

Teaching the Beginning Percussionist

FBA Summer Convention

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This Clinic will deal primarily with how to teach, develop and maintain a firm foundation of fundamentals for beginning percussion students in a band classroom or studio situation with regards to limited time and resources. Although these techniques and practices will be presented with the (non)percussionist in mind, experienced percussionists may find it equally as beneficial to use this clinic as a resource of information or as a reinforcement (or refresher) of concepts already used.

- I. **Benefits of a well trained and fundamentally strong percussion program.** The one exclusive sentiment we as band directors share is the desire and need to make our bands perform better. There are as varied ways of achieving this as there are problems to solve. However, regardless of which route you choose to take at the center of this always has and always will be *the teacher*. "What the teacher does is what the students get". This clinic is an attempt to outfit teachers with the strategies necessary to develop fundamentally strong beginning percussionists. Being that percussion seems to permeate almost every facet of a band program, its development can be of great benefit to the band program overall such as:
 - a. Broader range of Performance Literature possibilities
 - b. More effective ensemble performance techniques.
 - c. Better classroom discipline which makes for more time available
 - d. Ensemble Variety (Percussion ensemble, Jazz Ensemble, etc.)

- II. **Where to begin? The process of selecting percussionists: Underestimated since day one!** In many regards, this is probably the most overlooked and "underestimated" stage in developing beginning musicians. Especially, since most of the problems (not all of them) encountered at the beginning level can be avoided if a process is put in place that can ensure that the ability and aptitude of the student matches the required ability and aptitude needed for that instrument. Percussion requires simultaneous responsibilities from the onset and therefore requires careful consideration of its candidates to possess certain skills. Today's percussionist needs to be able to:
 - Command technique on several different instruments early.
 - Perform almost exclusively as soloists (Rarely would you see 4 students playing the same tambourine part or 3 triangle players, 5 crash cym., etc.)
 - Display highly acute listening skills (Timpani, balance from behind the ensemble, Marching Band "Snare")
 - Count and command pulse very well (Many compositions esp. w/ complex meter rely heavily on percussion)

For this reason simply placing a student in the percussion section because the only thing they can seem to blow well is their nose may be creating more problems for both you and "sneezy"! Before you run out of Kleenex, here are some things to consider:

- a. **Desire is not enough.** There are many "motivations" that shape a student's desire to play percussion: "It looks like fun", DCI, Guitar Hero/Rock Band, The movie "Drumline", Church needs a set player, H.S. Drumline, X-mas present, peers, family, and yes even YOU! However, rarely will any of these "motivations" alone meet the very real demands of playing percussion for the

beginning percussionist. As mentioned earlier, it will take actual skills to play percussion well and be able to reap the benefits. Desire *is* an important factor, however, just be sure that it is coupled with an awareness of the truth about percussion and the “real” responsibilities of a percussionist upfront.

- b. **Pulse/Tempo/Coordination determination exercise.** There are many different ways to do this. This is one way that has worked for me. First, while seated, have student pat foot to a steady beat (quarter note = 72). Then add one hand also in quarter notes w/ foot pat. Repeat w/ other hand (while foot continues to pat). Next tap eighth notes in one hand against the quarter note foot pat. Repeat process with other hand. Then alternate hands (while foot continues to pat). (*Optional:* You can also subdivide triplets alternating and sixteenths alternating). Using this exercise, I have found that most students capable of this usually do not encounter any trouble grasping most other percussion concepts.
- c. **To be or not to be a percussionist.** The process of selecting which beginning student musicians will actually play percussion will reveal both musical and nonmusical things. Use this procedure as part of your rationale in encouraging the student to play percussion or redirecting them to a more appropriate instrument choice. When dealing with students who are *not* good candidates for percussion it is important to let the facts speak for themselves (handle this with care however!). Be sure the student fully understands the basis of the decision. Soliciting the support of the parent can also be helpful here (Caution: Parents can help and **parents can help!**) However, with whatever decision you make be sure it is one you can live with.

III. Building the foundation. Developing techniques and practices that enable musical growth. (Note: all suggested practices below are done with the Junior Percussion Kit in mind)

- a. **Set-up and playing position.** Most method books cover this category pretty well however, just remember that the height of the instrument should be adjusted to allow the arms of the student to be *parallel* to the ground. This will be different from person to person. There is no “one size fits all” here.
- b. **Snare Drum.** The snare drum serves as the axis of the percussion family. Because of this, in my opinion, the skills attained in developing superior snare drum technique for the beginning percussionist serves as the catalyst to success in all other percussion instruments. *This is why the growing popularity of starting percussionists on Mallets first does not always work to develop good technique on mallets or snare.* The motivation behind this seems to be behaviorally driven rather than musically driven.
 1. *Relaxation.* This is the No. 1 problem with percussionist technique on all levels! Very little tension is involved in playing percussion. This will solve most of the physical technique problems your beginning percussionists will have if followed. *Always check for too much tension!*
 2. *Grip.* There are two types of grips matched or traditional. There are pros and cons to both however for the beginning percussionist I would suggest matched grip for the ease of development and versatility of moving from one percussion instrument to the other.
 3. *Fulcrum.* This is the *balance point* where the fingers (thumb and index most of the time) make contact with the implement (stick or mallet). A good balance point is where the stick bounces the most.
 4. *Motion.* The movement or flow of the implements should always be straight up and down. No deviations from that path. Beginners should begin with “high”, “full” or “complete” strokes to develop strength and good tone. (This makes the use of the practice pads in the JPK ideal)
 5. *Stroke Types.* There are 5 basic strokes: 1) Legato (Rebound), 2) Downstroke (freeze), 3) Upstroke (pull), 4) Tap, 5) Multiple Bounce. *This is how we do it!*
 6. *Rudiments.* This is the percussionist’s vocabulary. It is essential that rudiments are taught and developed everyday. Students should be able to perform them and recognize them in musical literature.

