



HOW TO MAKE YOUR ONLINE LESSONS FUN

Vibrant, vibrant, vibrant music teaching. Proven and practical tips, strategies and ideas for Music Teachers.

You're listening to Episode 115 of the Vibrant Music Teaching Podcast. I'm Nicola Cantan and in this show, we'll discuss games and strategies for making online lessons fun.

Welcome back, beautiful teachers. This episode is part of a short series we're doing to help you level up your online lessons. Now that many of us have been teaching online for quite a while or we're back to in-person but we're thinking we might be back teaching online in the future again and we're out of immediate panic, "How do I set up a Zoom call mode?" We're exploring here on the podcast how you can level up your online teaching, make it even better for you and for your students so that, yeah, we can all get better together, right?

So we've looked already at some equipment and tools and planning strategies in the last few episodes if you want to go back and check those out. Today, we're looking at my favourite topic – FUN.

Now, I want to give you a warning right up front about this episode. Nothing too scary but I want to warn you that I'm about to throw a lot of ideas your way, okay? There's a lot of stuff coming up; little things and big things.

And I don't want you to get overwhelmed by it. I don't want you to listen to all these things and say, "I have to do all of the things. Oh my gosh. My lessons won't be fun if I don't do every single thing on this list." That is absolutely not what I'm saying here, okay?

What I want you to do is listen and whichever one of these; we're coming back to one thing again, guys; whichever one of these you think sounds appealing or sounds doable and like it will make a difference in your studio, go with that. Try it out. One of them.

You can always listen to the episode again or go to the show notes page again if you want to check out the other ideas later, okay? So just pick one, listen, have fun with me and pick out one thing when we get to the end of the episode.

The first section of these ideas is what I'm calling general teaching fun. These are probably the easiest to implement. So the first one; I said I wanted you to pick out just one thing, right? But I actually think we should all do this plus one more. Is that okay? Two things?

So the first one is that you need to smile more than usual. And I've talked about this and how I'm reluctant to give this advice because people; when they see me on video, tend to talk about how often I smile, which is probably true. But I think it's important for all of us to



smile a bit more and not in a forced way but to prompt yourself to smile more often when you're in a video lesson.

I really like the way that Emily Lany of Top Music from the Top Music team put this. She's pointed out that online lessons are actually more face-to-face than in-person lessons. As in you're closer; your faces are closer together through a screen than they would ever be in person.

Your face is basically, a lot of the time, almost filling the screen. It depends on your angle, of course, but it can be. And so, when they're paying that much attention to your face, you need to look a bit more animated. You need to smile often to show them your enthusiasm.

You also don't have the other body cues that show subliminally. Almost show to your students that you're on their side, that you're enthusiastic about what they're doing, that you're paying attention, that you're listening and appreciating their music. You don't have a lot of those things. And so, your smile is one of the best assets there.

It doesn't matter what your smile looks like, it doesn't matter if you're a bubbly; that kind of person. You don't have to be like that but you do need to smile more and picture your student's face on the other side of your camera or your screen even when you cannot see them so that you're smiling back at them while they're talking or playing, right? Think of their playing almost like someone talking to you in a conversation and you smiling to let them know that you're listening.

So that's the first general tip. The other general teaching fun ideas are all still about showing your enthusiasm. So these are some of the simplest things to implement and you absolutely don't need to do all of these. In fact, if you do all of them, I'd pivot too much although I'd do almost all of these.

But the first idea is something I use in my studio and that is sound effects. So I use Ecamm Live for my online teaching together with Zoom and I talked about that in the tools episode. So two episodes ago that was 113, I explained how I use Ecamm Live.

And one of the things you can do through Ecamm Live is sound effects. You can have little things that you can play it at the touch of a button. And they're fun, and they're silly and they make people smile and we all need to have a bit of a laugh.

So whether it's for reinforcement of something specific or it's just literally for giggles, I think sound effects are a great thing to bring into your studio. If you're not using something like Ecamm, you could still have something on your computer that you play as a sound effect.



Or you can even have those buttons that you get; I believe in the US, you get them at Target; that play a sound effect back or even a recorded sound or that kind of thing. Just silly little things like that do make a difference.

Another thing you might like to use to show your enthusiasm to your students is my Online Lesson Ovarions. These are totally free. They're on YouTube. They're on our YouTube channel and there's a whole playlist of them. If you're a member, you can also download the videos so you can have them actually on your computer.

So the Online Lesson Ovarions are just little videos; they're less than ten seconds each, okay? And they just show something that shows enthusiasm. So one of them is like a cheering crowd, for example. And one of them is a sort of aerial, swooping down aerial view of a sunflower field, I think it is.

