

Creating Self-Directed Learning in Beginning Band

Rob Chilton and Claire Pittman

In this article we will cover five topics relevant to creating self-directed learning in beginning band.

1

The Roadmap

2

The Importance of Music Literacy

3

Developing Healthy Practice Habits

4

Making Time for Pass-offs

1. The Roadmap

Self-directed learners know where they are and where they're going. This can only be accomplished if they are provided with a roadmap. To create this roadmap, start by preparing a weekly curriculum guide of your instructional goals for the entire year. This document will be for your eyes only and won't be shared with the students. We suggest the following categories:

- Week & Date
- Theory or Literacy
- Tone and/or Fundamentals
- Scales and/or Technique
- Method Book(s)
- Literature (concert music, solos, etc.)
- Misc. Notes

Beginning Saxophone - Rob Chilton

| WEEK | THEORY | STONE | SCALES | ACCENT ON ACHIEVEMENT | LITERATURE | MISC. NOTES |
|--------------------|-------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------|------------------------|----------------------|----------------------------------------------|
| 11 10/22 | Week 11 | Play MP & Neck Articulation ♩ = 66 | | AOA 18 | | |
| 12 10/29 | Week 12 | Play MP & Neck Articulation ♩ = 69 | | AOA 22, 24 | | |
| 13 11/05 | Week 13 | Play MP & Neck Articulation ♩ = 72 | | AOA 25, 26 | | |
| 14 11/12 | Week 14 | Play MP & Neck Articulation ♩ = 75 | | AOA 27, 32 | Winter Concert Music | |
| 15 11/26 | Week 15 | Play MP & Neck Articulation ♩ = 78 Octave Slurs | | AOA 35 | Winter Concert Music | |
| 16 12/03 | Week 16 | Play MP & Neck Articulation ♩ = 81 Octave Slurs | G Scale (Level One) | AOA 37 | Winter Concert Music | |
| 17 12/10 | Week 17 | Play MP & Neck Articulation ♩ = 84 Octave Slurs | D Scale (Level One) | | Winter Concert Music | Notebook Inspection Instrument Inspection |
| 18 12/17 | | Play MP & Neck Articulation ♩ = 87 Octave Slurs | | | | Objectives Due |
| 19 01/07 | Week 18, 19 | Play MP & Neck Articulation ♩ = 75 Octave Slurs Vibrato ♩ & ♪ = 60 | A Scale (Level One) | Focus on the pass-offs | | |
| 20 01/14 | Week 20 | Play MP & Neck Articulation ♩ = 78 Octave Slurs Vibrato ♩ & ♪ = 64 | E Scale (Level One) | AOA 38, 40 | | |

As shown above, start with the first week of school and label each week numerically in chronological order. Most academic calendars have 36 weeks. Make note of holidays and other events that may interrupt or reduce instructional time. This will be helpful in determining the amount of material you'll reasonably be able to teach per week. Then, input your learning objectives for each column.

Regarding the method book column, we recommend teaching approximately 50 lines in the beginning year. You don't have to do every line in the book, and they don't have to be in numerical order. Pick lines based on educational value and reorganize them if necessary. For example, you can teach line 43 before line 41 if you prefer! Aim to introduce 1-3 new lines per week to leave ample time for literacy instruction, playing review, and pass-offs.

After completing your weekly curriculum guide, introduce the guide to your students in a kid-friendly way as a pass-off chart or similar document. Below you will see a pass-off chart we gave our students that was printed on blue cardstock. The kids affectionately called it the "blue sheet." We'd like to give credit to Jason Tucker for developing this specific template.

