

If You Don't Plan Teachers Lessons Now, You'll Regret It Later

by Jim Matthews

Creating a classroom atmosphere where learning takes place and students feel comfortable and challenged takes thoughtful planning. If you don't making teachers lessons before class begins, you'll end up regretting it later. This article will give you some ideas about how to properly prepare for class.

Plan carefully

Effective Planning = Effective Rehearsals. No planning means you are wasting precious and valuable time. Take time to go over all of the questions listed below throughout this article to help you as you are planning for your day, week and ultimately your year. Find a quiet place to sit before each new week and come up with a weekly goal. What would you like your students to be able to accomplish or learn by the end of the week? Have the end goal in mind. Next, break the concepts down into sections which can be introduced on Monday and built upon each day thereafter.

I personally check for understanding and mastery with a very quick quiz at the end of the week. Learning is a verb, and all of my activities are hands-on, sensory lessons. Students will clap, count, do the fingerings while calling out note names, sing, speak the articulations, and play the activities on their instruments. I might show a video that demonstrates a concept or provide listening examples, and then have student participation (self-evaluation and group-evaluation) of the concept being learned. The quiz can be very short. For example, you can have the metronome on and have each student start immediately after the previous student. If the quiz is ten seconds long and there are thirty kids in the class, you will be done with the quiz in five minutes and then continue with the rehearsal.

Be organized

Organize on paper thorough lesson plans and put it on the calendar. Besides the regular paper calendar all of your students and parents should have, consider making a master calendar (eraser board calendar) for the classroom and update it each month. Keep this in the front of your room. Put concerts, events, sectionals, master classes, deadlines, test dates, and your own personal absent dates on it. Both you and the students will learn to live by it. You might save some big headaches if they have other activities in school and the students notice an upcoming conflict. This will give you

time to work the conflict out with the other parties involved. It also acts as a visual goal of how quickly events are coming up!

Additionally you can use a PDA or smartphone, or even a printout of your Microsoft Outlook calendar for the year to remind you of upcoming activities. Always have someone proof-read your calendars before publishing and copying. This will save you tons of time and regrets in the long run. Having a trusted parent review everything you publish gives you a much needed parental view. Consider posting all of your calendar events and event information on your school website too.

Identify students for special activities

Take the time to notice all of your great students. These students can represent your program through many venues. Identify early your candidates for All-State, All-County, officer positions, etc. Work with them and give them little stepping stones of expectations to build their confidence and abilities. If they are not making small successful stages of progress by certain dates, consider removing them from the activity.

We have all been in an audition room where students are playing and you are saying to yourself “Why is this student here today wasting my time?” Or, “Why did their director let them audition?” Don’t let unprepared students do these special things – it is not good for them in the long run. It is not building their confidence and abilities and it is not teaching them – it is a negative experience for everyone involved in the process. Should they have a required amount of time to play for you? Should they have to master the required scales and exercises before having the privilege to audition?

Plan your rehearsals

When planning your rehearsals, ask “What are the goals for today?” Daily goals should be small, attainable, and measurable. You should always plan to go over individual tone quality exercises/assessments, rhythm exercises (vary the articulations), and singing exercises. Singing exercises will help students with pitch development, tone, musicality, phrasing, articulations, and learning the flow of the music. Also be sure to include technique exercises, and build success upon success (once they get it right, go to something harder). Make sure the technique exercise is clean, and then challenge that same exercise with speed. Your daily lesson plans should always include certain sections of pieces, with specific goals to be reached. You don’t have to start at the beginning of the piece each time. Identify problem areas and work them out first, and then once it’s fixed, add that good piece of the puzzle back into the picture. Also, don’t forget to find

something to praise each day. Students need positive reinforcement, so compliment them when they do something right, and the probability that they remember how to play it right next time will greatly increase.

Your Personal Goals

What are your own individual goals for yourself during each rehearsal? Always try to improve your skills. Try increasing your vocabulary so that you can describe concepts and ideas in various ways. Not all students will understand a concept if you say it only one way. Find many different ways to describe your intention in an economical manner. Look up musical descriptions and synonyms in Google so you can better describe every word. Don't just say "play beautifully"—find more elegant phrasing.

Another good idea when creating your personal goals is to create a "Not to Do" list. Some of the teaching methods you've been using probably don't work! So stop doing them. You know what produces positive results and what doesn't. If you don't know another way to do something that isn't working for you, then ask another teacher. Let them know what you want to do, and ask how they do it. Your "Not to Do" list might include things you say that you don't like hearing yourself say/do anymore (i.e. stuttering or snapping fingers). Whatever it may be, just put it on the list and get rid of it.

How are you motivating yourself and the students? How are you checking for mastery? How often? Are you listening to good music with them?

I believe that it is the director's responsibility to provide students with listening opportunities containing music they would not normally listen to. Why play their music for them in class? They already know that music. You could teach them about what they are listening to, but time is always short and there is so much music to listen to. Play all types of music for them. Use guided and unguided listening examples. Ask them what they are hearing – they might teach you something! What about the background or history of the group, the genre, the recording or the selection? People have a tendency to listen more carefully when they know something about what they are listening to. Peek their curiosity and then let them listen.

What is the story behind the music?

The deeper the meaning behind the music, the more music they will try to play! Don't play music without meaning – otherwise it's not music! Like an actor taking on a role, a musician must do the same for maximum effectiveness in a performance setting. If they are going to make the music

come alive, they must know about it. If you have to, make up a story about the piece.

What are the most important things to isolate today during the rehearsal? What is the concept focus for today's lesson?

You might have two to three concepts to focus on if they are all incorporated in the piece you are working on. Don't forget the non-musical concepts as well. They need to know so many things to be successful in a musical setting, such as how to enter the room, how to sit properly to produce the best sound, how to get along with others in the group, and how to care for their instruments. The list of things to teach is endless.

What individual challenge are you leaving them with?

Think about what additional resources you can point your students to. What exercises, scales, and events materials (i.e. concert pieces) should they be ready to play tomorrow? This gives students an immediate goal to work on and it shows them what your expectations are for them.

How are you developing leadership?

Consider offering mentoring opportunities for students where more advanced players help out younger players. Try creating tasks for certain individuals and provide opportunities for presentations, etc. We must give our students opportunities and responsibilities to help them grow.