

MINI ESSAY 22: GROUP TEACHING

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I have received many emails from teachers asking advice about teaching group piano classes for children, so I thought I would put my thoughts on the subject into a Mini Essay.

Group classes have become an increasingly popular way for children to learn piano in the beginning stages of study. They are a great way to introduce children to piano study, and I hope the trend of offering such classes will continue to grow.

We have been asked many times if we offer group class lesson plans for Piano Safari. We have considered writing plans, as both Katherine and I have taught many group classes using Piano Safari. However, since every configuration of group instruction is different, and each class has its own personality, we feel that the better approach is for teachers to adapt the activities and ideas presented in the *Teachers Guide for Repertoire Book 1* to their specific group of children.

Common Configurations of Group Classes

Some of the types of group classes that can be offered include:

- **Option 1:** Weekly lesson plus weekly group class
- **Option 2:** Weekly lesson plus monthly group class
- **Option 3:** Group class plus private lesson taught by a teaching assistant under supervision
- **Option 4:** Weekly group class only
- **Option 5:** Daily group class/lesson/supervised practice

Weekly Lesson + Weekly Group Class

My favorite type of class is Option 1, weekly lesson plus weekly group class. At one point in my teaching, I did not accept any new beginner unless they committed to coming twice a week, once for the group class and once for the lesson. Parents who are told from the beginning that piano is twice a week accept this easily. After all, soccer is much more frequent!

In this configuration, the lesson is devoted to learning repertoire and working on technique, while the group class focuses on performing, ensemble playing, and musicianship.

Classes like this work best if the students are at relatively the same level. Level is more important than age, but I would not put a 12-year-old beginner in a class with 6 year olds. However, a class of 6-9 year old beginners would work well. Having a weekly class where the levels are very different creates problems, as only certain activities can be made to be multi-level. The ideal class size is four to six students.

The group class is a musicianship class that includes subjects such as:

- **Theory:** Intervals, note names, terms are practiced in games.
- **Performance:** Children who have a chance to perform weekly become much more confident performers than those who have infrequent performance opportunities.
- **Ensemble:** Children play pieces together, and I create ensembles (rounds, etc.) for them to play in a group.
- **Improvisation:** The children stand in a line and, one at a time, improvise as I play an accompaniment.
- **Rhythm:** We practice rhythm with tapbacks, rhythm cards, and moving to music.
Listening: It is important for students to listen to good performances. I play for them, or we watch YouTube videos.
- **Sight Reading:** Each student works through his own pack of *Sight Reading & Rhythm Cards* at his own pace.
- **Music History:** I made a timeline for my wall to help the children understand music history. We listen to music and study composer biographies.
- **Ear Training:** I play patterns and the children repeat them at the piano, each in turn. Or we sing and solfege. Older students practice rhythmic and melodic dictation.

Here is a sample lesson plan for a beginning level weekly musicianship class:

Time	Activity	Purpose
4:00-4:05	Welcome and calisthenics in a circle	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Calm and definite start to the class
4:05-4:07	Tapbacks in a circle. I tap a rhythm and the students repeat. Tap on shoulders, heads, knees, etc.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rhythmic ear training
4:07-4:20	I have each student's performance piece(s) written on a slip of paper (which I do as they arrive before class). Put in a hat and pull one slip out of the hat to see who performs next.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Practice performing • The hat keeps them engaged because they do not know when they will play.
4:20-4:22	Cowboy Improvisation from <i>Repertoire Book 1</i> . Each person improvises for 8 measures while I play the accompaniment.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improvisation
4:22-4:37	Sight Reading Cards. I give each student a card to practice alone by tapping on a table. Each plays for me when ready. I check off each exercise and send the student to practice the next exercise.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sight reading practice • I can see how the student works alone • One on one time with each student to check technique
4:37-4:45	Suction Cup Game. I put letter cards on a window (set up before class), and the students take turns throwing a sticky suction cup ball at the cards. If it lands close to, for example, D, that student plays all the D's on the piano.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • White key names review • Fun

Weekly Lesson + Monthly Group Class

Performing is the best use of time for a monthly group class. Because the class is focused primarily on performance, this type of class can accommodate students at various levels and ages more easily than the weekly class. One very successful model I used in Oklahoma was to combine studios with another teacher. We had two group classes per month (these were free to students). We did not worry about who attended. Any student who was available could attend the class, whatever their age or level.

