

BEGINNING TRUMPET

Paul Nájera, Lufkin High School

- I. Recruiting / Student Selection
- II. Braces
- III. Embouchure
- IV. Mouthpiece Placement
- V. Tone Production
- VI. Buzzes / Mouthpiece Buzzing
- VII. Fundamentals of Playing (Posture / Breathing / Hand Position)
- VIII. Articulation
- IX. Tuning
- X. Class Arrangement (Heterogeneous vs. Homogeneous)
- XI. Parent Involvement
- XII. Conclusion

TBA Convention/Clinic 2003

Recruiting

There are many factors, such as physical characteristics, that are considered in the selection of an instrument for each student. It is essential that all staff members assisting with this process be both comfortable with the process, and aware of the instrumentation needs of both middle school and high school bands. If possible, involve the parents in this important venture.

Working with your middle school counseling staff is also a major part of the entire recruiting process, especially when it comes time to schedule your beginners in the correct class period. Those school districts that are able to have homogenous setting in their beginner classes will benefit the most. Heterogeneous settings however, have also been successful through careful scheduling, time management, and consistent effective teaching strategies.

Selection

When selecting a student for the trumpet, make it simple! Fortunately, kids come in many different shapes and sizes. Facial characteristics, along with good grades, etc...are all equally important elements to consider.

The Chin: I look for a medium rounded chin that is not too pointed or protruding forward unnaturally. It must be able to be flattened easily.

Top Lip: When considering this factor, thin to medium is fine. When correct embouchure is formed, the top lip should not be exposed over the bottom lip. Also, this lip should naturally follow top teeth alignment without going beyond or below tooth line. A fuller top lip may cause problems with mouthpiece placement, thus possibly causing difficulties with correct embouchure settings.

Bottom Lip: The bottom lip should be medium at most. Lips which are too full and overlap bottom teeth too much can create habits that will not permit proper tone production or tonguing techniques.

Braces: Braces are like taxes. We don't like them, yet we must live with them. I would encourage you to consider this dilemma during the instrument selection process. Parents can be informative about this possibility during your interview with them and their beginner student. While I don't discourage you to select students who may potentially wear braces, I caution you to be selective.

Modern dentistry has developed different types of "bumpers" or teeth guards that can assist students. Based on my experience, I have found that different children handle braces in different ways. Some young people can only play with the aid of "bumpers" or wax, while others adjust well without any protective devices. Either way, continually monitor mouthpiece placement and embouchure. Some students tend to move mouthpiece placement, which affects embouchure, thus hindering proper tone production.

Embouchure: I have found that simplicity is the best policy. Beginner students gain confidence when provided quick results. Teaching the formation of any instrument's embouchure needs to be done correctly. However, progress will bring about success and excitement. I use the following three steps:

- Moisten your lips.
- Think and say the letter "M".
- Pull back the corners of the mouth, flattening and holding in the cheeks. (Facial muscles should gently "hug" the bony structure of the face).

TBA Convention/Clinic 2003

Two terms that I am always cautious not to use during this critical time are “smile” and “pucker”. I am also careful not to allow students to roll their lower lip under their upper lip. The upper part of the chin remains flat when the correct embouchure is formed. ¹ A correct embouchure for playing brass instruments may be defined as the controlled tension of the opposing sets of muscles in the face in order to place the mouth, lip, chin, and cheek muscles in position for the purpose of producing a tone when air is blown through the lips.

Finally, I have students insert their smallest finger (usually their pinky) in the center of their lips. This procedure helps them know how much space to allow between their top and bottom teeth while playing.

Mouthpiece Placement

This is always a topic that can cause interesting conversations among educators. Different philosophies and success stories can be attributed to all theories. I teach the half and half method. I show them half of the top and half of the bottom lip inside the mouthpiece. In my experience, this method has helped both simplify teaching and provides a clear visual guide and point of reference. ² The placement of the mouthpiece will vary with each individual according to his particular dento-facial characteristics; however, the beginning student should start with the mouthpiece approximately centered on the mouth, thus allowing both the upper and lower lip to vibrate freely.

Tone Production

Once the students are ready to produce sound and have demonstrated consistency with the formation of embouchure and mouthpiece placement, take it slow. More excitement and anticipation builds now, so be careful not to get caught up in their enthusiasm. Remember, just because you are moving ahead does not mean that you neglect constantly checking embouchure, posture and mouthpiece placement.

