

“When All Else Fails, Try Practicing”

Wallace Dierolf

Some say that the art of practicing died on October 22nd, 1962 at 6:05 p.m. Although the exact time is still subject to debate, few will argue that it has been more difficult of late to motivate young people to spend any actual amount of time perfecting basic skills on a musical instrument. Indeed the few young people who discover that practicing outside of an organized rehearsal can significantly improve their instrumental and musical development are not sharing this secret with their peers for fear it may cost them their “chair”. It is a carefully guarded secret among the finest young players in band programs across the country.

We are teaching an old art form in a modern age. The simple truth is that it still takes a person as long to gain specific degrees of ability on a musical instrument as it did people hundreds of years ago. I often used, and still do, this fact to give a very unique value to the study of instrumental music. Music still requires the old tried and true methods of hard work, dedication and self-discipline. What a wonderful gift to the modern person growing up in our fast paced age of instant gratification—something that still

takes time and patience. Yet the problem still remains. How do we get our students to practice?

Some children actually still have parents who make sure they do all their homework each night, including practicing their instrument. I swear these people do exist. When you find one thank them repeatedly and tell their children how lucky they are. There are many parents that do take a great interest in their child’s education including making sure they do their homework, but often some of these parents don’t include practicing as a “real” part of their homework. So, what is a band director to do? Well, I have a few suggestions that worked for me during my career.

Students need to be taught how to practice. Take a few minutes during each band rehearsal for guided practice. This is very easy. Take something as simple as a major scale. Once the students have all the correct notes, drill the scale using proven practice techniques such as slow, steady repetition until the students start to discover they can easily play the scale. Then let them know it only took them two minutes to accomplish this feat. Doing this often will provide students

the opportunity to discover how little time it actually takes to accomplish a simple instrumental objective. Be sure to stress accuracy before speed. I found the mistake young players—and indeed often their teachers—make is trying to play something too fast too soon. Exactly where is it we are all going in such a hurry? Teach accuracy before speed, always.

The use of practice records never really worked well for my students or me. It did help a few of my students develop some very high skill levels in forgery. I did find that frequent trips “down the line” during rehearsal kept many of my students on their toes. I also reserved the right to move students up or down the section based on my “down the line” checking for understanding. In fact I discovered that the best way to seat my band was not to have chair tests or allow challenges, but to simply monitor their day to day efforts on their instrument. Call it “you have to earn your chair everyday” if you want, it works.

The best method I know, and used, is another old proven method that has of late been lost in our educational process—memorization. That’s right, make

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them play their assignments by memory. Remember the teachers you had in school who made you recite something by memory in front of the class? Bet you studied their stuff didn't you? Make certain that you assign material that can be memorized in a reasonable amount of time. Always set obtainable goals for your students. Also be sure to give them a few days to properly prepare their memorization assignments.

Another method that works is allowing “retakes”. I used a grading procedure that I highly recommend that allowed students to replay any and all assignments given during a six-week period. I would give the students a deadline before the end of the grading period and up to that time they could replay assignments for a higher grade. This accomplishes many very important goals. It encourages and rewards practicing. It allows the students to have more control over their grade and most importantly when the parents know that their child had the opportunity to replay an assignment, it places the ball in their court.

When a parent calls to complain about their child's band grade, you tell them about your retake policy. “You mean he could have replayed that test? Well he didn't tell me that. No wonder he didn't want me to call you.”

You hang up the phone and smile.

Guided practice, memorization, going down the line and retakes—these methods work. Of course the ultimate goal is that young people practice for the joy of making music. We want them to improve their skills and discover the feelings of self-satisfaction and personal accomplishment. When members of a musical ensemble practice, the level of performance rises, and everyone benefits. This can and does happen within outstanding bands. What a joy it is when a group of young people and their teacher accomplish this goal. The beauty of music, the power of the human spirit, the artistic moment all coming together in an old art form being created in a modern age. What better gift could we possibly give to our students?

Wallace Dierolf earned his B.A. Degree from St. Mary's University, with honors, and his Masters degree from the University of Texas at San Antonio. While attending St. Mary's University he was inducted into Delta Epsilon Sigma, an international academic honor society for students attending private universities. Mr. Dierolf served the students of North Side ISD (San Antonio) for twenty-nine years as both a Middle School and High School Band Director. Band programs under his leadership received numerous TMEA and UIL awards. In 1998, Mr. Dierolf opened Sandra Day O'Connor High School in Helotes, Texas. The band program at O'Connor earned six consecutive Sweepstakes Awards and rapidly grew to become one of the largest 5A programs in Texas. While at O'Connor he also served as the Fine Arts Department head and was the school's first “Teacher of the Year.”

Mr. Dierolf has also been blessed with many teaching honors including receiving the outstanding Alumnus award in the field of music from The University of Texas at San Antonio in 2003. Soon after announcing his retirement, the North Side ISD School Board voted unanimously to name the new band hall under construction at O'Connor the Wallace C. Dierolf Band Hall. A very versatile music educator, Mr. Dierolf remains very active as a clinician for marching, concert and jazz bands throughout the state of Texas. Many of his former students are currently professional players and teachers.

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