

'Net Gains

Growing the Beginning Clarinet Class

2021 West Texas A&M University Band Directors Workshop
Jim Shaw † Willow Wood JHS Band † Tomball, TX † jshaw322@gmail.com

Before we get started: As with most things Band, there are many ways to achieve great results when it comes to teaching clarinet. The purpose of this clinic is to provide food for thought, maybe spark some new ideas, and share what has worked for me and my students. You'll see and hear the phrase, "In my experience...", because this clinic is based exactly on that.

Many thanks to my amazing wife, Jennifer Shaw, and my mentor and good friend, Paul Worosello, both of whom are incredible teachers and my go-to resources for all things Clarinet.

The Instrument and Equipment

Here's What We Recommend to Our Beginning Students

- Buffet E-II or Yamaha YCL-255 (or YCL-250, the older model) clarinet
- D'Addario X-5 clarinet mouthpiece
- D'Addario H-Ligature for clarinet
- D'Addario Reserve Classic clarinet reeds, strength 3.0

Why these clarinets?

In my experience, these brands tend to be consistent in terms of quality, and they hold up well to daily use in the younger classes. They are also of a quality that, if a student does not step up, they are adequate for use in our concert bands. We provide multiple options in terms of cost and to head off possible availability issues with one model or the other. These two models "play nice" with each other when it comes to tone quality and pitch.

Why the X-5 mouthpiece?

In my experience, this mouthpiece is a bit less "forgiving" than other (good) brands and models that are used in many programs. This can make for a slower start in the beginning class, but, ultimately, can lead to a larger percentage of students playing with better habits down the line.

The Ligature

Not quite as crucial as a quality mouthpiece, but still important. Inverted ligatures tend to provide for a more even distribution of pressure around the body of the reed, but traditional ligatures such as the stock models most student clarinets come with are not bad. We prefer the one listed here because it doesn't slip like the more common Bonade brand.

A Word (or a Few Dozen) About Reeds...

When it comes to appropriate reed strength for beginners, there seems to be two prevailing schools of thought. In one camp, you have the "soft reed" folks who tend to start their beginners on 2.5 strength reeds (or softer), and in the other, you have the "hard reed" people who generally start their beginners on 3.0 strength reeds (higher in some rare instances).

The truth of the matter is that there are teachers from both camps who experience a great deal of success in teaching their clarinet students. Finding the correct reed brand and strength is a balancing act between the following:

Initial Reed Brand and Strength Too Soft	Initial Reed Brand and Strength Too Hard
Hard for student to produce a sound that is up to pitch.	Student more likely to play with too much tension.
Forming correct embouchure makes it difficult to produce a sound.	Difficult to produce sound without biting.
Tends to be too forgiving when it comes to teaching tone production and making a sound.	High achievers tend to "cheat" in order to make a sound.
Very easy to form bad habits because student has "false success."	Can make it very unenjoyable to play the clarinet.

For the mouthpiece we use and my personal teaching style, the D'Addario Reserve Classic (3.0) works best. It falls somewhere between a Vandoren 2.5 and a Vandoren 3.0. The D'Addario reeds do not seem to last as long as the Vandoren's, but they are very consistent out of the box.

"Pre-Instrument" Teaching: Setting Up The Class Culture

Teaching any instrument is a detailed, methodical process. By spending the time to establish classroom expectations and culture, the teacher can save immeasurable amounts of time later.

Expectations

- Take time to develop these ahead of time. What are your non-negotiables when it comes to things like how students enter and leave the room, what they should have and where they need to be at the start of class, how and when students ask questions, what supplies are needed and where they are stored, etc.?
- Rules should be broad and few in number; otherwise, you will paint yourself into a multitude of corners.
- Procedures should be clear and easily understood.
- Best taught, modeled, and reinforced on a "need to know" basis.
- Must be consistent from class to class and student to student.

