



Establishing a Private Teaching Studio

Introduction

The following guide offers a range of strategies for establishing and/or growing your private teaching studio. The recommendations and resources included in this guide were culled from several veteran teachers who have built thriving private studios in Boston and New York. The material is broken down into 5 sections:

1. Approaches to Teaching
2. Marketing Strategies
3. Setting Up Your Studio
4. Interviewing and Adding Students to Your Studio
5. Additional Resources

Approaches to Teaching

Developing an effective teaching practice requires a great deal of experimentation, reflection, creativity and time. As a performance major, you may not have had the opportunity to study pedagogy in depth or build experience as a student teacher. Don't let this deter you from exploring teaching as a possible strand of your professional portfolio. We certainly recommend taking advantage of opportunities to develop your teaching skills while in school—whether through student-teaching programs, community outreach initiatives, or volunteer opportunities. But if you are starting from square one, there are many informal ways to cultivate your teaching skills as you build your private studio.

- **Find a Mentor.** One of the most effective ways to strengthen your teaching practice is to find a mentor who can help guide your early development. Having a person to talk through challenges with, seek advice from, and share materials with will be invaluable as you begin to build your studio. You may be able to develop a mentor relationship with one of your past teachers, or you may choose to reach out to another teacher who you have met through your studies. If you aren't able to find a veteran teacher to mentor you, consider reaching out to several of your peers who have experience teaching—they will certainly have developed strategies and practices that you can learn from as you begin your path as a teacher.
- **Shadow a Veteran Teacher or Two.** Exposing yourself to myriad teaching methods and models is also a wonderful way to cultivate your personal teaching practice. Many established private teachers would happily welcome a volunteer assistant—if you have the time, this can be a great way to develop your teaching skills and also potentially connect with future students. Many established teachers have more demand than they can meet and may be able to match you with students who they don't have time to take on.
- **Take a Free Online Course.** While there is no substitute for hands-on experience, you can benefit tremendously from taking a pedagogy or arts education course. Taking a course doesn't have to be cost or time-prohibitive—you can likely audit a university course or take a class online for free through services such as Coursera, Udacity or edX.

Marketing Strategies

The first challenge facing any independent teacher is getting students, especially when you are establishing yourself in a new community. While each satisfied, well-taught student is bound to attract others, the first contacts are the hardest to win.

You can develop an effective promotional campaign and maximize your chances of success by defining your market before setting up. Consider these questions:

1. Are there any areas that lack an adequate number of teachers? Is there a demand?
2. What are the market segments? Pre-school children? Senior citizens? Adults?
3. Can you afford to rent a studio in a certain area? Do local zoning regulations permit the use of a specific building or your home as a studio?
4. What are the socio-economic factors? Can parents in the area afford the kind of fees you want to charge? Conversely, can you afford to set fees low enough for parents in a more depressed area?

Once you identify the existing conditions and market segments, you must determine strategies for contacting your audience:

- **Determine which segment of the market you want to engage.** Before creating a marketing strategy, it's important to decide on which age-group and level you are most comfortable with. It's also important to evaluate your strengths and lead with what sets you apart as a teacher.
- **Create a dynamic mission statement for your studio:** It's important to have a concise statement about your studio to offer to potential clients. Your "mission statement" should give a potential student a focused picture your teaching style, the age ranges and ability levels you teach, the instrument(s), styles or genres of music you cover, and any "add-ons," such as monthly master classes or recitals.
- **Diversify your marketing efforts.** There's no one proven way to attract new students—your marketing strategy should include a variety of efforts to reach people where they are.
- **Tell people in your immediate network that you are building a studio.** You never know who may be able to connect you with a new student. They won't know to make the connection unless you tell them you're looking for students. For example, your past teachers may have potential students they can't take on, your peers may be moving to a new city and looking to recommend a replacement, a beloved teacher in your community may be retiring. You can also leverage post-performance receptions as an opportunity to connect with audience members who may want to study with you.
- **Reach out to teachers and administrators at local schools to create awareness about your studio.** Introduce yourself to local music teachers and program directors by emailing your resume and an overview of your studio. You might not get an immediate response, but getting your name out there can yield a couple of referrals.
- **Join local and state-wide teaching associations.** Membership in local, state, or national organizations such as the Massachusetts Music Teachers Association (MMTA), the Music Teachers National Association (MTNA), or for pianists, the New England Piano Teachers Association (NEPTA), is extremely important for the independent teacher. It's as important to network with colleagues as it is with potential students and their parents. You will also gain access to timely information and resources that could be relevant to your students.
- **Have a business card on you at all times.** You never know who you're going to run into at a concert, birthday party or restaurant. Always have a card on hand to give to a potential client.
- **Post listings in free local papers, on craigslist, and in community parent list-serves.** Create a short, compelling pitch or ad about your studio and post away. Keep your message consistent,