I have found that a successful “buzz” without the mouthpiece can go a long way to increasing the possibility of success with the mouthpiece and hopefully with the entire instrument put together. I use three different “buzzes” that I learned from Miss. Diane Baker during my wonderful student-teaching experience under her guidance in the Hardin-Jefferson I.S.D. Beginner band students relate great to these:

- Tired Horse
- Bumble Bee
- Super Bumble Bee

Tired Horse Buzz:

This is the one I generally begin with because it is the easiest to produce. Basically with the embouchure in place, take a big breath and allow the center of your lips to vibrate freely. Watch the corners of their mouth and make sure they do not allow them to move forward as if to pucker. The corners should continue to “hug” the bony structure of the face.

Bumble Bee Buzz:

I usually move to this next. Again keeping it simple, everything is the same as the *Tired Horse Buzz* with one exception; you want to actually emulate the buzzing of a bumblebee. Physically, students should also feel the difference between this *Bumble Bee Buzz* and the *Tired Horse Buzz*. Obviously you will have to explain how you need faster air to produce the buzz. In other words, you are also teaching about the importance of air stream. Basically, you will be getting two for one lessons in the same time frames.

TBA Convention/Clinic 2003

Super Bumble Bee Buzz:

This is the most challenging of all three sounds and should be introduced when students have a solid understanding of the other two buzzes. Again you will be able to teach about air stream simultaneously due to the fact that this buzz requires the fastest amount of air speed to produce. Physically, the students will feel a difference. I tell the students that they should visualize a bumblebee with a super hero cape, big muscles, etc... Remember to keep checking embouchure! Be careful not to allow the upper lip to overlap the bottom lip.

Though these three ideas of buzzing may be untraditional to some educators, students at this age level really respond well to this type of approach. Remember, they are fresh from elementary school. Besides, don't we want them to have fun in band?

Mouthpiece Buzzing:

This is critical to overall success. Apply all three types of buzzes to your daily mouthpiece exercises. Students will be able to hear a difference between the three buzzes easier with the mouthpiece. Continue checking embouchure and mouthpiece placement daily. As anxious as both you and the students will be to putting the entire instrument together, be patient and creative with the mouthpiece.

Siren Buzz:

As important as the *Tired Horse*, *Bumble Bee*, and *Super Bumblebee* buzzes are, they are designed for single long tone buzz production. For teaching multi-pitch or flexibility considerations, I use *Siren Buzzes*. This one is the easiest method to explain because you are simply emulating a siren. Here is the great transition; they must think about and produce all three of the other buzzes in order to create a *Siren Buzz*; it just happens faster.

Creative Buzzing:

Keep class interesting with varied activities. You can assign each individual songs to be able to reproduce on their mouthpiece. (Folk songs have worked best for me). Guess what? As with all of these buzzes, you are also incorporating ear-training lessons without necessarily calling it that. Remember, use your time wisely and keep it fun!

Incorporate timed valued exercises with the mouthpiece as well. Insist that they think in sub-division frames of time. Now you have dealt with introducing a counting system that is crucial from the beginning.

If most of your class understand all of these elements and can effectively remember all of these ideas, you are creating a very talented, critically thinking student. And this is all before they touch the instrument!

Fundamentals of Playing:

The following three items require consistency in your teaching as well as attention to details. Insist on these basic fundamentals of playing. As individual's playing develops properly, your bands improve.

Posture:

Posture should be understood from the very first day of class, especially when you introduce embouchure. Remind students that one thing affects all of the others. Even when practicing mouthpiece buzzing, I utilize the following guidelines:

- Feet flat on the floor in front of you.

TBA Convention/Clinic 2003

- Backs off the back of the chair. (Sit up tall basically).
- Shoulders relaxed, not rigid or raised.
- Head/Chin level with the ground.

Breathing:

Correct breathing begins with correct posture. All necessary internal organs and muscles used to obtain proper breath control need to be in position to easily facilitate this task. Keep it simple! I always tell my students that breathing should remain natural and relaxed. Inhaling should take place through the mouth rather than through the nose. This allows for more air intake. The expulsion of air should then be immediate and fast. Do not allow students to “hold” the air in as if they were swimming under water. This creates unnecessary tension and improper expulsion of air.

Student instructions should simply include terms such as “in and out”. With regards to deep breathing, don’t get too involved. In talking to my students about this, I use the analogy of blowing up a balloon. Take a big enough breath to blow it up in a single push of air, then drive the air fast yet steady and direct it out like a laser beam. Watch those cheeks, don’t allow them to fill up with air and puff out.

