

Survival or Thrival

What are we preparing students for—band or life?

Dennis W. Fisher

There's little doubt that—good or bad—education today is not what it was. We're painfully aware that what we do with students in band is significantly affected by trends over which we have little control. Students are given data to learn and then asked through standardized testing to give all the right answers; it's called academic bulimia—the binging and purging of information without retaining its nutrients.

We invest untold time defending why band must remain a part of the curriculum. Our advocacy often falls on deaf ears because many are tired of hearing the same old arguments. However, we have the unique opportunity to help students develop skills to not merely survive but to truly thrive in band, school and beyond. We just haven't realized it.

As test scores are now used as the benchmark for success, the process of learning is increasingly compromised. Unfortunately, bands are pulled into this vortex and often suffer from the same academic (musical) bulimia as the rest of education. This is where it gets provocative.

Students are intensely rehearsed and learn individual parts with great accomplishment; but, are they learning *beyond* their individual parts? Are they really learning to think and listen critically, to make independent decisions and to adapt to their surroundings without engaging in musical bulimia? We emphatically

answer YES – but, are they *REALLY*? Unfortunately, students are often taught to *survive* performances, not *thrive* from the process and experience.

We have the opportunity to help them develop in a way not available in any other aspect of formal education as a preparation for life—and yes, a preparation for band. Playing in band can introduce and refine four essential components that make up the heart of what we can help students learn, turning survival into *thrival*!

Critical Thinking:

A favorite quote of mine from baseball legend Ted Williams is “If you don't think too good, don't think too much.” Critical thinking is defined as “the art of analyzing and evaluating with a view to improving it”. It is both objective and subjective, using intellect as a starting point. For students, it's about:

a. Curiosity

- Fitting my part with everyone else's
- Comparing to a goal, whether it's balance, articulation, style, intonation, or ...
- Understanding and interpreting written instruction such as dynamics, musical terminology, etc.
- Recognizing the consequences of acting on independent decisions. If I do this, what happens?
- Looking at issues from different perspectives
- Making decisions without someone telling me what to do

b. Establishing priorities

- Developing a process to prioritize tasks
- How to filter the immediate needs from everything yet to be accomplished

c. Consequences of thinking

- Determining what to do with what I've learned and applying it myself
- Developing, elevating and refining standards
- Putting everything in perspective

So, in short, critical thinking is the act of not only developing and encouraging a sense of curiosity, but developing a process of doing something about it. Whether it's notes, rhythms, dynamics, musical expressions, terminology or other clearly written directions, it all has to be seen, understood and decisions made about it.

Critical Listening:

Early in my career I heard the expression of the need to develop the ability to “listen with my eyes and see with my ears”. It took awhile for that to sink in, but when it did, I realized that nothing could be more valuable. Plainly and simply - AWARENESS of surroundings and how to fit in.

In band, the lowest threshold of this is listening to what we play. We want students to listen to what's going on around them for the obvious reasons of intonation, balance, articulation, style, etc. Although all this is essential, it really is the low-hanging fruit of critical listening. With students, we

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want them to hear what *we* see, but often we settle for them hearing only what *they* do. In a perfect world, we must strive to help them “see” the full score we have in front of us with their ears.

In full context, we are trying to help them be aware of their surroundings and how they relate or fit in. This is the radar that should be spinning all the time, inside band and to the outside world. So, critical listening involves the following:

a. Awareness of surroundings

- Developing a power of observation and how to improve it
- Awareness of how it affects you
- Awareness of how you affect it

b. Comparative listening

- Comparing against an expected standard
- Knowing what to listen for or be aware of
- Sorting through different strata of information (musical or otherwise) all happening simultaneously
- Developing the art of filtering the most relevant information

Independent Action:

Yogi Berra, one of our most profound modern day philosophers (and legendary catcher for the New York Yankees) is credited for saying, “When you come to a fork in the road, take it.” Quite simply, this means making a decision and acting on it. This is crucial in helping students grow if they are truly going to thrive. Too often, we make decisions for them: “raise your pitch, play a note this long, play louder/softer, stay with the metronome”. I could go on and on. We’re not teaching them to be leaders, we’re teaching them to be followers. We reinforce academic bulimia by making sure they do exactly as we’ve told them, when we’ve told them. Knowledge of data without transforming it into wise application is useless.

This is an easy trap to fall into because we want them to experience the highest levels of success. We don’t want them (us) to fail; but, in doing so, we aren’t teaching them *how* to fail. Yes, *I said how to fail*. I agree with John Maxwell when in his book *Talent is Never Enough* he says,

“Success is never final and failure doesn’t have to be fatal”. When students are put in a position to make independent decisions, they will sometimes make the wrong ones and momentarily fail. It’s OK. If we don’t allow students that chance, we can’t help them figure out how to make better ones and grow to succeed.

How students learn to act on critical thinking and critical listening must be to develop independence. To merely follow directions doesn’t do it. It’s not what they know, it’s *can they use it*. So, elements of independent action are:

a. Drawing on knowledge to act

- Helping students learn to access what they already know without us
- Requiring students make a decision and act on it
- Helping students consider the results of independent action, gauge its success and then adapt

b. Developing independence to act

- Helping students gain confidence to act independently
- Helping them develop that skill
- Helping them build a level of trust in their actions

As teachers, we can’t and shouldn’t make all the decisions for them. We have to develop the wisdom to know what to teach them and when, but also to have the patience, persistence and the courage to move them closer to independence. As we do, they will learn how to learn—and that’s what it’s all about.

Extemporaneous Compromise:

This is the art of developing flexibility, awareness and adapting to constantly changing circumstances. There are never any two seemingly identical rehearsals or performances that are the same. Helping students develop the awareness and flexibility to adapt instantly is multi-tasking at it’s finest. A few hints...

a. Leading and following

- Discovering who is leading
- Recognizing when to follow
- Acknowledging when change has to occur, and how to adapt

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b. Planned improvisation

- Preparing in a way that allows for “going off script”
- Trying to determine consequences of inflexibility
- Self-determining when adapting to something is necessary
- Recognizing that all people are sometimes wrong even though they think they’re right
- Nothing is absolute

Is there anything more essential to success in both band and more importantly in life than this? Clearly, most of your students will never study music (band) formally beyond high school and whether we like it or not, that’s OK. So, what they get from band has to be something they can use.

There is no other place in school where they can learn and develop these life skills in the same place. They get portions of it in some classes, but not everything all in the same package. If we have a place in the curriculum that’s irreplaceable, it’s this. If we want to capitalize on advocacy for what we do and offer, it’s this. In essence, if we do it right, we teach them to become their own teachers. Does it get any better than that?

So, is this it? Absolutely not. This isn’t an article about HOW to do it – but about WHY. Anyone can tell you how *they* do it, but ultimately, it’s up to you. As Tom Magliozzi so eloquently put it, “Education is a preparation for life, not a preparation for school”.

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Fisher holds professional memberships in TMEA, TBA, CBDNA, and Phi Mu Alpha Sinfonia. He has been honored by being elected to membership in the prestigious American Bandmasters Association and with invited membership in Phi Beta Mu. He is a member of the National Academy of Recording Arts and Sciences and is Past-President of the Southwest Division of the College Band Directors National Association. Fisher was awarded the Gagarin Medal of Honor from the Society of Cosmonauts of the Russian Federal Space Agency. He has also been honored by being awarded the Meritorious Achievement Award from the Texas Bandmasters Association. Other honors include twice being named “Top Prof” by the Mortarboard Society at U.N.T., a recipient of the University of North Texas Community Award, and named to Who’s Who in America in 2010.