MOTIVATION, INNOVATION & DIFFERENTIATION IN YOUR BEGINNING BAND

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As a beginning band director, I fully understand the immense responsibility I have to instruct, nurture, motivate and inspire my students. I know that everything I teach can and will have a lasting impression on my students. HOW they learn, WHAT they learn and HOW WELL they retain the information I teach them can set the groundwork for a strong foundation and many years of life-changing experiences in music. On the flip-side, if I am not providing my students with all the necessary tools for success, they can easily develop bad habits that will hold them back from their greatest potential as young musicians. No pressure, right?

We all know the first year of band instruction is the most critical. Ironically, band programs often have the least amount of rehearsal time during this stage of learning. As a result, we find ourselves cramming as many notes and rhythms into our students brains and hoping that they retain most of the information.

Several years ago, my band program was cut down to only a few minutes of instruction each week. The majority of my instructional time consisted of a revolving door of students coming in during their homeroom’s recess time (all at different arrival times). Because this time could not be used for traditional instruction, I had to get creative for the sake of my students and the band program. I needed something that would motivate my students to work hard without much instruction. I needed something that would motivate them to work more on their own.

WHAT WE KNOW ABOUT BEGINNING BAND STUDENTS

Students are motivated by

1) Working on something THEY like to play
2) Formal recognition for their accomplishments
3) Friendly competition between classmates (some students)
4) Physical rewards (gifts, incentives, etc.)
5) Having ownership in their learning
6) Instant gratification

When I was a student many years ago, if I needed to find the answer to something, I had to go look it up in a dictionary, encyclopedia or go to the library. Our students live in the age of Google, where they can find answers quickly. As a result, when it comes to our students, QUICK SUCCESS IS THE KEY TO MOTIVATION!
WHEN YOU ARE DEALT LEMONS, MAKE LEMONADE!

After much thought and advice from my wife, a first grade teacher, I decided I needed to do something that was simple and straightforward for my students that would allow me to evaluate every student quickly and effectively. I created two levels of short scale-based technical exercises and two levels of short rhythm-based technical exercises so that I could float around the room and evaluate each student individually during the recess class in a matter of seconds. The percussionists had scale exercises and snare exercises (incorporating rhythmic concepts and rudiments). I slapped charts on the wall and instructed students to mark their own progress on the chart with stickers as they learned each exercise. I presented my students with the exercises I called “Scale and Rhythm Chunks,” made sure they knew how to find new notes in their fingering chart and told them to set specific goals for themselves. Then, basically…. it was “go time.”

In about two weeks, nearly every student in 5th grade band had mastered all ten “Chunks” in the first level and many had moved on to the second level I had given to the 6th grade band. Nearly all of the 6th grade band students had mastered the second level and requested additional levels. All of my students were playing with better tone quality, fixing bad habits and understanding notes and fingerings much more quickly. Students were having remarkable success learning at their own pace and I discovered that while I was floating around the room, many of the students had combined to help each other. I had never learned so much from teaching so little! My students had ownership in their learning. They were becoming leaders and experiencing meaningful musical growth. They even wanted to practice! Many of them began coming in on all four other recess days to practice and get their “Chunks” checked off so they could move on to the next level.

TEACHING STUDENTS HOW TO PRACTICE

Although we teach our students to practice effectively, the truth is that when students go home to practice, they don’t practice the way we want them to practice…

*Director approach to practicing*

1) Break music down into smaller sections, or “Chunks”
2) Focus on the harder measures first
3) Don’t just run through the music
4) Be patient
**Student approach to practicing**

1) Run through a whole song over and over, making the same mistakes each time
2) Play until you make a mistake and then give up

One of the most important responsibilities we have is training our students to practice. When assigning students assignments for practice, put yourself in their shoes. What approach would you have taken when practicing the assignment at their age? Students will practice effectively and retain more when we provide them with one or two new concepts, rather than trying to master an entire piece of music all at once.

The program I set up for my students allows for differentiated instruction, meaning that students can work at their own pace, so that they are challenged at the appropriate level. When setting up assessments, it is important to remember that everyone in your band needs to be appropriately challenged to continue growing as a musician.

I have found, completely by accident, that students will learn more quickly and more effectively if they are individually assessed on a regular basis. As I mentioned, beginning band is the most critical level of instruction and while we may have so much to do in so little time, it is important to find time for individual assessment.

**THE IMPORTANCE OF INDIVIDUAL ASSESSMENT**

**WITHOUT INDIVIDUAL ASSESSMENT…**

*Students can develop bad habits that *WILL* stick with them*

1) Lack of breath support
2) Improper Embouchure
3) Lack of ability in reading notes and rhythms
4) Poor tone and technique
5) Bad habits will lead to a feeling of failure, causing students to want to quit

*Gifted students in need of a challenge may*

1) Become bored or frustrated
2) Lose motivation
3) Feel band is a waste of their time and want to quit
For the last fourteen years, the “Chunks” program has been piloted by other programs and has been developed to include four levels of Scale Chunks and four levels of Rhythm Chunks. Other elements have been added as well, including dynamics and articulation and elements of the Emmy Award Winning Breathing Gym Series. Over the past few years, I have had the honor of presenting several sessions with Patrick Sheridan, co-author of the Breathing Gym and have made breathing a part of my daily rehearsal with every ensemble. Adding just five minutes of breathing to my beginning band and junior high band rehearsals has been a game changer. Beginning each rehearsal with the sequence shown below helps my students get centered and focused for a great rehearsal:

BREATHING GYM DAILY WORKOUTS:

1) STRETCHING (eliminate tension)

2) BREATHING WORKOUTS
   (exercises that allow students to get full and get empty with their air)

3) AIR FLOW
   (exercises allowing students to use even and comfortable air flow as they would on a wind instrument)

Since I implemented at least five minutes of breathing into my daily rehearsals, I have seen incredible results. I do not need to address tuning as much, they have better control and understanding of dynamics and are more aware of blend and balance.

