

**2021 WTAMU Band Directors Workshop  
West Texas A&M University, Canyon TX**

# **Building Better Brass:**

**Making the Most of the First Year of Instruction for Brass**

**A clinic presented by  
Russ Teweleit, Ph. D.**

**Contact:  
WTAMU Box 60879  
Canyon, TX 79016-0001  
Email: [rteweleit@wtamu.edu](mailto:rteweleit@wtamu.edu)  
Phone: 806-651-2863**

## ***Expectations***

We should strive to hold the highest of expectations for our students. Your students are capable of learning whatever **you** are capable of teaching them.

## ***Persistent Insistence***

Let's face it. Most of us say the right things; however, the best teachers are those who INSIST that the students actually do what they expect.

## ***Air!***

Strive to achieve big, full, and rich sounds. Air usage is perhaps the most challenging and essential aspect of teaching a good tone.

## ***Motivation***

Motivating students should be a multi-faceted and daily occurrence. Make it part of your planning.

Daily Chair Tests	Weekly Grades	High-fives
Games	Prizes	Recordings
Mini-performances	Solo and Ensemble	High Expectations
Enthusiasm (on your part)		

## ***Playing Ratio of 8:2***

Try to make it a goal to have 8 minutes of playing to every 2 minutes of instruction. This is a very aggressive goal and one that is difficult to achieve; however, in a 50-minute class, 10 minutes of instruction should usually be enough (see attached article from TBA Journal).

We learn by:

1. Imitation
2. Repetition
3. Trial and Error (Musical Performance: Learning Theory and Pedagogy by D. Kohut)

Playing time is perhaps the single best cure for a bad tone. We should constantly teach our students about how to practice, and then rehearse as if they don't.

## ***Your Single Best Teaching Tool – Your Instrument***

Your instrument is your single best teaching tool! Modeling (even if it is not a brass instrument) will provide more than verbal explanation ever could.

## ***Posture***

Proper playing position is one of the best ways to avoid bad habits. Goal = Mention posture 3-4 times a day, even if it is perfect.

## ***Consistent Tempo***

Use quarter note = 60-72 bpm for 90% of the first year. This will allow students to internalize the beat more quickly. Note this does not mean that you shouldn't encourage building technique. If the students are playing a line well in 4/4, play it in 2/2 or even 1/1.

### ***Eastman Counting System and Foot Tap***

A counting system provides a vocabulary that allows you to instantly check for understanding. The foot tap helps students to internalize the beat, and also affords the teacher a quick and easy way to check for understanding (see attached).

### ***Legato playing***

Teach legato playing first. It is more difficult to do properly and encourages proper air usage. Legato playing should make up approximately 90% of the first year. This also includes teaching your students phrasing from the very start. Note: A beginning student who breathes at every bar-line (or worse, after every note) will always sound like a beginner. In most beginner method books, the place to breathe is at the rests or at the end of a four bar phrase. A 2 bar phrase with a big sound is a realistic expectation for much of the first year and a 4 bar should be the goal by the end of the year.

### ***Build Range***

Let's face it; brass playing is a very physical activity. Whereas woodwind students can quickly begin to explore the full range of the instrument once a proper embouchure and air usage are established, brass range must be developed over long period of time through a great deal of repetition and consistent hard work. Don't rely on the method books or band literature to build range. It simply won't happen. There are essentially two ways to build range:

1. Diatonically through slurred scales
2. Lip Slurs

### ***Articulation***

Again, hearing someone is more valuable than verbal explanation. If it sounds right, it probably is. The syllable you teach is not nearly as important as the sound that the students produce. I have found that students frequently tongue too high, too hard, and use too much tongue. It is often helpful to have the students tongue lower (almost between the teeth) and to use less tongue (less width).

### ***Intonation***

Tuning is not a topic that should be reserved for the 2<sup>nd</sup> or third year. At a minimum, you should approximate the tuning slides of every instrument from the first day. The instrument is not designed to have the main tuning slide pushed all the way in. Take the time to teach students what in tune sounds like.

### ***Listen!***

Goal = Strive to hear every student individually at least once per day for the entire first year and a minimum of once a week after that. This can help prevent bad habits from going unnoticed.