So, and they say specific things to complement your students like about their dynamics, about their reading improving; that kind of thing. So they're just fun little things but you pop them up on screen, it plays the video, there's cheering in the background and it just gives that extra mark of enthusiasm that I think we often need in online lessons.

One of the challenges for many teachers with teaching online has been no stickers, right? No high fives. Those kinds of things do matter to students. Yes, they shouldn't be doing things only for praise but they need to know that they're on the right track and that you see them. And so, the Online Lesson Ovarion fills some of that gap where stickers aren't going to work anymore.

Another idea and I haven't done this, would be a party popper or any kind of noisemaker like that. Something you can bring out that says, "You did an extra good job there." So it can be a symbol with your students. I mean, I could have Steve, my little pet lobster; he's not a real lobster, by the way. My stuffed toy lobster, he could come up on the screen and wave about a bit, right?

Just silly things like that that make people feel like things are a bit more normal and feel some of your enthusiasm that they would have naturally in-person with you.

Another idea on the same lines is pom-poms. I used my cheerleading pom-poms in my online recital. This is something that we've been doing in the last few years at our regular recitals in the hall. I distribute pom-poms to all the students to use during the applause.

So the parents clap like silly grown-ups and the students wave their pom-poms in the air so that when the person looks out on the audience when they're bowing, it makes them smile that little bit more because the audience is all colourful and full of waving pom-poms rather than just polite applause.



So when I did my online recital, I had the pom-poms in the background as our decoration and I also waved them about plenty in my sort of emceeing or my little vamping bits in between student performances.

So pom-poms could be a regular part of your normal lessons that you wave about pom-poms because they look pretty fun on a video screen. They're nice and colourful and they jump all over the place, especially if you have a couple of colours, it can work really well. So just something like that to mark student achievement is great.

Then if you want to kick your fun up a notch further, you might like to incorporate some games. So the first level of games, not that there are any levels; this is not a lesser form of playing games but the easiest way to get into playing games in an online lesson, nevertheless, is to use ones that don't require any stuff or much instruction.

I have my students always have a piece of paper and a pencil on hand beside them and we can use that to play a lot of different games. I have a suggestion of, I think it's 12 games in the Web Wonder Series inside the Vibrant Music Teaching library. So if you're a member, you can look it out up or you can get the link at the show notes for this episode at VibrantMusicTeaching.com/115.

So those games all require just a piece of paper and a pencil from your student. And one of them requires nothing at all; in fact, a few of them do; other than for your student to grab a toy. So I'm going to explain to you how this game works. So this could be your first step towards more fun online lessons is simply playing a game like this.

I ask my student to grab a soft toy from their house; anything, you know? If they have a favourite little lion or whatever and they come back and get that with that toy. And then we play High Low Mask Out. This is for young students, young beginners by the way. So if I play a high sound, they're going to reach their toy up to the sky. If I play a low sound, they're going to bring it all the way down to the ground.

You can do that for anything that's this versus that and it's a great way to engage your young student. So if you want to take just one idea if you haven't been doing anything that feels fun in your online lessons and you want to spice things up, that's a great simple way to start. Or you can find more ideas like that in the Web Wonder Series.

Another thing you can do is to play your physical games that you normally play at your studio. If you have a collection from Vibrant Music Teaching or from elsewhere, you can play them as you would. It's just going to be you doing all the movements but students still love to play them.



So our Content Manager, Sara, from the team at VMT, she put her game on a whiteboard, a magnetic whiteboard. So she just takes the game board and she sticks it up with magnets to the magnetic whiteboard and then she has more magnets to use as game tokens.

And for the cards, she just holds them up to the screen so the student can read them or identify the note or whatever they need to do. And she moves the counters around and they play that way. That works great.

You can also do this playing the game, Flat, if you like. You're just going to need to have an overhead camera that looks down at the board or have a way to angle your device so that they can see what's going on.

It can be as simple as that. So if you already have loads of games in your studio and they've been collecting dust and you'd love to just put them into action, then give it a go. Try it out.

Another option for online games is a version using slides. So we have official VMT versions of all the most recent games the last few months. So there must be about; there's at least 15 that have slides versions. There might be more than that but that's a good chunk, right? So there's at least 15 games; oh, no, there's more than that at this stage. Anyway, good chunk of games; all the latest ones have slides' versions that we created.

Members have also translated some of the older games of their own volition and their own generous nature to donate their time to the community. They've been reworking those older games into PowerPoint versions and Google Slides versions as well.

So there's a huge amount for members to choose from there. And you can play those directly on your screen and you can use something like the Zoom stamps to move people around the board. We have full tutorials on how to do this inside the library.

So if you're listening to me wondering how this would possibly work, there is a tutorial video. You can look that up if this is something that's of interest to you being able to play games on the screen.