and adjust the format to fit the forum. Always include a link for more information that will lead potential clients to your website.

- **Create a website with rich information about your teaching.** Prospective students and their parents will go looking for information about you online. You should have a central place where clients can find rich information about you—your teaching philosophy, pictures of your students, testimonials, etc. It's not hard to create a professional website: see our handout on 'web-presence for musicians' for help in this area.

These marketing efforts will require financial and human resources (that's you). Your studio budget should include adequate funds for business cards, print materials, policy statements, and web hosting fees, all of which are fully tax-deductible. Every effort you make to further community awareness of your studio has the potential for attracting new students!

Setting-Up Your Studio

Before plunging in and looking for students, it's important to take care of basic business and prepare carefully, in terms of set-up, accounting, and policies.

- **Studio Location and Structure**
 - *So, now you're self employed.* What does that mean, legally and financially? Local and/or state laws may require filing a statement to operate under a trade or business name or a license to operate a business. Go to your state government website to collect information about this process. If you are teaching from your home, be diligent about investigating the bi-laws of your building as well as neighborhood/municipal ordinances that may restrict how and when you can work from your home.
 - *The Home Studio:* If you live in a central location and are considering teaching from home, be mindful of creating a professional and welcoming environment for both your students and their parents. Considerations include: having a clean waiting area for parents, setting up a dedicated, quiet space for teaching, exploring the option of soundproofing your studio to cut-down on neighbor complaints, obtaining parking permits if needed, and communicating clearly with people who share space about your business needs.
 - *The External Studio:* If a home studio is not an option, you can explore a range of settings, including community centers, historic houses, schools, churches, and other places where convenient access and reasonable rent can be found. Keeping your work and personal space separate can be desirable, as well as the availability of parking, nearby public transportation, and soundproof facilities. Of course, you will likely incur rental fees, which has to be weighed as you build your business.
 - *Traveling to Students:* Many parents prefer teachers who are willing to travel to their homes. This can add a lot of extra time and expense, and should be weighed seriously. Your travel expenses and the extra time you spend can be structured into the lesson fee, and all expenses you incur (e.g. gas, public transport, etc.) can be tax deductible.
 - *Cooperative Multi-Teacher Studios:* In this arrangement, groups of teachers join together in a cooperative venture as an unincorporated small business in a communal space. They share business costs and provide both artistic and professional support to one another. Expenses can be shared on a proportionate percentage of income, with a specific salary given to a director who is responsible for business management and administrative duties. Pros include: task specialization, reduced overhead, and a creative team to support the growth of your business. Of course, when you are in business with many partners, there can be conflicting opinions and visions that require mediation.

Because this kind of venture is complex, it's crucial to seek advice from artists who have established cooperatives to learn from their models, best practices, and mistakes.

