



Classes That Captivate

**CLINICIAN:
Jim Shaw**

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CLASSES THAT CAPTIVATE

Classroom Expectations | Pacing of Rehearsals | Effective Communication

21st Century Learners

Our students are growing up in an age of instant gratification. Information, the ability to reach out to people, shopping, and entertainment are literally at their fingertips. It has become an increasing challenge to maintain a high level of student engagement while creating a positive rehearsal atmosphere. Classroom management, pacing of rehearsals, and delivery of information determine how successful we are in reaching our students.

The Daily Drill

Despite its immense value, this can be a “rehearsal killer.” It is better to do one or two exercises and work on getting them to a higher level that day than it is to just run through a laundry list of multiple exercises.

Vary the exercises that you cover on a daily basis to keep the students from going on “auto pilot,” and try to avoid exercise duplication (i.e., two components that basically cover the same skill) within a rehearsal.

Tie aspects of your music to the daily drill so that students can better understand their value. (“This passage is like an air flow study,” “Let’s turn this part into a Remington exercise,” etc.)

Many of these exercises we all use are processes, not events. It’s not all going to happen in one day. When you hit a point of diminishing returns, move on.

Classroom Expectations

There are two basic kinds of discipline in the classroom:

Proactive discipline consists of established classroom rules and procedures. **Rules** should be kept relatively broad and brief. The more detailed you get, the more you paint yourself into a corner when situations come up. **Procedures** are patterns of behavior that you establish, often as you go (how to enter room, changing from one piece to another, how/when to ask questions, what happens at the end of class, etc.).

Reactive discipline is how we as teachers respond to behavior issues and other unwanted occurrences in the rehearsal. If effective, reactive discipline should self-eliminate.

How we react to unwanted behaviors goes a LONG way toward setting up whether a rehearsal atmosphere that is positive or not. Here are some things to keep in mind:

1. From the beginning of the year, address EVERYTHING that occurs in a rehearsal that you do not want going on.
2. Address the behavior, not the student. Don’t make it personal.
3. Nagging is the fastest way to turn kids off.
4. Non-verbal corrections can save time, and proximity often works wonders in terms of student behavior (you are not chained to the podium).
5. Get the students to tell you why certain behaviors are encouraged or discouraged. This helps create more “buy in.”
6. Is it ever OK to let them talk?

The Value of Conducting

Conducting is the most efficient way of non-verbal communication we have. It allows us to address many problems without having to stop and talk to the band, creating greater student engagement and allowing for more repetitions of the music.

Common Conducting Issues

- Mirroring or "drum majoring"
- Floating ictus
- Expanding pattern
- Conducting AT the ensemble
- Too many prep beats
- Prep beat not in tempo
- Too Much Information
- Trying too hard to hold it together
- Conducting too high
- Ignorance is not musical bliss

How Do I Get Them To Watch????

Getting ensemble members to watch AND RESPOND to the conductor must be worked on from the very earliest part of the year.

Here are some strategies:

1. Flash a random number of fingers (or a series of numbers) with your left hand while conducting and then ask students to tell you what number(s) you showed.
2. Look at a random student as you are conducting. If he or she does not look up within a few beats, STOP, go back, and start over. If the student does look up, keep picking students until one of them fails to look up or you get to the end of the passage.
3. INSIST that they stop with you. Only give corrective info when they do so; otherwise, just go back and start over.

Delivery of Information

1. Vary the tone of voice.
2. Talk with students, not at them. "We" and "Us," not "You."
3. Monitor student attentiveness, and remember that just because they are not talking does not mean that they are paying attention.
4. Be aware of "non-talking" noise. ("Listen to the lights.")
5. Start most corrective statements with something positive.
6. Create a sense of urgency, not a state of constant stress.
7. Allow others (clinicians, fellow staff members, feeder directors, etc.) to talk to the kids. Sometimes they just need to hear it a different way.
8. Use of humor is a vital part of the rehearsal. It serves as a great reset button when tension is running high.
9. Show the kids that you are enjoying what you are doing.
10. Ask a student to explain your point back to you.

Pacing of the Rehearsal

This can be a challenge, especially for young directors.

1. Have a plan. The kids can tell when you are winging it.
2. Plan for more than you think you can get to.
3. Post your rehearsal order on the board.
4. Find ways to involve the full band when working with sections.
5. Know when to move on or "punt".
6. Keep your comments brief, and tackle one issue at a time.
7. Plan for detail work early in the rehearsal.
8. When working with sections, instruct percussionists to also play unless you tell them otherwise. They are more involved that way, and they get more repetitions on their parts.

Shaking it Up - Getting Out of a Rut

1. Change the time signature of a Daily Drill exercise (e.g., Remingtons in 3/4 instead of 4/4, long tones and rests of varying lengths instead of what you usually do).
2. Let students pick their own seats for the rehearsal (can't sit next to your instrument, can't sit on the same row as usual).
3. Change the set-up or the direction the band is facing.
4. Silent rehearsal for all or a portion of the class.
5. Play portions of the music without a conductor. Put it on the band.
6. Raise the level of accountability (individuals, small groups, sections).

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Contact Information

Jim Shaw, Director of Bands
Willow Wood JHS, Tomball ISD
jamesshaw@tomballisd.net work
jshaw322@gmail.com home
(281) 357-3030, ext. 1286

Reducing Ensemble Performance Anxiety

The level of tension or anxiety in a band is inversely proportional to the number of rehearsals remaining prior to a major performance. The negative effects of this anxiety, increased director frustration and poor performance on the part of ensemble members, tend to feed on each other.

How we help our students (and ourselves) deal with this obstacle has a huge influence on the finished product, as well as the students' perception of how they got there.

Avoid the "picky" rehearsal with a lot of stops. Repetition of big portions of the music builds confidence.

Prioritize, address, play again. After playing large chunks, go back and address issues that cropped up. Address one or two things at a time, and deal with the biggest issue first.

Keep it fresh by changing the focus. For example, while initial rehearsals are often about the "mechanics and the math" (note lengths, rhythm, alignment, articulation, etc.), the last several rehearsals might address more of the musical aspects (phrasing, nuance, implied dynamic changes and shaping, etc.).

Don't overreact. As the group achieves greater mastery of their parts, the music becomes more transparent, and it is easier to hear individual mistakes. It helps me to approach the last few rehearsals as if I'm clinic-ing someone else's band, removing (or at least suppressing) my emotional investment.

It all comes back to breathing. When tense, wind players tend to take shallow and quick breaths, stacking good air on top of bad - leading to even more tension. Remind students to use most of their air before taking a full, replenishing breath.

Students might also tend to hold air in on the inhale. It can help have the students "sigh," which tends to relax the body and serve as a reminder for proper breathing technique.

Touch on at least something in all three pieces.

Provide a list each day of areas to address that gets shorter as rehearsals get closer to performance. This creates the impression that they are getting better.