



CHAPTER 5

How to Teach Unforgettable Lessons & Classes

# On Zoom & Google Meet

A Step-by-Step Guide for Educators

Here, you'll find everything you need to know to teach amazing lessons online today.

# Interviews With TakeLessons Partners

TakeLessons interviewed three inspiring TakeLessons partners to get valuable insights about teaching online, how to enhance your pedagogical practice, and how to improve the student experience during online learning.

Below, you'll find interviews with cellist, Claire Mehm, pianist and vocalist, Phillip Fullerton, and language educator and musician, Azalea Laredo.

## TakeLessons Partner Interview With Cellist, Claire Mehm

TakeLessons interviewed cellist and TakeLessons partner, Claire Mehm to gather her insights for teaching online. Claire teaches private cello lessons online, provides music instruction for a high school music program via video, and leads an after school music program using Zoom.

**TakeLessons:**

What online platform do you use, and how did you end up choosing that platform? How is it serving you?

**Claire:**

I primarily teach via Zoom for all my group high school orchestra lessons and private lessons. Back in March, I had only used Zoom for meetings, and so that was my first foray into Zoom teaching, and I've been using it non-stop ever since.

**TakeLessons:**

Awesome. So you're teaching big groups on Zoom as well?

**Claire:**

Yes. I'm teaching a couple classes with co-teachers, and so with my my high school that I work with, I usually have a few co-teachers. Those classes range from orchestra - which includes all orchestral instruments - to jazz bands, guitar classes, and steel drums. I take the lead in the orchestra classes because my background is strings, and then I take more of an assistant teaching with the steel drum and guitar groups. My after school programs are primarily cello classes, and those vary in group size. I'm also leading an adult piano class.

**TakeLessons:**

Wow! You'll certainly be able to answer all of my questions. My first question is straightforward. I'm curious about your your actual setup. Where do you place your camera and your mics? And what arrangement have you found works best?

**Claire:**

I've switched it around so many times to finally get the setup that I want. I have my computer a little bit skewed, so you can see it's a blank space behind me, and you don't have to see all my my furniture.

Then, I use two web cams; one on top of my computer and then the other one situated right here above my piano. The camera on top of my piano is set up to show a close up of the keys. Because it's on a stand, it's pretty versatile and I can move it around.

I need a different setup to show close ups either of my hand or my bow when teaching cello.

I try to keep my microphone as straight on as possible. Right now, it's just to the side of my computer, and then it's easy to adapt for the other instruments I teach. I actually have a steel drum back here that I can wheel over in front, and it's easily adjustable to pick up the sound of my cello.

**TakeLessons:**

Amazing. Of all of the equipment that you use, is there anything that you have found to be most valuable, anything that you feel like you just couldn't do without?

**Claire:**

Having an upgraded microphone makes a huge difference. It means students aren't just hearing pitches, but they can hear the tone and the timbre clearly as well. This is especially important on string instruments, because string instruments don't come through very clearly on a computer. The sound can be very rough with built-in microphones, and so having an upgraded external microphone helps soften that a little bit, and you get more of the warm tone with that for string instruments.

The other element that's been important is having a camera that's portable. That's been very, very useful. Because it's on a stand, I can maneuver it around, and switch around pretty easily to get different angles to show students.

My students are all on different devices, and you'll definitely have some students tuning in on a little phone. Having one camera that can show close ups will definitely help. I can show a full view when I'm sitting a few feet from the camera, so they're seeing me plus my entire instrument. If I can have a close up just off my hand, it definitely helps a lot, and concepts like position and fingering will make a lot more sense.

**TakeLessons:**

Walk me through how you actually set that up. For somebody who might be a total novice; have you plugged your webcams right into your computer, do you have a USB mic? How have you configured this?

**Claire:**

I keep my setup very simple. They're very good web cameras, and they just plug right in to my computer through a USB port. And it's the same thing on my microphone.

I use a Blue Yeti microphone, so it's the same thing. You just plug it in, and you can manipulate the position. It has a few different settings for different types of sounds. And so that's something that - if you get a new microphone - you'll want to test for find the settings that work best for you.

The gain is right on the front. So you can kind of see, 'OK, am I in the red, do I need to turn it down?' It's very easy to tell because there are actually green, yellow, and red lights that flash, and so I can adjust it accordingly. If it's in the yellow, I think, this is probably blaring a little bit and I need to turn it down, or I'm only getting a couple of green dots, so I think I need to turn it up a little bit. It's really helpful.

**TakeLessons:**

And I think you probably have some insights here about making your classes interactive. Have you found exercises or certain tools to help students either collaborate with each other or interact more with you as a teacher?

**Claire:**

Yeah, it's hard, but there are a few things you can do. Kids are sitting in front of screens all day now in their classes, and if they're online and then they're coming to lessons or after school classes, they're also sitting in front of a screen.

Zoom fatigue is definitely a real thing, and you can see it when their eyes become glazed over. Even just a moment catching up and chatting, having a breather, and maybe just doing a stand and stretch for a minute is really helpful.

Some days, maybe change it up a little bit. Don't do playing, and instead, say okay, maybe we'll learn a little bit about this composer or we'll dive a little bit into this music and share videos with the students that are meaningful to you, and spend some time talking to them about music. This is a way to give them a break from the Zoom fatigue they might be experiencing.

**Claire:**

Yeah, I've definitely found that teaching online can feel a little bit cold with students, because you're not a human in the room with them anymore.

You're just someone they're seeing on the screen. And so it takes a little bit to make that extra step to humanize those lessons and to make them feel more personal. And so I always make sure - at the top of every lesson - to spend a few minutes asking how they're doing and what they've done recently. I ask, "How is school going?" "Do you like your classes being online?"

Spending just a few minutes checking in can be valuable. Normally, you would be doing that anyway in an in-person lesson. They would be unpacking, or they'd be tuning during that time. And you would probably naturally have some chit chat. And so it's a little forced that a lot of times when they turn their video on, they're already set to go. They've already got their instrument out, and they're already all tuned up. I think it's really important to spend those couple of minutes asking how they're doing, how their day was, how school went, and have they done anything fun lately. That just pulls them in a little bit, engages them a little bit more, and gets them to smile a little bit. If you do that at the beginning of the lesson, it has a huge impact on how the rest of that lesson goes.

**TakeLessons:**

For your online lessons, have you found that there are certain things that absolutely translate over from from in-person to online, and certain things that don't translate? Anything you've had to leave behind entirely?

**Claire:**

So there are a couple things that do translate really well. I really like the annotate feature on Zoom, and that you can pull up the music that you're working on and make little markings just like you would in person on their music, or tell them to write in. And so they can either take a picture of it or screenshot it, or copy it into their parts.

This is a very helpful tool because you're not just sitting there looking at the music and saying, 'OK, measure two, you have a down, and then you have an up'. By using the annotate feature, you're not dictating everything to them. Instead, you can write it out. You can ask some questions along the way, for example 'what should I do here?' It feels a little more interactive than me telling them verbally, especially if they're not verbal learners. For verbal learners, it can be really tough if they're doing everything orally and they're not doing anything visually. You can use the same technique with the whiteboard feature.

The whiteboard feature does that really well. I can kind of take a couple of minutes, maybe do some theory with them and scribble out a little staff and we can just talk about the notes or note reading, just like we would use a piece of paper in their lesson to do the same thing.

The main thing that does not translate well to online lessons is that you can't physically move someone if things are out of whack. For cello, that's really hard because posture's so important and it's really hard to get the posture correct. If you see their bow is crooked, normally in an in-person lesson, I would move their hand a little bit and straighten it out, which you can't do in an online lesson. And so you have to figure ways around it.

One way is teaching them to be the hand that I would normally be. If they're working on vibrato, I would kind of come over and move their arm like this a little bit. Or if they see that the bow was crooked, you know, putting their hand on the other end of the bow and kind of moving it to get it straight helps straighten it out a little bit and then just kind of conveying a little more visually also helps.

And then having a second camera that can show close ups might help clear up some of the things that maybe they're not seeing, or kind of getting if they're seeing a full picture of you the whole time. But then they know what to focus on. They know what to see.

**TakeLessons:**

That's really insightful. I'm curious about your work with different age groups. And if you find if there are specific online teaching techniques or tools that work, say, to engage very young learners or to engage adult learners.

**Claire:**

One great thing about younger learners is that they love learning songs they already know. And they will stay on those songs as long as you want them to. You know, Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star and sometimes Disney songs are great, too. They all know Disney songs. They can be a little bit more tricky to learn, so they might not be perfect for beginner beginners, but maybe start them on Disney songs when they've been playing for a few years. Disney songs are a great way to pull young learners in, and make it so universal with young students and younger kids in general.