Engaging Students from the Start

- Teach something new and achievable by all class members every day. Small successes create huge momentum.
- Praise every student attempt to the high heavens, especially when working with individuals.
- When redirecting student behavior, address the behavior, not the student. (In other words, don't make it personal.)
- Be mindful of non-talking noise in the room. ("Listen to the lights." - Randy Storie)
- Use non-verbal cues and proximity as reminders when possible.
- Ask students to explain back to you what you are teaching.
- Especially in beginning classes, there is such thing as "good talking."
- Involve the class when helping individuals.
- Use "we/us" WAY more than "you."
- Create a sense of accomplishment, as well as one of anticipation, at the end of every class period.
- Humor works as a great "reset button."

Promote ACTIVE LISTENING

- ATTENTION (Takes effort on the part of the listener. We process speech three times faster than someone can speak.)
- ATTITUDE (One's attitude is physically evident. The listener must be willing to receive the information that is being shared.)
- ADJUSTMENT (Poor listeners focus on their reaction to what is being said. Good listeners focus on the information shared, and then they react.)

"Pre-Instrument" Teaching

- Expectations, rules, and procedures
- How we sit in band
- Steady beat and foot tap
- Very basic time signature and rhythms
- Clef, parts of the staff, and note names
- Breathing for band (as opposed to "breathing for life")



During this time of teaching before getting to the instrument, it's important that students leave class feeling that they have learned something new every day.

Teaching Tone Production

All initial teaching and attempts at tone production are made on the mouthpiece and barrel combination of the instrument (sometimes referred to as the "small instrument.") This simplifies things for the student, allowing them to focus on breathing, embouchure formation, etc., without the distraction of the rest of the instrument. It is also easier to hear right vs. wrong on this part of the instrument.

Assembly of the Mouthpiece/Barrel Until COVID and remote teaching forced me to do otherwise, I used to WAY over-complicate this.

- Corks will need to be greased, especially for newer instruments.
- If they have a stock "reed" that comes with their clarinet, have them use this one at first (the "practice reed").
- Moisten ALL parts of the reed. The base of the reed tends to be neglected, and, if dry, it can draw moisture away from the tip.
- Match the reed to the mouthpiece (flat side to flat side, tip to tip).
- Reed tip should be even or very slightly overlap the tip of the mouthpiece.
- Affix ligature, making sure that screws will be tightened with right hand. Ligature sits just below the line on the mouthpiece and should be tightened just enough to keep it in place (more so if a Rovner ligature).

Forming the Embouchure

Mouthpiece placement and embouchure formation are covered prior to adding the airstream in order to produce a sound. The goal is to create great habits from the very beginning. If they always do it right, they'll never learn it wrong.

Embouchure is taught in a series of progressive steps (similar to the "Six Step Set-up" for brass, developed by Jack Nall). Director modeling and the use of mirrors are vital!!

1. **Form Your Chapstick Face.** Lay the bottom lip against the teeth. Running the finger back and forth over the lip (like applying Chapstick) can serve as a tactile reminder, but watch for students who immediately relax the bottom lip once the finger stops.
2. **Open Your Mouth.** Watch that students maintain the look and "feel" of the bottom lip as they open their mouths. The mouth should be open wide enough that the mouthpiece can be inserted without touching the bottom lip or top teeth.
3. **Insert The Mouthpiece.*** Students move to this step on their own only after it has been set up by the director (see below). Watch for students who push their bottom lip into their mouths with the mouthpiece.
4. **Click And Stick.** Raise the mouthpiece to the top teeth and "bond" it there. I prefer to talk to students about resting the weight of their head on the mouthpiece rather than telling them to "push up."
5. **Form Your Milkshake Face.** Grip the mouthpiece with the lips and corners as if drinking a very thick milkshake. Lips should close around the mouthpiece with bottom lip and "bonding" of top teeth to mouthpiece staying the same.

At this point, when first teaching this, I will go to each student and place the mouthpiece for them. ("This is where it goes.



This is what it feels like. Now you hold it. Now repeat while I work with the next student.") Yes, this takes time, but, again, we are spending time now to save time later.



Watch Out For...

