

KEYBOARD SKILLS

Strategies for Group Instruction

Guiding Principles

Teaching group instrumental lessons has both its challenges and its rewards. Classroom teachers must be mindful of social dynamics, differentiation needs, and volume concerns, to name a few considerations. However, learning to play keyboards in a group setting affords students numerous opportunities:

- Peer-to-peer teaching and learning
- Additional ways of solving problems
- Chamber music skills (non-verbal communication)
- An audience for performing
- Social support for focus and persistence
- Communal music making on an instrument that is largely a solo endeavor

Although students must have independent practice time to solidify technical skills, “strength in numbers” can also boost these skills when other members are playing in unison.

Planning Group Lessons

Building a Lesson around a Piece of Keyboard Repertoire

When writing a group keyboard lesson plan, begin by identifying the piece(s) you want your students to learn that day. Build the other activities—the warm-up, musical game, listening activity—around that focal piece. All aspects of the lesson should be related to the concepts you are exploring in your pieces that day.

Introducing a New Piece

When beginning a new piece, allow students to **experience** and **embody** the piece first. By internalizing the piece and creating a sense of ownership early on, students will be more successful and musical when they sit down to play it at the keyboards.

Here are some suggested steps to introduce a new work:

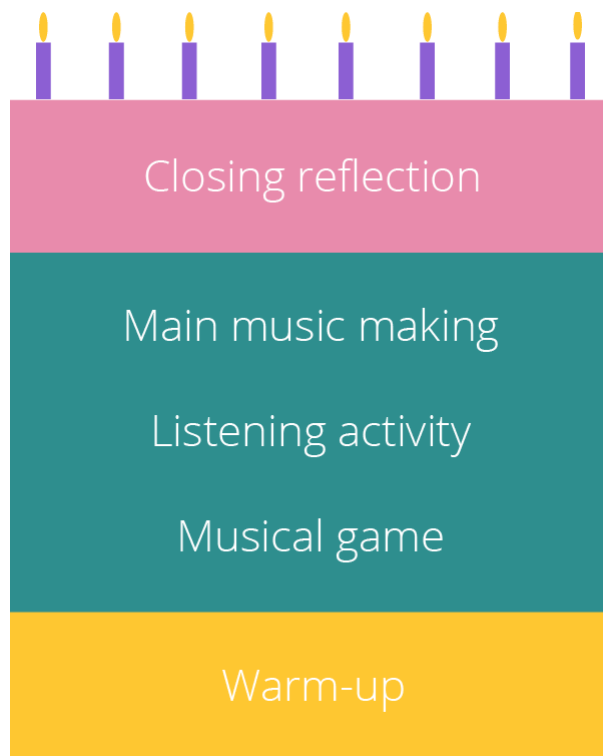
1. **Listen:** Introduce the new piece by listening as a class and discussing any interesting or unique qualities that stand out to you and your students.

2. **Sing:** Learn to sing the melody as a class (with lyrics, solfège, or chosen syllable).
3. **Embody:** Have students conduct and/or dance to the piece in order to physically express the pulse and character.
4. **Play:** Learn to play the piece on the keyboard.

Structuring an All-Keyboard Lesson

A well-structured keyboard class could be thought of as a three-layered cake: Warm-up—Listening and Performing Activities—Closing and Reflection.

These three main sections can be broken down into five activity categories: warm-up, musical game, listening activity, main music making, closing reflection.



One possible structure of an all-keyboard lesson plan includes five areas, all of which are related to the main piece(s) being studied as a class.

Instructional Activities	Objective	Time
<u>Warm-up</u> Songs	To warm up and engage students with a fun activity related to the main	5 Minutes

• Ear-training • Physical exercises	repertoire studied in the lesson	
<u>Repertoire and Technique</u> • Work on main piece and technique related to that piece • Composition and improvisation	• To learn new pieces and practice on related keyboard skills • To rehearse and perform for each other • To add new musical terms to the ongoing Musical Word Wall	20 Minutes
<u>Energy Song/Game</u> • Use song and movement to learn concepts related to repertoire	• To sing and play • To move to music	10 Minutes
<u>Listening</u> • Listen and analyze a score	• To build students' music literacy • To motivate and inspire students with great works • To learn about composers and the times in which they lived	5-10 Minutes
<u>Cool-Down/Reflection</u> • Closing song • Summarizing • Connecting	To make connections and reflect on concepts and pieces learned during the class	5 Minutes

Consider the learning and behavioral demands required of your students in each class, and experiment with varying the lengths of the segments and their order to keep students motivated and engaged. For example:

- If the majority of the class is spent learning a section of the piece, scaffold student practice time with clear tasks and objectives.
- If students have been sitting at the keyboards for a while, incorporate a movement game or transition to another part of the room before the reflection.
- If students are tasked with practicing a short, difficult section, allow for a longer listening reflection at the end of the class.
- If students are particularly energetic, give them a few minutes to explore the instrument and share back one interesting thing they discovered.
- Consider the use of manipulatives and visual aids to help students with different learning needs and abilities share information with one another.

Embedding Keyboard Work into Music Lessons

The components of a great all-keyboard lesson—warm-up, musical game, listening activity, main music making, closing reflection—can be incorporated as smaller segments within music classes as well. For example:

Day 1	Include a warm-up related to the new keyboard piece
Day 2	Play a musical game that teaches skills needed to play the piece
Day 3	Review new concepts or vocabulary and listen to the piece
Day 4	Learn a section of the piece
Day 5	Reflect on the piece and address student questions

Group Management

Establishing a Stop Signal

In your very first lesson, establish a signal that can be used to quiet the class. In order to maintain a musical atmosphere, consider:

- ringing a bell or chime,

- clapping rhythmic patterns via call and response (This is a great idea for younger students as it requires them to take their hands away from their instruments.),
- playing the opening of a fast keyboard piece (e.g., Maple Leaf Rag).

