



CELLO

“Take Note”: How I Track and Highlight Important Concepts in Lessons

by Teresa Richardson

Isn't it nice when a student comes happily prepared to a lesson, having practiced what they were supposed to practice? I love to see my students make weekly progress, no matter to what extent. There are so many obstacles that can inhibit a student's progression, not the least of which is lacking a clear understanding of what is being asked of them and how to go about practicing so they can achieve their goals. I have found that sending a student home with a clear, concise assignment is a crucial first step to their truly understanding what I am asking of them. In addition, I take my own separate notes which I have found to be tremendously helpful to ensure that I follow up the next week with the assignments I sent home the previous week. I have become quite attached to my own notetaking system, which I will share with you.

Since I start students as early as age five, I subscribe to Suzuki's idea that the parent is the “home teacher.” In other words, I ask parents of young children to quietly take notes during the lesson and then practice daily with their children at home. At the lesson, the parent is situated at a nearby table, with a clear view of both the teacher and the child, who are facing one another. I insist that the parent writes in the same spiral notebook for each lesson, and suggest that it is left open to the current page for ease of use during practice. If a student inadvertently leaves their notebook at home, I ask that notes are taken either electronically or on extra paper I provide.

Some eager parents write enthusiastically, while others are more distractible and write only when directed. Regardless, at the completion of each piece of repertoire or activity, I look directly at the parent, say the parent's name, the piece's name, and the concise assignment. For example, I might say, “Heather, for *Witches' Dance*, there are three practice items: 1) sink-and-release ‘pow!’ accents in ‘Witch #1,’ 2) contrastingly long, legato quarter notes in ‘Witch #2,’ and 3) five good reps of each of the three (additive) boxes marked in bars 37-38.” I mark the student's music to further clarify

the practice spots.

I find that the process of choosing and relaying a concise assignment necessitates prioritization on my behalf. While it is tempting to be meticulous, mentioning every mistake and detail, I have had more success with giving smaller, more manageable assignments. Also, assignment load depends on the age, maturity, and level of the student. If a student is polishing an intermediate-level piece for a performance, rather than inundate the parent with a list of tedious details with bar numbers, I will mark spots with colored, removable highlighter tape. It is easier to say “Brian, in Brevol Sonata first movement, he needs to practice the green stuff!”

Ideally, I want my students' assignments to contain the following: the name of the piece/scale/etude/exercise, concise direction(s) for how to practice each item, an overall technical or musical focus for the week, and which item(s) we will start with first at the next lesson. I include the latter so that the student knows to practice an item even if we did not get to it in the lesson. I love to utilize Suzuki's idea of a “one-point” lesson of choosing a single skill or technical focus to work on with the student in the context of different repertoire (scale, review piece, etc.).

I try to keep open communication on whether the assignment-relaying system is working. Is the child beginning to practice independently? Do they have trouble reading the parent's handwriting? Can notes be typed? I do like to have parents take notes for as long as this system continues to work for a family. I find it to be easier to maintain a feeling of connection with a parent who is present in the room during lessons rather than one I see in passing or not at all. When the parent is present, I feel they are more likely to understand my expectations and share in celebrating each small success their child makes.

Of course, when puberty comes along, the parent-child dynamic tends to change. Around this time, students typically seek independence from their parents, and I certainly see this during lessons. When a stu-

dent expresses the desire to no longer have the parent present, or if I begin to regularly sense tension within parent-student interactions, we have a short talk, and then the student starts attending lessons alone and taking their own notes independently. I set up a chair next to them that acts as a desk for the notebook and pencil. Just like I did with the parent, I tell them exactly what to write down. I do not consider the time it takes them to write as wasted time. In fact, I believe the very act of writing the assignment helps them internalize and commit it to memory. I have found note-taking to be empowering for students, and I feel it is a good life skill to develop.

The idea of having older students take their own notes is one that I took from Pamela Devenport (cello teacher at the School for Strings in New York and internationally recognized lecturer). On this topic, she says, “I love getting to a place in cello lessons when I ask the young cellist to take their own notes. However, it is imperative that I actually teach them *how* to take notes, what is important, and how to organize. Some people are born knowing this, and others need help developing this additional talent as well as the musical one.”

One of my former students who lived a considerable distance away decided to try to find a teacher closer to home. She had a trial lesson with a colleague of mine. At the completion of a discussion surrounding a piece she had just played, my former student whipped out her spiral notebook and asked my colleague what to write down as her assignment. My colleague told me that she decided to accept my former student into her studio at that moment. My heart beamed with pride at the responsibility and independence my former student had developed!

For many years, I did not take my own separate notes. In fact, when I first learned of a teacher who took her own notes, I was really puzzled as to why that might be necessary and assumed that it would be very time-consuming. A few years later, I discovered that my esteemed colleague, David Holmes, also took his own notes,

and I was finally convinced to give it a try. I set up my binder and never looked back. I was hooked!