In Zoom lessons, make sure you focus on one thing at a time, and don't give them too much. They're already so overwhelmed. They've already got so much going on. There's so much changing, and so making it as simple for them as possible is really what they need right now. Say, 'We're going to focus on this one little thing,' And if you see other things that are going wrong, don't say anything. Don't give them a hard time about it. Don't try to fix those other things. You can come back to those later.

If they feel they've learned one thing they will be so happy with themselves, and will be so proud. And it just motivates them so much to leave their lesson saying, 'OK, I did something correct in my lesson, I can do this,' they can use that motivation later on.

**TakeLessons:**

I've been reading a lot about Zoom fatigue and about how it's harder for our brains to interpret information by video because we're trying to decipher body language cues that we would normally get in more subtle ways. So I'm curious if you pace your lessons differently virtually than you would in-person?

**Claire:**

Yeah, I think it's more that we have to remind ourselves. I feel like because we're not in the same room, we need to consciously take that extra step to understand what they're feeling. And it's easy to miss cues that they are overwhelmed and you're giving them too much.

And you kind of have to remind yourself, 'oh, no, I've got to slow this down, we've got to do this one step at a time,' And if we just kind of learn the letter names and are able to pluck, you know, one line of music, that's a great achievement for today, and we don't need to push the whole song on them in one day.

I feel like that's a very easy trap to fall into, giving them too much. And you can ask them what they're getting from school, because I guarantee you, most of them will say that they're getting more schoolwork than they've ever gotten before. If their classes are online, they feel already overwhelmed with school. They have more homework at the end of the day. And so I think just keeping that in mind and giving them smaller things to do, and make sure they have a practice plan. I always make sure to have practice plans with as many students as possible, especially when they're younger. This way when they sit down at the piano or the cello, they know exactly what they're supposed to do. I sketch it out so they know, 'if I do 20 minutes a day, I'm good.'

I just kind of keep it within reason. I think with younger kids, I would not have them practice more than a half hour a day if they're in elementary school, especially right now. No more than a half hour maybe. And then if they're in middle school, maybe half an hour to an hour, depending on their level of motivation. And then if they're in high school, check with them and see what they're getting in school, how many hours of homework they're doing. And then, you know, if they're a little bit less motivated, keeping on the lower end of half an hour of practicing. And if they're more motivated, than have them practice for an hour or more, depending on the student and how long they've been playing. And again, the school situation, I think you have to be really careful of.

**TakeLessons:**

And how heavily do you structure your lessons. Do you leave any room for improvisation or are your lessons planned down to the last minute?

**Claire:**

You always have to leave some room for improvisation, because in classes and lessons, they never go exactly 100 percent of the way that you think they're going to go. You can have it perfectly structured in your mind and you get something completely different from your student or the students that you have in your class. And then you have to kind of be flexible enough that you can change directions on the spot if you need to.

For group classes, I definitely am a lot more structured. I tried to have a plan of, 'OK, we're gonna do this for this long, then we're going to switch to this activity,' and again, sometimes, you still want to be flexible. Maybe if you get through your plan really quickly, you can keep going with them a little further. And then, you know, if you're you feel like it's going a lot slower, then you kind of have to reorganize that a little bit on the spot. But definitely more structured with group lessons.

And then with private lessons, I it's a little more vague, but I definitely try to have set goals for the students that, you know, we may be worked on this part of the song. Now we're going to work on this section of the song. But then you start to be flexible because you might go into the lesson and then the students says, "Oh, I didn't actually work on that. I worked on this other song," so then you switch gears and work on that.

And then it's like, okay, we'll spend most of our time on the something you worked on, and will push the next piece to next week. And that's always going to mean you have to be flexible that way and kind of kind of go with the flow a little bit.

**TakeLessons:**

I'm curious about the tools you use. You mentioned a couple of them, but tell me more about the different tools you use to engage your students.

**Claire:**

ManyCam is especially good if you're wanting to be able to show your face, but then also show a close up at the same time. That's a really good tool to use. And YouTube is something I use a lot. I say, "okay, let's listen to this piece together. Let's talk about it together. Let's watch this performance," You know, if I can tell the student is kind of getting a little frustrated with their progress, I say, "okay, let's watch a performance of it. Let's see how this cellist is handling playing this part right here." Or, you know, if the student has a question about the music, I say "okay, let's look at some famous musicians and see how they solve that problem, and then we can kind of come up with a different answer,"

There's tons of apps that you can integrate into Zoom. I don't use a ton of them. Like I said, I mainly try to keep it as simple as possible.

Also because the more apps you integrate, you also kind of overload your C.P.U usage a little bit, and it can slow down your computer at the same time. I try to keep it simple and share my screen when I'm going to different websites if my student is curious about going to college to study music or going into music professionally, than I may spend part of the lesson helping them look at schools and sharing my screen with the student while visiting the websites. I might say, "let's see if they have their audition requirements up and see what's there," And we we might do a little bit of that instead.

**TakeLessons:**

You mentioned briefly about using the mute tool. I would love to hear more about how you use that for private lessons and group classes.

**Claire:**

Yeah, definitely. I don't use it a ton in private lessons. I would only use it to play with other students because there is a little bit of a lag. As a teacher, you want the lag to fall on your end, not on the student's end, which can be a little tricky.

I also like to hear my students, but it can also sometimes be a little bit tough, especially for playing a duet. Sometimes, I want to switch to where my students are playing and be playing with them on my end, but I have to understand that's going to create a lag on their end. And so if you feel that you're fighting that lag, and you're always going to be because that's so ingrained as well as us as musicians, and specially for teachers. You know, you'll naturally want to stay with them if you're playing with someone else. And so that can be a little bit hard to fight, that you won't be perfectly with them. If that's an issue, put the student on mute when you're playing, they're essentially sort of playing with a recording almost because you're going to be playing and you can't adjust to the student.

In group lessons, I actually use it lots. I use the mute button because you can't have them all playing unmuted with you. It's just going to be a cacophony of noise, and you won't be able to focus or hear anything of what's going on individually. And so in those cases - group lessons - I typically will have all the students on mute while I'm playing so they can play along with me. And then after we we do that a few times - if you're feeling good about it - have them take turns un-muting, and then when one of them un-mutes, everyone else can stay muted and still play with that student. They can still keep practicing their parts simultaneously and you can go around the class and take turns having one person be the leader, by unmuting students one at a time. That works great for playing in unison. You can also do duets that way as well. And then with duets, I would also add the metronome which makes it a lot easier for your students to be able to follow along, especially if their ensemble skills aren't quite where they shouldn't be.

**TakeLessons:**

So walk me through how you would do that. Do you play the metronome through Zoom or on your computer?

**Claire:**

I would have the metronome on my phone, and I use an app called Tempo on my phone. Then I would set it on my phone, and I can actually slip my phone underneath the microphone. And so they can hear the clicks really well. And then I would be playing with the metronome, and then essentially, it's almost like they're hearing it on their end, like a recording with a click track almost.

The student can sync up with the metronome, and then if I have my student play on mute along with the metronome, because if I turn on their sound there's going to be lag between my metronome and their playing. So what I do is I have them download the tempo app. I always make sure the apps I'm using are ones that they can download for free. So they can just do it really quickly if they don't have the app yet. Then they have it on their phone and can play with the click track on their end, unmuted.

**TakeLessons:**

Very cool. So the first option, you turn on your click track or metronome underneath the mic while they're muted and then they would play along?

**Claire:**

One great thing is that with Zoom, you can actually plug your phone in as well. You can share from your phone. And so when I want students to download apps that I want them to use, such as a metronome to make sure we're all using the same one, it's easier to tell students if they're younger, how to set their metronome using the same app. And so I'll show them, you know, how to download the app. And then also, how do you use it? I can I can demonstrate that through sharing on my phone, through Zoom. You simply log into your Zoom account on your phone to do that.

**TakeLessons:**

I'm curious about how you make sure that your students are digesting the information that you're sharing when you're teaching online lessons. Do you have them play back more? Do you have them complete a quiz? Or just respond to questions?

**Claire:**

There's not a huge difference there, from in-person lessons, except that they are always more self-conscious in online lessons. I feel like in online classes they're always a little more hesitant, especially in a class situation when they're asked to play for everyone. For some reason in in-person lessons and classes this isn't as intimidating.

But I really think part of it is seeing yourself on a screen. It just adds a whole other layer of nerves to it. So it takes a little while. And that was hard with this piano class that I started doing a few weeks ago. Initially, the first class was a little tough with getting people to share, because these were adults who mostly had never taken a formal lesson before, or really taken lessons on any kind of instrument before. And so a lot of this was very new. And so they were very nervous unmuting themselves and playing.

