

DRUM INSTRUCTORS ONLY

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Setting And Regulating Your Teaching Income

by Billy Cuthrell

The unexpected will *always* happen, and the expected will *never* happen. This one paradoxical sentence sums up the average cash flow for many private instructors on a month-to-month basis. Students come and go for different reasons, but the light bill, telephone bill, car payment, and other expenses of living make it to the mailbox with reliability rivaling death and taxes. Teaching privately is challenging in many ways, not the least of which are its inherent financial uncertainties. Unlike working at a nine-to-five job, with a nice, stable paycheck, your income will rarely match what you anticipate—and more often than not it will be *less* than you expect. Some of the lessons I learned about regulating my teaching income may help you minimize, or at least reduce the effect of the vagaries of being paid to teach people to play the drums.

Rookie Mistakes

The first year I taught was hard. Learning to run my practice like a

business was a challenge, and the distinction between the right moves and the wrong was not always clear. I had no idea the profession's financial element could get so complicated and confusing. I initially set my rates extremely low, assuming that prospective clients would appreciate the bargain they were receiving. In retrospect, they probably said, "Look at how cheap this guy's rates are; he must not know a thing about teaching!" True, my teaching system was not fully developed at the time, but I did have a game plan, and all I needed were a few students to get started—or so I figured.

When setting your fees, do your homework: Check out the number of music stores and established instructors in your area. Also have an idea of the local population's prosperity, i.e., their ability to pay.

Another rookie mistake I made was to offer lessons of thirty, forty-five, and sixty minutes. My intentions were good: I was attempting to accommodate everyone's needs and budget. Things seemed to run smoothly at first, but after a while the scheduling became confusing to my students and me. I should have offered only half-hour and, preferably, one-hour lessons. Drum instructors sell themselves on their ability to teach effectively, not the amount of material they can cram into a session.

I also offered "house calls" priced slightly higher for the students who felt more comfortable learning at home. Depending on your situation, this might not be a wise option due to the mileage and wear and tear on your vehicle. I justified it because I was able to use my gas expenses to my advantage at tax time. (Check with an accountant to determine whether this is legal in your jurisdiction.)

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Making Practice Meaningful

by Neal Busby

The first question I always ask my students when they come in for their lesson is, "Did you practice?" Then I point out that I don't just mean the material I gave them to work on, but any drumming at all—whatever came to mind. Thankfully, the answer is usually yes, but often they complain that practice is boring. When I prompt them to explain how they practice, I can see what they mean. Many grab their old copies of *Stick Control* and *Syncopation* and trot down to the woodshed for a couple of hours of rudimental exercises. I'll admit sometimes I do this myself, but not every day, since there is so much to work on, and many more ways to accomplish our goals.

I believe the most important way to practice is to play with other musicians. After all, playing

music should be the prime motivating factor from the time you pick up a pair of sticks. Your students could learn more in one Saturday afternoon jam with their "buds" than almost any lesson. Subjects like timekeeping, different styles and feels, tempo, groove, dynamics, and building drum parts compositionally cannot be fully mastered alone. If your students are not in a position to rehearse with a band, then they should at least strap on the old headphones, crank up their favorite CDs, play along, and *pretend* they're in a band. Make them conscious of song structure and how the drums fit in to the big picture. Whether they are learning cover tunes or just playing along with the stereo, have them figure out the songs note-for-note. This really helps when they finally get

a chance to construct their own beats. The more musicians they play with, the more songs they learn, the more styles they adopt, and the more they will improve. And, incidentally, the more they will be motivated to play—and if you play your cards right, keep taking lessons.

How or what your students choose to work on is up to you. However, I recommend implementing some method of charting their progress. Have them record everything they play. That way they can hear if they are actually getting closer to their goals. I have always listened back to rehearsals to get an objective view of my playing and be my own worst critic. Comparing rehearsal tapes to live tapes is also very eye-opening. Videotaping practice sessions and especially live performances is a great way for your students to monitor improvement in all areas. Then if somebody mentions that an aspect

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Regulating Your Income

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Once you've established an appropriate rate, you can ease some of the monthly fluctuation in your income by implementing a pay schedule that reflects the value of the students' time as well as your own. The "home-work" I mentioned above will help in this area too. The two structures we'll examine are monthly payments and tuition. (*Never* count on week-to-week payments, a system that places you at the whim of your least-serious students; you'll go hungry.) Let's look at each system separately to understand their respective benefits and drawbacks.

Monthly Payments

After learning (or being *on*) the ropes of my new occupation for a year and a half, I decided that some changes were in order. I needed to know from month to month at least a ballpark figure of my income to proportion my tax payments better and strategize a savings program.

I instituted a monthly payment structure and added a late fee if the payment wasn't received by the second lesson of the month. If applicable, I also assessed a bounced-check fee. Parents seemed to appreciate the convenience of the monthly payments. They also liked not being obligated to keep the lessons going just to "get their money's worth" if the student wanted to quit; they could simply withdraw at the end of the month.

