mice and men.” The student gets distracted by life and typically doesn’t put in the time at home. That’s why taking lessons is so valuable: they have an intrinsic “accountability” factor that self-study doesn’t have, or if it does it would take an enormous amount of self-discipline to maintain.

So, almost all the time, the student simply loses momentum, until the time comes when he/she either goes back to playing the same old things, or in the case of beginners, they quit playing altogether. Even if students were able to practice on their own in a way that was sustainable and conducive to making long-term progress, the momentum might be highly reduced.

And even if the same momentum continued, the degree to which the student would practice efficiently would be far from ideal. Teachers provide guidance in the form of knowing what’s important and what’s not important. Most of the time, when I see a returning student, they have become side-tracked on some detail of music (or a specific song), the involvement in which doesn’t really serve their overall progress as musicians.

It is up to the teacher to not only keep the student engaged by providing short-term gratification such as learning riffs and songs the student is interested in, but also to guide them to keep strengthening their skills in the fundamentals of music – rhythm, harmony & melody. If only one of these things dominate the lesson time, the student will, respectively, either a) never become proficient on their instrument or b) lose interest.

It would be ideal if music teachers across the world would: a) talk to their students about their personal overarching musical goals, b) break those goals down into smaller increments that are doable and easy for the student, c) explain to them how the activities presented relate to the overall goal to keep them motivated to doing them, and d) ask for and actively reflect upon student feedback, and do so regularly.

It would also be ideal if students: a) communicated openly and honestly about their experience of the lessons, b) listened to the teacher's feedback about the big-picture of why they are doing what they are doing, and c) trusted in the process of learning.

There is a lot more that could be said here, perhaps enough to fill a whole book, but for now, if you are a student, it would be wise for you to see how dramatically faster taking lessons is toward reaching your goals, and to speak up and tell your teacher what is working for you and what isn't, because you owe it to yourself to make the fastest progress possible, not just because you are paying for lessons and 'the customer is always right,' but because in becoming proficient (or even virtuosic) on an instrument there is a degree of life-long fulfillment that is too indescribably joyous for words.