Because of this, I was very supportive. I said, “That was so amazing. You did so well,” And gave them really positive feedback. And then they were more relaxed, “okay cool, I can do this!”

I feel like you have to be a little bit more positive than you would normally be in real life and really show it because there's that little bit of personality that gets lost through the video and through the camera. And you have to compensate just to make sure everyone really feels comfortable on the other end, and to make a greater attempt to make everyone comfortable.

**TakeLessons:**

I'm wondering about keeping students motivated when they sign up for a series of online lessons. Do you find that you've had to step in and help them set actionable goals or take extra steps to make sure they feel motivated?

**Claire:**

From week to week, sometimes it's just a matter of talking to them. And sometimes what can help is just saying, you know, “what song would you like to learn?” And making sure we're not just always just going, “OK, here's your next song. Here's your next song,” and instead, trying to give students more options, letting them pick the songs they want to work on. I tried that this summer and this year in the fall, saying, “OK, here are your options. I've selected some songs for you. You know, you go through, you pick one,”

Some of them pick some really hard songs that I would never have given them. But it's something they really like. They're actually rising to the occasion because they're like, “well, this is my favorite song. I've always wanted to play the song. I saw you put the song here and I really wanted to do this one. I love this song,”

That really helps, just letting them take a little bit of ownership over what they're doing. You know, a lot of things right now kind of feel out of control, and things are out of their control in general, and by giving some of that control back to them goes a very long way in helping them feel safe.

**TakeLessons:**

What a great idea. Are you doing any kind of a virtual recital or anything like that?

**Claire:**

Yes. With my cello group classes for my after school program right now, their goal is for the younger students to play a little mini recital by the end of what we call our semester in December. They'll do this in the virtual classroom that they share, and they'll just be able to play a song for each other and make it a little bit more formal feeling. I won't give them feedback and I'll just tell them how great they were. They'll be playing like they would in a real recital setting.

With older students, I'm making them do mock auditions, because they're a little bit more ready and able for that. Some are planning on going into music, and so having them prep their mock auditions gives them that same motivation and preparation. Many of them are still going to do music auditions, but this year music audition requirements are pre-recorded videos. They may be recorded next year, but we probably won't find out until next year.

**TakeLessons:**

So how are you structuring that mini recital that you're doing with your younger students?

**Claire:**

I'm letting them all play it live for one another. There are a couple different ways you can do this. We've done recitals where students can submit a video. Then you play the video or simply view it together.

If it's their first time doing a recital, playing a live online recital is going to make them very nervous. Giving students the opportunity to record it - especially more shy students - they will love that option, because I think it's very intimidating to play for other people, especially depending on how many people you're going to have if you're going to allow parents and family for younger students, that can be really stressful for kids, especially over video live. And also, you don't know people's bandwidths and things like that. Or maybe a student that's on a slower connection might have a harder time. And so having giving the option for recorded videos I think is a really good option to have. And you might find more students are willing to participate for that reason. And then, you know, I'm just having them kind of do this for each other.

And so in a smaller setting, I have them play live for each other. That's great too. But I think just kind of being understanding of where your students are emotionally is also key. Telling them, "OK, you're going to play this live from your house for, you know, a hundred people" that might be intimidating, and having another option is important.

**TakeLessons:**

So, how do you set up a live recital? Do you use your lesson room on Zoom?

**Claire:**

Yes. So you'll spotlight the students and keep their video pinned. And you can record the whole thing, too. Again, I would make sure your students are all OK with that. Doing a recording, however, you know, if you're doing it and in a smaller setting, it's helpful for students to go back and see it later. And then if you're doing a really big recital, just checking with parents first to be sure they're okay having it recorded. And then if they would like to have their their child's recorded video, you can send it to them.

**TakeLessons:**

So you set up the Zoom meeting and send parents the link?

**Claire:**

I would set it up as an a meeting on Zoom, for specific meetings you get a one-time link and then you can distribute that to your students and they can distribute the link out father to family. Then, they can come and all join in and watch together. And then as you know, you can spotlight the student that is performing. And you can still put together a little program and, you know, kids love knowing where they're going to be on the program.

One thing we did was allow students to turn off their video and mute themselves and practice a little bit, and they know when they're on, so they know when they need to be on deck, just like we would normally do in a real recital. You can do a lot of the same thing there, just knowing how to make those changes.

I would also make sure you have everyone muted upon entry, and keep participants muted throughout. And if you have issues with people un-muting themselves - for example, younger siblings might accidentally hit the un-mute button - you may want to also turn on the request to un-mute button might also be another feature. But then again, that's for a larger the recital. And also, turn off the annotate feature, so no one's drawing over the student when they're performing. I definitely have seen that happen.

**TakeLessons:**

I never thought of that.

**Claire:**

It's usually just a younger sibling playing around, discovering the annotate for the first time and then starting to draw over a student while they're performing. If people that are attending want to give feedback, if they want to says "congratulation", you can encourage people to do that in the chat.

Kids love seeing those comments come in on the chat, saying, “you did such a great job!” so just verbally telling all the participants in the recital that if they would like to give some positive feedback to the players, feel free to drop that in the chat.

**TakeLessons:**

I'm wondering about your scheduling strategy. For somebody who's new to online teaching, how are you organizing the links to each of your lessons? Do you have a calendar for yourself? Tell me a little bit about how you streamline that process.

**Claire:**

I feel like I am almost lazy in that respect. I keep it as simple as possible, and of course, other teachers may want to structure it differently. I use one link for everything. I use my personal meeting room link, and all my students have access to that. I give them all the same link and it's not the safest way, but I haven't had any issues, and I do have the meeting room set up so that I know who's coming in. I know if someone's in the waiting room. I've had a few students that just kind of hit the link to see if I'm online. If that happens, I can actually send a message to someone in the waiting room, and say “I'm in a lesson right now. I'll see you next week,” or sAnd then they'll sign out.

**TakeLessons:**

So you just use the one meeting link for all your lessons.

**Claire:**

Right. And then it's easier to start your lessons. And then if I'm running late or something, you know, I don't have a lot of time switching between lessons, I just always start the next lesson by hitting the start a new meeting button. But I think that's personal preference. If you would like to have different links, that's an option, too. It just makes it a little bit more confusing on the students end, that they've got a lot of links. I mean, sending each student their own link means there's a little more setup. And so if I could do it all again, I might have done it that way and sent a different link for each student. But at the time I felt that I was a Zoom newbie myself. And so I kind of went with what was easiest at first, and then decided to keep it this way.

It seems to be working and we're fine. And why change and give them new links when you know it's going to be confusing to do that. And you know, especially with different programs when they might be coming in for different classes with you, they might be coming in with a private lesson and a group class, it seems better to just keep it all as simple as possible. That seemed like the best method at the time.

**TakeLessons:**

What do you use to gauge a successful lesson? Do you have a success metric that you use personally or for your students? And do you send out any kind of a survey to get feedback on what's working or to get new ideas?

**Claire:**

The way I gauge the feedback of a lesson is having the student play and making sure that they achieved what I wanted them to achieve in the lesson. So I have them play it back for me at the end. And then the other thing is to ask them. I think it's important to make sure that we're always talking to our students at the end of their lessons. I always leave a few minutes at the end to say, "Okay, do you have any questions? Did you understand everything we were doing? Can you tell me what you're supposed to do this week?"

Having them repeat back the lesson to you verbally is also a very good indication of whether they actually got the material or they're just kind of nodding along and saying, "OK, yes, yes, yes, I get this, I get this. I don't have any questions,"

By having them repeat the things they learned back to you you can find areas where they may be confused or need clarification.

**TakeLessons:**

Awesome! Those are all the questions I have for you. Is there anything that you want to add? Anything that I didn't cover?

**Claire:**

Nothing I can think of, we went over a lot. I think just getting started with Zoom, there's just so much there. And I'd say the best thing to do and what helped me was just kind of troubleshooting, setting up a fake meeting and sign in on another device with somebody in your household, make them sign into the meeting and get their feedback and say, you know, "is my sound okay? Is my video OK?"

And then troubleshoot anything that doesn't work. This way you're not finding that stuff out in the lesson, and you're not trying to, you know, do things like share your screen for the very first time with a student. You've got those buttons down. You know how they work. I don't know about other people, but for me, if I'm doing something technical for the first time in front of a student, there's always a little bit of added pressure, an "Oh God, what if I don't do this right?"

And it's always easier to get more frustrated, especially when you've got a student in the room and you're trying to do this in front of them. And so just grab someone in your household or a friend in another house, and say, "Can you jump on Zoom call with me? I'm just gonna try some things out with you and I just want your feedback," I think that's a really good way to get started and troubleshoot a lot of those issues up front.