Simplify your rate structure by standardizing the monthly rate regardless of whether four or five weekly lessons fit into a month. This will also come in handy when you apply for bank loans and credit. But be prepared to show how those monthly rates break down by the hour or half-hour. Establish a clear, firm refund or credit policy. Consider eliminating refunds for missed lessons entirely in favor of make-up lessons.

During the two years I used the monthly payment system, I adjusted my rates so they were comparable with other instructors', and my studio began showing a small profit. Still, I remained a little nervous at the beginning of each month, waiting for students to pay, and seeing which students would make all of their scheduled lessons. Students also become increasingly "flighty" during the summer months, opting to quit temporarily until school reopens. These prolonged breaks cause retention problems, requiring you to review previous lesson material when the students return. They also play hobs with your financial planning. A worst-case scenario: A student leaves for vacation after the month's first lesson, expecting a refund for the remaining three or four lessons. These are some of the drawbacks of a monthly pay structure that point to an appealing alternative approach....

Tuition

Receiving students' pay as tuition—that is, in advance for periods longer than a month—is a great way to help regulate your income. This policy reduces the likelihood of a student arbitrarily taking the summer off, or even skipping a scheduled lesson here and there. Your reward: more steady gainful employment. Especially during the summer and holiday seasons, you may have to rearrange your schedule somewhat to coordinate with students' agendas, but this extra effort will show your dedication to their progress.

If this approach seems to suit you and your clientele, set up a term for your tuition plan. Typical terms last two or three months; in some cases you can even go longer. Send out reminders to all of your students and their parents telling them when their tuition is due. Have students and their parents or guardians sign terms and agreement papers when they begin the program. Have duplicate copies printed for their records. By clearly stating your policies, these documents can help alleviate any misunderstanding that may arise.

When I introduce the idea of tuition payments to parents and prospective students, I first point out the policy's benefits, and usually convince them that tuition may prove to be a better bargain. First, I explain that the money saved from avoiding late fees can be used to purchase the method books and materials needed to get started. And assessment of late fees becomes less likely as payments are due less often. As a further incentive, consider dropping your rates a little for students willing to pay tuition. For

example, if you charge \$65 a month for weekly, thirty-minute lessons (regardless of the number of days in a month) that adds up to \$195 per quarter. Tell the student or parent that you will drop that rate to the equivalent of \$60 per month when paid quarterly. This *saves* them \$15, and your \$180 is safely in the bank, so you don't have to worry about income from that student's lessons again for three months. To me, this kind of security is worth offering the discount, since it helps smooth out the natural income fluctuations that occur when students come and go.

One drawback of receiving tuition (versus monthly) payments is its complication of the refund policy. According to my studio's terms and agreement contract, we only issue credit, not refunds, toward missed lessons. Problems arise when a student pays his or her tuition for three months, but cannot fulfill the term. And just as having a relatively sizable advance in the bank is comforting, refunding that larger amount seems all the more unsettling. But discontinuance of lessons occurs for a number of reasons, such as moving out of town, illness, or problems at school—each situation is different—so sometimes a refund may be your only fair alternative.

Never compel students or their parents to change from monthly payment to tuition. Some students cannot afford this option, due to their own cash flow problems, and it may make them feel as if they can no longer pay for your services. Maintaining two payment options requires additional clerical work on your part, but it's worth it to avoid alienating (and perhaps ultimately *losing*) students who can't accommodate your preferred system. If you are considering adopting a tuition policy, test it with a few students first. This trial period will allow you to compare the systems without risking a complicated and potentially embarrassing return to monthly payments for your entire student roster.

Regardless of whether you accept tuition or monthly payments, write receipts for *all* lesson payments, even if your student or parents don't ask for them; don't rely on canceled checks to serve as their receipts. Last, but certainly not least, keep a schedule and stick to it. These kinds of sound business practices will ultimately help you stay organized, turn a profit, and keep your mind on the fun stuff...teaching!

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Making Practice Meaningful

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of their playing needs work, you and they can thoroughly scrutinize their work and make any corrections.

Different goals require different practice techniques. Speed, stamina, dexterity, and endurance can certainly be worked on to great effect by woodshedding. In these areas the use of a metronome and a stopwatch will be of great benefit. In the past I have spent a considerable amount of time working on double kick. The best way to chart my progress was to actually write down the bpm settings. On a day-to-day basis I could see if I was getting faster. I also used a stopwatch to keep track of how long I could keep the exercises going. Still, in practical use of the acquired speed and stamina I found that the best way to improve my double kick was to actually play music that warrants its usage.

The same is true for more "drumistic" endeavors, such as extended soloing, four-way independence, metric modulation, and odd-meter studies. Developing these skills usually does require a good deal of time and dedication. But obsessing on the more technical and esoteric aspects of drumming often results in practicing things relevant only to other drummers.

The point is to put all these subjects into perspective. A successful drummer has to be constantly playing *music*. Some musical situations call for extremely technical drumming, but many more call for simplicity, solidity, and taste. Try to prepare your students for any situation, and encourage them to make their practice time meaningful accordingly—in their own terms, and in terms of the real world of music they are a part of.