



Go Play!

MOTIVATING THE NEW GENERATION OF PIANISTS

A free e-book

By Catherine Sheski
allpiano.wordpress.com

introduction

"Go practice."

These words no longer mean anything to our piano students.

They are growing up in a world where instant feedback is the norm and random access to information has replaced sequential learning. Our students prefer learning that is relevant, useful and fun. For some, the idea of sitting alone at a piano for an hour a day is sheer torture.

"Go play."

Now *these* are words that resonate with today's generation of young musicians.

Between social media, unlimited downloads, video games and all the rest of digital technology they have an abundance of "toys" to encourage musical creativity and a world of "friends" with whom to play.

Music has always been at the forefront of the technological revolution. Our students know this, but unfortunately, for many of them, attending the weekly piano lesson is like stepping back in time.

My goal with this e-book is to present a few ideas to parents and piano teachers on how they can make music lessons more relevant to the digital generation and keep them ***playing!***

the students

Digital Natives, a term coined by author and visionary, [Mark Prensky](#), are those students who were born into the world of digital technology. They don't know a world without computer games, email, the Internet, instant messaging, iPods and cell phones.

Our students have grown up with Reader Rabbit, Mario and Pokemon. They have digi-pets, carry thousands of songs on their iPods, download movies instantly, and communicate daily with friends around the world.

They prefer to learn at a fast pace. They are visually oriented. They're used to quick non-linear access to information. They have no tolerance for lectures, stale lessons, or bland presentations.

Our students crave interactivity. Above all, they are creators. Without some control over their own learning, many find the boredom unbearable. They tune out and drop out. Prensky suggests that their motto is [EoE](#) - "Engage or Enrage."

[Dr. Larry Rosen](#), author of *ReWired*, states, "We now have the know-how to provide an educational experience – both inside and outside the classroom – that is motivating, captivating, and engaging. We can no longer ask our children to live in a world where they are immersed in technology in all parts of their lives except when they go to school. We must rewire education or we risk losing this generation of media-immersed, tech-savvy students."

"Our students have changed radically. Today's students are no longer the people our educational system was designed to teach."

- [Mark Prensky](#)

the teacher

Most **Traditional Piano Teachers** are Digital Immigrants; many have not even applied for their passport yet.

As part of a centuries-old tradition of piano pedagogy, they teach the way they were taught, introducing each new skill only when the student is ready.

Repertoire progresses from Bach Minuets, to Inventions, to Preludes and Fugues, and finally to the French and English Suites. Sonatinas come before sonatas. Five-finger patterns are taught before one-octave scales, which are taught before two-octave scales. There are method books for Lessons, Performance, Technique and Theory - Thompson, Alfred, Bastien and Faber in all the colors of the rainbow.

The **New Piano Teacher** recognizes that we must rethink our approach to the Digital Natives or risk tuning them out.

The New Piano Teacher incorporates technology into the piano lesson, moves at a faster pace in a parallel rather than step-by-step fashion, and works side-by-side with students as co-creators.

He gets his students fired up about making music by giving them the tools of theory and technique and then setting them free to create new compositions, mash-ups, improvisations, multimedia performances.

We are moving from an economy and a society built on the logical, linear, computerlike capabilities of the Information Age to an economy and a society built on the inventive, empathic, big-picture capabilities of what's rising in its place, the Conceptual Age.

- Daniel Pink, [A Whole New Mind](#)

the world

The world is changing. And our students are adapting.

Isolated → Connected

It's been called the biggest shift since the Industrial Revolution. 73% of online teens used social networking sites in 2009, [Facebook](#) has more than 400 million active users and the average user has 130 friends. [Twitter](#) now has over 100 million registered users and new users are signing up at the rate of 300,000 per day.

A [study](#) from the Pew Internet and American Life Project titled "Social Isolation and New Technology" and published in the fall of 2009 claims that social media makes people more social and more involved - not less. According to the study people who use social media have larger, more diverse "discussion networks" - groups of people with whom they share important issues - than those who don't.

Our music students are connecting with other young musicians from around the world. They're sharing YouTube videos and mp3s. They're introducing each other to new composers and emerging performers. They are being inspired.



What we're seeing is what [Matthew Syed](#), author of *Bounce*, calls *motivation by association*, the spark that will start a student down the long hard path to excellence.

For example, a student comes across a YouTube video of another young pianist from the other side of the world performing a piano arrangement of the music from the computer game Age of Empires II. With a little encouragement from his teacher, that student may spend more time practicing his own arrangement of the game tune than his Bach Minuet.

What's lost? The Bach gets set aside, perhaps permanently.

What's gained? The student is developing his ear, his technique, his confidence, and that spark that Syed refers to may be lit permanently.

