

The Most Difficult Teaching Assignment I Have Had in Over Fifty Years, by Richard Lambrecht, Alpha Chapter of Phi Beta Mu

Having been bombarded for weeks by newscasters on television and my favorite public radio station about the new, strange and deadly virus we knew only as Corona virus, I began the week before Spring Break fearing that school as we knew it was about to change. In fact, on Monday of that week I changed how my lesson setup was in my studio. I had the students sit, instead of their usual place next to me, to sit just inside the door to maintain a (more than) six-foot distance apart.

During our final weekly studio horn choir rehearsal before the break (Friday, March 14), I told my students that it was likely to be our last day together. Despite this sobering statement (or perhaps because of it), they responded amazingly as we played through our entire program for the May 3 Horn Choir Concert. Their playing was “stunning,” intense, focused, and passionate. It had me in tears.

Two days later an email arrived from the head of the music department detailing UTEP’S decision not to

return to campus following Spring Break. Faculty members were urged to use the week after break to prepare for “distance teaching” which would be our mode of instruction for the remainder of the term. I immediately began on my plan for the rest of the semester. Realizing that the students would be missing up to twelve hours of playing time (band, orchestra, horn choir, chamber music) each week, I wanted to find a way to engage them and keep them playing. Furthermore, I wanted them to continue their feelings of camaraderie, even though they were separated, in their own different homes, but together with me for group learning and playing.

High on my list of priorities was the welfare of my students. Many of them came from families with everyone out of work, or with little or no access to the internet (maybe sharing a computer with a parent who was working from home along with several siblings who were also trying to go to school on the same computer.) I vowed to be positive, to remain energetic and to make each Zoom session active, new, exciting, different, and worthwhile.

The weekly plan was to meet Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday for three hours each day (11 to 2.) Realizing that some players would miss due to obligations to other classes, I planned for students who missed some or all a session to attend a “make-up” session with my Graduate Teaching Assistant. (I personally was not involved in this session. It was entirely student-led as Raymond (TA) and the students worked out the time frame, generally one and a half to two hours, and what material/skills they would cover.)

In addition to all current students, I extended invitations and welcome to area high school students, former students, adult area horn players (El Paso Symphony Orchestra colleagues), and horn players from Klein High in Houston and Hebron High School in Carrollton, bands my son Chris Lambrecht and Andy Sealy (both Alpha Chapter, Phi Beta Mu) direct and that I have close association with.

All sessions were done with the Zoom app. We have all learned that when you are teaching a one-on-one Zoom lesson, you can hear how the student plays and respond to that playing. However, in a group environment (16 – 20 people was our average), only

one player is heard - You, the person instructing and modeling. With distance learning, the focus is on the content and the purpose of **what** is being played, not **how** it is being played. You cannot and should not deal with the quality of students' playing. In real-time teaching, you can respond to all the factors of music performance. On Zoom you do not hear the ensemble. All ensemble elements are absent. For some students, this can be a distinct advantage. It is safe to sound however they sound, and there is zero criticism. My advice is that you make suggestions for improvement in a positive, humorous, and non-judgmental manner.

You must, however monitor/manage the student participation. You can see everyone on the screen and how active or inactive they are. I remember feeling like saying to them, "You have to participate. Here I am playing this exercise the very best possible way I can, and I'm watching you do "twirling routines" while you empty water from your instrument. Do that when I'm talking, not when you are supposed to be playing." And watch for that cell phone texting, which all students are adept at hiding from us.

Back to the plan. Structure for our sessions are as follows:

1. Pre-show music or video, usually horn related (London Horn Sound, a major orchestra, Los Angeles Horn Club, American Horn Quartet, some crazy YouTube video like Romain Thorel (Rock and Groove), Chris Castellanos, and Genghis Barbie
2. Welcome, might include some discussion of the pre-show or talk about the “special” day we might be celebrating. Here are a few of the “days” we dressed up for or featured: Dress-up day, Mask day, Bring Your Pet day, Pajama day (with much guidance), Horn Choir shirt day, “Shoesday Tuesday,” Wacky Hat Wednesday, Cinco de Mayo (really big in the west Texas town of El Paso), Family day, “Orange You Glad It’s Thursday” (orange is one of our school colors), Hawaii day, Favorite non-alcoholic beverage day
3. Breathing/stretching routines – different every day and generally student led
4. Warm-ups, fundamentals, technical studies, scales – different every day, and incredibly challenging to create sixteen+ different sessions

5. Recipe for Success by Karen Houghton and Janet Nye – (this book each student owns) exercises, “music” and duets. BTW The duets were high on the list of favorite activities listed at the end of the semester.
6. Scanned and emailed music, “call and response,” shared screen music
7. Two selections of band music and/or orchestral music from Smart Music. I chose important band literature that the students had not ever performed. SO FAR, WE ARE ABOUT 90 MINUTES INTO THE SESSION
8. Individual playing of (first few weeks) etudes assigned, (later in the semester) solo assigned for jury. During this time everyone used the “Chat” function to respond to the performances. BTW the students really liked the chat function, seeing their colleague’s comments.
9. Guest artists – I invited, persuaded, cajoled numerous guests to appear: Carsten Williams of London Royal Philharmonic and London Philharmonia, David Cooper Principal horn in the Chicago Symphony, former students who are now professional horn players (and other instruments as well), colleagues from El Paso

Symphony, UTEP professors (band directors, brass pedagogy, music business)

10. Wrap up – each and every student would speak about the day, and I would “wrap” it up with thanks and motivation
11. Exit – Postlude, peaceful music usually poignant, sensitive, introspective, ballad-like. Sometimes vocal (Eva Cassidy very often)

In post semester evaluation of the horn sessions, there were some favorite parts that many shared. They really enjoyed playing along with me, both in duets and on the warm-up exercises. One junior confided to me “I realize we play all of these routines together often. Now I hear all the things you have been telling me, that I’m sharp on certain notes. As we are doing these on Zoom, and I can hear you and me, I can HEAR IT.”

Here are a few more comments. “My thoughts on this on-line semester are that I had a lot of fun doing this project. The three times a week gave some of us who needed the meeting to spur us to play something to occupy our time and make the quarantine go much faster. I appreciated your

enthusiasm in this challenging time; it surely kept our spirits up and kept us motivated...” Ryan

“If it weren’t for your continuous diligence, Covid-19 would have beaten us as a horn choir and beaten me as a musician and ultimately as a person. With each passing day I found it even more difficult to pick up my horn. I completely lost my motivation and drive to do anything. Thankfully, that is where you came in to change all of that... You created new warm-up routines daily which helped create the excitement and anticipation of doing something new every day. By showing us new things on the horn, it allowed us students to experiment and try new things on our own... Ultimately, it gave me the drive to pick up my horn and play again... Musicians need to be able to play with other musicians in ensembles to put what we learned in lessons into practice. That is what I missed most – the ability to play and work alongside my friends. Fortunately, Mr. Lambrecht found a way to have us play together without physically being together. With Smart Music we were able to play some of our favorite pieces in band and orchestral settings. The best part was being able to play new pieces we had never heard. Although we could not hear each other, just playing along with the

recording in our Zoom session made me feel like I was playing with my friends again. Covid-19 may have completely uprooted our way of life, but Mr. Lambrecht was able to inspire us each day. We are living through unprecedented times. It seems like everyday things are just getting worse, and I never realized how easy it is for your mind to wander down into a dark pit. My professor went above and beyond to make certain that none of that would happen to his students. From dressing up for our crazy theme days, to the special guests like David Cooper and Carsten Williams, he made me eager to pick up my horn so I could see everyone's faces."

Raymond