

Teaching Rhythm Logically from Day One

Darcy Potter Williams

The start of the year, especially for anyone who teaches beginners, can be stressful. It's not collecting handbook signatures, the t-shirt money, or checking out instruments and lockers that is truly going to impact the infancy of your students' band experience (although it's often where we spend much of our time); it's getting them off to the right start when they know nothing. And it's imperative to understand **they know nothing**... even if they know something! You are given one opportunity to create *your* vocabulary, *your* systems, and define just how *you* want to build their understanding of concepts, and that small window of time influences your program until the day they leave.

In our band hall, we approach rhythm as though it is a fundamental equal to that of tone, articulation, intonation, etc., and we believe it should be taught in isolation just as we do other fundamentals. The right note at the wrong time is a wrong note, no matter how beautiful it is.

With our beginners, rhythm is the first fundamental we teach. In fact, we teach rhythm starting on the second day of school. That gives students that are missing supplies or who have just moved in a chance to get everything they need for the instrument while still being able to participate fully in the lessons. Maybe more importantly, I believe that first week of school sets the tone for your class for the entire year, and rhythm is an incredibly organized and academic concept to present to the kids as opposed

to the controlled chaos of making sounds initially. I want the students to understand from day 1 (actually day 2) that band, despite all the loud noises, is a very structured class.

For the first week and a half (sometimes two) we only address counting and note-flashcards. Before we get our instruments out for the first time, we expect our students to understand quarter notes, halves, wholes, dotted halves, and 8th notes, as well as answer a full octave of flashcards in 10 seconds. The kids aren't disappointed because they don't know any differently. They only know that counting loudly and playing games is so much more fun than any other period. Class is extremely structured but a ton of fun. Students are engaged every second they are in the band hall, and they love it before they ever play a note.

Having that foundation in rhythm before we learn to make sounds gives form to the initial tone production. There is never a moment in which we are holding random lengths of sound. The kids learn immediately that sound/notes start and end at a specific time. Already with a strong understanding of rhythm and counting, we can expect from the very beginning that our first sounds will be controlled and not out of turn.

Even as we shift our focus more to tone production, rhythm continues

to be taught at the beginning of class every single day for a minimum of 1-2 minutes, longer when a new rhythm is introduced. Because we reinforce rhythm daily, the kids become excellent counters quickly. The students who will struggle with playing the actual instrument still get to start every class with a concept with which they feel confident. Beginning the class with counting is also a great way to refocus the kids' brains from whatever class they come from.

There are many methods that start

students with whole notes, and I personally disagree. I suppose this stems from band classes in which tone is produced before theory is addressed. In those situations, I can understand wanting to hold a pitch longer than one second. However, even in a heterogeneous class taught by one teacher, I will still argue that beginning with rhythm before tone creates a more organized environment and sets the kids up for more thorough success.

Organization aside, I do not understand introducing rhythm and counting outside of the basic building block note: the quarter note. When we learn to count as toddlers, we do not start with counting by tens or fives, keeping track of the numbers within. The same can be said of introducing the whole note first.

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Other methods introduce students almost immediately to 8th notes, which is similar to teaching your child to count to ten and then moving on to fractions.

All of music is based off of the beat, and it only makes sense to base our counting off of the beat too—also known as a quarter note. The kids should feel completely comfortable with counting any number of permutations of quarter notes and rests before combining beats in their head.

We teach quarter notes in direct relation to the beat, specifically explaining them in terms of foot taps with the metronome. As this is the foundation lesson of everything we will be learning rhythmically, I guide the students through a number of theory basics as they are organically needed in our conversation about the beat.

While many of your students may genuinely have no prior musical background, you will inevitably have a few in every period that have taken piano or violin. As I guide the kids through this first lesson, I allow those students to be leaders of sorts, calling on them to fill in the blanks with some of my most basic of questions.

On this first day of counting we teach how to write in count as well. If you say the number, you write it underneath big. If it's a rest, it's a small number with a line through it. So for <quarter, quarter, quarter rest, quarter> a kid would tell me that the count is "Big 1, Big 2, Little 3 with a line through it, Big 4."

We write in the count for a couple of measures every day. It is "illegal" to write the count for all the measures because it's cheating—it discourages the kids from reading the notes but to look solely at the written count. However, writing in count is a tangible way to reinforce rhythm and is an easy way to check for understanding.

Kids will be as bold and thoughtful as you require them to be. Don't ease them into participation; encourage/demand loud, confident counting those first days while it's easy to be correct, and just as your general education

classes told you, don't just call on the kids that raise their hand. It's important to "volun-tell" kids to give answers, especially on review questions. Plus, it's hilarious every time you get to say, "You got volun-TOLD!"

Rhythm is taught with our kids from the second day of school, but if you can't manage that, you should introduce rhythm as soon as possible as it is the easiest of the fundamentals and theory concepts to attack.

Counting is not a baby step; understanding rhythm is the foundation for musical fluency. Yet many band directors touch on rhythm some as beginners and then move on to "bigger and better" concepts once they are in a full band setting.

In summer band and then for the first few weeks of school, ALL of our bands

(from the 3rd band to the top band) go back to the basics, including rhythm reading. Our kids keep their rhythm charts in their binder all three years at Stiles, and we refer back to them until they leave us for high school. In those early weeks of August and September, we continue to revisit their charts—the tricky and the easy ones—with counting, TAH-ing, air playing, sizzling, bopping... any ensemble skill you would use with a full band piece for alignment and clarity can be applied to the charts.

Any number of skills can be addressed while isolating rhythm through some form of counting chart with your full band:

- Note length
- Articulation
- Balance
- Blend
- Tone while tonguing
- Intonation (unison and chords)
- Bop style
- Dynamics
- Anything you can possibly think of...

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Especially with our lower bands, mixing in counting and/or playing of the charts into their fundamental time keeps it fresh and relevant, especially when you take it to a higher level by adding one of the skills listed above. Throughout the year we will use our rhythm charts as an introduction to the sight reading process

A word of caution: ***the mere presence of rhythm charts will not make your kids better counters or your band more rhythmically stable.*** It is how you use them, how frequently you use them, and the quality of your rhythmic pedagogy that will create better readers and more confident, self-sufficient musicians.

When you build musical fluency into your students from day 1, the responsibility of *teaching* a song transfers to the student *learning* the song. The director can now teach and shape **music** instead of notes and rhythms, and that is what makes our job fun.

Darcy Potter Williams teaches at Stiles Middle School in Leander ISD. In July 2015 they placed 3rd in the TMEA CC Honor Band Contest, and in December 2015 they performed at The Midwest Clinic in Chicago. Additionally, her bands have won the Outstanding Performance Series and performed at the Western International Band Clinic (WIBC) in Seattle. Darcy graduated from West Texas A&M University in 2004.

Darcy has been invited to give clinics on teaching rhythm at both TMEA and The Midwest Clinic. Most recently, she wrote the book Teaching Rhythm Logically, a method for teachers (not students) that helps directors structure their lessons through scripts and diagrams. The eBook is available for download at TeachingRhythmLogically.com.