**TakeLessons:**

What a valuable tip.

**Claire:**

Yeah. And then also, if you can get that person to pretend to be a really annoying student that's just pushing all the wrong buttons and playing with everything on Zoom, you want to experience that before a lesson with a student.

**TakeLessons:**

Thank you so much for meeting with me. This has been incredibly valuable, and I so appreciate you sharing your expertise. Thank you!

**Claire:**

All right, sounds good. Bye!

## TakeLessons Partner Interview With Pianist & Singer, Phillip Fullerton

TakeLessons interviewed Phillip Fullerton, a piano and voice teacher and TakeLessons partner who teaches 60 students each week online. I've been online for over two years and a lot of students who take lessons, of course. So and yeah, I've been teaching for 20 years, but more than 20 years, actually.

**TakeLessons Team Member:**

It looks like you have a very comprehensive setup. I would love to know more about that, how you placed your cameras, your microphone, and how you optimize that for online teaching.

**Phillip:**

I'll start with the microphone. I have a mic from a company called Essy. The only reason I use that over brands like Audio Technica is because I'm cheap. I like to spend less money. And I did my research and found this mic. It does just as well for online teaching for one hundred dollars, where other mics start around one hundred and fifty. So I went this route.

I also use something called a Focusrite Scarlett USB Interface. There are loads of other options out there. It's one of the least expensive major brand options. There's actually a company called Zoom - not related to Zoom that we're using right now - that makes great quality stuff. If you want to pay a little more. I know a lot of teachers use that. And what that does is allows me to have multiple microphones if I want.

So I have a microphone here. I also have my keyboard, and I plug directly into it. So it gets sound from there. You can have lots of inputs with that. So that's what I use for my sound. And that allows me to be able to change how loud or quiet I am, like, oh, very easily. OK. There's USB that do the same thing like the Yeti does that also. OK.

But for someone who needs multiple mikes, like any body teaching a keyboard instrument or a guitar or whatever, it's nice to have multiple microphones so you can have a microphone on your instrument or a microphone on your mouth. So like if it's loud where you are. You can turn the gain down and put the mike next to your mouth so that your students don't have to hear the person cutting the grass right outside your window. OK. Makes a huge difference. Little things like that are really nice. When I say, can you hear the person right outside my window? No, I hear nothing good. It's wonder. Well, they're not doing it right now, by the way.

Now for my cameras, I've got three cameras. You can have as many cameras as you want as long as your computer can handle them. And you also need software to do it. I use a software called ManyCam. There is a free version. The version that allows you to use multiple cameras like this is not a free version. So I've technically got four cameras. I have three cameras, plus I have this little thing that lights up when I play the keys. That's just another screen on my computer that allows you to see what keys I'm pushing. So I can have up to 16 cameras. Do I need all those? No. But without that, you can't do that. Zoom will allow it, but you have to log in through multiple devices with Zoom if you want to have multiple cameras. So ManyCam has been wonderful for me because I can instantly change my views.

There are free programs, one called OBSS. I've used it, but it's a little bit less user friendly. Like if you're a teacher and you're not tech-savvy and you don't really want to try that, it can be hard to figure it out. I want to have a program that works well for one hundred dollars or less will do all the work for me, which is ManyCam. I love that.

**TakeLessons Team Member:**

Can you walk me through setting that up, for somebody who's a total novice? Is that compatible with Zoom?

**Phillip:**

Yes, so with ManyCam, I can set up my cameras where I want them to be. So I've got one that's over my head right here that's looking down on my keyboard. I've also got one off to the side here that gets the side view of my keyboard. And of course, the one that you're seeing me on. And so I decide where I set those up and I use microphone stands to hold them, or you can use camera stands. I mean, it doesn't really matter how you hold these web cams. Mic stands are good because you see the little pole behind me is part of a boom from a mic stand, and it's holding the camera on the end. You can get adapters for it to hold cameras by the way, if you're wondering how that works.

People that are used to microphones say, wait a minute, how does the camera fit in a mic stand? It does, because I have a little adapter that goes where the microphone would attach normally.

And then I have the ManyCam software, and I've got the premium edition of that. You don't really need the premium edition, you can actually use the basic. There was a really good deal one year, so I just bought it all.

And then through that, you tell it which cameras you want and you drag and drop them to the spaces where you want them. You can resize them into whatever part of the screen you want. So if I wanted to change the size of my screen right now, I can do that, and I can just move it wherever I want, however I want, whenever I want. And that's really nice. But you can also have set up camera angles ahead, where you just click one button and “boom!” you've got a new camera angle.

I use that for classroom, because a lot of times in classroom, people don't get the full wide screen. So I shorten it a little bit. And then if they're on Zoom, I use the wide screen.

Now, ManyCam tricks the computer into thinking that it is a camera. So basically ManyCam is a camera. So when you go into Zoom, you would actually choose ManyCam as your camera.

**TakeLessons:**

Excellent. And before we move on, I noticed that when you had the overview of your keyboard. Tell me what's going on when you press the keys and then something lights up and tells you what you're hiding.

**Phillip:**

So you do have to have a midi-capable keyboard. You cannot create this particular effect with an acoustic keyboard. I sold my acoustic keyboard and now teach using a Kawai midi-capable piano called a hybrid grand.

It looks like a tiny upright, but it sounds like a grand piano. I've plugged it into my computer, and because it's a midi-capable keyboard, I can plug it directly into a P.C. or a Mac and it should be automatically accepted, and you don't have to download drivers or do anything fancy like that. There's nothing to do as far as that goes. So that part's really easy.

Now, after that, you need a program that can show a keyboard, and what I use is a program called Muse Score. I use it for writing and stuff like that. When I teach group classes, I do my own arrangements of things and I write the arrangements into there.

Muse Score allows me to show music as a live video animation. So when I drag it, it just changes. And you can make it preset if you want that way. And so what this program does is when I hit a key, it knows what key I'm hitting. And it shows it. It's a little bit behind.

But I noticed that in my group classes my students would ask me, “Can you put stickers on your keys so we know what colors you're hitting?” And at first I said, “No, that's not how learning piano works.” Eventually though, I agreed. I had people leaving because they were confused or frustrated, and so I decided to implement this tool to help them.

I felt like I had to figure out a way, at least for my classes, for people not to have that problem, and connecting Muscores to Zoom really helped with that. The hardest part is lining up the keyboards. I will say that because you do have to kind of drag the keyboards back and forth because they're not going to auto lineup.

**TakeLessons Team Member:**

OK. You do that manually.

**Phillip:**

Yeah, I have to do that manually, unfortunately, because otherwise, when I'm doing this, if it's like in the wrong, I can move it up and down. It will move side to side right now. But my keyboard will if it's in the wrong spot, like I'm zoomed in right now. So it's lousing me to move it so I can move it and move my camera as though you might have to, like, manipulate your cameras a little bit to make sure that it gets in the right spot so they can see it. OK. I have no advice for other instrumentalists on that, though.

**TakeLessons:**

Tell me about how you're plugging that in? Is that plugged into your Focus Rite Scarlett Interface?

**Phillip:**

Yes, it plugs into the Focus Rite Scarlett, and then the Focus Rite plugs into the computer through a USB cable. And so does my keyboard. So the keyboard is plugged into the USB to the computer, but it's also plugged in through an instrument cable directly into the interface.

And you see on the front of the interface, this is where my mic is plugged in. And then out the back of the interface, there is a USB cable that plugs into the computer. The great thing with this is that you still have gain controls for everything. I can turn myself up so you can hear me better when I'm further away from the mic. If I'm too close to the mic, I can turn it down.

**TakeLessons:**

I'd like to talk a little bit about pedagogy and about how you design your online lessons. Have you found effective ways to make your classes or your lessons interactive? Certain exercises or tools you use to allow students to collaborate with each other or with you?

**Phillip:**

In group classes, that's always been a challenge. I'm always trying to encourage students to play along with me and then say, 'does anybody want to demonstrate?' And, you know, there are always kids that do and there are always kids that are wanting to show off their abilities. And I encourage adults to do it, too.

The most important thing in a group class is just getting them to interact. Some adults don't want to. And you can tell who they are. You can just leave them alone. Those are the people that are like me, I don't necessarily want to interact when I'm a student in a group class. Sometimes I do. But most time I'm gonna sit back because my mind might be wandering some.

But yeah, it's mostly about getting them to to demonstrate the things that you're showing them. And I know a lot of the language teachers are wonderful at doing that. I've been in some of the language classes and they're awesome at that.

