

# 5 Tips for Teaching a Guitar Class

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## 1. REPETITION

When a student has successfully done something once, of course you want them to repeat that over and over. Show them the importance of this by doing it with them. Play a two measure phrase over and over, and don't get bored. I use the analogy of the diamond in the diamond mine. After they see progress in a relatively short time I say, "It's just like a diamond mine. You move tons and tons of dirt, which may seem meaningless. But then you look at the diamond and realize that moving all that dirt was worth it, because this beautiful gem can only come from moving tons of dirt." I'm sure you'll probably have an analogy of your own. But the bottom line is, after they have actually watched progress happen before their own eyes, and experienced it in their fingertips, they start seeing the value of repetition. A steady rhythm is extremely helpful in passing the time while all this repetition takes place. Every new chord or scale idea I give them is done with a rhythmic exercise. That makes it easier to count minutes rather than repetitions. Instead of "I'm going to play this 100 times", it's "I'm going to follow this rhythm until it's over" or "I'm going to play along with this metronome for 8 minutes". Then, once you get going, you go on automatic pilot, and it gets to be a lot more fun. You'll find that all exercises in my books are done this way.

## 2. REMEMBER THAT ALL GUITAR STUDENTS ARE DIFFERENT

In many high school and college classes, certain landmarks must be reached before the student can move on to the next section. I think that is not such a great approach with teaching guitar. If a student has a problem getting the C chord to sound right, you don't want to say, "Just keep working on that C chord until you get it, because only then can we go on to something else." It's better to feel free to skip around. Point him to another exercise later in the book. If you know the text and know the student, you can probably find something further on that he can 'get'. Meanwhile, tell him to be practicing the C chord (or whatever it is) several times per day. Part of the value of having him move to a later part of the book is that once he conquers something that others have not tried yet, that gives him confidence instead of a sense of frustration. One thing I have learned about people's hands is that they don't all approach things the same way. They all have very different strengths and weaknesses. So in writing a beginner book, it was quite a task putting things into a gradual slope that would work for the majority of people. Don't consider it infallible. Anything a person can tackle and conquer will keep them moving forward. And there IS no moving backward except stopping completely. It really has to be a glass half full situation. I see the importance of having standards, measure people's progress, testing them, and grading them. But you may have a sleeper that doesn't show much in the first few months and then the light comes on and they really go for it. I believe they are more likely to do that if they aren't thinking about grades but about learning to play.

### **3. IDEAS BREED IDEAS**

While I'm not a Darwinist per se, I like the idea of natural selection and how it applies to a guitar class. If everybody is working on the same thing, and the class is kept regulated to the same pace, nobody has any ideas to trade each other. Whereas, if you break it up just a little bit and have some variety from student to student, there is a certain amount of crosstalk inside and outside of the classroom. People help each other accomplish things. The more this happens, the more 'musicians' will emerge from the room at the end of the semester.

In my teaching, I feel like my largest milestone is when a student comes to me and asks me to show him a song he's trying to play. The fact that he is trying to accomplish things at all, outside of the curriculum, means that he has found a certain passion for guitar. If you're not a guitarist yourself, you may not be able to show him every Metallica riff he's trying to get. But that is where the crosstalk between students can come in handy. Maybe that is a chance to have a student who knows it TAB it out for the rest.

### **4. IT'S NOT WORK**

Any learning experience is ideally fun, but with guitar, fun is mandatory. It's sometimes just a matter of getting people to see that the more time they put into it, the more fun it gets. In my teaching, sometimes I'll have a person who doesn't quite understand that at first. (Ok that's an understatement!) So I ask them, "Do your parents ever ask you to step away from the video game and do something else?" The usual answer is yes. Then I tell them "When I was 16, there were no video games. But my dad used to tell me to step away from the guitar." Usually a little light comes on that helps them to separate thinking of guitar as a subject in school, (which many students associate with pulling teeth), to thinking of it as more of a recreational activity. Use your own stories to put that across. But the sooner they realize ALL of their favorite guitarists see playing guitar as fun, the sooner they themselves will begin to see it that way. There is absolutely no famous guitarist that considers playing guitar as a chore. They see it as a super fun, recreational activity that they decided to take to a more serious level. The same thing could be said for any subject, really. There is no mathematician that sees math as a chore. But with music, well, it IS called *playing* the guitar. So it might be a little easier to put that across.

### **5. ONE SET OF MUSCLES STRENGTHENS ANOTHER**

Remember that music is a language. There was nothing proper or symmetrical about the way you learned the talk. You heard things, you tried things, and eventually you knew how to ask for a glass of water. Learning the muscles for the A minor pentatonic scale will strengthen the muscles used to play the F chord. Bottom line... If you can't work on one thing, work on another. You need to know them all eventually, right? Whatever you're trying to achieve, *learning other things* will bring you closer to perfecting it.