

Financial Case Study of ‘overlapping’ group teaching with Lynnette Barney

Introduction

About ten years ago, it became apparent that I would need to generate income to almost solely support my large family.

Two things became clear - that group instruction generated more income, and I love teaching private lessons.

I enjoy the dynamics of both private instruction and group instruction, and I wanted my students to have the benefits of both. But there was no convincing my families to drive for lessons twice each week!

I really wanted to keep the 1-on-1 because I just love it. In my opinion, private lessons are so important for tweaking learning to individual requirements and tastes.

So how could I do both effectively?

Over time, I developed a lesson structure that allowed my students to come once a week by creatively combining private and group instruction into one lesson each week.

How the overlapping lessons work

At first, I offered 90 minute lessons that overlapped four students each 2 1/2 hour lesson block. Here’s how it looked in a timetable:

	Private (30)	Lab (30)	Ensemble (30)	Private (30)	Lab (30)
3:30	Susan	Mary			
4:00	Mary	Susan			
4:30			Susan, Mary, Eric, William		

5:00				Eric	William
5:30				William	Eric

Lab time is a necessary component, to give students something that engages them and offers opportunities to explore when it's not their turn for private lesson. Lab assignments might include composition, sight reading apps, theory apps or games or books, music history listening, and many other activities.

Ensemble time is primarily for playing and making music together. We play lead sheets, ensembles, and a lot of group improvisation. We also play games and do activities such as bucket drumming and sight singing with kazoos.

Over time, I realized that 90 minutes is a long time for students, so in the past few years I've taught a 75-minute lesson structure. One benefit is increased income for me. In addition, two students can work together during lab time, so there are even more collaborative opportunities for students.

Currently I teach 75 minute lessons that overlap 6 students in each 2 hour time block:

	Private (15)	Lab 1 (15)	Lab 2 (15)	Ensemble (30)	Private (15)	Lab 1 (15)	Lab 2 (15)
3:30	Susan	Mary	Abigail				
3:45	Mary	Abigail	Susan				
4:00	Abigail	Susan	Mary				
4:15				Susan, Mary, Abigail, John, William, Eric			
4.45					Eric	William	John

5:00					William	John	Eric
5:15					John	Eric	William

It might seem like 15 minutes of private instruction may not be sufficient. However, families drawn to my studio are interested in a broad music education, not solely piano skills, and this lesson structure allows for that.

We cover many skills in the ensemble part of the lesson (the group section) and many skills are reinforced in the lab setting, so the private lesson focuses primarily on individual development of technique and student-led repertoire choices.

Also, students are encouraged to send video and audio recordings during the week. This gives them additional instruction time, and feedback between lessons.

My teaching assistant reviews the videos and gives feedback to students.

Calendar structure and studio logistics

On average, we have three lessons or events each month.

I currently charge each student around \$160 per month. My membership/tuition includes lessons, books, music, apps, performances - basically everything except outside events.

I aim for 14 “regular lessons” in each school term (fall, winter), plus three additional event weeks each term, which might be performances, enrichment workshops, sight-read-a-thons, or whatever I dream up. However, I don’t share this specific math with my families - it’s for my own planning purposes.

I also teach 45-minute Music Together® classes for parents and children ages 0-4, and 45 minute beginning piano classes for small groups (6 children) between ages 4 and 6 (preschool through 1st grade in the United States).

Selling Lesson “Memberships”

My students don't pay tuition.

They participate in a **studio membership**, which is the same flat fee every month, regardless of the number of lessons or events each month. Calling it a “membership” is a conscious decision that has a big impact on how parents perceive the lessons and how I approach missed lessons and makeups.

I borrowed some great language from Clinton Pratt that says “missed lessons are inevitable and, therefore, have been taken into account in the overall tuition cost.”

However, I offer several options for students missing lessons - attending by Zoom, sending my recordings of their music, and attending class on a different day or time if space allows.

Summertime and holiday planning

I do things differently in the summer - students have *more instruction time* for the same tuition, *but I teach fewer hours*.

Wait. What?!

How does that work I hear you ask!

My students participate in workshops of 6-10 students, where we work on individual and collaborative projects.

Generally students have six 2-hour workshops and can add on private instruction for an additional fee.

Students continue to pay their monthly membership during the summer, schedule the workshops at their convenience, and I generate additional income by teaching some private lessons and inviting community students and siblings to participate in just the summer workshops. Some summers I've increased my income by \$1000-2000.

I am “off” several weeks a year, although some of those weeks I'm at professional conferences or in-studio planning for the next term. Typically, I don't teach:

- Fall Break (mid-October)
- Thanksgiving Week
- Two to three weeks at Christmas
- Rodeo Days (in February, you'll have to move to Tucson to get this one off)
- Spring Break (mid-March)
- Random weeks in the summer

Impact on Income

Now, the most amazing part of the change I made to the rotational structure and number of concurrent students was on my hourly rate and income.

Since I was the primary supporter of my large family, it was important to increase my income without increasing my working hours. While it takes more energy to teach this way, it doubled my income.

Here's the math:

	Structure during a 2 hour time block	Lesson inclusions	Income from students	Monthly income	Effective hourly rate
Old format	4 private 30-minute lessons	Three lessons/events per month	\$120 a month per student	\$480 each month for six hours of instructor time	Instructor brings in \$80/hour of teaching time
New format	6 hybrid overlapping 75-minute lessons	Three lessons/events per month	\$160 a month per student	\$960 each month for six hours of instructor time	Instructor brings in \$160/hour of teaching time

If a teacher taught 20 hours of lessons using the 75-minute format at my rate, their gross monthly income would be \$9,600, with an annual gross of over \$100,000. Of course, there are building and utility costs, music purchases, and myriad other expenses, but it is possible to comfortably support my family.

Teaching with this structure, **I'm able to earn twice the hourly rate that I would earn teaching private lessons.** I use the same lesson plan for all my ensemble classes and labs each week, with some adaptations for different ages and levels, so lesson planning takes an hour or two each week.

My studio is equipped with three acoustic pianos in one teaching space, and four digital pianos in my lab room, but that's not necessary. The ensemble class could be taught with four students and only one piano.

A basic setup with 4 overlapping students could include one piano for ensemble class and private instruction, and one digital piano for the piano lab.

For families with financial need, I refer them to the MTNA MusicLink program (USA only). If they qualify, I teach them at 50% of my regular rate. I also barter with some parents for studio help, landscaping, and other useful tasks.

Conclusion

I hope you've found this case study instructive for your own studio. Don't be afraid to think outside the box as you consider the piano studio you want. That's what I did - I wanted students to have both a private lesson and a group lesson each week, and I found a solution that works well for me and for my families.

Now it's off to enjoy my summer holidays without worrying so much about income.

Lynnette Barney is a creative, enthusiastic, and innovative piano teacher and a registered Music Together® teacher in Tucson, Arizona, where she's taught for over 30 years. Her goal is to provide enjoyable, motivating, and individualized music instruction to each student and family. She is a member of Music Teachers National Association (MTNA), the treasurer of the Arizona State Music Teachers Association (ASMTA), and a member of the Tucson Music Teachers Association (TMTA) and enjoys presenting at state and national music teacher conferences. She also enjoys accompanying choirs and soloists, musical theater productions, ballet classes and is a church organist. She studied with Dr. Rex Woods, Dr. Jeffrey Shumway, and David Glen Hatch.