Name: _____ Saxophone

| Band Member | | Good Band Member | |
|--------------------------|-------------------------|------------------------|------------------------|
| ___ 1 | ___ 10 | ___ 18 | ___ 27 |
| ___ 3 | ___ 12 | ___ 22 | ___ 32 |
| ___ 5 | ___ 13 | ___ 24 | ___ 35 |
| ___ 8 | ___ 15 | ___ 25 | ___ 37 |
| ___ Staff Chant (memory) | ___ 17 | ___ 26 | ___ G Scale (1-octave) |
| Excellent Band Member | | Superior Band Member | |
| ___ 38 | ___ 47 | ___ 61 | ___ 77 |
| ___ 40 | ___ 52 | ___ 68 | ___ 83 |
| ___ 41 | ___ 55 | ___ 72 | ___ 84 |
| ___ 43 | ___ 59 | ___ 74 | ___ 90 |
| ___ 44 | ___ D Scale (1-octave) | ___ A Scale (1-octave) | ___ E Scale (1-octave) |
| Outstanding Band Member | | | |
| ___ 91 | ___ 104 | ___ 117a | ___ Chrom. (1-octave) |
| ___ 92 | ___ 108 | ___ B Scale (1-octave) | ___ 126 |
| ___ 100 | ___ Bb Scale (1-octave) | ___ 123 | ___ 130 |
| ___ Solo | ___ 111a | ___ 124 | Congratulations! |

“
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 ”

2. The Importance of Music Literacy

In addition to having a roadmap, it's important to develop musically literate students if they are expected to take ownership of their own learning — they can only move ahead if they are able to figure out music on their own. We emphasized the value of literacy often with our students by reminding them that “understanding and not being able to play” was much different than “not understanding and not being able to play.” When they understand, playing is only a matter of practice. When they don't understand, they require knowledgeable or professional assistance to fill the gaps.

Therefore, it's imperative to have a consistent and sequential approach to develop the following content areas:

- Rhythm
- Piano Keyboard
- Staff Notation
- Vocabulary

To reiterate, the key is consistency. We did our literacy every Wednesday or Thursday and it would take up most or all of the class. At first, it may seem like a waste of time. You may have doubts about the process and feel the need to spend more time playing. However, like many things in life, the development of musically literate students comes in the form of delayed gratification. At some point, usually about 2/3rds of the way through the first year, you'll start to notice your students move faster through material and even learn lines and scales on their own. It's then you'll be able to see and hear the difference music literacy is making in your classroom!

We told our students that this pass-off sheet was everything we wanted them to learn in beginning band and that once pass-offs started, they could move through it as fast as they wanted! They could take their time carefully mastering each objective or work hard to get ahead and display their desire to rise above the pack. This allowed the students the opportunity to reflect on their own performance goals and understand that they were in the driver's seat. This helped them understand that as their teachers, we are only facilitators of the content — learning to play and the pace of learning is up to them!

It should be noted that not every student completed the pass-off chart by the end of the first year, but a surprising number would, and often did so much earlier than expected! We regularly passed out second and third pass-off sheets based on the second and third books of our method book series and included multiple-octave scales.

This pass-off chart also guaranteed there was never any question about what students should be working on. Parents also found it helpful when determining what their child should be playing at home. We talked about this pass-off chart often at parent meetings, open house events, and on-campus performances to reinforce its value in our processes.

3. Developing Healthy Practice Habits

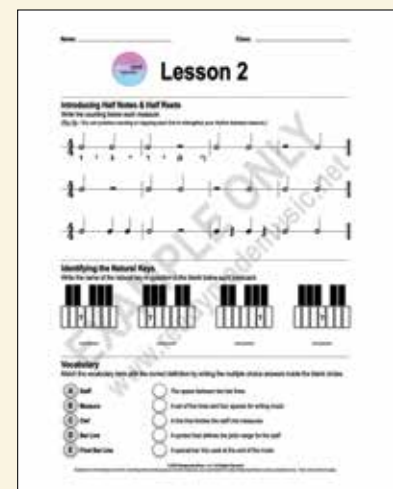
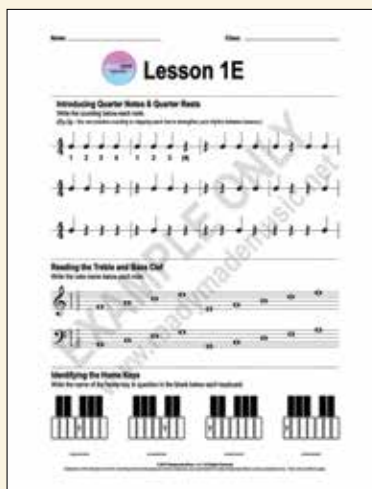
Now that your students have their roadmap and you've made the investment in music literacy, the next step is to get them to practice! We all wish we had an easy answer for this one. Students will only practice if they are regularly made aware that practice is something they should be doing. Find a way to talk about practice every day. One of our favorite phrases to use in class was, “when you practice tonight.” Notice the careful use of the word “when” and not “if,” implying that it is going to happen.