Issues	Common Causes/Solutions
Chin not flat	Too much bottom lip in the mouth
Mouthpiece is loose, moves easily	Teeth not bonded to top of mouthpiece, lips/corners not gripping the mouthpiece sufficiently
Angle that is too far out or down	For most students, a straight line drawn from the end of the barrel would point between or just in front of the student's knees
Not enough or too much mouthpiece in the mouth	The bottom teeth should align with where the reed and mouthpiece intersect

Moving to Step 6 (Tone Production)

Once students are consistently producing an embouchure and set-up that are correct (and after much repetition), we will move to producing a tone on mouthpiece and barrel. If possible, we try to get to this within the same class period as the one in which embouchure has been taught...because they're going to go home and try to do it, anyway.

Step 6 evolves in the following manner (Despite the numbering here, we always just call it "Step 6" in class.):

Step 6.0: "Breathe, and blow a calm, steady stream of air without making a sound."

Like all iterations of Step 6, this is first practiced away from the small instrument (air on the hand). EVERYTHING is demonstrated by the director first. Tongue should be up in the back as if saying "heeeeeee."

Step 6.1: "Breathe, and move from air to airy sound."

Students gradually increase the speed of the air until a pitch that is a "mixture" of air and sound is produced. If class size allows, this step is best done individually or in small groups at first. Students should be aware of not adding tension with air.

Step 6.2: "Breathe, and move from air to airy sound to sound."

Demonstrate first and work with individuals and small groups. This is especially important because you want the students to develop the feel as to when to stop increasing the air speed and just maintain the air to produce a characteristic sound.

Step 6.3 "Breathe, and play."

Students start the sound with sufficient air velocity to produce a characteristic sound. (No articulation yet. The air starts the sound.)



"Why not just skip to the last one?"

We want the students to produce a Concert F# on the mouthpiece and barrel combination. Gradually "ramping up" the air stream allows the students to better monitor their faces and bodies rather than fixate on producing a sound.

This leads to less added tension. My experience has been that, using this method, the vast majority of the students in the class produces the Concert F# immediately.



Watch Out For...

Issue	Common Causes/Solutions
No pitch or very thin sound is produced once air is "ramped up"	Not enough mouthpiece in the mouth (VERY common)
Sound is sqauwky, spread, and/or difficult to control even at softer volumes	Too much mouthpiece in the mouth and/or angle of instrument is not correct
Air will not go through the mouthpiece	Too much tension in jaw, likely biting tip of the reed closed (and probably not enough mouthpiece in mouth)
Pitch produced is consistently below Concert F#	Not bonding top teeth to top of mouthpiece, lips are not firm around mouthpiece, too much bottom lip in mouth, top lip is not engaged to mouthpiece (push down with top lip), reed is too soft, and/or tongue is too low in the back
Pitch produced is consistently above Concert F#	Biting/jaw is too tight, bottom lip needs to be softened against the reed, back teeth are too close together, and/or too much tension in body (check hands and arms...this carries into the face)



Even after they have developed consistency, checking student pitch and sound on mouthpiece and barrel should happen often during the beginner year, and students must be made to understand the importance of doing so as part of their own practice routine.



"Does the Concert F# have to be perfectly in tune before moving on?"

30 cents sharp is better than even one cent flat. My goal is to get most of the class within a +0-30 cent range. There are always students who appear to be doing everything correctly and are still playing flat. Many times, they just need to develop strength over time, and the pitch will gradually come up.

Instrument Assembly and Hand Position

The assembly of the rest of the instrument, and hand position, are taught at the same time as tone production. The body of the clarinet is used (without mouthpiece and barrel attached).

At first, students rest the bell of the instrument on the knee, and we learn where to place the hands. Holding the instrument gently by the barrel, the student lets their right hand hang loosely by their side, allowing the fingers to rest in their natural curved shape.

