

Bridging the Gap: Remediation After an Incomplete Year

Darcy Vogt Williams

*Developed from Ms. Williams' presentation at the TBA Virtual Convention.**

The evolution of this clinic-turned-article mirrors the extreme evolution of band in a six-month window—first as a typical TBA clinic about bridging the gap between beginner band and full band, then to a virtual clinic about remediating our 7th graders who missed the last three months of their beginner year, and now to an article about teaching our students in a format none of our experience could have predicted.

A SHORT THERAPY SESSION

I no longer buy into the idea that we are remediating our band students. Remediation (root word *remedy*) implies we are correcting something that is wrong. The level of development at which we find our students this year is not wrong; it simply is. Spiritual teacher Eckhart Tolle says, “The primary cause of unhappiness is never the situation but thought about it. Beware of the thoughts you are thinking. Separate them from the situation, which is always neutral. It is as it is.”

Our students do not come to us on the widest playing field we may have experienced to any fault of their own. They are a product of a time we will talk about for decades. They do not have a deficiency. To have a deficiency we must apply expectations for a

situation that does not exist. They are where they are, and it is our job to meet there.

Meet them where they are, not where you want them to be. Not where they *should* be but where they are.

“Accept—then act. Whatever the present moment contains, accept it as if you had chosen it. Always work with it, not against it.” —Eckhart Tolle

This year is going to mean a lot of compromise. Our 7th graders didn't choose to miss out on so much in-person instruction, and we are all very aware of the limitations of online learning. There is going to be a struggle between building our 7th graders and pushing our 8th graders, and the way we push our older students might look completely different than on a normal year. It is possible that our older students are going to come out of this new school year, of course as better musicians, but the leaders we have never grown them to be.

Guess what? We are all in the same educational dystopia (perhaps varying shades of dystopia), but instead of railing against the now and wallowing in the loss of normal band—which is real—we need to reimagine what band today can look like.

“Stress is caused by being here but wanting to be there.” —Eckhart Tolle

Anyone feeling like that?

This *can* be an exciting and one of the most student-growth centered periods of our career. This could be our chance to truly build the individual. There is time for ensemble concepts, and we don't need to push past the obvious learning gaps and the reality of our teaching situations to get to transparent balance and chordal tuning when there isn't going to be a traditional concert for a while. We all need to take a deep breath, recognize where we are in the midst of a global pandemic that doesn't give a flying flip about your #performancegoals, and work with the situation in the best way we can.

Part of our stress is that we have become very comfortable in one medium of music—full band. Our medium will potentially be unavailable...for awhile. **Build the individual.**

WHAT IS WORKING

Much of what we are doing in our program at Stiles is exactly what I forecast in my TBA clinic though it continues to evolve as education as a whole takes shape. Two projects in particular are proving worthwhile.

Fundamentals Tracker

In order to truly build my individual players, my students should not be working on the same assignments

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at the same level at the same time. Online learning has actually given us the freedom to create a more self-paced version of band while attaining the same goals. My Honors Band is utilizing our *Fundamentals Tracker*, a basic Google Sheet shared with the band with multiple tabs ranging from articulation exercise tracking to songs out of Essential Elements Book 2 to scales.

The first week of school my band submitted through *Flipgrid* a recording of a basic articulation exercise at a very attainable tempo and a mid-level Book 2 song focusing on articulation. I thought it was important that the song reflect the fundamental focus just as we would do in a normal year. This first *Flipgrid* provided the baseline for where each of my students are in their development and where we want them to progress.

The *Fundamentals Tracker* gives a sequential list of articulation recordings by tempo and level of difficulty that the students need to achieve. With each *Flipgrid* submitted the student can pass off and move on, or be reassigned the same tempo as notated on the tracker. Each student is given specific comments and guidance for improvement on *Flipgrid* by both myself and their Accountability Partner. They follow the same process for progress through carefully selected songs in Book 2.

We are taking the stance of Content Mastery meaning I do not give grades on the assignments until they pass it off. Every student should be able to earn an A on each assignment, and they are not passed off until they do. From the very beginning we discussed as a band that no one is in the same place, nor is it a fair expectation that they be, and our only goal is progress for each person.

One might assume that I am holding the older students back. Conversely, I am finding the opposite. Assignments I would normally consider easier than necessary for my top band are benefiting my kids on three very different

levels: 1) my 7th graders are actually allowed to grow using short attainable songs and exercises without frustration, 2) my 8th graders that either moved up a band or sat toward the bottom of my band last year are playing more confidently with each attainable assignment, and 3) my stars are making music out of songs instead of focusing on technicalities. Is this putting me on track for a 1 at

UIL or selection for Midwest? I don't know. Our only goal is progress for each person.

Both the *Fundamentals Tracker* and our *Flipgrid* recordings are available for all to see. In a normal year we would play individually every day, and this is no different. This gives my leaders a chance to track their sections and 7th

graders a chance to be inspired. At the start of our last class I recognized students whose *Flipgrid* progress was notably improved with as much enthusiasm as I recognized the students whose *Flipgrids* should be watched for their wow factor. Progress for each person.

Accountability Partners

Before school started, I selected 20ish student leaders based on the positive way they interact with their peers and/or their playing skill. I divided their sections between them, calling them Accountability Partners. These students not only run their student-led sectional time but also are responsible for listening to every *Flipgrid* their assigned partners submit. It is their job to not only make sure everyone in their section is completing their assignments but also to act as quality control. They identify problems that need to be corrected "before Mrs. Williams sees it", communicating that to their partner as well as giving them the positive feedback that sometimes flows more freely between students. With the veil of a computer screen between them, several of my more reserved leaders are taking a noticeably more active and confident role than I know to expect in person.



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EXPECTATIONS FOR NOW

Success is defined by our expectations, and it is unfair to our students and ourselves to hold our success to the same standard when we are online, or cannot meet with our band in its entirety, or have a percentage of our band who remains online for the rest of the year, or have parents who do not support a class like band under these circumstances... Instead, we **MUST** clearly define what success can appropriately look like this year, for all of our students, whether they come to school or not. Changes in opportunities for performance, competition, and fellowship dictate a creative exploration of how we celebrate growth, because if success is anything it should be a measure of growth.

For a very specific outline of everything done at Stiles Middle School to facilitate growth in these bizarre times of music education, check out Darcy's TBA Clinic or the accompanying handout.

Darcy Vogt Williams is the head band director at Stiles Middle School in Leander, TX. She is a graduate of West Texas A&M University and in her 17th year of teaching. Her bands have performed at The Midwest Clinic in Chicago (maybe even this year!) and the Western International Band Clinic (WIBC) in Seattle. While at Stiles MS her bands have consistently been finalists in the prestigious TMEA Honor Band Contest. In addition to teaching, Darcy is a clinician across the country for both students and music educators. She is the author of two books about teaching band (Teaching Rhythm Logically and Pacing for Success: Beginner Band) and creator of the music education podcast "After Sectionals".

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