Daily breathing workouts are another element that you may feel you do not have time for with a limited amount of instructional time, but taking just a few minutes to get your students moving and breathing at the start of the rehearsal will result in a much more focused and productive rehearsal every time.

GOAL-ORIENTED STUDENT ASSESSMENT

When individually assessing students, it is important to keep in mind that all students are in a different place on their musical journey. Because I assess my students on a regular basis, I know each of my student’s strengths and weaknesses. When I listen to Scale Chunks, I know that some students may be taking steps toward better tone production or better articulation. Sometimes those elements take longer to fully develop and so I will address how the student can work toward reaching their goal and allow them to continue the process of developing over the next few exercises.
When Assessing Students:

1) Mastery of the Chunk/exercise is the ultimate goal
2) Each student's goal may be different
3) It is the director's responsibility to assess individual tone, articulation, etc. in the manner that best suits each student

THE IMPORTANCE OF MUSICAL LITERACY

As band directors, we share similar goals. We want our students to retain the information that is taught to them. We want them to enjoy playing their instrument and be motivated to continue playing in our band program. Most of all, we should want our students to be musically literate. Training our students to practice effectively helps them become more efficient sight-readers and the ability to sight-read more effectively results in quicker success for students. If students are having success, they will want more success. This means they will want to practice!!! And wouldn't it be great if all of our students wanted to practice?

MOTIVATIONAL TOOLS

For our students that are motivated by physical rewards and less intrinsically motivated, I have found a variety of tools that work well. Here our some tools that I have used for motivation:

1) Recruitment Concert
   - For students that earned higher levels of achievement, I formed a band that performed a recruitment concert for future beginning band students. In addition to the performance, students played demonstrations of each instrument

2) Rewards for achievement of Chunks levels
   - Pins for uniform
   - Different color zip ties for each level (to put on instrument case)

3) “Caught Doing Good” Raffle Tickets
   - Students earn raffle tickets for extra effort
   - Have a raffle at the end of the quarter with prizes donated by parents or your booster organization

4) Chunks Wars (see below)
   - place students in groups and have friendly competition between the groups for who can complete the most Chunks. The winning group is rewarded with a party.
Whether you use the Scale & Rhythm Chunks program or another form of assessment, find what works for your group. What motivates your students and what will help them achieve success quickly? What tools can you use that will lay the foundation for a great future experience in music for your students?
GET CREATIVE!!!

Set Daily/Weekly Goals!

1) Do at least 5 minutes of breathing each day
2) Assess your students at least 15 minutes a week, in class or using technology
3) Use a recording App and have students email Chunks weekly
4) Put students in groups by ability or partner students to help one another
   - Students with strengths help those struggling
   - Working together will build leadership at an early age
   - Will build a sense of teamwork and a better bond between your band members

BENEFITS OF PROPER BREATHING

1) Better fundamental tone
2) Better tuning, blend and balance
3) Better phrasing
4) Better control of dynamics
5) New concepts learned more quickly
6) Even more positive experience in band

BENEFITS OF DIFFERENTIATED INSTRUCTION

1) Quicker learning of music by students
2) Better retention of knowledge by students
3) Better retention of students in your program
4) Students learn how to work together to help each other
5) Students learn notes and rhythms allowing them to achieve far beyond their normal age level
6) Better habits are formed from consistent assessment
7) Director is aware of all students’ strengths and weaknesses

AND BEST OF ALL….

STUDENTS LOVE BAND!!!

Always remember that the job of beginning band director is incredibly important, even if we don’t always have the most time for instruction. Find those creative ways to instruct, nurture, motivate and inspire your students. Tell them you are proud of them and celebrate their success in every way possible. Thank you, fellow band directors, for all that you do for students in giving them the gift of music!
Richard Canter serves as a band director for Walnut Hills High School in Cincinnati, Ohio, where he directs beginning band, junior high and high school bands.

Mr. Canter is the author of the beginning band teaching supplement *Scale & Rhythm Chunks*, which is endorsed by Dr. Tim Lautzenheiser as “exactly what is wanted and needed…an idea whose time has come.”

Mr. Canter has presented clinics throughout the United States, including the Midwest Band and Orchestra Clinic, the Texas Music Educators Association, The Texas Bandmasters Association, the University of Oregon Band Director Academy, the Georgia Music Educators Association and the Ohio Music Education Conference. Mr. Canter holds a Bachelors Degree in Music Education from Bowling Green State University and a Masters Degree in Music Education from Miami University. He resides in Cincinnati, Ohio with his wife, Kellie and two children, Lily and Andrew.

For more information on Scale & Rhythm Chunks, visit scaleandrhythmchunks.com

For information on Scale & Rhythm Chunks and the Breathing Gym, visit focus-on-music.com