The **RIGHT HAND** is then placed first because it is the hand that holds the clarinet:

- **Right thumb rests under the thumb rest.** Placement of the thumb varies according to the size of the student's hands and length of fingers, but, generally, the lower edge of the nail is even with the middle of the thumb rest. The pad or fingerprint of the thumb rests against the instrument, and the thumb placement is adjusted to allow the fingers to cover the holes with no tension.
- **The pads or fingerprints of the fingers cover the holes.** When not pressing the keys, the student's fingers should be directly above them, not bunched up or "flying away."
- **The pinky rests on the Low F (or "home") key.**

If the clarinet were to be pulled from the right hand while the hand maintains its shape, it will look like the student is holding a cup of water. **WATCH OUT** for students resting the top of the hand or index finger underneath the side keys.

Once the right hand is in place and holding the clarinet, we place the **LEFT HAND:**

- **The left hand first hangs down at the side in order to form its natural shape.**
- **The thumb is placed first, over the thumb hole, pointing to approximately 2 O'Clock, and slightly overlapping, but not pressing, the register key.**
- **The pads or fingerprints of the fingers cover the holes.** When not pressing the keys, the student's fingers should be directly above them, not bunched up or "flying away."
- **The pinky rests on the E/B (or "home") key.**
- **If student hand size allows, the angle of the left hand is slightly different than the right.** The student should be able to cover the thumb hole and push the register key **AND** cover the first hole and open the A key at the same time without pulling other fingers out of position (hand will angle up slightly). If hands are too small, it is more important that the keys on front are covered completely (hand angle may need to be adjusted and then gradually worked into place as student grows)
- **As hand position is established, spend some time building dexterity and covering the holes** (see "Digit Widgets" handout).



Students with small hands can **GREATLY** benefit from the use of a clarinet neck strap.



Watch Out For...

- Students bunching up fingers rather than keeping them directly over the holes
- "Fly away" fingers.
- Students trying to hold the clarinet with the left hand, especially when moving off of the leg
- Excessive tension in the shoulders, arms, hands, and/or fingers
- Students who try to use the bottom side keys as a crutch when holding the instrument
- Collapsing of the hands, especially the left hand moving down and away from the A key to more mirror the right hand
- Bridge key alignment

Getting on the Instrument!

Adding the Upper Joint

The goal is to make tone production on the clarinet feel the same to the student as on the mouthpiece and barrel. Once the class is consistently producing a characteristic sound using good fundamentals on the mouthpiece and barrel, it's time to add the upper joint. Have students hold the upper joint in a manner similar to the mouthpiece and barrel. I encourage my students to hold the instrument with their left hand because this set them up to move to the next step (the full instrument) as outlined below.

When adding the upper joint, the pitch produced will be a Concert F (or G on clarinet). It will be the same pitch in the same octave as the full instrument when no keys are pressed. Students may find that they need to visualize their air going farther in order to produce a sound.

We follow the same process as outlined for the various Step 6's above. As with mouthpiece and barrel, individuals and small groups are monitored closely before involving the whole class at once. Whenever you add a part to the clarinet, it can feel like you (and the kids) are staring over. Articulation will be taught separately on mouthpiece and barrel from tone production on the full instrument (see below).

Many of the same potential issues may occur as outlined for mouthpiece and barrel above. It is still important to check the mouthpiece and barrel pitch every day because, once combined with the upper joint, it is harder to hear pitch discrepancies and voicing issues.

It is common for students to squeak a LOT when adding the upper joint. Likely culprits can be that they are subconsciously biting because they think that "more instrument equals harder to play," that they are allowing the tongue to drop inside the mouth (also can be a common cause of flatness), and/or that the amount of mouthpiece or angle is incorrect.

QUICK TIP: Once you have added the upper joint/full clarinet. A great way to determine correct amount of mouthpiece is to have the student play, take a bit more mouthpiece, play, and then repeat this process until they squeak. The student should take the maximum amount of mouthpiece in the mouth that is possible without squeaking.

Adding the Lower Joint and Bell AND Getting the Hands in Place

When first moving to the full instrument, I have my students grip the clarinet with the left hand at the mouthpiece and barrel (as in the upper joint step above) and the right hand just above the bell (or at the thumb rest if the student's arms are too short). We then work to produce the same sound as with the upper joint (again, using the various levels of Step 6 outlined above).