### ***Sing!***

Singing is a valuable teaching tool that instrumentalists often ignore. Suggestion: Have 1-4 students play while the rest sing note-names or count on pitch.

## Building Better Brass: Concepts for Teaching Lip Slurs

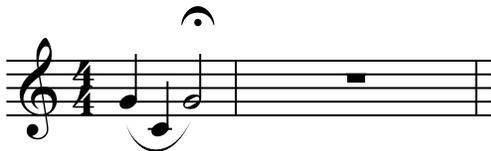
### *General Concepts*

- Slurs can be started in the first few weeks or days. Gradually build on what they are doing.
- Tone, tone, tone!
- Play each slur in one breath.
- The last note is the most important note of each slur. If you are not satisfied with the students' tone, have the students repeat the note as a long tone. They should do the same at home.
- Do not tongue. It defeats the purpose and makes the exercise ineffective. It is important that you hear individuals often in order to ensure that the students are not tonguing.
- Rest as much as you play. Alternate solo/soli. (Teacher/students, 1<sup>st</sup> chair/student, small group/large group, down the row solo/soli, etc.)
- Play each slur through all seven positions.
- If the slur is going to stretch the group's range, start in seventh position and work your way up.
- The following slurs should be done once a day in class and once a day at home.
- Note: Use these same concepts when building range diatonically.



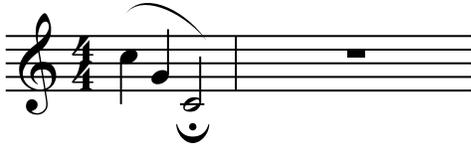
1. Start with a simple half note slur from concert F to Bb.

- Slurring down is easier and less likely to produce manipulation.
- Those students who begin too low may actually lock-in at 5<sup>th</sup> or 6<sup>th</sup> position. Then they will eventually start locking in on 3<sup>rd</sup> or 4<sup>th</sup>, followed by all correct notes.
- Suggestion: After this slur is learned, start your class with this each day for the rest of the year. Counting, announcements, etc. can be done after your daily routine.



2. Add this slur only after #1 is going well.

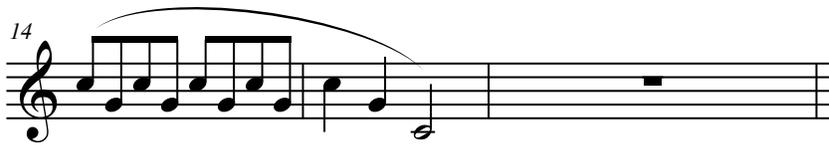
- Use this slur to prepare the group for #3 below. After #3 is added there is no need to continue with this slur.



3. Add this slur after #2 is going well.



4. Replace #3 with this slur when the class is ready.



5. Replace #4 with this slur when the class is ready.



6. Four note slur. Add this when #5 is going well.

How to approach the slurs that build range:

- Start in 7<sup>th</sup> position and work your way up
- Rules – Don't stop the air and don't tongue. Remember: DON'T STOP (even if the student totally misses the top note and the most important note of the slur is the last.



7. Five-note slur. Replace #6 with this when #6 is going well.

How to approach the slurs that build range:

- Start in 7<sup>th</sup> position and work your way up
- Rules – Don't stop the air and don't tongue. Remember: DON'T STOP (even if the student totally misses the top note and the most important note of the slur is the last.
- Some students will be able to do this easier than others. Make sure they know that is just the way it is, and it is only one aspect of brass playing.
- IMPORTANT: If the student misses the top note, finish the slur and then rest (approximately 30-45 seconds).
- Attempt the slur again. If you miss the top note again, you are done for the day. If you get it, go on to the next slur. Continue until you have missed the slur twice. Note: In class, have the students be honest and drop out after they miss it the first time and continue working with those who are left. Be sure to emphasize that it is no big deal to drop out (after the last note) and that this is only one small aspect of playing.
- Once the 4-note slur is going well, move on to a 5-note slur. However, have the student look at the music to the four-note slur and just go one note higher than the top note. This can help avoid the extra tension that is often caused by seeing notes that look high.
- Five-note slur in cut time. Once the 5-note slur is going well, try the 5-note slur in cut time.
- More Slurs! At home, have the students who can play the 5-note slur add the 6-note slur using the same concepts add 7-note slur, 8-note, etc. Note: It would be too time consuming to do these exercises everyday in class. At most, once a week you can continue with 6, then 7, then 8-note slurs as a mini-contest.

