

Why run a bluegrass jam class?

Almost every aspiring musician dreams of playing music with other people. Bluegrass music is a group form, blending the sound of several different instruments and several voices.

Yet very little music teaching stresses interactive skills. Most teaching focuses on “reciting” exact instrumental lead arrangements - not the skills needed for group music-making. The simple fundamentals of playing rhythm may be glossed over.

So there is an important gap in the way bluegrass is taught. Jamming is fun, jamming is fundamental.

Group playing skills are interactive:

- Unfamiliar songs can be followed easily by watching others, and jams often include unfamiliar songs. But this skill is rarely taught.
- In jams, factors such as controlling volume, transposing, using a capo, staying in tune, etc., are critical to the musical quality and smooth flow of the jam, yet these are rarely taught.
- Jams depend on people knowing how to lead songs, offer breaks, start and end smoothly, etc. Again, these skills are rarely taught.
- Harmony singing, a treasured part of bluegrass, is rarely taught in bluegrass. It can be taught to a group in a satisfying experience for students.

These interactive skills are among the essentials that Pete Wernick's jam teaching has emphasized since his first jamming classes in 1995. In over 50 jam camps in 22 states since 1999, he has developed methods to teach these skills hands-on, using a combination of classroom instruction and coaching small jam groups as they jam.

Teachers can now offer their students a supplement to one-on-one lessons with classes mixing their own students with players of other instruments, for the powerful benefits of teaching "in context", and the motivation that students get out of these situations.

Pete works with detailed evaluation forms of his teaching and the camp experience at every camp, and has cultivated an understanding of the many typical learning patterns of students young and old. The most common complaint of new jam students is that their previous teachers emphasize strictly rote learning of instrumental solos with no attention to what it really takes to be in a functional and enjoyable jam session.

Pete has worked with many assistants at his camps, and has summarized his teaching techniques for use by Wernick Method jam teachers. All certified WM teachers receive well-organized written materials as well as audio and video supplements, including an hour-long DVD of excerpts of Pete teaching at a camp. The materials are intended for use by a bluegrass teacher who's never before taught bluegrass jamming. Each class session is outlined with a lesson plan that guides the teacher, along with his/her own additions, in teaching that class.

With jam teaching still only rarely attempted by the many bluegrass teachers nationwide and worldwide, the Wernick Method has now trained over 100 teachers to do this job as effectively

as possible. The results have been extremely positive, with profitable classes, and happy students and teachers.

What are the advantages to students of attending a jam class along with individual instruction?

Students who decide to learn "an instrument" are in fact also aspiring to be part of bluegrass jams from time to time, that is, *not just to become a "really good closet player"*.

While the first chords are learned by rote practice, the very next skill is how to smoothly *change chords along with simple songs*. (For fiddle and bass players, the comparable skill is to play the right notes with the chords.) Nothing will build skill, confidence, and pleasure more quickly than jamming successfully following easy songs. Successful students are not likely to give up!

The ability to stay in time, to keep their instrument in tune, and to change chords properly, are the most fundamental skills a new player needs to function well at a jam. Playing solos by rote has no relevance at this point. Instead, Pete recommends students cultivate (with help from a teacher) *ear skills such as the ability to remember and anticipate chord changes, and eventually to correctly guess chord changes, and to find melodies by ear*. Most students recognize if they lack ear skills and understandably wonder how they will ever learn them. A teacher saying, "It comes in time," may not be enough to overcome a building pessimism. However – a student who jams regularly gets ample evidence of their developing ear skills at every session.

Learning an instrument a la classical music (solo practice of set pieces) is a lonely pursuit. Often a student's musical quest is known only to their teacher and family. But when students in a jam class pursue a common goal, they bond. They help and are helped by each other, building a camaraderie that we know is an appealing part of the bluegrass community. If they miss a week, they are missed. People start to carpool, and meet each other between classes for mutual help. After the series of classes, when the jammers are now "launched", they typically continue to meet to jam and team up to attend festivals and concerts. The bluegrass community grows!

How students can benefit from private instruction along with jam classes

Students lacking the skills and confidence for jamming can work with a teacher on whichever problems are holding them back, so that their learning process has specific near-term goals with clear gauges of and rewards for success. It usually takes just a few sessions for a student on any instrument to learn how to follow along in a jam. If a student has trouble following along, a teacher working with a properly-amplified jam video can help a student follow the video, spotting and solving problems.

Singing skills, while on the surface not of relevance to instrumental skills, are actually quite important to jamming and also help build general musicianship that applies to instrumental skills in many ways in the long run. The Wernick Method includes a specific and easy technique for a teacher to help a student learn to carry a tune with their singing voice. Many a Wernick student has been happily amazed to see that their 4th grade teacher was wrong: They are *not* "tone deaf" or have a "tin ear", but mostly have to learn to pick a good singing key and follow the sound of a chording instrument. This method has never failed yet!

Another skill students usually want to address at an early stage is "what to do when someone says, 'Take it!'" The Wernick Method includes ways of teaching students how to "fake" rudimentary solos on their instruments, by doing minimal moves while following the correct

chord changes, or by applying scale notes in the correct key. This skill gets developed in the small jam sessions, and eventually leads to being able to find correct melodies, a critical and fundamental skill of bluegrass musicianship.

At this stage, the introduction of tablature to teach specific patterns and licks becomes useful. Rather than learning entire “canned” solos, students are encouraged to create their own solos using elements learned from others (whether from tab or being shown), and at that point embellishments such as slides, hammers and pull-offs enter the picture as enjoyable and “real” sounding moves that new students love to apply to their simple homemade solos. Again, these skills get exercised and developed *in the context of small group jams*.

Eventually, the learning of entire solos from tab has its place, and throughout the entire development of the student, a teacher is able to guide him/her in proper techniques, good tone, rhythm, and other essentials of musicianship in the context of hearing them play with other musicians.

What's the advantage of being a Wernick-Certified jam teacher?

Along with detailed written guides from Pete on how to set up, publicize, and teach a series of jam classes and how to coach small group jamming, Wernick-certified teachers also have access to the resources of Pete's extensive web site, publicity materials, student materials, and exclusive Teachers Library. All Wernick Method jam classes are listed on LetsPick.org and DrBanjo.com and promoted, each with its own signup form. Students are emailed their class materials upon registration and a student roster is kept updated. The teacher is saved time-consuming administrative work, and the Wernick Method provides teachers hard copies of the student materials including the new JAM Songbook at no cost.

Thanks to the popularity of LetsPick.org and DrBanjo.com, new students routinely discover the site and view a listing by region of all classes offered. They can then access full information on any class and a signup form where they can also pay a deposit to register. Two email promotional blasts for each class are sent from the Home Office, and information is posted on Facebook.

In addition, a Wernick Method teacher receives a pdf file from which to print a customized flyer promoting their class. Before the first class session the teacher is provided a student roster and the Home Office settles up with the teacher so the teacher winds up with the full proceeds minus the Wernick Method fee (generally 15%).

Pete's popular jam-along videos are often used at home for practice by learning jammers. Wernick Method teachers may order them at a discount for resale.

Following each class students are invited to take an anonymous online survey evaluating the experience. The responses are tabulated and comments summarized and shared with both the teacher and Pete Wernick, who keeps a close eye on maintaining quality and effective teaching.