And they've made me interact. Even though I think, "I didn't want you to call on me. I'm not good at this,"

But then in private lessons, it is really hard, depending on how young the kid is or the student is. A lot of it is just really knowing the material that you want to teach. Find a method that works for you. I teach out of a lot of different methods, and specifically, I teach out of Alfred. I'm thinking about doing Piano Safari, even though it's not a really good online lesson tool. But I love Piano Safari anyway. It also helps students learn the international English words for all the musical terms instead of just the American terms, and is valuable for little things like that.

Making sure that you have something that you understand so well that you don't necessarily have to be right in front of them - that's the hardest part.

I mean, for me, one of the hardest things to do is getting little kids to even just curve their fingers on the piano and keep them curved. I encourage parents to be there if the student is under a certain age or under a certain developmental age.

And you don't use that term in front of the parents because then it can be very disheartening. So an eight year old can be like a five and a five year old can be like an eight year old. You just have to determine whether the parents need to be there and talk to them about that. And if the parents need it. I've had so many students where if the parents are sitting there, the parents can help the student. I can have one right now that's a six year old and she does so well, but without the dad sitting there, she gets really confused and he just helps her and says, "let's do this and helps and shows her what I'm talking about on the book because it can be hard for her to understand with me just saying, 'look at page six,'

I mean, she's a kindergartner, she doesn't know. And so a little things like that. For my adult students, a lot of it is that I always make sure to use adult method books, whether it's the Alfred Adult or it's the Faber Adult or Basken adult, because it's just a mental thing. I used to use all the other methods, but I think that sometimes, especially online, I think they get a little discouraged when they say, "Oh, I'm in a kid book," If they get to a high enough level than I do use standard method books, because basically they have to go towards some of the higher end kid books. But that's when they're getting really good and they understand what they're doing. It's just keeping them engaged during the week.

I have 60 students and I encourage them - if they have a problem with something - to email me. I mean, not bombard me with, "I can't do this. What do I do? Can you send me a video?"

But for instance, I have a student today who emailed me that said, "OK, my wrist is hurting playing this," And he made a video that I watched, and I sent him a little email back. Took me like two minutes to watch the video and send an email back. Things like that because of it being online. I think just being able to do that kind of thing helps the student out tremendously when they're not in person. And I can't physically show them as easily, you know, like on their own hands what to do.

**TakeLessons:**

Do you find any value in students recording their assignments or different ways to make sure that they're digesting the information?

**Phillip:**

Well, for my singing students, I encourage them to record themselves all the time. Do they? Not necessarily. And I do the courage them to record themselves. And there are two good reasons for this. I want them to listen to themselves sing because I feel like if you say "I don't like hearing myself sing," then you need to do it more because you'll eventually become okay with it. I'm a great example of that. I never liked hearing myself sing until I got older and I've finally decided, "okay, I'll start listening to myself and not hating it," because it's easy to cringe at your own voice, and think "that's not what I sound like when I sing,"

Well, yes, it is. And I also like doing that because one of the things about Internet lessons, even though, of course, I mean, we're both on really good, robust Internets right now. And so this is like we're in the same room together. That's not the way it is for 90 percent of lessons. I'm just going to say right out that 90 percent of my lessons, somebody is on Wi-Fi at the other side of the house from their Wi-Fi signal. My Wi-Fi is right behind here. Normally, I used to plug it directly in, but I've upgraded since then and gotten even better than that. So I don't need to plug in anymore.

I used to use an Internet cable to plug directly into the computer. I don't feel like I need to do that anymore. But the thing is, is a lot of students might be in a 3000 square foot house, and the Wi-Fi is on the other side of the house. And then they say, "I have good Internet and I have no idea why it's not working," so it does break up the Internet. So if they record themselves singing, it's actually easier for me to hear their singing. And it's a clearer sound. So even if they have great Internet, a recording is usually a higher quality than anything we hear in a lesson or that you're gonna get through Zoom, at least in my my experience, without both sides being plugged into fiber.

**TakeLessons:**

And just for detail's sake, do you have your student say, upload that video to YouTube? Or do they send it directly to you?

**Phillip:**

Yeah, usually I recommend using something like YouTube and just upload it as an unlisted or private YouTube video. This way they don't have to worry about everybody seeing their YouTube channel upload. It's just a really easy way because videos are so huge, if they do a video of it. Now, if they just do an audio, they can just email it. Audio is really small. And that's what I suggest to my singing students. They don't have to video themselves when they practice. Just do an MP3 and send it to me if they want. If it helps their anxiety with singing, I tell them, "Don't worry right now about videoing yourself and having me see it," but I do encourage them to video record themselves for their own learning purposes.

I say "If you can't stand in front of a mirror and sing, then you need to video tape, then watch it later, because that might help," but yeah, using YouTube and uploading to YouTube is usually my go-to way of doing things.

**TakeLessons:**

Awesome. And some teachers have told me that they find that teaching via video has a dehumanizing effect. I'm curious if you have found any ways to make the virtual teaching environment feel more personal.

**Phillip:**

That is hard. And there are some students that don't want it to be personal. And you find that out quickly. They're just like, "I just want a lesson. I want to be done with the lesson. I want to learn the subject and that's it," And then some of them, while you don't want to waste lots of your your lesson time chatting and finding out about them, but you can make it a little more human by finding out what they do for a living, if they want to tell you, or what they like to do, or why they're learning the piano or learning to sing, or learn to play the violin.

And get into a conversation about that, so that helps it become personal. It's kind of like when people get on Zoom with their grandparents or their grandkids or their brother or their sister, it's still human. Every single Sunday morning my dad talks to his brother in England without fail. And that gives him that connection that they didn't have before this. So back in the 90s, they didn't have that. It was a phone call you know, and so I like to think that it can be humanizing, but that we're just not used to it yet.

**TakeLessons:**

I love that. What in-person teaching techniques have you found definitely do work in an online teaching environment, and that translate easily from your in-person lessons to your virtual lessons?

**Phillip:**

In piano, it's easy because we've got method books, and method books are absolutely wonderful. And for singing, there are some useful method books, but there's no really good ones. I mean, I hate to say they really aren't, because I have a lot of pedagogy experience and in piano through education and teaching. And then when I got into teaching voice, it was a little different.

So for piano, it's all about the books and that allows you to be able to follow something methodically. The one thing you can't do is help them fix physical problems in person. You can't just take their hand and say, "okay, your hand needs to be in this spot instead of what you're doing,"

But at the same time, it's not necessarily a bad thing. Once they figure it out themselves, then they've really got it. So the main thing - the main technique - that works online is going to be the types of books you use now for singing. Singing I find is harder, but I've gotten better at it and more used to it. I just immediately tell the students when we do exercises, "I'm going to play them on the piano. And you're not going to sing them until I'm done playing. I play, you sing, I play,"

You're never going to be able to sync up entirely with another student, even if your student is next door and you both have really great Internet. I've had two students - ever - where I was able to play while they sang. And that was just random luck and it didn't work every week.

And so you just have to get used to that. But it's still the same technique. It just takes a little longer. And so, if they're singing a song and you need to accompany them, one of the things that really helps is if you record your accompaniment, and they can practice along with the recording. Then, it's just like being in person. It makes no difference because you send it to them, tell them to play it and sing it, and they sing while they're playing the recording.

**TakeLessons:**

That actually brings me to my next question about using the mute tool. Do you find any value in that? I've had teachers tell me that they use the mute tool in order to play along with their students, or to make sure the student is playing the correct notes, or choir teachers who use the mute tool to enable everyone to sing in unison.

**Phillip:**

Well, I don't have perfect pitch, but I have a really, really, really, really good ear. I could sight read perfectly just about anything that was put in front of me singing-wise. So if someone plays a wrong note, I immediately know what it is and where it is.

But at the same time, I actually do use the mute tool for another reason. If the other side, if they don't have very good Internet or their device keeps cutting in and out, whenever there's sound on my side, if you mute yourself, that won't happen.

So you'll be able to hear them throughout the whole piece. So for instance, if someone makes a loud noise in your house and all of a sudden it cuts off the sound, you can't hear anything because that does happen. Zoom tries to compensate a little bit, and that's the only reason I sometimes use it. I have a couple of students I do that with, especially with piano on mute just so that I can hear it better.

**TakeLessons:**

And how heavily do you structure your online lessons? Are they planned down to the very last minute or do you leave some room for improvisation?

**Phillip:**

They are semi-planned. And the reason for that is that I don't know what I'm going to be getting into in any lesson. I could go into a lesson and have my student say, "I practiced two hours a day every day," or I go into a lesson and have the student say, "I haven't had time to practice this week," That's the standard. So that's easy to structure, but it's really hard to structure any kind of lesson, although you want to have a general structure for what you're going to do. How much are you going to do exercises? How much will do scales or whatever kind of exercises you might do? How much are you going to work on pieces? How much do you want to work on theory? If you want to work on theory. That part's easy to structure.

