



## TEACHING BEGINNER READING IN ONLINE PIANO LESSONS

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You're listening to Episode 120 of the Vibrant Music Teaching Podcast. I'm Nicola Cantan and in this episode, we'll investigate how to approach beginner reading in online lessons.

Well, hey there. How's it going? It's great to be back with you again. I hope you've been enjoying this series about online teaching. If you've missed these episodes, then don't worry. You can go back and check them out in your podcast feed or on the site, Vibrant Music Teaching. And you can see the full list of episodes in the series on the show notes with this episode, which is [VibrantMusicTeaching.com/120](http://VibrantMusicTeaching.com/120). 1-2-0.

So we'll leave links there for every episode in this mini-series, which has been about taking what we know about online teaching so far, taking our confidence that we can do this, that we have the tech basically working and that everything is sort of okay and saying, "Okay. Now, what can we do better?"

Without beating ourselves up, without getting it too fancy; what's something we could improve here to make the experience better for us and for our students? If this is an option we're going to keep in our studios, if we're stuck with it for a little while; what can we do better? So that's what this mini-series has been all about and this is the last episode in it. Oh, my gosh, that flew by.

Today, we're talking about beginner reading but we've already covered tons of topics like equipment, and tools, and teaching technique, fun and games; lots of different things. So you can go back and check out all those episodes.

But this last topic is about beginner reading because, honestly, let me be straightforward with you – this was hard for me. Right at the beginning of the lockdown, I had, well, two completely and then a few more students who were almost at the beginning stages of reading music.

So two who were just about to approach reading on the staff; like we were just-- they were in Piano Safari and they were about to reach Unit 3 and then a few who needed more reinforcement or were in the beginning stages of reading in some other way.

And I struggled to think about how I was going to do this. I was tempted to just put it off, to say to myself, "Okay. The rest of the semester, I'm just going to teach them more pre-reading material and really solidify those concepts and tons of playing by ear and improvising and rote pieces. And I'm just going to run away from the other thing."



But I didn't. Of course, I didn't. I had to get real with myself and say, "No, you definitely can teach reading online. There's no reason why you can't do this. You just need to think carefully about it."

So what did I need to do? Well, I needed to do what I always do, which is prepare the students for the concepts before they get there. It sounds simple but a lot of the prep that I do for reading work, the reason I was struggling was that so much of it, I usually do with big, big motor skills, floor staff and big movements, basically, and a lot of stuff that's directly on the piano that was also going to be challenging in this format like the games that we play directly on the keys.

But that's an opportunity to be creative, right? So my list that I want every student to know before they get to the staff is pretty extensive. And I needed to make doubly sure and I believe you need to make doubly sure that your student knows, understands, can use, can manipulate all of these concepts really before they get to their first reading piece, especially for a young beginner, okay?

So the list goes as follows: the treble and the bass clef and associating them with right and left and up and down and high and low; all of those terms, they need to be associated well with each other. They need to understand up and down more generally in music and the sounds going up and going down as well as those patterns on the staff in notes that they can see things going up and down.

And that's more challenging than you think because if it's a really young student, they might not be as familiar with language reading from left to right. And so, you have to introduce that to them as well in conjunction with that so that they can see which direction the notes are going because they're going from left to right.

Then I also want them to know the landmark notes or at least a few special landmark notes that I need them to learn before we get to the staff. I need them to understand the difference between line notes and space notes and be using that vocabulary to describe them so that it's consistent with what I'm saying and they're saying and they can understand my explanations.

I also need them to understand steps and skips or 2nds and 3rds before we get to the staff and I need them to know their note values that we're going to come across soon. So for me, that would be quavers, crotchets, minims, dotted minims and semibreves they would all know before they get to the staff. And in US speak, that is a quarter, half, dotted half and whole notes.

So I told you it was a pretty big list, right? You might think it's kind of crazy that my students would learn all of those things before they ever read a note on the staff. But honestly, I have found that the shortest route to success, especially, as I say with young



students that if they know all of those things, they can be successful with their first reading piece.

And it's not a matter of me constantly saying before we start, "Okay. So this is this and this is that and here's how it goes," that they actually can take some agency over it because they know these beginner concepts.

So how do I do that? How do they know all those things? Well, games. That's the answer – lots and lots of games. And that's the same answer for online lessons. I just had to expand my repertoire of games that I could use online in order to be able to teach all of those concepts.

So that's where the learning was for me and the getting a bit creative was for me as well. Some of those, I ended up adding new games to the library for members to use and some was just about me thinking differently about something.

But one example of a new game that I introduced, partially because of this and partially because of a student who was further along and was struggling with this concept, was Right Left Smash Crash. So that's a game that I created to associate left and right with down and up and bass and treble.

I know not everyone would find that useful. But in some cases, it is a good association to have that bass clef is for left hand; sometimes you need that, and up and down on the staff and those patterns as well.

So I created that game to put all of those things together. That was one of the steps in making this work for me so that I could review those concepts with students. We created a screen version of that game so we could play it in Google Slides and that's really been helpful to make sure that's in place. That's just one example.