8. More advanced slurs!

- This is one of the most valuable slurs any brass player could play.
- This slur can be taught slowly at ½ tempo. Teach 7<sup>th</sup> position for a week or more, and then add a new position each week.



# *Eastman Counting System*

## *Only Five things to know!*

1) A note that comes on the beat is called by the number of the beat:

2/4 1 2 | 3/4 1 2 3 | 4/4 1 2 3 4 | 5/4 1 2 3 4 5 ||

2) A note on the upbeat is called "te" (tay):

2/4 7 8 | 3/4 7 8 | 4/4 7 8 | 5/4 7 8 |

3) A note on coming on the second third of a beat is called "la"

4) A note coming on the last third of a beat is called "li" (lee):

6/8 1 la li | 2 la li | 3 la | 4 la | 5 li | 6 li | 1 la li | 2 la | 3 la

5) **Everything** else is called "ta" (tah):

4/4 1 ta te ta 2 te ta 3 ta te 4 ta ta | 5 ta ta | 6 ta ta | 7 ta ta | 8 ta ta | 9 ta ta | 10 ta ta | 11 ta ta | 12 ta ta | 13 ta ta | 14 ta ta | 15 ta ta | 16 ta ta | 17 ta ta | 18 ta ta | 19 ta ta | 20 ta ta | 21 ta ta | 22 ta ta | 23 ta ta | 24 ta ta | 25 ta ta | 26 ta ta | 27 ta ta | 28 ta ta | 29 ta ta | 30 ta ta | 31 ta ta | 32 ta ta | 33 ta ta | 34 ta ta | 35 ta ta | 36 ta ta | 37 ta ta | 38 ta ta | 39 ta ta | 40 ta ta | 41 ta ta | 42 ta ta | 43 ta ta | 44 ta ta | 45 ta ta | 46 ta ta | 47 ta ta | 48 ta ta | 49 ta ta | 50 ta ta | 51 ta ta | 52 ta ta | 53 ta ta | 54 ta ta | 55 ta ta | 56 ta ta | 57 ta ta | 58 ta ta | 59 ta ta | 60 ta ta | 61 ta ta | 62 ta ta | 63 ta ta | 64 ta ta | 65 ta ta | 66 ta ta | 67 ta ta | 68 ta ta | 69 ta ta | 70 ta ta | 71 ta ta | 72 ta ta | 73 ta ta | 74 ta ta | 75 ta ta | 76 ta ta | 77 ta ta | 78 ta ta | 79 ta ta | 80 ta ta | 81 ta ta | 82 ta ta | 83 ta ta | 84 ta ta | 85 ta ta | 86 ta ta | 87 ta ta | 88 ta ta | 89 ta ta | 90 ta ta | 91 ta ta | 92 ta ta | 93 ta ta | 94 ta ta | 95 ta ta | 96 ta ta | 97 ta ta | 98 ta ta | 99 ta ta | 100 ta ta ||