I like to structure all this, to a point. I mean, I have to leave a little improv in there, because if they seem to be really getting into trying to learn one scale and they're getting frustrated with it, I'll spend extra time on that scale because I don't want to just say, "well, just keep working on it this week and I'll see it next week," That's not helpful to the student. So I spend more time on it. I do structure that. I start with exercises, go to pieces, and then maybe some theory if we have time.

**TakeLessons:**

When you started teaching online or for people who might be totally new to online teaching, did you find any value in rehearsing your lesson plans before you started? Toggling between screens, making sure that things were set up?

**Phillip:**

Definitely making sure that your camera's working beforehand. Because I've had way too many times where I'm running in here, and for some reason, my camera is not working. One of my cameras isn't working and I have to restart the computer, which means I have to restart all of the apps that I was using and all that. So just giving yourself at least a five minutes of leeway to get in there. If you're good at it, 10 to 15 minutes if you're not, and give yourself a little bit of time to make sure your cameras are working, because it's the strangest thing if a camera comes unplugged, you plug it back in. It may not work without a restart. It might depend on your computer. It just depends on luck sometimes. And I've had moments where one camera won't work and I just say, "OK, I've got to restart and get that working,"

Give yourself some time to make sure all of your equipment is working and that you can actually go into Zoom and check your microphone too. In the audio section and the settings you can just click "test microphone" and you talk and then you can hear it back and see how loud it is or not.

**TakeLessons:**

I'm curious about how you pace your lessons, because I've been reading some studies that say that the brain takes a little bit longer to process information via video because people are interpreting facial expressions and information differently than in person. Do you find that you pace your lessons differently than your in-person lessons?

**Phillip:**

Absolutely. And more so for voice lessons than for piano lessons, because of the exercises required for each. Because leading in-person exercises lessons was so easy. Five minutes and the exercises are done. We have the rest of the time to do real work. Good exercise aren't real work, but it's like it'll take at least 10 minutes to do what used to take five minutes.

Now on piano, it's the same thing really. Because I'm not there to really show them, even though I am showing them. Like you said, this is the inhuman part of it. It's like they're not sure, or it's like somehow it's not quite the same, even though I'm showing them a close up of my hand. They can see what's going on. So if there's a section of a piece they're having trouble with. I actually spend time on that. And I make sure to focus on that and use it as practice time.

And I make sure to focus on that and use it as practice time. And don't pretend like don't feel like, OK, well, this is a lesson. I'm here to tell them what to do and what not to do on this piece and then let's move on. I really I treat a lot of it as practice time for them, with me showing them how to practice.

**TakeLessons:**

That's really helpful. Do you find that students have a harder time staying motivated with online learning? Do you help them develop goals that are meaningful to them?

**Phillip:**

I do. Now, I don't notice a real big difference in motivation, really. As far as in person and online.

I do feel for some people it can be different, because if you're in that person's room, you feel like you need to practice to be there. But if you're in your own house, you think "wow, they're just online," and you feel less pressure to be prepared. But I haven't really noticed that because more people are getting used to the idea of using online learning.

One of the things I do with my piano students, if they are willing, is to have them take exams, especially because it's hard to do recitals online. A lot of teachers have been trying to do recitals and I've considered it. They'll do YouTube recitals. The only issue I have with that is if everyone sends you their video and you uploaded to YouTube, you know what they're going to watch? They're going to watch only themselves - unless you require them to watch everybody else. And even if you do, they might not.

You can do Zoom and Google Meet recitals where everybody's there and each person just goes one after the other. It's still not quite the same as an in-person recital because an in-person recital, you have to sit there and pay attention and not eat a sandwich or ice cream or watch TV or talk to your friends. You can't do any of those things while you're waiting for your turn. So it is different.

I feel like the exams, one of them is called a BRSM. Now we'll say for anyone who uses the Faber method, the exams start quite a ways in there already. It's like the end of the adult book number one. The very end is the beginning of grade one in the English system. And so it's a little different. But I have some students when I get them doing this, they really get into it and it encourages them because it gives them something to work toward.

And it can be any system, or it can even be competitions. I've had a couple of students do some minor competitions that give them encouragement to play. Some of my little kids that are more advanced, after a year they're already playing better than most people. You encourage them to do competitions because they need something to encourage them to get even better since they're already better than many of their peers.

**TakeLessons:**

And do you find that exams are something that you have adult learners do as well?

**Phillip:**

I have adult learners that are more interested in it. I even had one recently ask me about that because it was a brand new student. She's only had two lessons. She asked, "do you ever do exams?" And I said yes, that we can and we will.

**TakeLessons:**

Can you do the exams online?

**Phillip:**

I'm not sure. I think they were doing some online in England. I don't think in America they were, but I'm not sure. I didn't do a lot of research into that because at one point they all just stopped, and now they are bringing it back. There are places in the U.S. that do it. Certain states are doing it. Certain states are not. So it is slowly opening back up and the exams are fairly safe. It's one adjudicator and the student and you know, they stay far away from each other.

**TakeLessons:**

I'm curious about your scheduling strategy. I'm curious how you design your lesson flow. Do you have just one meeting link, or many meeting links?

**Phillip:**

I have each student have a permanent link, or they'll just use my Zoom ID, or they're using classroom. After they take a lesson once or twice. I want them to like keep that link on their computer, so they can just keep going to that link for their lesson each time.

**TakeLessons:**

And lastly, how do you gauge a successful lesson? Is there any kind of success metric you use for yourself or for your students? Do you send out any kind of survey to your students to gauge what's working, or to get new ideas?

**Phillip:**

I haven't done a survey and that is a good idea. I thought about doing that. It's all personal. But I if I feel like they have learned something new and they seem excited about something in the lesson, I feel I have accomplished something. Now, as far as their accomplishment, as far as I'm concerned, if they if they are enjoying it, they're accomplishing something, and that's especially true with kids nowadays. Especially this year the way things are for kids.

As far as my adult students, I actually just ask them. I just sometimes plain out ask them, “Do you have any questions about today's lesson? Do you feel like you've learned something about that? Do you understand the topic we went over? And please be honest, don't just say, ‘yeah, I think so.’”

Just ask them right out, especially near the end of the lesson. And I'd like to make sure that they're not leaving the lesson going, “I have no idea what I'm doing. And I just spent 30 minutes or an hour with this person and I don't know what I'm supposed to practice. I feel like I haven't gotten anywhere.”

I've had long conversations with one of my students especially, he was accomplishing so much in the first year. And I was over encouraging him. I admit it. I wasn't necessarily doing the best job myself because he kept finding pieces, and saying, “I really want to play this piece,” So I would say, “Okay, it might be a little ahead of you, but we can try it,” And the thing is, he would learn the piece, but it would take him six months, and he was feeling worn out.

Instead, I need to make sure I've had conversations with him. Today, we've actually gone a step back a little bit and he's okay with that. You just have to make sure you keep your students at the level that they feel comfortable as well.

## Partner Interview With Music & Languages Teacher, Azalea Laredo

Azalea Laredo is a piano teacher and Spanish language teacher, who teaches both private and live group classes with TakeLessons through TakeLessons Live and through the TakeLessons TV platform.

### **Azalea:**

Hi! My name is Azalea Laredo, and I am a teacher with TakeLessons, and have been teaching private Spanish and group lessons with Take Lessons Live and hosted a few webinars as well for the TakeLessons TV program.

### **TakeLessons:**

So you teach both private and group lessons?

### **Azalea:**

Yes, I have private students and then a few group students and of course with TakeLessons, live group classes.

**TakeLessons:**

Fantastic. I know that you're going to have a lot of great insights for us. What online platform do you use and how have you found that platform serves you in your teaching?

**Azalea:**

I use TakeLessons classroom for private classes. And then for group classes, I use Zoom. And I love it because there are so many different applications that you can use. I mean, you can share your screen, you can share your audio, and you can share your audio, which is great for language, because sometimes students want to hear different accents or different people speaking in the target language. So sharing audio quickly from a computer is super, super useful instead of having to play it on my phone or on a speaker. So I like Zoom because of that.

**TakeLessons:**

So walk me through that. You have your audio on your computer and then you'll share your audio through the Zoom application?

**Azalea:**

That's correct. Yes, I would have a video or an audio file pulled up on my computer, which I know has the dialog that I want to share with my students. And then I just push 'share my audio', which basically shares my computer sound, and I play that audio clip or video for the class. They will hear it and then we can discuss it instead of having to share the audio individually or having to play it on the phone or through a smaller speaker, which means it's not super clear for them to hear.

**TakeLessons:**

I'm curious about your setup. You sound great. Tell me about how you've set up your teaching environment. Do you have a microphone? Walk me through that.