Over the course of a few days, we will follow these steps in order to move the hands into place. After students succeed in producing a tone on a given step, we will move to the next one.

1. **Grip the instrument at the mouthpiece/barrel and bell**
2. **Maintaining the position of the left hand, move the right hand into place** (previously taught alongside tone production)
3. **Maintaining the position of the right hand, let the left hand hang at the side or rest in your lap** (essential in order to teach the students that the right hand holds the clarinet).
4. **Finally, place the left hand.**

REMEMBER: Each time you go to a new step, it will feel like the students have slipped back and/or are starting over. Take the time to help them connect the dots between the steps, and don't be afraid to back up.

Covering The Holes

Prior to starting the book, and alongside teaching articulation (see below), it's time to get those fingers moving. Exercises similar to those found on the "Digit Widgets" handouts in the shared folder linked at the end of this handout can be taught by rote or using music. Be methodical at first, and work to build consistency in student hand position and coverage of the holes.

Teaching Articulation

I start teaching articulation around the time that we are moving to the upper joint/whole clarinet. This seems to be about when embouchures are stabilizing and students are consistently producing the right sounds on the instrument.

First, articulation is taught completely away from any part of the instrument:

1. **Say the word "Dee."**
2. **Form your embouchure, and say the word "Dee."**
3. **Form your embouchure, and whisper the word "Dee."** Now say it multiple times, and connect the end of each word to the beginning of the next one.
4. **Do the same thing, but don't actually whisper the word.** Move your tongue in the same way.
5. **Starting the air stream first, practice Step 4 using air on the hand.** (This teaches them the tongue does not start the sound, the air does.) The air should feel constant on your palm. The tongue dents the air stream, which is constant.
6. **Now start with "Dee" and the air at the same time.**

We next move to working on articulation using the mouthpiece and barrel. As with tone production, it is easier to hear issues using the mouthpiece and barrel than with the rest of the clarinet added.



Common issues that tend to crop up when learning articulation include:

- Once the student starts thinking about the tongue, they stop thinking about the embouchure.
- The back of the tongue falls down (as if saying, "Dah"), causing flatness.
- The student moves the jaw while tonguing (manifests itself as "scoops" at the start of each note).
- The student starts and stops the air.
- If when moving to the full instrument, the student persistently squeaks when tonguing, it may be due to too much tension, moving the jaw, or allowing the position of the back of the tongue to change when articulating.
- Air before sound/tongue before tone.

Work for a connected style (full value notes). Short notes, accents, etc., are easy to teach (MUCH) later if the student is taught to articulate in a pedagogically sound manner.

A Daily Fundamental Routine

Teaching students how and what to practice is a HUGE part of beginning band. By following a regular routine at the beginning of class each day, we are not only improving on the fundamental level; we are also teaching students an effective warm-up routine upon which they can build throughout their "clarinet lives."

This routine evolves over the course of the year and should be adjusted based on material covered and strengths and weaknesses of the class. By making such a routine important and placing an emphasis on fundamentals in class, we are teaching our students to do the same at home.

An initial daily routine will be taught mainly by rote, and look something like this:

1. Posture check/sitting in the chair
2. Steady beat and foot tap with the metronome for 1-2 minutes
3. Rhythm(s) of the Day (or Week) - counting and then clapping and counting while tapping foot
4. Breathing/Air on the hand
5. Tone production on mouthpiece and barrel

As we add concepts and skills, the routine evolves. eventually covering skills on the "Daily Habitudes for Clarinet" pages, included here. We will also, at appropriate the time, incorporate scales.

The Method Book and Supplements

When my students can make a characteristic tone on the instrument, cover the holes, articulate correctly, and count basic rhythms while tapping the foot with a steady beat, we will begin moving toward starting the book. At this point, we can identify notes within the treble clef, and we have learned a number of fingerings and finger patterns by rote (or "Suzuki style").

After completing the "Clarinet Jump-Start" page found in the linked folder, we will move into the method book.

Beginning band method books are written in a way where all of the instruments can be taught together, if needed. You will likely need to supplement. There is no one beginning band book that is going to cover everything that your young clarinet players will need to know when they need to know it.