I have a three-ring binder with a divider for each student, filled with notebook paper. It sits on a piano bench that I pull next to my chair before I start teaching. My binder never leaves the studio. I use it only during lessons, not beforehand or afterwards. Each lesson is marked with a date and bullet points for assignments. I am able to fit around nine to twelve lessons on a single page since I use shorthand and abbreviations. Seeing so many lessons at once makes trends more apparent and gives me a big-picture view.

I note deadlines and audition dates in the margins. Milestones are in capital letters; for instance, when the student upgrades to the next cello size, starts MYS, or begins taking their own notes. In my studio, we set three to four annual cello “resolutions” in January which I surround with a box for easy reference. I also circle the lesson’s main technical or musical focus for the week and put a star next to the item(s) I want to start with at the next lesson. I make a big point of covering any “star list” items in the next lesson so that no assignments are neglected or forgotten. Sometimes I write my notes

while the student is playing so that I remember all the discussion points once they have finished playing. Other times, when there are fewer points to discuss and they are easier to remember, I will write my notes simultaneously as I give the assignment to the parent or student. I can write honestly in my own notes about how things are going. If a student just needs to practice an assignment more, I write “PRAC.” More than a few PRACs signal that I may need to address practice habits with a student. I also keep track of a student’s big emotions, or lack of cooperation or focus so I can make goals in those areas to better serve each student.

The left column in the chart below is a sample of an actual student lesson I logged in my own binder. The middle column contains what I may have said to the parent, and the right column gives further explanation.

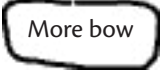
My own notes contain just enough writing for me to see at a glance what we did the previous week so I know immediately and exactly what to teach next, enabling me to follow through with specifics so I can be thorough. It helps me avoid wasting time asking the student or parent what we did the week before or wondering out loud if

something was previously addressed. I feel that taking my own notes results in vastly increased amounts of follow-through and specific, small goal-setting. For me, that equals greater efficiency in lessons and a stronger sense of having each student on a linear trajectory.

Something funny happened while I was writing this article. I brought my binder home so that I could use it for reference, and since that was an unusual occurrence, I accidentally left it at home. Having to function the next day without it made me realize just how important referring to my own notes has become to me as a teacher. Even with the student and parent there to help remind me what assignments were, I felt frustrated because my level of follow-through was noticeably reduced. Ultimately, I have found that taking and referring to my own notes has truly increased my ability to better serve my students.

My intent is that this thoughtful, collective note-taking readies students to more confidently convert their written lesson notes into beautiful musical “notes”!

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What I wrote	What I had the parent write	Explanation
Perp GM Doub- hold last G	Perpetual Motion G Major doubles- play a single quarter note at the end rather than 16ths	Refinement of previous piece. The student otherwise played the piece well.
(TW/FFS GM count to 3)	When reviewing French Folk Song, remember to count to three on all dotted half notes	The point of the assignment was to transpose review songs to G Major to prep for Long, Long Ago. I use parentheses for an activity we did that I feel we don't need to repeat the next week.
GM SOTW/LRow more bow	Transpose Lightly Row and Song of the Wind to G Major for next week	The technical focus of the lesson, circled below, is to work on using more bow. He will work on doing that with the review piece as well as the current piece (see below).
ICRM Pitch 18-19, Rhy 6-8	I Can Read Music: pitch lessons 18-19 and rhythm lessons 6-8	I write down only the lesson numbers assigned for next week, not the numbers we did in the current lesson.
LLA- C rhy, go to Peng Joe 	Long Long Ago- C part rhythm. Clap and say rhythm while listening to recording. Say “big little big little big little slow bow.” Air bow while singing. Go out to “penguin Joe” sticker on the bow for every quarter note. One point each time Joe is reached.	I put a penguin sticker on his bow, and when I asked if he wanted to name it, he named it Joe. We worked on various ways to correct the rhythm and use more bow, but all I felt I needed in my own notes was the goal, not the activities. “C” or “C Part” refers to line 3.
Allegretto-start A, B	Allegretto- short short long articulation. ABCB form. Each 3-note group is either a scale or a skip. The last note of each 3-note group is the same as the first note of the next group. B part same pitches as A but one 3-note group is missing and ends in half note. Learn A & B for next week.	The assignment is to learn the A & B parts. The rest of the info is not something I will specifically dictate to the parent since I have marked those things in the music, but they usually write down info like this as I am introducing a piece.
*GM . . -	Practice GM scale with Allegretto short short long articulation	We didn't get to this in the lesson. It is starred so I will remember to start with it in the next lesson. The shorthand shows the articulation without me having to write “short short long”