To dismiss the student's online world is to disengage him. He will shut down, clock-watch, and simmer.

Generic → Personal

The idea of 'personalization' in education as put forth by [Sir Ken Robinson](#) applies to piano lessons as well as classroom learning. For some students private piano lessons are their only opportunity for a truly 'personalized' educational experience.

Put aside the method books for a few weeks and find out what your students really want to learn. Ask and they'll tell you.

“Creativity now is as important in education as literacy and we should treat it with the same status.”

- Sir Ken Robinson, [TED.com](#)

Consuming → Creating

Speaking about the differences between the brain development of children who "consume" television and those who "create" with the computer, [Dr. Bruce Perry of Baylor University says](#):

"I think the difference between computers and television is that television tends to be quite passive. You sit and you are watching and things are happening in front of you but you don't do anything. Children are natural "manipulators" of the world — they learn through controlling the movement and interactions between objects in their world — dolls, blocks, toy cars, their own bodies. With television, they watch and do not control anything. Computers allow interaction. Children can control the pace and activity and make things happen on computers. They can also repeat an activity again and again if they choose."

According to Mark Prensky, one of the defining characteristics of the Digital Native is the [desire to create](#). "Digital Natives are adept (or become quickly so, given the chance) at building Web sites, Flash movies, and other online creations. In their games they create not only avatars (characters to represent them), but entire worlds, including the houses, furniture, clothes, weapons and implements of whatever world they are inhabiting."

Students come into their piano lessons ready to take control and anxious to create. When asked, my students tell me they want to compose their own music or make arrangements to give their own performance.

According to [an article](#) in BBC News Technology -

Professor Sugata Mitra first introduced children in a Delhi slum to computers in 1999.

He has watched the children teach themselves - and others - how to use the machines and gather information.

Follow up experiments suggest children around the world can learn complex tasks quickly with little supervision.

A student may be introduced to the music of the alternative rock band Muse, for example, and be inspired to try her hand at her own rock-influenced version of a Chopin Nocturne. Another might bring in an original composition hot of the press from Finale Notepad. Another may be teaching himself [Debussy's Clair de Lune from an online video](#).

These students should not be discouraged.

The New Piano Teacher will help the student by building technical skills and introducing the music theory concepts. He can leave the computer know-how to the students - they probably know more than their teacher about creating sound files and uploading videos - but ultimately it's the teacher who brings the musical expertise.

Composition, improvisation, videos and soundtracks, music mash-ups - teachers must allow all of this creativity to spill over into the piano lesson.

Closed → Open

Alternative classical or alt-classical, a term coined by [Greg Sandow](#), refers to that music which is not mainstream. It's a word that describes classical music without the stuffiness. It's exciting, creative and inclusive. It's jazz, pop, classical, improv, indie and experimental all mixed together.

It's the opening up of what was once a 'members only' audience to the digital generation. It's serious musicians having fun 'playing' for an 'engaged' audience.



It's an all-girl bassoon quartet from Eastman called "Breaking Winds" with a [hit viral video](#).

It's Tan Dun's [YouTube Symphony](#).

It's the pianists - [Anderson-Roe Duo](#), [James Rhodes](#), [Lola Astanova](#), and [Jade Simmons](#) to name a few.

It's small intimate concert settings where you can wear jeans and sneakers and drink coffee.

It's where the performer engages the audience in conversation.

It's about mixing it up with dancers and artists.

It's where the price of admission is open to whatever you can give.

It's thinking out of the box.

It's what inspires our students.



engage

According to [eSchool News](#), Andy Petroski, director of the Learning Technologies Master of Science program at Harrisburg University of Science and Technology in Pennsylvania, says *engagement* is a key to connecting with today's students.

"These kids are highly engaged and active in their personal world. Traditional school is so far on the other end of the spectrum for them," he says. "More than any other generation, they are pleading, 'Engage me,'...because to sit and listen and do one thing for long periods is so foreign to their daily lives."

In today's world, how can we engage our music students when learning an instrument has always been about hours of solitary practice?

- Introduce theory, scales, chords, and history as it applies to the music the students are working on. Keep it relevant.
- Technique and ear training go hand-in-hand and must be incorporated into each lesson. Again, keep it relevant.
- Listen to the students. Ask them what pieces they like to play - most of them will light up and be happy to tell you what they're working on at home outside of your lesson plan. Find time during the lesson to acknowledge their 'real world' music making.

How lucky is the man who, like Mozart and others, goes to the tavern of an evening and writes some fresh music. For he lives while he is creating, though he does what he likes.

-Johannes Brahms. From Letter to Clara Schumann, Hanover, February 12, 1856.