But you have three great options there for playing games. You don't have to give up your games when you're in online lessons. You can do ones that require no equipment or require the student to draw something on their end on a piece of paper.

You can play your physical games on something like a magnetic whiteboard or just simply laying them down on a table and pointing the camera down so that they can see what's



going on. Or you can play slides versions of the games, which have been adapted for use on the screen.

Another way to make your lessons a bit more fun, spice things up, keep your students guessing in their online lessons is with fun projects and themes. So one of the things I did in the last semester was called Surprise Starters.

So every week, for the last chunk, meaning, after the Easter break; so officially, the summer term for most schools here, I had a Surprise Starter ready for my students. And I shared this with members as well. So you can download these in the video library if you like or look them up and use them with your students.

Each one was a pattern-based activity and it starts with an intro video to show the Surprise Starter theme and then it's something silly and fun. So I'll give you one example.

One of the weeks, we did a musical Morse code. So I had Morse code up on screen and you had to communicate that using or playing a note on the piano. So dots and dashes or it's dots dash, you're going to play bap-ba or something like that or sing it or play it on the piano.

So we had musical Morse code and then it developed into rhythmic version of the musical Morse code so they were actually rhythm patterns on the last slide. So every Surprise Starter had three levels and they were all based on patterns in some way like that; rhythmic or oral patterns or something like that; chords, that kind of thing.

They were all things that could work with any level of student. So I did one and I did it for the whole week with every single student in their buddy lesson time with their own buddy lessons or in their solo time if they just have solo lessons.

So that kept things really fun for my students, really interesting. And every week, they would look forward to it and they would guess what was going to be in the intro music, intro video and that was a great feature for our lessons.

Another project we did last term was a composing project. I called these Collaborative Compositions because what we did was my students pass along these compositions between them.

So one student composed the A theme, the next student looked at the A theme and then composed a B theme to go with that and put it into a form. So they composed the next part and then they say, "Okay. It's going to be A-B-A-B," and we put it out like that.



And then, the next student took that and added the left hand to that or the accompaniment. And then, the next student decided on the title and the dynamics and the tempo for that piece. So four students, at least, touched each piece and we put them together.

I did all the notating myself on the screen in the lesson so they can see what was going on and I was doing that part for them. If you have a lot of older students, you could certainly get them to notate it themselves. But it was handy for me to be able to do that and it does save a bit of time if you do the notating.

So that was an awesome project. We absolutely loved putting it together. If you want more details on that and you think that might be a fun addition for your studio, you can find a video where I walked through exactly the full process on one of our YouTube lives.

So if you go to the YouTube channel or go to the show notes for this episode at VibrantMusicTeaching.com/115, you can find the link directly to the right YouTube video for that.

The last theme or project we did last year was a chord exploration. So with all my students in their buddy time or in a portion of their solo time, we did some exploration of chords. We talked about them in terms of roman numeral analysis, or well, not really analysis, but we talked about chords in terms of numbers, basically, and built patterns of chords together.

We talked about major and minor chords, the common patterns as well as inventing their own. And then we took some of those and we put them into Garageband to different instruments and effects to them.

That was detailed again in another YouTube live as I was doing it or as I was in the middle of that project. So that was actually two-parter; there's one about teaching chords creatively and then there's one about the Garageband part of that. Again, you'll find the links on the show notes – VibrantMusicTeaching.com/115.

So I've given you, as I said, a ton of ideas there. You don't have to do all of them, you don't even have to do any of those. But I want you to think about one thing you could do to make your music lessons more fun when they're online.

Whether you're online right now or it might be in the future or you are just using it as a backup lesson option for makeup lessons or whatever you're doing with online lessons, think of one way you could make them more fun. Maybe you're going to use Google Slides games, maybe you're just going to get a party noisemaker that you can wave around when they do something cool.



Choose one way and let us know in the Facebook group or in a comment on this episode show notes at VibrantMusicTeaching.com/115. We would absolutely love to hear from you and love to brainstorm together about how we can all make our lessons more fun.

Coming up next week in this mini-series, we're going to be talking about teaching strategies for online music teaching. So in other words, what are the things that we need to do differently when we're teaching online? How can we still be effective in the teaching of various different things? What strategies can we use in our teaching for online lessons?

We'll look at that as a general topic next week. So I hope you'll come back again for that. A lot of the tips will apply to in-person lessons as well. I find I've learned a lot from online lessons that I can apply in person. But definitely, extra important when we are teaching online to use these strategies.

So we'll be discussing that next week in Episode 116. I hope you'll join me back here then. And until then, have a fantastic week.

If you're a member of Vibrant Music Teaching, you can get access to tons of fantastic slides versions of our games as well as the Web Wonder Series that I mentioned in this episode. Just go to VMT.ninja to sign up today if you're not a member and you'll get instant access as well.