Have fun and choose the signal that feels right for you and your class!

Using the Space in Your Room

The piano is a fascinating, beautiful, enticing instrument! It is only natural for students to want to play, so teaching a new concept while at their instruments may prove distracting! Therefore, have children go to the instruments only when it is time for them to play.

Monitoring the Sound Level

Allow students to play both with and without headphones.

When practicing a new skill or learning notes to a new piece, headphones will be useful in helping students concentrate. While students are practicing independently, make your way around the class, ask students to remove their headphones and play for you, and offer comments and corrections as needed.

When reviewing or reinforcing work, students can benefit from practicing without headphones. Encourage students to listen to and learn from one another when possible.

Take note that some students may have sensitive ears and the noise may be too overwhelming for them (or for you). Purchase some ear plugs or allow students to use their headphones if the volume becomes an issue.

Practicing Away from the Instruments

In an effort to isolate and reinforce specific skills, it may be useful to have students practice away from their instruments. Consider:

- Warming up individual fingers by having students tap the table top.
- If practicing note reading, display music for all to see (with or without fingerings printed depending on the class ability) and have students “play” the notes on a table top or on laminated keyboard cards. Extend this activity by having students sing along with their silent finger playing.
- Practicing rhythmic accuracy by having students “play” their new songs on a hard surface, listening for finger strength and rhythmic accuracy

As an extra practice beat, ask students to “play” their new songs on a hard surface like a table top in front of them before trying it out on the keyboard. Warm up by asking the students to isolate certain fingers in their hand and tap the table top with them. Which fingers are more challenging to isolate? Ask: *Who can follow a short finger pattern you have set? Can another student invent a new pattern for a fellow student to try out? Can someone do the same pattern*

but add on a finger tap? Extend the idea by having the students sing along with their silent finger playing.

Facilitating Effective Practice Time

In order for students to feel successful when practicing, time management and lesson pacing is essential.

- Make sure that students **understand their task** before beginning to practice—it might be a class goal or personalized tasks.
- During the allotted practice time, intermittently **offer advice** to the class or draw the students' attention to written reminders on the board (e.g., fingering hints, rhythmic clarifications, technical advice, musical considerations).
- Be mindful of students' attention span and **set age and skill-appropriate intervals of work** (2–5 minutes for younger students and 5–15 minutes for older students). Gradually increase the practice blocks as students gain confidence and increase their playing abilities over the course of the year.
- **Break up the practice session** by reviewing the assigned task, either with a group tutti performance, a verbal reflection, or a game played away from the instrument.

Leading Group Rehearsals: Conducting and Playing

Lead the class in unison and group rehearsals by conducting with clear gestures. Ensure that you're standing in a place in the room that is visible to all students when they're sitting at their keyboards. It might be helpful to sing the melody.

Leading the class by playing your own keyboard—or choosing one student to lead the class from his/hers—can challenge students to practice their listening and chamber music skills.

Varying the Size of the Group Performing

Playing music is an ability that instills curiosity, concentration, determination, focus, and joy to name just a few benefits! Help students develop these skills by creating a safe yet stimulating atmosphere in your classroom that promotes hard work and improvement, and does not punish mistakes along the way.

Foster an atmosphere of group learning and accountability by varying the number of musicians selected to perform for the class at a given time. Build confidence in students and assess their vocal development, ear-training, and musical understanding by calling on soloists, duos, and trios to share their work with the class in a mini performance. This opportunity can be developed by having individual or small groups of students sing—or play on their responses on keyboards—simple call and response exercises with you.

Call and Response Exercises

Teacher: Student(s):

Hel - lo keyboard class Hel - lo Sa - sha
Good-bye (student's name) Good - bye (teacher's name)

Teacher: Student(s):

Sol Mi Sol Mi

Teacher: Student:

Hel - lo Fra - ces Hel - lo Sa - sha
Good - bye (student's name) Good - bye (teacher's name)

When performing in unison as a class, change the sound of an individual's keyboard to hear him/her over the rest of the group.

Sharing Keyboards

Having partners use the same keyboard can be a fun and beneficial experience for your students. Take note of the register each student plays and allow students to switch parts while learning a piece or vary roles from one assignment to the next.

Duets and four hand piano pieces are great ways to develop listening, teamwork, and chamber music skills in your students. There is fantastic and simple repertoire available for four hand playing. (See the repertoire list for some suggestions.) You could also arrange easy duets simply by having one student play the left hand and one person play the right hand of a new piece. Consider *Puppy Waltz* or *Hungarian Rhapsody Duet*.

Puppy Waltz

A. Artobolevskaya

Theme from Hungarian Rhapsody No. 2

Franz Liszt (1811-1886)

The image shows a musical score for the Theme from Hungarian Rhapsody No. 2 by Franz Liszt, arranged for two violinists: Primo and Secondo. The score is in 2/4 time and D major. The Primo part (top staff) is written for the right hand (RH) and left hand (LH). The Secondo part (bottom staff) is also written for the right hand (RH) and left hand (LH). The Primo part features a melodic line with eighth and sixteenth notes, while the Secondo part provides a harmonic accompaniment with chords and eighth notes. The score includes fingerings (1, 2, 3, 5) and a repeat sign at the end.

Note: The student playing the bass register, or the secondo part, will traditionally manipulate the pedal in any duet.