

# Engaging the Beginning Clarinet Student

## The trick is to make it feel easy!

**Tye Ann Payne**

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They say there are no original thoughts, just original implementations of them. I have been blessed with many great mentors who have bestowed upon me the knowledge for teaching both beginning clarinet techniques and full band ensemble skills. Many of these techniques and skills can be used in other band classes and grade levels. You can have the best information in the world, but if no one is listening, who cares? Creating an environment that is mixed with classroom expectations and your passion for the subject matter makes students feel safe and triggers curiosity. Greeting the students with this in mind the first day can be accomplished even as you worry about how many are in the wrong class and where in the world did they get their instrument and accessories. Teach your students how to think about band and all that involves playing a musical instrument. Just this simple thought can guide students to consistent playing fundamentals and desirable behavior. Yes, we all experience problems. You can make the difference. The trick is to make it feel easy.

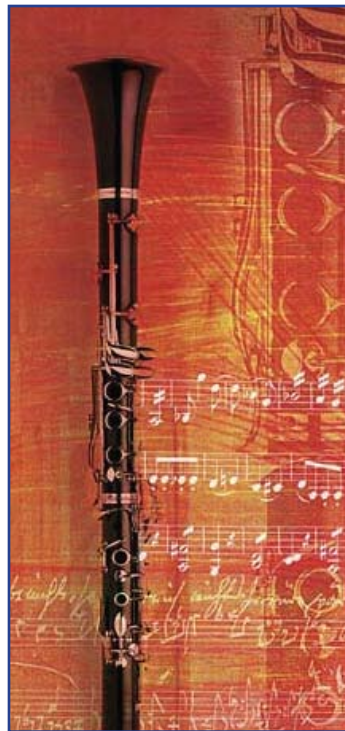
One of the most important

things I have learned recently is that our job is to present material in a manner that leads the student to the desired result. I will use the technique of teaching posture as an example. The students have already been made aware that it is important to keep their body in a relaxed and balanced state. Students stand with their body balanced on both feet. Some may need help with balanced shoulders, head, etc. Define what you mean by their rear end. Yes, they can and will snicker a little. Define what you mean by the backs of their legs. The back of the legs is the back part of the leg between the rear end and the knees. Keeping in balance, sit down on the chair on the backs of the legs, not on the rear end. The rear end will feel like it is behind them. Poof! You have just led them to good posture.

This becomes the expectation and you refer to it in the future with a phrase like “sit correctly”. Use the phrase again and instantly you have great posture. Make a game of it. To re-teach just say, “Sit on the backs of your legs with your rear end behind you.”

I have found that starting breathing exercises in and out through the nose can lead students to proper breathing while playing a wind instrument. The desired result is for students to learn to take in a larger amount of air than what

is considered normal breathing, while maintaining a sense of stillness and balance in the body and mouth structure. Students can sit or stand “correctly” and breathe in through the nose and out through the nose, staying balanced while they take in more air each time. Help them notice what it feels like to fill up lower in the



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body first. This can be the start of building your “daily class routine.” The next step is to breathe in through the nose and out through the mouth. The mouth does not have to have a specific form. Just keep it in a normal relaxed position. Have students put a finger in front of their mouth and make the air feel cool. They instinctively make the air faster and focus the embouchure to the center. Later in development, begin to teach breathing in through the mouth and out through the mouth. Most importantly, remind students to keep the tongue forward while breathing in through the mouth.

The order in which you assemble the clarinet does not matter. Spend the most time explaining the assembly of the critical aspects, one being the bridge key that connects the top joint of the clarinet to the bottom joint. Make sure that you have stressed things that will insure that keys will not be bent in the process. Do this for a day or two as you are teaching a little bit of music theory, posture and breathing. The most critical aspect is the assembly of the barrel, mouthpiece, ligature and reed. If you have taught a beginning clarinet class for at least one year, you probably have numerous visions of the humorous ways students try to put the reed on the clarinet. I know I do. Just this year, after giving more careful consideration to the explanation of the pieces involved and the process of assembling the barrel, mouthpiece and reed, I have had almost no instances of students doing those silly things that make us laugh inside, but can cause frustration to the student. This is

yet another way for your students to build trust in you as their teacher and have confidence in their ability to achieve.

Let me say that the monitoring of individual students is paramount. This is the time when students may have a hard time staying on task. Get creative on ways of involving the class as you go around the room guiding individuals. Students can learn a lot by listening and responding positively to each other. Do your best to get around the room quickly. Give praise and encouragement at every opportunity.

Now it is time for the clarinet embouchure. Posture and breathing are intact. The barrel, mouthpiece and reed assembly is getting more consistent. With the student holding a mirror in front of their face, go around the room and touch the mouthpiece and barrel of the clarinet to the student’s bottom lip. The students let the mouth “fall” gently open. Place the clarinet mouthpiece on the student’s lip. Ask them to remember what it looks like and what it feels like. In a larger class, that may be all that is taught that day. Get the students excited by telling them what may happen tomorrow. With the teacher holding the mouthpiece, the student touches their top teeth about 1/3 to 1/2 of an inch down on the mouthpiece. When they do this the jaw will naturally close slightly. Students seal their lips around the mouthpiece encouraging a natural focus. They look in the mirror and we are both amazed at how natural and easy it looks and feels. I do not recommend saying “keep your chin flat and corners

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in.” Students can put the middle third of their bottom lip against the two middle bottom teeth to help with the natural focus of the embouchure.