Another concept that I introduce and demonstrate is thinking of the word “OH” when taking a breath. This helps open up the oral cavity and lower the tongue for the best opportunity to fill up the lungs with as much air as possible. For exhalation, I also use “HO”. This also provides an open oral cavity with teeth apart and lowered tongue.

Hand Position

Left Hand – This is the hand that actually “holds” the trumpet. With that in mind, place the hand firmly (not tense) around valve casings. The third finger should be inserted into the third valve slide ring. If the trumpet (cornet) is equipped with a first valve U-shaped saddle, place the left thumb in the saddle just slightly past the knuckle. If equipped with a first valve trigger, place the fleshy part of the left thumb on that trigger. CAUTION: Do not allow students to twist their wrist in toward their body. They will be tempted to do this in order to distribute the weight of the horn on to their wrist. This creates bad hand position! In some severe cases, the instrument will turn in while valve casings, as well as the wrist, will almost be parallel to the ground.

Right Hand – I always explain to my students that the right hand should be formed as if they were going to catch a baseball or tennis ball. This should create a natural ‘C’ curvature of the hand. Once that is accomplished, simply move that ‘C’ hand formation to the horn. The first three fingers should correspond with the valves. Do not allow fingers to become parallel to the ground or to the other extreme, over-curved. The right thumb should naturally fit in between the first and second valve under the lead pipe. As far as the right pinky is concerned, I do not allow my students to insert that finger in the pinky ring that is on the majority of trumpets (cornets) on the lead pipe closest to the main tuning slide. Too many bad habits can begin; the worse of which is undue pressure being applied to the embouchure. Another concern is hindering valve/finger speed as well as the wrist relaxing and bending down, thus creating bad overall hand position

Arms – When the student brings their instrument up to playing position, they should look and feel comfortable. Again, this should be a natural position for them, as breathing should become. Insist that elbows not touch the sides of the body. Generally, I look for about 10-12-inch clearance from the elbow to the side of the body on both sides, depending on the stature of the student.

TBA Convention/Clinic 2003

Instrument Angle – This is another topic that can be discussed at great length by educators. In my experience, I have taught students to hold their instruments parallel to the ground. Though a little challenging at first, most can adapt quickly. The main reason that some may have difficulty with this is because they have never had to do this before. The weight of the trumpet just takes a little getting used to just like anything else new. Besides, in the real world, many students will end up slightly angling their horn down a few degrees while they play. Be careful not to allow them to overdo this. It can create embouchure problems and bad habits. I strive to maintain a comfortable parallel playing position. Besides, your high school marching band director will thank you for your efforts with this.

Articulation:

This is an area that can easily become complicated. For basic articulation however, I simply tell my students that one of the main functions of the tongue is to serve as a valve to release a note through the lips and then get out of the way. Secondly, I instruct them that the other purpose of the tongue is to occasionally lightly interrupt or manipulate the air stream that passes through the lips and eventually through the trumpet.

I use the analogy of a water hose with the water running through it fast. The water represents the air stream because it remains constant. One of their fingers represents their tongue. If they were to quickly use the tip of their finger to contact the water and move it back immediately, they would visually see that the water speed did not change. This will hopefully help them understand that air speed must remain constant and that the tongue is not to be used to stop a tone, rather only to quickly interrupt it.

The syllable I utilize to start a basic tone is “Taw”. I strongly emphasize that they are never to tongue in between their teeth. Keeping it simple again, I instruct them to use the tip of their tongue and gently make contact with the back of the front upper teeth (the gum line basically). I also incorporate the syllable “Too”.

Some educators also use “Tee”. I have not found a lot of success with that particular syllable. In my experience with beginners, the syllable “Tee” affects tone quality too much. When you say “Tee”, you will notice that the back of the tongue becomes arched which closes up the intended rounded oral cavity. Beginner students don’t always have the maturity to lower that arched tongue, consequently affecting good tone quality. What you usually end up with is a nasal quality or thin sound rather than a full, dark, rich sound.

I believe that the more mature and confident a student becomes as a player, the easier they can be introduced to additional tonguing techniques such as the effective use of the “Tee” syllable. I have found it effective in mid to upper range lip slur exercises. The most important element of tonguing, in my opinion, is the effective use of a steady air stream. Remind your students to always direct fast air through the instrument.