- Give them the green light to go ahead and experiment with Audacity, Garageband or Finale.
- Familiar tunes work. How often do teachers actually hear students ask to learn a piece they've never heard before?
- How long should they practice? We know students will spend hours figuring out Bella's Lullaby from a YouTube Video, but if they resist when it comes to their weekly assignment, advise them to practice in [10-minute bursts](#).
- Encourage students to focus on what they like and to get better at it. They might tell you they prefer singing, or they want to learn another instrument. They may listen to jazz at home, or opera. Don't ignore them. More than any other generation, this generation knows what they like.
- Re-evaluate the relevance of piano competitions, marathon recitals, and annual "certifications."
- And while you're at it dust off that Fake Book.

All of our students have something in their lives that they do and are good out. If we can find out what engages them outside of the piano lesson and bring it into the studio, we'll have their attention and their respect along with a fresh burst of enthusiasm.

We can no longer ask our children to live in a world where they are immersed in technology in all parts of their lives except when they go to school. We must rewire education or we risk losing this generation of media-immersed, tech-savvy students.

- [Dr. Larry Rosen, Ph.D.](#)

collaborate

Practicing piano is a lonely job. Only the most motivated students are willing to shut off their devices and disconnect from their online world for the hours of concentrated work required to memorize a Bach Fugue or Beethoven Sonata.

Pair a student up with another musician (or musicians) and you have collaboration. Whether it's a marching band or a rock band, for most kids it's just more fun to play with other musicians.

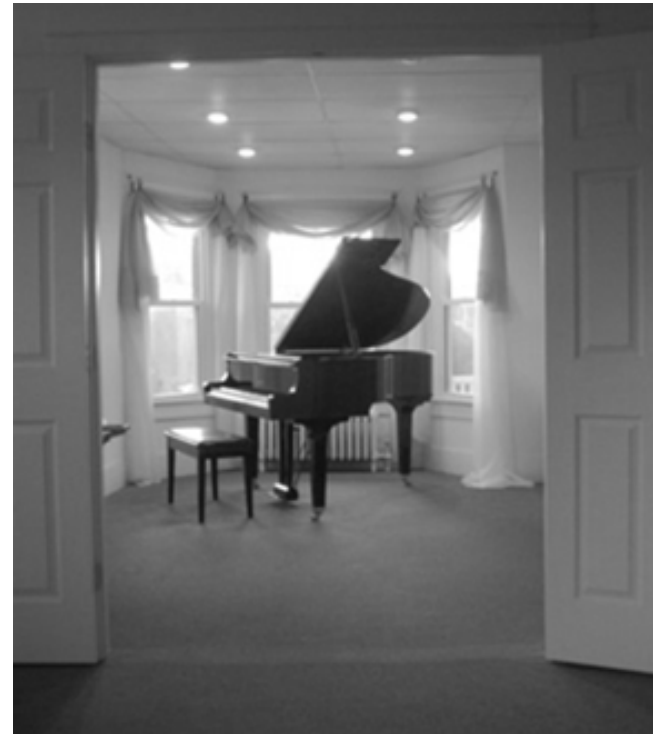
Get even more creative. Here are a few ideas to suggest to your students. Let them take ball and run with it.

- Team up with a local dance teacher or art teacher or author for a multi-media performance such as on the spot drawing, piano improvisations to the spoken word, or movement and music.
- Start a project on [FreshBrain](#). Meet other mixers, mashers and music-makers.
- Hold a contest. For example, Wendy Stevens held [a cartoon-motive contest](#) for her students.
- Play chamber music - join the [Classical Revolution](#).



just play

- Hold student-run coffeehouses or open-mic nights where students are free to perform with or without the music. Students choose the repertoire and invite their friends. Keep it casual and open-ended.
- Start a [YouTube](#) Channel for your studio. Upload student recitals, lessons. Try using [USTREAM](#) for a live broadcast.
- Become active your community by gathering your students wherever you can find a piano. If necessary, take a keyboard with you. Start with nursing homes, pre-schools, the mall and your local library.
- Fund a cause. The 21st century students are willing to volunteer their time and talents for causes they believe in. From the Facebook invitation to the donation box at the door, let them gather their friends to raise money for their favorite charity. Stand back and watch.



about

Catherine Shefski currently teaches over forty students at her studio in Northeast Pennsylvania.

In the past she's taught online piano lessons working with 'virtual students' from Alaska to Turkey.

For more information:

allpiano.wordpress.com

[twitter](#)

[facebook page](#)



legal

This work is free. Share it with the world under the terms of [Creative Commons Attribution 3.0 License](#).

© 2010 Catherine Shefski