6/8 1 ta la li 2 la ta li | 3 la ta li | 4 la ta li | 5 la ta li | 6 la ta li | 7 la ta li | 8 la ta li | 9 la ta li | 10 la ta li | 11 la ta li | 12 la ta li | 13 la ta li | 14 la ta li | 15 la ta li | 16 la ta li | 17 la ta li | 18 la ta li | 19 la ta li | 20 la ta li | 21 la ta li | 22 la ta li | 23 la ta li | 24 la ta li | 25 la ta li | 26 la ta li | 27 la ta li | 28 la ta li | 29 la ta li | 30 la ta li | 31 la ta li | 32 la ta li | 33 la ta li | 34 la ta li | 35 la ta li | 36 la ta li | 37 la ta li | 38 la ta li | 39 la ta li | 40 la ta li | 41 la ta li | 42 la ta li | 43 la ta li | 44 la ta li | 45 la ta li | 46 la ta li | 47 la ta li | 48 la ta li | 49 la ta li | 50 la ta li | 51 la ta li | 52 la ta li | 53 la ta li | 54 la ta li | 55 la ta li | 56 la ta li | 57 la ta li | 58 la ta li | 59 la ta li | 60 la ta li | 61 la ta li | 62 la ta li | 63 la ta li | 64 la ta li | 65 la ta li | 66 la ta li | 67 la ta li | 68 la ta li | 69 la ta li | 70 la ta li | 71 la ta li | 72 la ta li | 73 la ta li | 74 la ta li | 75 la ta li | 76 la ta li | 77 la ta li | 78 la ta li | 79 la ta li | 80 la ta li | 81 la ta li | 82 la ta li | 83 la ta li | 84 la ta li | 85 la ta li | 86 la ta li | 87 la ta li | 88 la ta li | 89 la ta li | 90 la ta li | 91 la ta li | 92 la ta li | 93 la ta li | 94 la ta li | 95 la ta li | 96 la ta li | 97 la ta li | 98 la ta li | 99 la ta li | 100 la ta li ||

### *Special Cases*

In those beats having three 8th-notes in asymmetrical meters, the extra 8th is also called "te":

5/8 1 te 2 te te | 7/8 1 te 2 te te 3 te | 9/8 1 te 2 te te 3 te 4 te

In 2-beat triplets, the second note comes on the last 3rd of a beat and is therefore called "li", while the third note comes on the second 3rd of a beat and is called "la". In 4-beat triplets, the syllables revert to their original order since the second note comes on the 2nd third of a beat and the third note on the last third of a beat:

2/4 1 li la | 4/4 1 la li |

# 8:2 A Ratio, a Concept, a Pathway to Improving Beginning Band Instruction

Dr. Russ Towelot

"Did you practice last night?"

Have you ever regretted asking a student that question? Truthfully, this is a question that is often better off avoided. If Timmy is asked this question just after playing "Twinkle-Twinkle" better than it has ever been played in the history of beginning band and answers "yes," are we not giving the class the false impression that one night of practicing pays instant dividends? Conversely, a boastful "no" would be the worst possible answer. As musicians and teachers, we all understand the need for individual practice. The act of practicing is a process and not a product. It's more like a slow cooker than a microwave, more like a marathon than a fifty-yard dash. In short, it is much like real life. Consistent work over a long period of time is the ONLY reliable pathway to success. Regrettably, as teachers, the reality is that a sizeable number of our students do not practice anywhere near as much as we would like. The first year of instruction is the most critical as it is when habits—both good and bad—are formed. That is why it is so vital that the director make the most of the available time during class.

## Persistent Insistence

Let's face it. Most teachers say the right things; however, the very best teachers are those who are great motivators and absolutely INSIST that the students actually do what they expect. We should strive to hold the highest of expectations for our students.

Your students are capable of learning whatever you are capable of teaching them. One of the greatest pedagogues of our time, Marcia Zoffuto, asserted that the key is "persistent insistence." She

explained that there should be no limits placed on learning/performance and that, "persistently monitoring and insistently guiding based on time-honored principles yields a good harvest of knowledge." Adding, "Insistently encouraging and persistently applying a fair system of rewards and consequences provides learning environment security." It is important to evaluate your own teaching and determine your level of persistent insistence.

## Playing Ratio of 8:2

It almost seems too simple, but the single best way to learn to play an instrument is to simply do it. If one accepts that premise, it is essential that the teacher make the best use of the students' time in class. A suggested goal would be

**Consistent work  
over a long  
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to success.**

to have 8 minutes of playing time/active music making to every 2 minutes of instruction. This is a very aggressive goal and one that is difficult to achieve; however, in a typical 50-minute class, ten minutes of

instruction should be more than an adequate amount of time to explain any concept. Anything more than ten minutes is likely to be far less effective and possibly even counter productive.