Tuning

It is never too early to begin teaching students about the significance of tuning. In fact, I consider tuning lessons a valuable support element that goes hand in hand with the development of tone production. It is almost impossible to tune a bad sound. It is more feasible to tune a quality sound on any instrument. I encourage the use of a tuning machine with beginner students. It will go a long way in assisting students as a visual tool so that they can receive immediate feed back on their efforts. Also, in most cases when they play flat, it is generally due to the lack of air support. In other words, they can actually see

TBA Convention/Clinic 2003

that they need to use more air in order for the pitch to become centered. In the same process, they have just improved their tone production. The best types of tuners are the old ones that only have one window to watch. The newer models with many windows are great tools for band work, but for beginners, can be confusing. Whatever you have however, use it! When your beginner students make the transition into a full band setting, you will be glad that you introduced tuning to them.

Class Arrangement:

Heterogeneous vs. Homogeneous. If given an option, the majority of band directors would prefer a homogeneous setting for their beginner classes. With classes divided in this type of grouping, a director's attention can be concentrated on one particular instrument per class period. We are fortunate in Lufkin I.S.D. to have two beginning classes only. One period is a brass/percussion class while the other is a woodwind class. When all of the brass players report to class at the same time, they report to one of the four directors in a room inside the band hall. The same occurs during the woodwind class period. Fortunately, even with the advent of block scheduling, we do see them every day!

Heterogeneous settings are not always negative. Many times it is a "one-band director" school. Work closely and cooperatively with your counselor and administrators to at least try to get as many of the like instruments together in one class. If you can split them between you and an assistant, everyone wins. However, if the only option you have is to teach assorted classes, and you see them every day, take it!

With mixed groups of beginner band classes, you have many challenges ahead of you. One thing is for sure though; it has the tendency to make you a better teacher quicker. You must have a thorough understanding of every instrument's particulars. Come prepared with a plan on a daily basis and be efficient with your instructions. Keep all students involved at all times during class or you can create your own discipline problems. If they are active, they don't have time to get in trouble. Address basic fundamentals DAILY! And don't get caught up spending too much time "preparing for a concert". There are too many items that need to be addressed before the end of the beginning year. Do your best to address as many as possible, but remember, quality learning is always better than the amount of information you share.

Demonstration. It is always best if you are able to demonstrate the desired tone quality on the trumpet or any instrument you are teaching. There is no substitute for students hearing a quality sound that they can emulate. It is not reasonable, in my opinion, to expect them to produce a characteristic sound if they have never heard one. Play for them as often as possible, for demonstration purposes, so that excellence becomes the standard from the very beginning. In addition, this gives you instant credibility.

Parent Involvement

Each community's needs are different, nevertheless most beginning band parents are anxious to do anything to assist their child. Without getting too involved, two of the most important elements that a parent can do for their beginning band youngster:

- Create an environment that is conducive to practicing.
- Be willing to afford opportunities for advancement.

With the first, although there can be many distractions at home in the evenings, encourage parents to have a room set aside for productive practicing, not necessarily lengthy practices. Also, purchasing a music stand would help tremendously, instead of a child using the bed, back of a door, or a little brother

TBA Convention/Clinic 2003

to hold their music. You don't want bad habits with posture, etc... to occur at home and then make their way to the band hall.

Second, when you deem it appropriate, promote the vital system of private lessons. This is one of the best ways that a parent can afford their child with opportunities for advancement. Make sure that you recommend quality, proven individual instructors for this training. From the beginning, discuss with those instructors what you want emphasized during the lessons so that there is no misunderstanding.

Conclusion:

As a beginning band instructor, you have what I consider to be the most important job of any band program. Three critical points, remember that the ultimate goal is to prepare these students for a successful high school band experience. Those high school directors may get all of the glory, but ultimately, you are the one that set high standards from the beginning. Next, be prepared every day! This age group will be able to see right through you if you "wing it". Finally, HAVE FUN! Most of these kids will never forget you and the fun times you had together during their Middle School Band experience.

I will never forget my Middle School Band Director, Mr. August Haufler. Thanks Mr. Haufler! I had a great time in the Page Middle School Band!

(Footnotes)

¹ Guide To Teaching Brass - by Norman J. Hunt – Third Edition – WM.C. Brown Company Publishers
– Dubuque, Iowa
– p. 21

² Guide To Teaching Brass - by Norman J. Hunt - – Third Edition -- WM.C. Brown Company Publishers
– Dubuque, Iowa
– p. 23