Don't rely on the book to set the pace when it comes to going lower on the clarinet. In many books, your students would barely use their right hands for the bulk of the fall semester. If the class going to successfully cross the break during the beginner year, you have to go low early to go high later.

Moving Into Higher Registers and Crossing the Break

If students do not have a solid foundation and are able to play low notes with ease, then they are not ready to begin working in the second register. We will generally start using the register key around mid-January to early February. This is largely dependent on class size and student progress up to that point.

Don't mention to your class that this is "hard," it's just "new."

You are also going to want to involve the register key way earlier than most books will get to it. You can do this through supplemental exercises such as the ones found on the *Daily Habitudes* pages here. The "Rhythm Master" clarinet book and the "Musical Mastery" book, available online from MRN Music, also have great resources.

Approach as if learning a new instrument (lots of small group and individual playing time, not a lot at first with the full class).

Crossing the break is first approached from "above" as in the examples on the *Daily Habitudes* exercises in the link folder below.

Developing Technique (Scales)

Major Scales

- One octave major scales usually introduced in January or very early February.
- Pass-offs held throughout January and February leading up to Spring Break.
- An "acceptable" scale attempt is graded at a 90, and "exceptional" merits a grade of 100.
- 1-2 scales per week covered during this time with an early emphasis on how to learn scales for those who want to get ahead.
- Two octave scales are introduced next, and we work on them throughout the remainder of March and all of April.
- Students are encouraged with pass off all 12 multiple-octave scales, but the seven that are emphasized in the beginning year are Concert F, Bb, Eb, Ab, Db, C, and G.
- Third octaves are introduced and touched upon, but these are mainly saved for when the students get into their second year.

Chromatic Scale

- Small chromatic segments are started in the late Fall, around the first part of December.
- Gradually built upon throughout the year.
- Generally, our goal is to be able to play from Low E to third-space C by Spring Break or shortly thereafter.
- From that point, if fundamentally sound, it's fairly easy to gradually work up to the next C.
- The portion from high C to high G (the altissimo register) is introduced and touched upon, but mainly saved for the second year.

HINT: Provide your students with a fingering chart upon which the measures are NUMBERED or have them number the chart in the book. This is a game-changer when teaching the chromatic scale and new notes.

Another Word About Reeds...

As students progress, reed strength may need to be changed/adjusted. If a student suddenly has difficulty in producing a sound, has response problems that seem to come up suddenly, etc., it may be time to investigate moving to a different reed strength. There is no timetable, and not all class members will need to change strengths the first year.

My students who do change rarely move beyond a 3.5 with maybe a few moving to a 3.5+. I usually have up to 20% of the class that stays on 3.0's for the duration of their beginner year. The important thing to emphasize to students is that moving to a different reed strength doesn't mean they have "leveled up," and staying on the initial strength longer than others does not indicate that a student is behind.

The correct reed strength for a student is the one upon which they sound great while playing in a fundamentally correct manner.

Tying It All Together: The End of Year Evaluation

The end-of-year evaluation at the culmination of the beginner year serves multiple purposes: as a measuring stick for student progress, as a tool to determine placement in one of our performing bands for the following year, and as a way to prepare students for future auditions, such as All Region.

So that students can best show their degree of success in meeting established goals, our audition process is leveled.

For example, a student may pick from the following levels of the **CHROMATIC SCALE**:

Level 1 - Low E to G at the top of the staff (70 points)

Level 2 - Low E to High C (85 points)

Level 3 - Low E to High G (100 points)

The seven required **MAJOR SCALES** are broken down like this (additional, or "bonus," scales, are graded the same way):

1. One octave for 12 points.
2. Two octaves for 25 points.
3. Three octaves (if within that scale's range) for 35 points.

The AUDITION ETUDE gets progressively more challenging/involved, with only a portion required. We usually use the WTAMU Band Camp junior high audition music for that year. Students earn bonus points for playing beyond the required portion.



SUPPLEMENTAL MATERIALS MENTIONED IN THIS HANDOUT