Philip Farkas, one of the most highly regarded teachers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, states in his book *The Art of Horn Playing* that he thinks the three factors that have the greatest impact on student achievement are repetition, constant intelligent analysis, and correct instruction. Of these, he suggests that the most

## 8:2 A Ratio, a Concept, a Pathway to Improving Beginning Band Instruction

important of these is repetition. In *Instrumental Music Pedagogy: Teaching Techniques for School Band and Orchestra Directors*, Daniel L. Kohut explains that we learn by imitation and repetition through trial and error. Unfortunately, instrumental teachers are often too quick to offer further explanation and spend an inordinate amount of time providing instruction when it would be much more effective to simply provide more imitation, repetition, and trial and error.

As teachers, it is essential that we start our classes on time and make the most of every minute of the class period. It is important to teach the students how

to practice and to consistently stress the importance of daily practice outside of class. Simple pragmatism, however, requires the teacher to constantly explore ways to motivate their students to practice all the while utilizing every minute of rehearsal time as if the students do not practice at all. All too often, despite the teacher's best efforts, many students will not chose to practice daily; therefore, if the director does not make the most of the available time, student progress is slow. The following is offered as an illustration of two imaginary beginning instrumental classes:

### Making the Most of the Time Available: A Comparison

School A	Time Wasted	School B	Time Wasted
<b>Start:</b>		<b>Start:</b>	
2-3 minutes after the bell rings.	2 minutes	Class Starts when the bell rings.	0
<b>Announcements &amp; Counting:</b>		<b>Announcements &amp; Counting:</b>	
The class listens to announcements and then works on counting rhythms as a group.		The class begins split and announcements are typed and given to each teacher.	
Classes split for team-teaching:	2 minutes	Classes begin split:	0
<b>Daily Chair Test:</b>		<b>Daily Chair Test:</b>	
Students change chairs following chair test.	2 minutes	Students write down chair number in their book and sit in the new chair at the start of the next class period.	0
<b>Playing to Instruction Ratio:</b>		<b>Playing to Instruction Ratio:</b>	
6:4 6 minutes of playing to every 4 minutes of instruction.	2+ minutes	8:2 8 minutes of playing to every 2 minutes of instruction.	0
Class stops too early and student wait by the door for the bell to ring.	2 minutes	Class stops on time without any wasted time.	0
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>10 minutes</b>		<b>0 minutes</b>

In a typical school year, the students at School B above will play their instruments:

50 minutes more per week	or	1 entire class period per week
200 minutes more per month	or	4 entire class periods per month
1800 minutes per year	or	36 entire class periods per year

## 8:2 A Ratio, a Concept, a Pathway to Improving Beginning Band Instruction

### The Result:

Even with quality teaching at each school, the students at school B will end the year with almost two months more playing time. When you consider that these students have only been playing for nine months, this is an extremely significant amount of valuable playing. Truthfully, many teachers have the ratio reversed. That is, 2 minutes of playing time to every 8 minutes of instruction! In which case the disparity between the two classes would be light-years apart. There would be no comparison.

### Benefits

In addition to increased student learning, the use of an 8:2 playing to instruction ratio can also lead to improve classroom management. If the pace of instruction is on track, and there is ample imitation, repetition, and trial and error, the teacher will likely find that there is a sharp decrease in the need for corrections in regard to student behavior.

### What can you do?

Examine your own teaching and look for ways to increase your students playing time. Even a few minutes per day can increase their playing time by weeks over the course of a year. Again, set your goal at the ratio of 8:2. Eight minutes of playing to every two minutes of instruction. It is a simple concept that can yield astounding results.

### References

- Farkas, P. (1956). *The Art of Horn Playing*.  
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*Dr. Russ Teweleit is the associate director of bands at West Texas A&M University in Canyon, Texas. Dr. Teweleit's duties at WTAMU include conducting the Concert Band and directing the Buffalo Marching Band. Additionally, he teaches graduate courses and serves as coordinator of music education for the university. Prior to his appointment at WTAMU in 1999, Dr. Teweleit served as the Associate Director of Bands (1991-1996) and then Director of Bands (1996-1999) at Canyon High School. He is active as a clinician for marching band, concert band, jazz band, and instrumental pedagogy. A member of the Texas Music Educators Association, Dr. Teweleit holds bachelors and masters degrees from West Texas A&M University and a Ph. D. from the University of Oklahoma.*