- *The Books.* You can consider opening a checking account for your studio—it may make it easier for you to track expenses and income for tax purposes. You may want to consult a tax advisor. You will be paying in quarterly estimated tax payments (what self-employed business people do), unless your studio teaching is only a small fraction of your income and you earn a salary from another source where taxes are deducted. Your tax advisor will help you determine your quarterly estimated tax payment. For more information about taxes for self-employed artists, consult the Personal Finance handout.
- **Create a studio policy statement.** A policy statement is perhaps the most important tool for your studio. Your studio policy statement should include your policies on the following:
 - *Number of lessons (private and group) over the academic year.* Clearly articulate how many lessons you will give in a year and how long and frequent they will be. Align your calendar with the local public school calendar and block out major vacation periods.
 - *Policy for student absences and make-up lessons.* Articulate how much notice you require in order to reschedule a lesson (e.g. a parent must contact you 24 hours before the lesson in order to be eligible for a make-up). State clearly that if notice isn't given, payment for the lesson will be due. You may also want to limit the number of reschedule/make-up opportunities in a calendar year.
 - *Policy for teacher absences.* You should have clear language about the way you will contact students/parents if you are unexpectedly unavailable for a lesson. You can give two options: a make-up lesson at a convenient time for the student, or no lesson and a pro-rate of payment.
 - *Policy for tardiness.* Clearly state your expectations about tardiness—you should make it clear that you won't extend a lesson if a student is late and full payment will be due.
 - *Lesson rates.* This is often the hardest thing for beginning teachers to decide upon. Consider your training, experience, and the market-rate in your community. Ask teachers at different levels what they charge, and establish your rate accordingly. Provide students with rate options for 30 minute, 45 minute, and 60 minute lessons (the fees don't have to be exactly proportional).
 - *Frequency and preferred method for payment.* Most teachers recommend monthly payment, up-front via check or direct transfer. Some teachers also offer a 'semester' format, which cuts-down on administrative and bookkeeping duties. It's important to establish an organized system for tracking payment. You may want to establish an invoice system for situations such as recurring late payments or bounced checks.
 - *Policy for late payment.* You should clearly state when and how you will communicate if payment is not received on time. Create stock language that you can use either in person or via email to remind parents of late payment. You may also want to build in a penalty fee for very late payments. If it's a recurring problem, be open and honest with the parents and try to assess if there are broader underlying issues.
 - *Your contact information.*
- **Collect and refine your teaching materials.** The best way to build your library of teaching materials is to collect recommendations from other teachers. You will grow, refine and personalize your teaching materials as you become more experienced and as your students reach new levels. Don't hesitate to mix materials from several different series and publishers. The

most important thing is to keep your materials organized, either through a digital or physical filing system. There is also a wealth of information online—scour teacher blogs, Amazon reviews, instrument family organizations (e.g. National Flute Association, Percussive Arts Society) for recommendations and newly published resources. If you can't find something that fits your needs—create it! It may also be helpful to have a one-sheet with information about local instrument materials and repair, new instrument purchase, and tuning service for your students and their parents to reference.

Interviewing and Adding Students to Your Studio

Once you have inquiries coming in, the next step is to go through an interview process with the student to assess whether you are a good match for one another. Below are some guiding principles for working through this phase:

- *Fielding Inquiries.* Whether an inquiry comes via phone, in person or in an email, you'll want to articulately communicate the focus of your studio, your approach to teaching, and the range of students you work with. Practice being succinct, personable, and inquisitive.
- *Keep track of prospects and how they heard about you.* Whether or not a prospective student turns into an actual student, you should hang on to their contact information. This can enable you to stay-in-touch, which may lead to a working relationship down the line. Also, always ask how prospective students heard about you—it's great to know which aspects of your promotional efforts are more effective.
- *Offer a trial lesson.* A trial lesson should enable you to assess the following: (1) the student's goals and needs; (2) whether there is (or could be) good rapport; (3) the a student's musical level. You should also communicate to the student and his or her parent your expectations, in terms of musical study, financial obligation and general studio policies.
- *Be firm with your fee.* Even with a reasonable fee, you should be prepared to get objections or requests for discounts — state your fee plainly and adhere to it. If your fee is prohibitive, you could offer referrals to other teachers who may be younger and less costly. If you are a new teacher, simply stick to your guns. You may lose some prospective students but you don't want to sell yourself short, or de-value your abilities and service.

Additional Resources

- *The Complete Guide to Running a Private Music Studio*, Mimi Butler, Butler 2008
- *The Independent Piano Teacher's Studio Handbook*, Beth Gigante Klingenstein, Hal Leonard Corporation, 2008
- Music Teachers National Association: www.mtna.org
- National Association for Music Education: musiced.nafme.org
- MusicPeeps – suite of online tools for managing your studio: www.musicpeeps.com
- PayPal – free tool for collecting lesson payment online
- Renters Insurance – if you are teaching from your home, make sure to have renters insurance to cover you in the case of an accident. Compare prices with some of the major providers such as Progressive, Statefarm, and Geico.