Here is a sample lesson plan for a monthly group class:

Time	Activity	Purpose
Before class	Write performance pieces on slips of paper	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Streamline performance order
4:00-4:25	Performances. Pull a slip of paper out of the hat to see who plays next.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Practice performing
4:25-4:35	You perform for the students while they eat a snack, if desired. Snacks lend to a party-like atmosphere, but you can dispense with snacks if you want a more serious class.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hearing live performance
4:35-4:45	<p>Play a multi-level Whiteboard Racing Game that works with all ages.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Place two chairs side by side a distance from a whiteboard on the wall. • Choose two students (level and age does not matter). • The students sit in the chairs. • You say to the 6 year old, "When I say go, run to the board and draw a treble clef sign." • Say to the 16 year old, "When I say go, run to the board and draw a Bb 2nd inversion chord in the bass clef." • Give them each a marker. • Say, "Ready, set, go." • The student runs to the board, completes his activity, and returns to his seat. Whoever completes this first gets a sticker on his hand or book (even most high schoolers like stickers). • Call up two more children. <p>I like this game because there is no winning and no teams, just a low-stress sticker reward. If one child is not getting earning any stickers, you can easily change the outcome of this game by the questions and pairing of children you choose, so that everyone is successful.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Theory review game • Suitable for children of all ages and levels • Fun

Weekly Lesson Taught by Teaching Assistants + Weekly Group Class

If you have teaching assistants, you can have a class that meets once a week for an hour. For the first half hour, the students have a private lesson with a teaching assistant. You walk from room to room to see how they are doing. Meet with the teaching assistants at another time in the week to give feedback and help with lesson planning. You will need one teaching assistant per student in the class.

During the second half of the hour, the students have a group class that you teach, with the teaching assistants helping and participating. The types of activities will look very much like the Weekly Group Class Plan from Option 1.

Variations:

- If you need to teach one of the lessons, you can have your teaching assistants videotape themselves teaching so you can still offer feedback.
- If you have six children and three assistants, you can have three of the children have lessons in the first half hour and class in the second half hour, while the other three children have class the first half hour and lessons the second half hour. Each teaching assistant will teach a child each half hour, while you teach both of the group classes. The teaching assistants should videotape their teaching.

Weekly Group Class

If the class you offer is a group class only with no lesson component, the children will most likely progress more slowly.

I would suggest limiting the class to four students and having the parents attend to help their child.

You can have a class like this with one or two pianos or in a piano lab. You will have to present all the pieces in the class and keep the students progressing at the same rate.

This type of class is ideal for beginning adults in a piano lab setting. With children it is more difficult because they need more individual help and instruction to stay focused.

I team-taught a preschool class with a colleague that met weekly in a group. It went fine, but we were not very concerned about progressing quickly, because the children were so young. It was more of an introduction to piano. For older children, progressing is of more importance.

Here is a sample lesson plan for beginners of average age:

Time	Activity	Purpose
4:00-4:05	Welcome and calisthenics with parents and students	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Calm and definite start to the class
4:05-4:10	Review Charlie Chipmunk, with children and parents sitting in a semi-circle around the piano. Begin with the student you know will play the best. Have the person playing next standing next to the piano to watch the playing student.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Review a Rote Piece • Learn by watching another child playing
4:10-4:20	Introduce Hungry Herbie Hippo with two children sitting on the bench and the other two standing on either side to watch. Play a phrase, then each student repeats it several times. Each sitting student changes places with a standing student. Repeat. It should go much more quickly with the second pair of students, since they watched the first pair. Repeat with other phrases.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • New piece
4:20-4:25	At a table, have the students and parents tap each finger 4x each while you work on hand position. Use the fuzzies, do finger circles, have them check each other's and their parent's hands, or use whatever other activities you like to shape hand position and develop firm fingertips.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Technique
4:25-4:30	Charlie Chipmunk Ensembles. Have two children play Charlie Chipmunk together, while you play the accompaniment. Add a third, and then the fourth child (if you can all fit at the piano!)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensemble • Reviewing Charlie Chipmunk
4:35-4:40	Improvisation Cowboy Improvisation while the children play in turn on the black keys, with you playing the accompaniment.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improvising
4:40-4:45	Suction Cup Game listed above	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Learning the names of white keys
	Send home a very clear and specific assignment. If a child is falling behind, talk to the parents about practicing more, or adjust the pace of your class to keep the children progressing together.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Accountability

Daily Group Class/Lesson/Supervised Practice

I would love to teach children who could come daily to piano. This would require practice rooms for each student. I have heard that this is done in other countries with mixed results.

For this to work, balance would be required between using time for group activities, performing, ensemble work, practicing, and hearing pieces. A teaching assistant would be helpful. If I ever have the chance to try this configuration, I will update this essay with a lesson plan.

Resources for Group Piano, available on Amazon

Athey & Hotchkiss. *A Galaxy of Games for the Music Class*
Fisher, Christopher. *Teaching Piano in Groups*
Yurko. *Music Mind Games*