

# Starting A Teaching Studio

## Essential Tips For Aspiring Educators

by Mike Sorrentino

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**M**any articles have been written about making the decision to begin teaching. If you haven't thought long and hard about whether teaching is the right career for you, I encourage you to go through back issues of *Modern Drummer* to find discussions of this subject, and to take a long look at the reality of what teaching entails. It's not an easy career, but it can be a very rewarding one. This article is designed to help answer some of the most important questions you might have when deciding to set up your own teaching business.

### Where Do You Go?

The first thing you need to consider when you're looking to start a teaching practice is location. Will you teach at your own studio? At a school? In a store? In students' homes? If you decide to use your own studio, will it be a room in your house, or will you rent space in a local rehearsal studio? These may seem like simple questions, but the answers can present some serious challenges. For example, if you rent space from a store that provides a teaching drumset and then a drumhead breaks, who pays for it?

Wherever you decide to teach, you'll need adequate space, high-speed Internet access, a modest budget for equipment, and a reasonable amount of silence. Don't underestimate that last one. If you've ever tried to teach finger technique on a pad while the student next door is practicing blast beats on a kit, you'll understand how important it can be to have a quiet space.

### What Do You Need?

Once you've decided where to teach, what do you put inside the space? I remember taking lessons from the New York-based teacher Al Miller many years ago, and he had two practice-pad kits and two drumsets in his studio. The legendary jazz drummer and educator Alan Dawson had one drumset and a vibraphone. What tools do today's drum teachers need that are different from what they were twenty years ago?

Aside from the obvious teaching tools (drumset, practice pads, music stands), there are some new technological needs for today's drum instructor. First, it's almost a must to have a computer. In my studio I have a Mac G5, which serves several purposes. I use it to play songs, show DVDs, visit websites, reference drummers, and record students. I also use it to communicate with students and their parents via email to schedule lessons, and I do a good bit of marketing on it as well. My setup is fairly elaborate, as I also do

recording sessions in my studio. Your outfit, however, doesn't need to be as complex. Let's take a look at some other technological needs for establishing the most effective teaching practice.

**Playing music.** It's important for an effective drum studio to have an extensive music collection, as well as the means for students to listen to and play along with recorded music. In my studio, my computer plays DVDs, CDs, and MP3s, either through my studio monitors or through Vic Firth sound-isolating headphones powered by a separate headphone amp. You can easily accomplish the same thing (minus CDs and DVDs) with an iPod or other MP3 player and a headphone splitter. For lessons on the road, I bring a laptop and a splitter. If you have a high-tech cell phone, you could even store your music collection on it, which would cut down even more on what you need to carry with you. Today the paradigm has shifted to the point where most teachers are using recorded music

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**Video recording.** Many teachers have found that there's a tremendous benefit in using video to show a student his or her physical tendencies. The famed educator/clinician Dom Famularo has a very involved setup at his studio where students can play on a pad and watch themselves on a large flat-screen monitor. On the other end of the spectrum, I've heard of some teachers using the video record function on their cell phone to capture and examine short snippets with their students. Both methods are valuable and have yielded great results. Allow your creativity and budget to help you decide the best way to fit this tool into your arsenal.

**DVDs, play-alongs, and multimedia.** Some of the tried-and-true method books remain essential to most drum teaching programs. For example, I wouldn't teach jazz without Jim Chapin's classic *Advanced Techniques For The Modern Drummer*,

and I wouldn't work on a student's hands without George Stone's perennial masterpiece, *Stick Control*. But teachers need to keep up with new material as it becomes available. There are a number of DVDs that are destined to become classics, and you as a teacher should encourage your students to learn from them.

**Recording.** This is a subject that the Broadway drummer and famed clinician Tommy Igoe has a strong opinion on, and I couldn't agree with him more. To summarize Tommy's thoughts: If you teach, you must record your students. Tommy and I have recording studios that we also teach in, but you don't need to go to those lengths. In fact, for a quick reference, like if I want to show students that they're playing a bass drum pattern incorrectly, I record them on my Zoom H2 digital recorder. It's fast and easy to use, and it's a simple way to let students listen back and correct any mistakes. I've also used the voice-notes recorder on my BlackBerry for

the same thing. Don't let the prohibitive cost of setting up a full-fledged recording rig discourage you from taking advantage of the new lower-priced recording equipment that's available.

**The Internet.** The Web has completely changed the world. Sites like YouTube have brought everything to your screen, while online forums allow drummers from around the world to come together and exchange ideas and make friends. Of course, some students overuse the Internet to find quick answers to drumming issues when they should be spending more time in the practice room. But the access to information that the Web provides far outweighs the cons of having this powerful tool in your studio.



**Mike Sorrentino** is the program director of Hudson Music's Teacher Integration Program (TIP), which was established in 2008 to enhance drum instruction by helping teachers incorporate new media and technology into their existing methods. For more on TIP, visit [hudsonmusic.com/hudson/tip](http://hudsonmusic.com/hudson/tip).



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