SKYPE TEACHING: How? Why? and Why Not?

Wendy Seravalle-Smith, Ellen Kogut, Judy Olmstead-O'Regan, Judy Bossuat-Gallic

SETTING UP A SKYPE LESSON

(note: Google Chat and Facetime are also alternatives)

EQUIPMENT

Teacher and student download program from www.skype.com; set up passwords and share with each other

It is useful for the teacher to set up on Skype a separate group folder with students so it is easy to find connections

Practise using Skype before offering it to your families

- Be sure the lighting is good
- Do not put the sound too high as it distorts the tone
- Position the student so they can see you and you can see both the left and the right hands. If you hook yourself up to a bigger screen, they seem almost life-size!
- Try to see the feet as well; if not, parent needs to check this during the lesson for good balance
- For cello, it is helpful to have an external camera attached to laptop that can be moved up and down or attached to a tripod to focus on the bow pathway and then the left hand.

Good internet speed is necessary on both ends of the call for best results.

- A modem extender which splits the signal into a house keeps it stronger when others in the house are also using the internet

Prepare the teaching materials (books, instrument, etc.) in advance so you do not go off-screen

Avoid multitasking during a lesson such as texting or emailing; it is more tempting without live student in the room

When the connection drops, just reconnect and keep going. It is easier if you know who will do the calling back. Have phone numbers/emails ready in case it is a major glitch so you can communicate and say "I have to reboot my computer. I will call you as soon as I am back and ready."

TEACHING STYLE and PARENT EDUCATION

- Parents and/or students must be able to tune the instrument to agreed **A** before the lesson and double check when lesson begins
- Create non-verbal signals that indicate stop playing so that you do not interrupt with your voice

- You learn to listen! You can hear bowings, fingerings even on the days when the connection is not in sync
- It is a window for the teacher into how the parent works with the student at home
- Parent lessons and conferences are even more important and easier to make happen at the beginning or end of the lessons
- You learn how to be very specific and detailed in instructions
- You learn to break down the teaching into learning segments
- The teacher improves their ability to see and diagnose problems
- Adjusting shoulder rests and chinrests when they change sizes and grow takes more time but can be done successfully
- Scan and attach to emails edited music with fingerings, shifts, bowings and they copy into music in advance of lessons

ADVANTAGES

- Skype teaching can allow for schedule flexibility

  Depending on the time zone, lessons can be scheduled when you would not be ordinarily teaching.

- Skype can give a window into the student's home practice environment as well as how the parent works with the student at home. The teacher can see if music stand is high enough, if environment at home is not full of distractions, if the lighting is good, position of parent, etc.

  There is no transition from home to studio. The students are very comfortable and the lesson playing level tends to be much closer to what they do in their practice sessions.

- Skype is embracing technology available to us. Skype is free and most laptops have built-in cameras so the expense is not large

- Skype can be used for missed lessons on occasion for sickness, weather, and transportation challenges.

  When missed lessons are not made up as a studio/program policy, this is an option.

- Skype can be used to continue lessons during an extended illness or injury

- Teaching via Skype can reach students in remote locations

  This widens the Suzuki community and allows the method to reach areas where there are no teachers

  When either teacher or student in the regular studio is away, lessons can still continue

- Skype teaching can continue a teaching relationship when a student moves away, especially if it is either hard to find a Suzuki teacher or the transition to a new teacher is too difficult emotionally.

Ethically, however, if a teacher is available in the Skype student's area and the relationship can be forged, then the Skype teacher should consider encouraging the student to have this live teacher

CHALLENGES and SOLUTIONS

TONE

Consider two types of students: 1) Occasional Skype students
2) Skype only students

1) Tone via Skype presents less of a problem because you will see the student live

When addressing tone in the Skype lesson, use modified approaches:

- Put less emphasis on playback, because the sound the student hears coming through the computer speakers is not an ideal one
- Put more emphasis on imagery
  - Diamond tone, banana bows, playing under or through the strings, church bells, tuna tone
- Put more emphasis on visual elements
  - Watch the string ring, Suzuki's "natural tone" exercises from Tonalization
  - Describe tone as color or fabric
    - Dark blue vs. light yellow tone
    - Satin vs. velvet tone
- Put more emphasis on self-evaluation
  - How many seconds did the string ring after you stopped playing?
  - On a scale of 1-10 how resonant a tone did you get?
  - Was that your most beautiful sound?
  - Was that water bug, minnow, or tuna sound?
  - Listening to the beginning, middle, and end of notes (Ed Kreitman)
- Use visual cues to determine quality of tone…"guess" what is going on with the tone, based on these cues
  - Posture
  - Bow Hold - Check whether thumb is bent
- Talk about technique in relation to sound
  - Not squeezing with the thumb
  - "Let the strings hold the bow"
  - Second-finger/thumb connection
- Teach the parent how to listen and evaluate tone production in these same ways

Although audio quality is not high (especially with regard to resonance), it is still pretty easy to recognize subtle differences in tone production when students play

2) Skype only students

All of the above methods apply PLUS:

- Also send Playback recordings via Dropbox or private UTube so the student can hear an example of fine tone and students must periodically send recordings of themselves done with a high-quality recording device to the teacher via dropbox

- Listening to recordings, both the Suzuki CD and "supplemental" listening is all the more important for these students. Ask for twice the amount of listening you normally would!
- If possible, these students should be persuaded to attend Institutes and/or concerts, in order to have some exposure to live violin playing

GROUP LESSONS

- Place the computer on the piano and ask the child to mute their end and possibly turn off their camera as their time delay may confuse your "live" group students.
- The important thing is that the camera/microphone is close enough to you that the Skype student hears the instructions clearly. Sometimes, the solution to this is to have an external camera that can be placed on a tripod nearer to the teacher.

TESTIMONIALS

"Because it is their home environment, there is no transition. They are very comfortable and seem to play as well as they do in practice. When switching location to the lesson, they seem not to be able to play at the same level. There is also no risk that you'll have to wake a child who has fallen asleep in the late afternoon being transported from school to the lesson and arriving groggy and spends the first part of the lesson just waking up. Having a Skype lesson in the home environment allows us more family time and also gives the opportunity for lesson observation in an easy and more attentive way than in the teacher's home or studio. One lesson when the video setup did not work, Mrs. Wendy was still able to diagnose the technical problems of bow hold and bow pathway without seeing. It reminded me of the stories I read in Nurtured by Love of how Dr. Suzuki would be able to tell these things and also about the relationship of the student with the parent from just what he heard on the graduation tapes he listened to."
-Daly family, Boston area, violin student 14 and cello student 8, of Wendy Seravalle-Smith

"Brick and mortar learning centers don't exist in our homeschooling, ex-pat life. We rely on the internet for contact with other homeschoolers, curriculum, background literature, supporting activities and extracurricular activities. I think that there is an educational shift happening throughout the world with the advent of the internet. Learning can no longer be recognized as a classroom with four walls, no more that say shopping is limited to your downtown main street […] Most people of a certain age could not comprehend doing all their Christmas shopping online. And so, perhaps they also think learning the violin via Skype will not be able to work. But didn't Suzuki learn how to play from listening to his recordings of Kreisler from a photograph? Don't we still get our skills in tonalization from listening to the CD today?"

On the Suzuki triangle:
"I think we tend to communicate more. We tend to shoot off more emails with questions and concerns because, well, it's our only mode of communication. If I had to go to your studio, would we be doing the same?" - Lisa, parent of two Suzuki violin students, ages 5 and 7