

Building Better Brass: Concepts For Increasing Range and Endurance Through Lip Slurs

Dr. Russ Teweleit

Do you find that your brass students may sound good on a concert F, but are not able to play with a good tone in the higher range or seem to tire out too quickly? Brass playing is a very physical activity, and a teacher certainly cannot rely on the beginning method book or young band literature alone to adequately build range and endurance. The purpose of this article is to give teachers a pragmatic approach to building brass range and endurance through lip slurs for their first year students and beyond.

It should be stated that teaching young students to play with a beautiful characteristic tone quality is perhaps the most important aspect of playing that can be taught in the first year. Range and endurance are essential facets of developing good tone quality. A brass student with a weak embouchure and limited range will not have the strength and endurance to play challenging music with a good tone. 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.

Playing to Instruction Ratio of 8:2

One must recognize that it is essential that the teacher make the best use of the students' time in class. It almost seems too simple, but the single best way to develop range and endurance is through spending time playing. A suggested goal would be 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 typical 50-minute class, 10 minutes of instruction should be more than adequate. In

Instrumental Music Pedagogy: Teaching Techniques for School Band and Orchestra Directors, Daniel L. Kohut explains that we learn by imitation, repetition, and trial and error. Unfortunately, instrumental teachers often 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. It is essential that teachers start their class 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. However, the teacher's approach should be to utilize rehearsal time as if the students don't practice at all. Despite the teacher's best efforts, many students will not chose to practice daily; therefore, if the director

does not work to build range and endurance during class, it often does not happen.

Concepts for Teaching Lip Slurs

Lip slurs can be started within the first few weeks of instruction. Once started, the teacher can gradually

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build on what the students are capable of. Throughout the process, the importance of playing with a good tone should be emphasized. The author recommends that the following concepts be observed:

- Play each lip slur in one breath. Students will naturally want to breathe too often. A student who breathes at each bar or worse, after each note, will always sound like a beginner. If the exercise is simply too long to play in one breath, avoid breathing before the top notes of the exercise. This will help prevent manipulation.

- The last note should be low and easily played. Indeed, it is the most important note of each slur. If the teacher is not satisfied with the students' tone, have the students repeat the last note. They should do the same at home. The purpose of last note should be to relax the embouchure and prepare the student for the next slur.

- Do not tongue. Tonguing defeats the purpose of the lip slur and makes the exercise ineffective. It is important that the teacher frequently hear his/her students individually in order to ensure that the students are not tonguing.

- Rest as much as you play. Alternate solo/soli. (Teacher/students, 1st chair/all students, small group/large group, down the row, etc.).

- Play each slur through all seven positions. This will provide the necessary repetition.

- If the slur is going to expand the high range, start in seventh position and work up to first.

A Few Recommended Slurs

The following slurs should be done once a day in class and again once a day at home. For the purposes of this article all slurs are written for Bb trumpet, but they are equally useful with all brass with the possible exception of horn.

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

- Slurring down is easier and less likely to produce manipulation.
- Early in the semester those students who begin too low may actually lock-in on the correct pitch at 5th or 6th position. Eventually they will begin locking in on 3rd or 4th position, and soon the exercise will be simple to play.
- Suggestion: After this slur is learned, start your class with this exercise each day for the remainder of the first year. Counting, announcements, etc. can be done after your warm up. Brass players need rest, but there is no need to start your class with rest. Get the students playing as soon as the class begins.



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.



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



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



6. The Four-note slur. Add this when #5 is easily played. Important: This slur should be started in 7th position and then worked up to first. Remember, the last note is the most important note of the slur. The students should not stop the air and should play each slur in one breath. After the class can play this slur relatively easily, it should be learned in cut time.



7. The Five-note slur. Next, the students should be ready to move on to a five-note slur. However, it is recommended that the student look at the music to the four-note slur shown above and simply add a note to the top of the slur. This will help avoid the tension that is often caused by seeing notes that look high. If a student can easily play a four-note slur in all seven positions they are ready to play a five-note slur. After

all, the top note of a five-note slur in seventh position is lower than the top note of a four-note slur in first position. Nonetheless, the five-note slur will certainly be difficult at first. In order to avoid tension and manipulation the following recommendations should be useful:

- Start in 7th position and work up to first.
- Do not tongue! After all, it is a lip slur.
- IMPORTANT: If the student misses the top note, they should finish the slur and then drop out for the remainder of the exercise. Again, the students should be taught that most important note of the slur is the last. When practicing this exercise at home, the students should attempt the slur again after 30-45 seconds of rest. If they miss the top note a second time, they are done for the day. If they get it, they may go on to the next slur and should continue this process until they have missed the top note of the slur twice.
- Some students will be able to do this easier than others. Make sure the class knows that this is normal, and this only one aspect of brass playing.
- Once the five-note slur is going well, try the five-note slur in cut time.
- More Slurs! At home, have the students who can play the five-note slur add the six-note slur using the same concepts, then add a seven-note slur, eight-note, etc.

10. More advanced slurs! These are among the most valuable slurs any brass player could play. This is the tessitura where the vast majority of brass playing occurs. Once a student can develop the dexterity to play these slurs, they will have sufficiently developed their embouchure to a point that they can play almost anything. The following slurs should be taught slowly at first, perhaps even at half tempo. Teach 7th position

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for a week or more, and then add a new position each week. The following slurs are valuable to all instruments. It is recommended that they be written out for the entire ensemble.



In Closing

In order to properly develop range and endurance of the young brass student, the author recommends that the following three simple guidelines be observed:

1. Slur any exercise that is expanding the student's range beyond what they can easily play.
2. Keep the air moving throughout the entire exercise even if the top note is missed.
3. End with a long tone on a lower and easily played note.

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.