For things like landmark notes or lines and spaces, that was just about adjusting how I thought about these things and sort of doubling down on my own checklist but just making it work in online lessons and making sure, absolutely sure, that all of those things were in place.

So I impossibly did more review and more prep than I normally would because I knew that the student needed to be able to understand my explanations even more because I wasn't there, right? We've all experienced this.

Students need better, executive, functioning skills. They need to be able to organize their own stuff and follow more detailed directions in an online lesson or they need a parent on hand to do so.



So that's why I needed them to understand these concepts and especially the terms even more than in-person so that when I'm using certain vocabulary, they definitely know what I'm talking about and are associating those things the same thing.

This is like what I talked about a few episodes back when we're talking about general teaching strategies about understanding the words bar or measure and line and how they're distinct from each other so that they can navigate their music, right?

It's similar here. They need to understand treble and bass, and up and down, and lines and space notes and steps and skips so that when we're talking about things, we're actually communicating in the same language and they're following what I'm saying. Not that I'm giving lengthy explanations; I absolutely wouldn't suggest that but we do need to be on the same page, so to speak.

Which brings me to basically the reason that I knew this was going to be challenging or I was a bit hesitant about teaching this beginner stage of reading online at all and that's the pointing. The reason I needed them to have all this vocabulary more clearly is because I can't point at stuff.

And that was really the core of the challenge although I didn't realize that right away. I didn't know that was why I felt so like there was a barrier in the way but I think that's the primary barrier we have.

So once you understand that, okay, you're not going to be able to point at stuff, so that means you need that the student to be able to find it themselves, you can put things in place to make that possible, to make it able to happen.

So what do you do with all this prep? Where do you go next? Well, when you're introducing the first piece to your student, their first reading piece on the staff or the next one if you're already at this-- passed that stage with a student, this is absolutely fine to do later.

But for that first piece, ideally, what you want to do first I think is do a treasure hunt on the page together for all the things they already know. So you've done all this prep. Now, get them to identify all of these things within this new context of a piece that they're going to be learning to play.

So no reading yet, just get them to find all the stuff they know. So all those, "That swirly guy, what's that called again? Oh, that's the treble clef. What's the treble clef for? Well, it's for high notes and we normally play those with the right hand because they're on that side of the piano."

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So just talking through these things as much as possible, getting your student to find the things on the page that they already know and associating them with all of those concepts that you've covered so well is a great first step with this piece.

And then, don't be afraid to demonstrate the piece for your student. In some reading work, I definitely shy away from them and straighten the piece, playing the piece before my student has played it but they don't need to sight-read their first-ever piece.

So if you're someone who has a bit of that mentality that maybe slightly old school view that I still have a bit embedded in me, which is, "I can never play a piece before they play it or they won't learn to read." Right?

I want to encourage you to take a bit of a breath, step back and say, "It's fine," that they hear the music first. Like, "Come on. What am I even talking about?" That's what I need to say to myself anyway.

So it's fine to have the ear before the eye with these beginner pieces. They will still associate it with what's on the page and you've done so much great prep that they are understanding the notation, they are getting inside it and it's totally fine if they then hear the piece before they physically play it themselves.

So don't be afraid to demonstrate it, don't be afraid to play it a few times for the student. If a student is struggling and you think their practice is not going to go well, maybe you even send a recording to them so they can listen to it and get used to the sound. And yeah, maybe that they then learn that piece slightly by memory or by ear; that's okay. They're still getting used to the reading process.

Another little tip is what I actually mentioned for rote teaching last week as well. We chose to test the first note before they begin the piece. So get them to find their spot on the piano and get them to play the first note. Ask them, "You play just the first note for me and hold it," and then you quietly play that note on your piano and just check that they're in the right octave and on the right note.

Because it's not fun to have to interrupt a student, is it? But if they start that out and you don't have a perfect pitch like me and maybe you're not paying super attention to the pitch even and they start the piece on D instead of C, you're not going to realize until they play that F natural and you go, "Oh, oops. It's minor. It's not supposed to be minor." Right? So just get them to check that first note with you. Set them up for success right from the get-go.

So that's the very first piece and I would do that for the first several pieces but that's a good process to follow in the beginning. Treasure hunt on the page for all the things they



know and discuss it and then demonstrate it. And then, test the first note so you make sure they're starting in the right spot.

From there, things might not go smoothly. Maybe they will. Maybe you're off to a flying start and they'll just keep going and they're grand from there. But maybe they're not. So how can we troubleshoot when things are going wrong? When your student just isn't getting reading? I did air quotes there. When they're just not getting it? When it's not going well? When it doesn't seem to be clicking for them?

The question you need to ask yourself is are they missing one of the prep concepts I mentioned earlier? That's normally the answer, okay? I mean, normally, I would say always. Unless you can come up with an exception for me, I'm going to say that's always the answer. They're missing one of the things on that list that I gave you in the beginning or you're giving them a piece that's impossibly too difficult.

But I'm going to assume that's not the case that you're using some kind of method book. In which case, they have missed out on the difference between treble and bass clef and up and down and that being left and right on the piano, they have missed out on the directionality on the staff itself – so up and down and how they need to read from left to right and the direction of the notes.

