

# Your Syllabus

Building An Ever-Evolving Library by Joe Bergamini

One of the things that private drum instructors enjoy most is the fact that because we work independently, we can create our own course of study for our students. But this can also be a bad thing. Because there is no accreditation or oversight of private drum teachers, it's up to us to push ourselves to be the best possible instructors. Anyone who has taken courses at the college level knows that with each course of study comes a syllabus—a list of books that are required to be purchased and used while taking the course. This article will focus on the thought behind creating that list.

## Why You Need One

Creating a syllabus is something that can benefit all private drum instructors and their students. In order to be a good teacher, you must have a vast knowledge of music and drummers—and this includes having a selection of music that you're continually listening to, referring to, and recommending to students. This idea extends to educational materials. The selection of drum books and DVDs available today is of such an amazingly high level of quality that every teacher should tap into and benefit from it.

Many teachers employ a very small number of books (if any) and often write out exercises on staff paper. I believe this method misses an opportunity to capitalize on the range of products currently available from dozens of great artists and authors. In my teaching practice, each student gets a syllabus of books, and we work on a regular basis from those books. Don't get me wrong; I often write out exercises and customize the lessons. But when my students want to learn Afro-Cuban drumming, they are assisted by Frank Malabe and Bob Weiner in *Afro-Cuban Rhythms For*

*Drumset*. When they want to learn R&B and funk, they're assisted by Zoro in *The Commandments Of R&B Drumming* and by Stanton Moore in *Groove Alchemy*. Do they want to work on double bass technique? There's *The Encyclopedia Of Double Bass Drumming* by Bobby Rondinelli and Michael Lauren, *Double Pedal Metal* by Steve Kilgallon, and my own *Pedal Control*, which I cowrote with Dom Famularo. And along the way, in every style, each student is coached by Tommy Igoe, as we learn the songs in his *Groove Essentials* package. All of these famous artists/authors are assisting *me* in teaching my students!

## The Anti-Book Approach

Some teachers have a concern that they need to go "beyond the books." Of course this is true, but it assumes that you are aware of, understand, and have applied the knowledge found in the books before branching out with your own ideas. Going beyond the books is not the same as ignoring the books.

Some instructors are concerned that using books will stifle their own preferred teaching methods. I can appreciate wanting to create a personal educational style, and I try to do this as well, but why would I attempt to invent a method of teaching jazz drumming when John Riley, who's an expert in the field, invested years of research into *The Art Of Bop Drumming*? Just about every one of my students goes through that book.

There are tried-and-true drum manuals, such as Ted Reed's *Syncopation* and Gary Chester's *The New Breed*. Those are amazing, time-

less books that we all should use. But I can't tell you how many students have come to me from a previous teacher and told me all they used was *Syncopation* and a book of staff paper. Yes, I know it's theoretically possible to teach students everything they need to know using that one book, but to me that displays either a lack of knowledge of the products that are available to the modern drum instructor, a stubborn desire to cling to an old-fashioned method of doing things, or a lack of desire to research what's available on the current market. When I was building my teaching practice, I invested hundreds of dollars in books and DVDs in order to track down the most effective materials. Most of my peers also have huge libraries of media that are referred to as needed.

Another disadvantage to the staff-paper-and-book approach is that in today's market, drum lessons are sometimes competing with after-school sports, karate lessons, video games, and other activities. I've found that using different books and DVDs helps keep things exciting for my students. We simply can't expect to teach drumming the way it was taught thirty years ago and retain



students whose attention is being clamored for by so many other things.

### Use It All

Often we private instructors develop a system using certain materials that we stick with over time. Although I understand and agree with the “If it ain’t broke, don’t fix it” philosophy, I feel that we need to continually reevaluate our methods to make sure that we’re providing the best possible resources to our students. For example, for years I used Jim Chapin’s classic book *Advanced Techniques For The Modern Drummer* to teach jazz. When *The Art Of Bop Drumming* came out, I realized that it contained a lot more material about jazz performance—whereas Chapin’s book mainly focuses on independence. *Baby Steps To Giant Steps*, by Peter Retzlaff and Jim Rupp, differs from both of the aforementioned books in that it has a more extensive section on broken ride cymbal patterns, and it contains eleven play-along tracks.

As I’ve reevaluated my approach to teaching jazz over the years, I’ve realized that all of these books offer something unique, and most of my students wind up purchasing all three. I see no reason to limit it to one or another.

### The Extra Expense

As you start to implement your syllabus and request that your students purchase books and DVDs, you might be faced with resistance from parents. As a parent myself, I’ve found that every activity my children take part in requires spending money. It wouldn’t make much sense for me to sign up my son for the local soccer league and then not purchase the proper equipment for him to practice with at home. It’s the same thing with drum lessons, and I’m not shy about telling parents so.

That said, I’ve personally never had problems getting parents and students to purchase the requested materials. Most of my students like developing a library of reference books and DVDs, and they enjoy a

sense of accomplishment as we finish going through them.

One interesting thing that many teachers don’t realize is that your syllabus can also generate extra income for your teaching practice. If you have your own private studio, it’s possible for you to purchase books at wholesale prices from the publishers and then resell them to your students. I’ve been doing this for years, and it has resulted in a nice chunk of extra income each

year. My students purchase all the books in my syllabus, and sometimes they also purchase books and DVDs on their own, outside of lessons.



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