**Azalea:**

Yes. So I have my computer basically just using the speakers. Sometimes I just use a microphone on the computer so I can move around if I need to, especially if I'm teaching kids. Sometimes if I'm in a class, sitting is a little bit boring. Sometimes I'm like, "OK, let's stand up and do different actions or motions and learn about jumping!"

So sometimes I'll do that and I'll just speak loudly so they can hear me. But I also have a little headset over here with a microphone that I can connect. And so they can totally hear me. I can move around as well. So sometimes I use that. Any Bluetooth headphones that I have give me the liberty of moving and not being connected to the computer itself.

**TakeLessons:**

You've touched on this briefly just now, but do you have certain exercises to use that might help students either collaborate with each other or collaborate with you as a teacher?

**Azalea:**

Yes. I like to customize the class to whatever the student needs. If it's a child, of course, I'm not going to be talking about very complicated subjects. But I do want to involve a little bit of the parents because they are the ones that are practicing with that child in their home. So I want to make sure the parent knows what's happening or what are we talking about. And they can ask them questions. So I try to make it interactive. If it's a child with a parent or if it's an adult group class, they need to talk to each other and need to listen to each other's accents or pronunciation and get a little bit of information from that.

If someone speaks a little bit more than other student, they are using more vocabulary or using more conjugations, then the other student can ask, "Wait, what was that?" You know, "talk to me about that. Explain to me,"

So that's a great learning tool to have them interact with each other. Even if it's simple questions that have a yes or no answer. They have to listen to whatever verb they're using or whatever vocabulary they're asking. So they can respond to that question properly. Also, I like to challenge them by having them switch to the negative form of what they're asking. For instance, how do I say "No, I don't do that. I do this," in Spanish. So have that little map to to guide them by hearing the question from one student, and then having them respond, then having them ask the same thing of someone else, and having the next person respond. Having that interaction is very, very important.

**TakeLessons:**

And have you found that any of the Zoom interface tools have helped support that? For instance, do you use breakout rooms or anything like that in your classes?

**Azalea:**

I have not used the break out rooms for my classes yet, but we would have everyone muted at first. So they can hear the instruction, and then I would choose. "OK. So and so let's start with you and have a little conversation with me. Let's practice this exercise then. OK. You invite someone like pick someone from the group or the next person in the line. Right now you guys talk and then so on,"

We would have to a little chain as if we were in-person, because we're all in a circle and we're just asking the next person around the circle. So that's one thing that I do. But everyone is listening at the same time so they don't go in their groups.

They're all listening and still paying attention to the conversation that's happening. And they can ask questions like, "This person said that, and then this was their response, but I thought I would respond with this?"

They can have conversations about decisions on what vocabulary they chose or what verb they used for Spanish, for example. And you can spotlight students as well when they're speaking. And then they could talk to each other and I can spotlight those people for the whole group.

So they they are listening, and they are in tune. But it's a conversation between two of them. And I'm just there as a guide. I'll say, "Yes, that's how you say it!" And I'll just do gestures if they need a prompt.

**TakeLessons:**

What a great tool. I've spoken with a lot of music teachers about using the mute tool and I hadn't spoken with a language teacher who recommended that kind of chain of conversation going to the next person. That's so awesome.

**Azalea:**

I mean, it's great for music too, because you can mute everyone, but then allow them to play this little scale, and then take turns and have the next person be the unmuted player and play a scale.

**TakeLessons:**

Very useful. Have you found that the annotation or whiteboard tool is helpful to give your students written language experience? Do you use those at all?

**Azalea:**

All the time. Visual learning is one of my favorite ways to teach, because that's how I learn a language best. For example, if I hear a word and I think, "That sounds so foreign to me," I usually need to see it spelled out to really understand how the sound works.

And so I like to put the words or the sentences or the phrases on the screen so that the students can read them at the same time. And then I would just make circles and do annotations with my mouse to demonstrate certain points. To divide the phrase in syllables and all these things, because I know some people are visual and some people might learn by hearing the words, which is totally fine. But at least that's a tool that they can use and see it. See how the word breaks down or how that sentence is built, or where the subject is and all these different things. So, yes, definitely annotations. I use them all the time.

Kids love it because then I'm trying not to speak English when I'm teaching Spanish, I would draw something, you know, and they love trying to remember the Spanish word for what I drew.

**TakeLessons:**

And I get the sense that this is not a problem for you. But I've heard teachers say that live, interactive video lessons can feel a little bit dehumanizing. And I'm curious if you've experienced that, and if you have found tools for making your lessons or classes feel more personal.

**Azalea:**

Yes, sometimes it's hard because you're not there. It's not like you can high five the students, you know? But I do everything I can to make it feel like I'm right there with you. So sometimes people who feel like they are staring at a computer for another hour of their life, because they have been learning all day at school, they come to Spanish classes or music classes. And I sit here and listen, and I ask, "Is your sister around? Is your brother around? Is your mom around?" And if they say, "Oh, she's right here," then I say "Okay! Come together and we're going to play a little game, you know, like we're going to ask each other questions, and we're going to have a little circle time,"

Sometimes there are clapping games, or we keep a rhythm together while we're practicing words, and even though I'm not there, they can still interact. And I'm just guiding the game or guiding the activity.

**TakeLessons:**

And are there any in-person teaching techniques that you've found don't translate from in person to online?

**Azalea:**

It's hard, especially for music, because I have some piano students where you want to reach out and reposition their hands. You know, you can't say, "I'm going to move your fingers and put you in this position," It's just so different.

So you have to use images. Sometimes I would use an overhead camera. I'd say, "These are my hands the way they seem from the top, but if you look at them from the side, that's how they look,"

And so giving them as much visual information as I can is very helpful. And if that still doesn't work, if the video is glitchy or they don't understand, I would do a little video after class. I'd say, "You know what? I'm going to send you a better close up of what this looks like,"

Whether it's how to sit at the piano or how to put your hands on the piano. I just say, "I'll send you a little video, OK? You can watch at home and think about it, and discuss it with your parents,"

And so that way they can still be learning outside of class. If that video helps, even if it's playing a scale or playing a song, they can still practice at home with some guidance from me, even though I'm just in a video and not in a real life.

Another piece of advice I can give you is to always have a plan B. If something happens with the computer or you get disconnected, sometimes I just say, "I'm just gonna call you on my phone, or I'm going to join in the meeting on my phone," because you can join a meeting on Zoom from your phone as well.

**TakeLessons**

Right. Switch to a different device if something happens.

**Azalea:**

Exactly. Like I'm just going to call you and finish the lesson on the phone, or something like that. Sometimes if the internet is not working as well, I can just say, "You know what? I'm going to use the internet on my phone and call in that way. You have to have a plan B, plan C, plan D, and be agile all the time."

**TakeLessons:**

How heavily are your lessons planned? Are they planned down to the very last minute? Or do you leave a lot of improvisation room?

**Azalea:**

I like to plan them ahead of time so I know what I'm doing. I have my idea of what I want to teach them. But then I would have students that join and say, "I have a big question with this topic. I want to work on this,"

And in that case I can be flexible and say, "Okay, let's answer those questions and I'll give you a little bit of the new material that we can do,"

**TakeLessons:**

When you were new to online teaching, did you find any value in, say, rehearsing just the technical flow of your lesson? So if you were going to share your screen during the lesson, did you find any value in practicing that at the beginning?

**Azalea:**

Yes, I would totally do like a little mock lesson. You know, I would call maybe my sister, and would say, "Will you be my guinea pig? Can I teach you something in Spanish that you might already know?"

Whether it's how to sit at the piano or how to put your hands on the piano. I just say, "I'll send you a little video, OK? You can watch at home and think about it, and discuss it with your parents,"

And so that way they can still be learning outside of class. If that video helps, even if it's playing a scale or playing a song, they can still practice at home with some guidance from me, even though I'm just in a video and not in a real life.

Another piece of advice I can give you is to always have a plan B. If something happens with the computer or you get disconnected, sometimes I just say, "I'm just gonna call you on my phone, or I'm going to join in the meeting on my phone," because you can join a meeting on Zoom from your phone as well.

**TakeLessons**

Right. Switch to a different device if something happens.

**Azalea:**

Exactly. Like I'm just going to call you and finish the lesson on the phone, or something like that. Sometimes if the internet is not working as well, I can just say, "You know what? I'm going to use the internet on my phone and call in that way. You have to have a plan B, plan C, plan D, and be agile all the time."

**TakeLessons:**

How heavily are your lessons planned? Are they planned down to the very last minute? Or do you leave a lot of improvisation room?