Maybe they've missed out on landmark notes and they're having trouble finding their starting spot. Maybe they don't see the difference or understand the difference or have the terminology for line notes and space notes or steps and skips.

Or if it's a rhythm that's the issue, maybe they don't understand the note value. So it's sort of slightly separate from all the other things there and pretty easy to identify. So it's probably one of the others if you're struggling with reading.

So what's the solution if you find they're missing one of those preparatory concepts? What's the solution? What do you think? "What am I going to say?" Games, of course, games, right? Lots, lots more review with games and with little playing activities on the piano.

So getting them to, for example, play skips going the whole way up the piano. That's something I'm doing with a student right now, actually, who may be glossed over some of the beginning stages of reading and just didn't quite get it. I mean, she's not that far along but didn't quite get it so I'm having her play skips going up the piano.

That reminds me of one of the concepts, the preparatory concepts that they might have missed that I didn't mention and that's the music alphabet and the piano keys. That can be another one. So making sure that they know the music alphabet and that they can find piano keys easily is another really, really crucial step in the beginning stages before they get to reading.



So this particular student, actually, that is one of the issues I found that she does understand steps and skips and she can see them on the staff and on the piano. What she's not great at is actually navigating the piano.

And so, we've been going through that and she's been playing skips going up the piano while saying the letters. So she's saying A-C-E going up and saying the letters of all the keys and we're also doing more work on piano keys to fill that in and lots of games.

So little playing activities like that or you make up little improv that they can do to go over whatever preparatory concepts are not foundational concepts, really, of reading, are not in place there.

Another great solution for many of those things is to get them to play while saying whatever the thing is. So if they're having trouble with the directionality of the notes – the up and down; get them to play and say the thing; or if it's steps and skips, get them to play and say that; or if it's the note values, get them to play while saying the rhythm.

So saying it while they're playing is useful for two reasons. One, they're focusing on that thing, which you need them to pay extra attention to, but two is it will help them with tracking. So if that is actually what's happening, you'll discover that through this activity.

If it's that they're not tracking left to right and they just, you know, they're looking down at the piano back up in the music and they're losing their place constantly and jumping around, that may be the issue and saying the up and down, for example, will help them to track the music more accurately without you pointing at it.

This is where you see, you can't point. Now, if they are still having trouble with tracking and you discover that's the issue and even saying the notes or saying the directionality or saying the intervals is not sufficient to help them follow it from left to right, you may need to enlist the parent, bring them into the room and have them point with a pencil from above to help their child follow the music.

So that's my rundown. I hope that it was useful for you and that it helps you think about these foundational concepts how we can teach them online and some of the pitfalls that we could easily come across in our online teaching when it comes to teaching beginner reading.

And if you were scared like me, I hope that it's alleviated some of your concern because I absolutely have had success doing this with my students and it's been totally fine once I've put those things in place and had games and activities ready to cover all of those concepts with them and make sure everything was ready.



So I would love for you as an action step for this episode to write a list of all the concepts you think a beginner needs to understand to read the first piece in your favourite method book. So I love Piano Safari. I don't use it for all students but I do use it for a lot of my students. It's my favourite; maybe that's yours; maybe you have another one. Maybe you use pretty much a different book for every student.

In which case, just pick one at random and pick the first piece and even open it up and look at it and write down a list of all the things the student needs to know to play that piece successfully. If they didn't have you there beside them to help them play it, how could they play it, how could you-- what would you need to prepare with them to-- that would mean that they could play that independently of you.

They would need to know some of those things I mentioned. Maybe there's some extra things they would need to understand as well. Make a list for yourself and try to get really into the nitty-gritty of it so it's not just the symbols and what they mean but it's actually the concepts behind that like that directionality I was talking about.

Make a little list for yourself and if you feel like it, share it with us over in the Facebook group. We would love to see your list and compare with each other and hopefully make an even more comprehensive list so that we can all get our students ready for reading on the staff.

I hope you've enjoyed this episode and this mini-series into teaching music online and how we can level it up a little bit, do it a little bit better and create version 2.0 of our online music teaching studios whether they're permanent or temporary.

If you have enjoyed it, can I ask a favour? Could you go to your podcast app whatever you're using and just leave us a review? I really do read every one and I absolutely love reading them and hearing your thoughts about what you enjoy about the podcast and, yeah, why you appreciate it. It really helps spur me on to keep going and keep creating these episodes for you.

And of course, if you have any suggestions about something you'd like us to change on the show or in general, we are always open to feedback. You can just email us [support@vibrantmusicteaching.com](mailto:support@vibrantmusicteaching.com).

So I hope you'll take the time to leave that review today before you forget and then write your list of concepts that all beginners need to know before tackling that first piece in your favourite method book and share it with us in the Facebook group if you're feeling up to it.

I'll see you over there. Bye for now.





We have tons of fantastic games for teaching these beginner reading concepts inside Vibrant Music Teaching. If you're a member, just hop on over to the printable library and select the level beginner to make sure you filter down for the right types of games for you. And if you're not a member, you can sign up at [VMT.ninja](https://vmt.ninja) to get instant access.