

National Conference on Percussion Pedagogy
Best Remote Teaching and/or Learning Practices for Percussion
Christopher Wilson

In the immediate aftermath of learning the two institutions I work for were moving to remote instruction for the remainder of the spring 2020 semester, I went through a myriad of emotions including anxiety and tremendous sadness. I questioned my ability to provide my students with the guidance they needed to continue their growth. I worried about their perceptions of losing half of a semester. It turned out that for the most part my students showed no limit in their capacities for understanding and resilience. There were of course challenges, some of which were brought on by the differences in two institutions and some of which were unexpected.

At one institution we had completed our percussion ensemble concert just before spring break; while at the other, we were still over a month away from our percussion ensemble concert when classes were moved online. Because this ensemble had not performed a concert, I was asked to create assignments that would make up for the grade associated with the performance. Instead of performing the selections from our concert, students were given score study assignments on said compositions. These assignments included leading questions that guided students through a simple analysis of the composition scores, comparison of different recordings of the compositions, and contemplation on how they would lead rehearsals on the compositions. I had experience creating assignments of this nature from having taught courses in conducting, so the pivot was quick and easy for me. I found that having students study a particular score, which was scanned into pdf, and contemplate the leading questions resulted in extraordinarily thoughtful responses. Because of this realization, I will continue to utilize assignments like this in future semesters.

The greatest difference between the two institutions was the approach to percussion instruments. At one institution, my percussion colleagues and I were able to loan instruments to students for the remainder of the semester. Thus, every student had a snare drum or practice pad and a keyboard percussion instrument on which to practice. In some cases, this was limiting. There were a couple of students who had to borrow xylophones, so they mostly focused on two-mallet playing for the remainder of the semester.

This approach was not preferable at the other institution, which did not allow students to borrow instruments. Each of these students had a snare drum or practice pad, but many of them did not have access to keyboard percussion instruments. In these situations, I assigned students four-mallet exercises to play on a surface that did not harm their mallets. The exercises were mostly made up of technical assignments focusing on the four major strokes outlined in Leigh Howard Stevens' *Method of Movement*.

Obviously, the majority of my students did not have access to a drum set or to auxiliary instruments, and none of them had access to timpani. In these cases, we had to get creative ala their four-mallet studies. For timpani, this included strengthening their French grips by playing sticking exercises on a pad or soft surface. For drum set, this included playing limb-independence exercises, while tapping their feet and playing on practice pads.

Outside of lesson content, my greatest challenges were in the practical application of remote video lessons. I had multiple students with poor Internet connections, and one student whose computer died towards the beginning of the quarantine period. At one point, a month into remote teaching a storm knocked out power to multiple student homes the day of their lessons. It

was obvious to me that I needed to be patient and understanding as well as flexible with rescheduling lessons. However, there were multiple times that I offered overwhelmed students the option of sending me videos of their playing in place of rescheduling their lessons. In these situations, the students would record their assigned literature, usually at least five minutes of playing, then upload their recordings to YouTube and send me the links. I would write down notes, then respond with my own video of constructive criticism with playing examples. While this pedagogical approach might not be applicable post-quarantine, I do like the idea of having students record their practices to be viewed at their next lessons with me.

At one institution our formal juries were cancelled, with it being left up to the instructors how to proceed with their studios. I decided to convert our studio jury into a studio class. Each student recorded his or her jury materials and submitted links to me. I put each student's link into a document with a leading guide. Students watched the juries of their studio mates and gave two comments, one positive and one of constructive criticism. The students were required to send these comments via a "reply all" to my original email, so that everyone in the studio (including myself) saw these comments, which provided accountability. What I was not prepared for was the positive community building that came from this exercise. These students had not seen each other in two months and missed making music with each other, which showed in their positive studio class comments. There was a sense of pride radiating from the emails at seeing how their studio mates had grown in the time away.

For me, there were personal challenges as a pedagogue. I found it quite easy to continue to foster the students' technical developments. It was always easy to see and hear issues of technique, whereas it was often challenging to provide aid in musicality or style. Often this was due to audio problems. This led me to really challenge my students on technique and base-level proficiencies. I was stricter with learning rudiments and memorizing scales than before, and while I will need to balance that when returning to face-to-face lessons, I think these students may be stronger because of it.