

Misconceptions About Group Teaching

By Sharon Cheek

I have taught beginners in small groups since I began teaching 28 years ago. Having taught all my intermediate and advanced students privately, I switched them all to group lessons two years ago. The following thoughts came out of a letter I sent to parents, explaining why I was changing to a group lesson format.

Misconception 1: Private lessons are superior to class lessons. Children will learn faster in private lessons.

Historically, piano lessons were taught privately because the first piano students were the sons and daughters of royalty. Common folk did not own instruments. On the other hand, many other artistic and athletic activities have been traditionally taught in groups. Most Olympic gold medalists have spent the majority of their time on teams. Even dance was originally learned in tribal rituals, and has been passed down for centuries in group form. Music teaching is one of the rare teaching genres that believes private lessons are better than group lessons. The idea of private piano lessons sprang from financial and cultural necessity, not because effective education demanded it.

Just because something is traditional does not make it correct. We did not have the technology to teach in groups until around the mid-point of this century. The assumption that private lessons are better has not been thoroughly tested. In my own experience, I believe that well-taught group lessons are a more effective means of teaching. Students progress faster, have more fun, and develop more independence in group lessons.

Misconception 2: Students will be held back by other students. Better students will not be able to progress at their own pace.

When I first began teaching group lessons 25 years ago, this was my primary concern. My first realization was that the pace of learning is definitely not the most important factor in learning. Above speed, I would say comfort in learning is much more important. This includes self-esteem, solidity of learning and peer support.

I emphasize skills, not repertoire. Repertoire can be performed correctly only if the skills are there to accomplish it. The pace of learning these skills is fairly universal. However, the use of these skills is individual. For example, I can teach a piece that drills the five fingers of each hand. Some students will play at lightning speed, while others play slowly and methodically. I have some third-year students that play better than fourth-year students. How fast students progress is primarily determined by how much they practice at home and their innate talent, not the format of their lessons.

Misconception 3: Private attention from the instructor will inspire a student to practice more than other students.

I do not know where this idea originated, but I don't believe it's true. I've taught private lessons to beginners, intermediate, and advanced students for 25 years, and the students who practiced the least

in my studio had private lessons. Students are much more inspired by their peers' performances than my own.

Misconception 4: Private lesson time is more valuable than group time.

A lot of time can be wasted in private lessons. When a student comes in and hasn't practiced, you have several alternatives: have a "practice lesson," threaten and yell, or talk about their lives. (I have done all three.) However, in a group lesson you can: have them work on theory, listen to another student, or give a student a specific passage to practice alone in addition to the above.

From my perspective, a group setting is educationally richer than private lessons. What is missing in a private lesson is the ability to observe the learning process. When the teacher makes a correction during a private lesson, the student is forced to concentrate on that correction and produce it at the lesson. Their attention is on the doing aspect, not the intellectual process of self-correction. In a group setting, students have the opportunity to observe the teaching process, which helps them become their own teacher. If they are watching the music while listening to another student play, they begin to observe the process as a teacher would. They become independent learners by recreating this process on their own.

Misconception 5: Students at the intermediate and advanced levels learn at different paces; therefore, lessons must be individualized.

I have not found this to be true. The intermediate and advanced levels progress in a regular fashion. Although students who practice more learn faster, the process is similar.

I like to think of my students as the cream of the crop. Most of them make As and Bs in their schoolwork. I also have cream-of-the-crop parents, because non-caring parents usually don't give their children piano lessons. So, students in my group classes have similar backgrounds.

The pace of learning piano is dependent on a variety of factors. Certainly the first factor is the amount of time spent practicing. But equally as important is the physical coordination of the student. Very often I will have a brilliant student who has average or below average coordination, or a very coordinated student with a lot of other activities and less time to practice.

Misconception 6: Students need to have their pieces carefully and individually selected for their learning.

Piano teaching has drastically changed in the past 40 years; we know so much more now. Those of us who have continued to study the art of teaching have become more adept at evaluating pieces for students. There are appropriate pieces that teach intermediate and advanced skills. For instance, I use Bach's C Major Prelude to teach the technique of blocking broken chords.

Misconception 7: You cannot teach technique effectively in a group lesson. Each student needs individual attention.

Imagine that you are teaching a Hanon exercise to a private student. He or she plays it a week later with a collapsed second finger. You advise the student on how to correct the problem during the coming week's practice.

Now imagine that you are teaching the same Hanon exercise to four students in a group class. When they return next week, one has a collapsed second finger, one has a fifth finger going up in the air, one has a flattened hand shape, and one has a collapsed wrist. The class listens while each student is corrected. Not only are the students learning to correct their own performances, but they are learning other principals of technique.

Misconception 8: Students cannot develop their own musical style in a group lesson.

The first requirement for musical playing is to follow the instructions on the page. Think about how much time you spend teaching the student to carefully look at the entire page. In a group lesson — with peers listening to each other — musical playing becomes the norm. No one wants a peer to point out the dynamics of a piece. The biggest change I have seen with advanced group lessons is musicality.

Students who are thoughtful, intellectual, and open to emotional playing are instantly transformed in a group lesson by hearing other players' performances.

Misconception 9: You will not get to know your students as well in a group as you do in private lessons.

Before I taught exclusively in groups, I thought this was true. However, many students who barely spoke to me in a private lesson blossomed in a group lesson, expressing themselves more than ever. I saw personalities with more humor and more expression than I had seen in private lessons.

Which students need private lessons?

It may sound like I don't believe anyone should have private lessons. However, there are conditions which make them necessary. The first factor is having no social peer. For example, a high school beginner should not be grouped with second graders. There are other factors that make group lessons less effective for exceptional students. Most of them will have some of these qualities, but usually not all four:

- Exceptional coordination skills
- Practicing one to two hours daily and consistently
- Advanced intellectual and physical abilities
- A desire to play the piano to the exclusion of other activities

If a student has all these qualities, private lessons might be necessary. However, if you have a studio with multiple gifted students, you can still teach them effectively in a group. I now have such a student who prefers to be in a class with her peers because it is more stimulating. When she needs extra help, I simply give it to her at no charge.

I believe that properly taught group lessons are a more effective means of teaching than traditional private lessons. If you are a teacher who has taught private lessons exclusively, I suggest you get two students together who are socially compatible, and play at about the same level. Give group teaching a try — you may like it!