**Azalea:**

I like to plan them ahead of time so I know what I'm doing. I have my idea of what I want to teach them. But then I would have students that join and say, "I have a big question with this topic. I want to work on this,"

And in that case I can be flexible and say, "Okay, let's answer those questions and I'll give you a little bit of the new material that we can do,"

**TakeLessons:**

When you were new to online teaching, did you find any value in, say, rehearsing just the technical flow of your lesson? So if you were going to share your screen during the lesson, did you find any value in practicing that at the beginning?

**Azalea:**

Yes, I would totally do like a little mock lesson. You know, I would call maybe my sister, and would say, "Will you be my guinea pig? Can I teach you something in Spanish that you might already know?"

And so I would test the audio. I would test sharing the sound if I want to share an audio clip. I'd ask, "Can you hear it. Can you hear me at the same time?"

I would troubleshoot all of that in advance. And after a while, you get a little bit more used to it. I felt like, I think I know what I'm doing now. I think I know how the platform works. I think, you know, I can improvise if I need to. I know the different tools or I can change the game as I am playing now. But yes, I would definitely try to practice what I'm going say or what I'm going to do.

**TakeLessons:**

My next question is about the way you pace your lessons. There are some studies that show that the brain takes a little bit longer to process information via video chat, because we're also interpreting body language cues and things that we would normally pick up subconsciously in person. I'm curious if you find that you pace your lessons differently now that you're teaching online.

**Azalea:**

That depends on the student. Because I have students that would definitely catch onto the topic super quickly. They'd say, "Oh, I totally know what you're doing," They would get, I guess not bored, but they'd fee like they know what the question is. They know how to answer it. And they want a little bit more. So then I would say, "Okay, let's jump to a little bit more crazy conjugations or a little bit more of the next verb pronoun," or something like that.

Yes, and some students, I would definitely just focus on one thing like colors. Some students just say, "I just need to learn my colors in Spanish." For those students, I would do different things like playing a game of guessing what color I'm looking at, or I'd ask them to find a color in their house and bring me something of that color.

You know, like I might say, "Bring me something red," in Spanish, and they will bring me a red sock. Even if it's one little thing, you can still do so many different activities. And they are just practicing, practicing, practicing whatever you the topic is that they want to learn.

I would say the pacing depends on the teacher and the students. If they are learning slowly, just practice this basic thing or really master it. And others, that say they want to move faster, we move faster. It also depends on whether they do their homework. That's another thing.

**TakeLessons:**

What kind of assignments do you give? And are they different than maybe your in-person lessons or not? Are they the same?

**Azalea:**

For Spanish, I give the students the document or the information that we see on the screen. This is the topic. These are the questions. These are our answers that we came up with.

And so I would send that to them so they can see it at home. They can review it. They can practice. And I will give them an assignment based on that. If we were talking about days of the week and we know this many verbs, we're going to do a little list that says, "On Monday, I'm going to ride my bike. I am going to play the piano. I am going to do my homework," and we'd actually practice those sentences. And some students are great. They totally do it. Others might be say, "I thought about them, but I didn't write them down."

And that means they might actually have to do their homework in class with me, I'd say, "If you didn't do it, then we're gonna have to do it together,"

And then next topic is going to have to wait until after that. You know, we're not going to get to as many games because we are using our class time for homework stuff. I also give them little points when they do their homework. Maybe each part of their homework is worth a certain number of points.

**TakeLessons:**

Talk more about that, using a point system to reward students.

**Azalea:**

Right. I started using it for piano lessons, because there are so many different things that I want to keep track of. I want to make sure they're playing the right notes, to make sure they're keeping the right rhythm, I want to make sure they can count the song or they can count the piece, and they know the time signature, and if they know which hand is which.

There's so much to think about. And so I would make a little list and have little check boxes in my Google Sheets. Then I say to them, "Okay, we're going to start checking things off right now. Let's see if we get them... let's clap this measure or let's count this other measure out loud without playing, and I'd ask them, "What time signature is it?" If they don't know, then we don't check that box yet.

Students get motivated, and say, "If I want to make sure everything's checked, I have to do my homework. I have to do my assignments," So that's a little bit of a motivator for them, because they want to see everything super colorful with all the boxes checked.

**TakeLessons:**

On the note of motivation and goal setting. Are you doing any kind of a recital with your music students, exams, quizzes, or things to help students work toward an end goal?

**Azalea:**

It's hard to do a recital now unless you have managed to get all your students on board. It's a little bit harder because everyone has their own schedules or a different time zone, different levels, all the different things.

But what I do is that I would have them record a video or do a little video assignment. Like this is going to be your performance, right? Even if you're in your living room and probably for your family, you're going to record this video the best you can. Play the song, perform your piece and, you know, say your name.

And I try to make it as real as possible. And then once they have that video, I have them share it with their family. I say, "You can share with this with your friends, this is your end of the month assignment, your opportunity to finish the song and perform it for people,"

And so that's a video project motivator. It acts as a little recital that it's not actually live. It's nice because they can redo it as many times as they need. And they like it.

**TakeLessons:**

You mentioned having students in different time zones. I'm curious about your scheduling strategy. So if you're using Zoom or another platform, how do you create your weekly teaching schedule? Do you use the same meeting link to send to all your students or do you schedule them separately with their own meetings and links? Tell me about how you do that.

**Azalea:**

Yes. So the good thing is that when you're using the TakeLessons platform, the times are presented in the students' own time zones. I would see them in my own time zones. So they do it for me, basically.

I know I signed up for lessons at 3:00, and I don't have to count backwards or forwards. I can just say, "Okay, great! That's when I have to be there," I mean, we both see it at the hours that we need to - the hours that are important for us.

And then outside of that or on Zoom, for example, I would get the request that the student wants a lesson through Zoom this day, and so I will schedule it automatically. I've connected the website that I use with Zoom, and so it automatically makes the zoom link and sends an email to the parents, sends me my calendar reminder. And so that's set also in their time zone.

It's a lot if you're doing it manually, you think about how you like your time zones. You think, "Okay, now we're two hours before or three hours in the future," But if you can do it with some sort of platform it's so helpful, if someone can automatically do it for you.

**TakeLessons:**

How do you gauge a successful lesson or class? Do you have a certain something that you strive for or that you look for in your students? And do you ever send out a survey to ask questions of your students to find out what's working, or to get new ideas for teaching?

**Azalea:**

Yes, I would ask the student at the end of class, you know, I'd say, "What did you learn today?" Have them do that assessment themselves.

I would encourage them to try to make it as specific as you can. "I learned this many verbs or I learned this many scales. I learned that you do this and you do not do that," You know, that's also like a good way to remember.

You know, the thing is that they remember what makes them laugh. They will remember that. So, I'd say "OK, what did you learn today?" And I'm going to ask, you know, next class, the same thing, and use little keywords from the previous lesson. Like, "remember how to sit on the piano? Remember what not to do with your hands?" Oh, yes, I do know.

They end the lesson with a little bit of this is what I learned and this is what I liked about it. This is what I want to improve. That's when I know it's successful. They have clear goals of what they're going to do at home and what they want to improve next time.

Maybe they say, "I want to do a better counting, and count a little bit faster, or increase the tempo on this song because it's so slow at times, so I want to play it faster,"

But first, you have to play the right notes. First you have to play the right rhythm. So doing that, I encourage them to improve for sure if they know what they have to do at home. Then they can come back in the next lesson and be prepared. Be ready with a couple questions or things they want to improve. We can polish it a little bit and they can practice if they know how to practice, how to work at home.

**TakeLessons:**

Is there anything that I missed or that you'd like to add for other teachers?

**Azalea:**

Just to be patient. It's the new normal these days, having this virtual setting, I know it's frustrating for many teachers. Feeling like there are certain things you can't do, or that there are certain things you miss from in-person teaching.

I know we all miss it and everything. But I mean, online teaching is a great tool. You're connecting with people around the globe and you're teaching them and you're helping them through this whole process and journey of whatever they're learning and what's going on out in the world.

You're just there to guide them and connect with them for an hour, or even for half an hour. Be patient and know that you are making a change. You are helping them. You're helping them for the better, and you're a little light in this whole chaos.

**TakeLessons:**

That's a wonderful message to remember. Awesome. Well, thank you so much. It was really a pleasure speaking with you today.

**Azalea:**

Thank you for having me.

## What are Your Online Teaching Experiences?

The interviews in this guide are designed to help you jump-start or deepen your online teaching. But remember, you'll find your own style, your own techniques, and your own setup that unlocks your full potential as an online teacher.

# Hey... You Got This!

Teaching online can be challenging. But with a little preparation, you can create an education experience that's rewarding for both you and your students.

**If you haven't already, now's a great time to start teaching with TakeLessons, and if you're looking for more resources for teaching and learning online, check out the TakeLessons Blog.**