From this point, to actually make a tone is simple. Simple is the operable word here. Use #2 reeds at the beginning. Any student, especially if they are small, could need a #1 ½. I have them handy just in case. They may use the #1 ½ for just a day or longer. When it is obvious to me that the student’s muscle development is causing problems in starting the sound with ease, I may suggest a stronger reed. Most students will not play on a reed harder than a #2 ½ for the remainder of the beginning year. Some will stay on #2. I keep reeds on hand for students to try before asking a student to purchase a different strength reed.

The sequence for making a tone is established as follows:

1. OPEN the jaw slightly.
2. TOUCH the reed to the bottom LIP.
3. Place the TEETH on top of the mouthpiece.
4. SEAL lips around the mouthpiece.
5. BREATHE in through the nose and out through the mouth.

It is fine if a student accidentally makes a sound. When the student breathes in through the nose and out through the mouth, they make the air go faster or cooler little by little until the tone just happens. All this is done looking in the mirror while keeping everything still. The point at which the air just turns into tone is a natural occurrence of the tone. The pitch that a mouthpiece and barrel matches when played correctly is an F# concert. More times than not, the F# is the tone heard when students play for

the first time. Some will just have a short little “toot”. Others will play a longer tone. If anyone makes a tone that is natural and easy, praise them and say “that’s it!” Move on to the next student quickly trying to make it around the room before you get caught by the bell with cases open and parts everywhere. For students that do not make a sound, check the reed strength and adjustment on the mouthpiece and the air speed. Maybe the jaw is open. Tell them not to worry. Help the student through the process again. To make a tone on the entire clarinet, go through the same process as the mouthpiece and barrel. This process moves quicker because you are not teaching a new concept. You are just putting another layer on top of a previous concept.

While the first sounds on the entire clarinet are happening, it is time for hand placement and finger movement. Place the student’s hands and fingers on the proper place of the clarinet telling them to use no more energy that it takes to hold the fingers in place. Students will then hold the clarinet straight out in front of them with arms outstretched. The student’s only responsibility is to remember how the fingers and hands feel. Practice squeezing and releasing each finger. The energy in the finger changes as it squeezes and releases. Students bring the elbows in with the elbows staying closer to the sides of the body. The hands should stay in the same position. This position is the exact hand position they will hold when playing the clarinet. By now, the student should be able to hold a steady long tone. Start with the fingers on first line E. Practice positioning and or playing E-F-E-F-E-F-E. Gradually work your way down the natural fingerings of the clarinet. They are learning finger movement at the same time that they are learning the timing of covering holes and uncovering holes. Watch for fingers that merely

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move up and down. It is a just subtle difference visually, but it is not the correct energy or the correct timing. You and the students will not have to worry about collapsing fingers. If you see this, have the student bring the clarinet outstretched in front again and retrace the steps to good hand position. This step can become a part of the daily class routine.

Finally, it is time for articulation. Have students feel every tooth in their mouth with their tongue one at a time, on the top, and all the way around. Then repeat it on the bottom all the way around. Next, have students look in the mirror and open their mouth until they can see their teeth. Place the tip of the tongue on the inside of the front top teeth where the teeth and gum meet. Now place it on the inside of the front bottom teeth. Alternately move the tip of the tongue up and down from the top to bottom teeth. Practice placing the tongue on the top teeth and holding it there with a little air pressure behind it. Show the students how the air blows the tongue

down. The air is active and the tongue is passive. This is directly related to tongue starting on the clarinet. Place the tip of the tongue on the tip of the reed. Make sure you have defined the area that is the tip of

the tongue and the area that is the tip of the reed. Repeat the exercise with the mouthpiece and barrel as well as the entire clarinet. Listen for a tone that starts calmly. Make sure that the tongue does not touch too much of the tip of the reed. Stress the importance of doing it the same every time. Because of leading students through this process, embouchures do not move and tongue starts are clear and instant from the beginning.

I hope that these guidelines will help insure that your clarinet class has perfect posture and breathes beautifully. As well as having a terrific tone, they positively position and miraculously move their hands

correctly. Articulation is artistic. You are leading your students through the first of many great years of clarinet playing!

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*Tye Ann Payne has completed her twenty-sixth year as a Texas band director and her eleventh year as Director of Bands at Charles B. Cook Middle School in the Cypress-Fairbanks ISD, Houston. Prior to Cook, Ms. Payne taught at Jersey Village High School in the same district. She has also taught at the junior high level in the Spring Branch ISD in Houston and the Richardson ISD. During her tenure at Westwood Junior High in Richardson, Ms. Payne was awarded the prestigious Sudler Cup of Honor presented by the John Philip Sousa Foundation for outstanding achievements at the junior high level. Ms. Payne is a graduate of the University of Houston and a student of Eddie Green. Her bands have received consistent superior ratings and honors at concert and sight-reading contests and festivals. She has been honored to serve her profession as a committee member for the UIL Prescribed Music List. She is a member of the Texas Bandmasters Association, Texas Music Educators Association and Phi Beta Mu. Ms. Payne is an active clinician and adjudicator throughout Texas.*