- c. **Mallets.** Most beginning percussionists dislike playing mallets (or more specifically reading music on mallets) and for good reason...they're hard to play! That is to say that the bell set that comes with the JPK is not ideal for learning to play mallets. If you as the teacher spend any time at all trying to play on these instruments the problems will be easy to figure out:

- Size of the bars compared to the size of the mallet head and if that wasn't enough there are a lot of them to play!
- Kinesthetics (players do not actually touch the keys like wind players, distance=discrepancy)

However, even with the inherent problems these instruments present, practically speaking, using them is still preferred over not using them. But, there are some accommodations that should be made to ensure success to your percussionists.

1. *Continue reinforcing* snare drum techniques since they will also apply to playing mallets
 2. *Learn the keyboard.* Some JPK's are now being outfitted with bell sets that have no printed note names. This is preferred. If your beginning percussionists have sets that have note names cover them with electrical tape. Getting them to know the pattern of the keys will help reading.
 3. *Switch regularly between mallets and snare.* Impress upon the students that both are of equal importance *from the start.* (i.e. half snare, half mallets, then switch, etc.) No snare or mallet specialists.
 4. *Keep eyes on the printed page.* Inform students of peripheral vision to develop kinesthetic "feel" for the instrument. Adjust stands to accommodate this. Do not promote memorization. This will only go so far.
 5. *Rewrite method book lines.* Method book lines are designed for the success of the majority and mallets are not in the majority. Playing whole notes do not promote good technique or keeping eyes on the printed page. A rewrite of the lines can keep students focused while developing technique.
- d. **Other percussion instruments.** Most method books introduce the auxiliary percussion instruments on a gradual basis throughout the book. They can also be revealed via the demands of the literature performed. Regardless as to how these instruments are made aware to your beginning percussionists, they should be presented with absolute respect and with correct techniques. There are many resources that can be used to assist in this. If you don't know (no one is expected to know everything) enlist help.
- e. **Care and Maintenance.** By default most beginning percussionists know little to nothing about maintaining and caring for their instruments. Largely, because the instruments seem to maintain themselves. The scope of this subject alone could in itself be a clinic however, there are some basic procedures the teacher and the beginning percussionist can follow to ensure their instruments remain in working and good condition:
1. *Use instruments in the manner they were intended to be used.*
 2. *Use the proper implements each instrument calls for.*
 3. *Only percussionists are allowed to touch and play percussion instruments*
 4. *Learn proper transport of instruments especially large instruments*
 5. *Use covers! Put them on after use, even between classes. Get in a routine!*

Taking these basic steps can not only extend the life of your percussion instruments but, will save valuable time and money in repairs and performance failure.

- IV. **Method Books and Exercises.** There are many band method books for the beginning musician to choose from. Choose one. It will most likely work. It is important, however, to remember that method books are helpful suggestions and the specific needs of the students and the effectiveness of the teacher will dictate how well those methods will work. For the beginning percussionist, as mentioned earlier, most beginning band methods alone will not meet all the needs necessary to develop fundamentally sound percussionists and supplemental material will be essential. Here are some suggestions:

- a. **Haskell W. Harr Snare Drum Method, Bk. I.** A great supplement to develop snare drum technique. (Can be used in a both a homogenous or heterogeneous class settings).
 - b. **“A Fresh Approach to the Snare Drum” by Mark Wessels.** Probably one of the best books on the market of its kind. Very comprehensive and covers just about everything. However, this method would be most effective if used in a homogenous class setting. I would personally only suggest using this method in a heterogeneous setting if you have a strong percussion background (or great determination) and can make modifications to work it into class instruction effectively.
 - c. **The Beginning Band Method Book** should suffice for all mallet instruction at the beginning level except for solo/ensemble literature.
 - d. **Exercises. Handout: “Alternative Warm Up Ideas for the Beginning Percussion Section”**
 - e. **Execution.** When using methods of any type, be sure to have students read everything and *don't take shortcuts*. Most exercises have to be performed a specific way to reap any benefits (i.e. stickings, tempos, esp. dynamics!, etc.)
- V. **Continue student personal development. Boredom.** A very dangerous and destructive word in the world of teaching. If most students are left to their own devices, boredom and disenchantment will inevitably result. Keep things interesting and goal oriented. Here are a few things to consider:
- a. **Percussion Ensemble.** Fills the gap that the musically less demanding band literature leaves open.
 - b. **FBA Solo/Ensemble.** As mentioned earlier, percussionists perform almost exclusively as soloists. Participation in S/E MPA is a great way to develop skills and independence.
 - c. **Preparation for Audition.** Preparing for next year's All County/All State
 - d. **Media.** There is a plethora of information available in all forms of media on the subject of percussion.
 - e. **The Internet.** The possibilities are endless!
 - f. **High School/College.** Valuable resources to explore and they would love to hear from you 😊.
 - g. **Live performances.** Find out what is going on in your area (there is usually a lot) that might interest your students (this is not limited to just percussion).
 - h. **Summer Music Camps.** They are everywhere. Use them!
- VI. **Resources.**
- **Troy Jones, FGCU, tvjones@fgcu.edu**
 - **Vicfirth.com**
 - *A Fresh Approach to the Snare Drum, Mark Wessels (A great book to have as a reference) He also has a mallet book equivalent.*
 - *Row-Loff Publications*
 - *Tap Space (Jim Cassela)*
 - *PAS (Percussive Arts Society) also referred to as PASIC*