Our approach to practicing was different than most. We didn't use practice records, though it's totally fine if you do! To establish healthy practice habits, we used the following “XP” chart:

Weekly Practice XP Chart

| | DAYS PRACTICED | = | DAYS NOT PRACTICED | = | EXPERIENCE POINTS (XP) | |
|--------|----------------|---|--------------------|---|------------------------|---|
| PRO | 7 | = | 0 | = | +7 (XP) | 👍 |
| BEST | 6 | = | 1 | = | +5 (XP) | 😊 |
| BETTER | 5 | = | 2 | = | +3 (XP) | 🙂 |
| GOOD | 4 | = | 3 | = | +1 (XP) | 🙂 |
| | 3 | = | 4 | = | -1 (XP) | |
| | 2 | = | 5 | = | -3 (XP) | |
| | 1 | = | 6 | = | -5 (XP) | |
| | 0 | = | 7 | = | -7 (XP) | |

Below are examples of the types of worksheets we did on a weekly basis to accompany our literacy instruction.



Our students were expected to practice a minimum of 4 days a week; beyond that was up to them. The Weekly XP chart is wonderful because it helped our students understand the following:

1. You choose the amount of practice necessary to meet your desired outcome.
2. You should practice at least 4 days a week to stay on par.
3. It is possible to lose skill.
4. Practice compounds over time.

The last one about practice compounding over time is great for helping students make sense of the large skill gap that often starts to form around January and continues to widen by the end of May. By the end of the year, someone who practices 4 days earning 1 XP per week will be at +52 XP points. Someone who practices 7 days earning 7 XP per week will be at +365 XP. It's not a perfect science, but it helps make an intangible concept concrete.

Scan the QR code below if you want to access additional resources to introduce this practice method to your students.

PRINTABLE
HIGH RESOLUTION
XP CHART



YOUTUBE VIDEO
EXPLAINING THE
XP CHART



4. Making Time for Pass-offs

You'll need to make time for pass-offs in order for students to move ahead. There are multiple ways you can offer pass-offs:

1. In-class
2. Before/After School
3. Audio/Video Submissions

We did in-class pass-offs as part of our weekly routine. This would typically happen in the middle or end of the week after new material was taught. For example, when reviewing old lines, take a moment before progressing to let those on that line try to pass it off! We also regularly used Fridays as "Pass-off Friday" if all the learning objectives for the week had been met. The students knew this, and it helped incentivize focused learning of new material at the beginning of the week.

Our favorite form of pass-offs was the before/after school option. We allowed students to sign-up for 7-minute appointments with us before or after school on days we didn't have sectionals or other obligations. They would come in and play their prepared lines and we would offer feedback and support as if they were in a mini private lesson. These sessions were also great for relationship building!

The final option is allowing students to submit audio or video recordings of their material. We did not use this method much with the beginners for several reasons. First, the kids do not receive immediate feedback. Second, it makes more work for the teacher outside of school. Third, it doesn't allow for relationship building. That being said, every program is different, and you may find that online submissions work great for you!

Conclusion

You may already be doing many of these things in your own way. Keep doing what works for you! If you're not doing some of these and want to try them, we suggest implementing one or two ideas first. Stick with them for a while and measure the results. Some of these processes discussed took years to craft in our own classrooms and the results took time!

Just remember - trust the process!

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CLAIRE PITTMAN currently serves as one of the Associate Directors at Lake Highlands High School in Richardson ISD. Her responsibilities include co-conducting the Wind Ensemble, leading the Concert Band, assisting with the Symphonic Band, teaching the marching band, and guiding the beginner curriculum for the cluster. Before joining the LHHS staff, Ms. Pittman was the Associate Band Director at Killian Middle School in the Hebron HS feeder pattern. Prior to her appointment at Killian Middle School, Ms. Pittman spent two years as an Assistant Band Director at New Braunfels High School and Ninth Grade Center. She led the high school's marching brass program as well as the ninth-grade bands. Ms. Pittman is a member of the TMEA, TBA, and Tau Beta Sigma. She is also an active adjudicator and clinician in the DFW area. When she is not in the band hall, she spends her time in the gym, with friends, traveling, or volunteering and fostering dogs for a DFW rescue group, Tzu Zoo Rescue.