



THE DEVELOPING PERCUSSIONIST: WHY DO THEY STRUGGLE?

Thomas Marceau

As a music educator and percussionist, I often wonder why my young percussion section develops differently than the rest of the ensemble. There are certain aspects of musical understanding and rehearsal etiquette that seem fluent for my wind players, but from one year to the next, pose problems for the majority of my young percussionists. Weak reading and listening skills, lack of focus and/or organization, and the occasional “they are out of control”, are all concerns we are familiar with. It begs the question: do percussionists learn differently or are the teachers missing something?

Let me qualify my opening statement with this: there are no absolutes. I’ve had many successful percussionists graduate and move onto promising careers; I’ve also taught numerous wind players who have stumbled through basic musical concepts. Having said that, this article focuses on the developing percussionist and those common concerns associated with the back of the ensemble.

Some musicians and educators might reference how drumming attracts a “rambunctious” or “distracted” personality, in an effort to justify the shortcomings or inadequacies from the section. It makes sense; we are hitting stuff, right? Well, no. Having spent several years in the classroom, I can confidently say that colorful personalities are abundant in all sections of the ensemble. As educators, we should consider the reason why our students are struggling. Would changing the approach to instruction and clarifying the teacher expectations result in a different outcome? It is important to be organized and efficient in the way we teach our percussion students.

My percussionists can’t recognize notes on the treble or bass clef. Why?

The importance of note reading seems to be at the heart of many beginner wind and string lessons (Suzuki aside). Students might learn one or two notes per week and then apply those notes to their lesson materials and elementary band music. There is a steady pace set for learning, allowing the player to progress as the ensemble music increases in difficulty.

A percussionist's introduction to discerning note names and pitches is often quite different. Students that are fortunate enough to begin reading notes at the elementary level are often in very good shape. Since percussionists are required to learn multiple instruments at the same time, their time should be split between mallet and battery percussion. In effect, their initial progress in regard to note reading may be slower than their peers. The key is to then continue their development throughout middle school and into high school. Ideally, their reading skills on battery and mallet percussion will progress at approximately the same pace. Typically speaking, the majority of percussionists read rhythms with more fluency than notes. That gap in skill seems to get wider as they get older and the music gets more complicated. The problem occurs when they are expected to play complicated mallet parts that far exceed their reading skills; this is when students are forced to enter survival mode. They begin compensating by memorizing music, using visual patterns to memorize melodies, writing pitch names in their parts and for those really struggling, labeling the bars of the instrument with the appropriate note names. This type of learning is not sequential or methodical and unfortunately, has long-term negative effects on how the percussionist approaches music and their instrument.

Percussion education continues to advance in the area of teaching mallet percussion, and we need to continue to reinforce those skills. Make it part of every lesson; there are lesson books designed to give instruction on snare drum and melodic instruments simultaneously. Some schools do not have the required instruments to teach mallet percussion, however, we must continue to train percussionists to play mallet instruments. Is asking a student to rent or purchase a bell set any different than asking them to rent or purchase a saxophone?

My percussionists struggle with note values. Why?

When we teach beginning wind players what a quarter note or half note is, we can explain it in two parts: duration of time and duration of sound. The concept of time doesn't pose a problem for percussionists; down and upbeats function the same across the board. However, explaining the duration of sound on a drum pad (which is where most beginner lessons take place) poses basic problems. The pad or snare drum doesn't offer any controllable duration of sound unless playing a roll. The sound starts and finishes based on external elements such as the size of the room and the size of the drum. How do we explain the difference between a dotted quarter note and a quarter note followed by an eighth rest when they sound exactly the same on a drum pad or snare drum? Unless you are teaching these concepts on an instrument with controllable sustain, the concept of note duration can be lost. I would propose reinforcing these skills using other vehicles. The concept of subdivision accompanied with down and upbeats always seems to help me when teaching note values. Having percussionists vocalize the counting while playing has also helped me in the past; allow them to do this with their internal and external voice.

Ironically, my percussionists don't understand basic rhythms. Why?

Many of us will construct our small group lessons around lesson books and band literature. In my humble opinion, a sure-fire way to set percussionists up for failure is to only focus on band literature in lessons. Band literature will not always supply enough in the way of rhythmic development and often times it is much easier than where we'd like our players to be in terms of skill level. Also, all of the parts are different, so teaching a single rhythmic concept is relatively difficult in that particular setting. Is the suspended cymbal player being challenged rhythmically? Is the bass drum part ideal for explaining subdivision? Are the mallet players simply using their tonal memory to play parts? Rhythmic concepts must be taught and reinforced in small group lessons. Remember, some of your percussionists might not play in every piece. The pieces they do play in might not require them to use their counting skills. Teaching only to the band literature is an easy way for previously learned skills to be lost.

My percussionists aren't focused in the back. Why?

There are several layers to the 'focus' issue, but let's start here... Consider where they are in the band. Go into any academic or elective classroom and you might notice the students in the back drift more often than those who sit closer to the front. There is something to be said about proximity to the instructor and how that affects students' attention level. If you don't believe it, place your percussionists in the front for a day and flutes in the back. You just might discover your flutes are suddenly distracted and your percussionists are suddenly attentive musical geniuses (no promises on the last statement). Also consider your ratio of players to parts. Do you have ten percussionists in the back and three parts available? Are those students who aren't playing anything actively engaged? Have you assigned them anything else to do? If not, they will lose focus. There are a few tips you might consider for keeping your percussionists occupied. If you aren't a purist, you might try doubling the wind parts in the mallet percussion; it keeps your players engaged and reading. You might also consider doubling snare/battery parts on practice pads. You could think of them as understudies for important parts; it also helps when you have a student miss the concert because of a poorly timed cold. Also, it's very easy to focus 90% of your time on the winds and forget about the kids in the back during a rehearsal. Even as a percussionist, I find myself doing this occasionally, be aware of the section. On a side note, if you typically have too many percussionists in your high school band, consider how many feeder schools you have, and then discuss how many beginners should actually be started at the elementary level. I understand the concept of letting children select their instrument, but as band directors, we have a responsibility to create well-balanced ensembles with students who are engaged.

My percussionists seem disorganized in the back. Why?

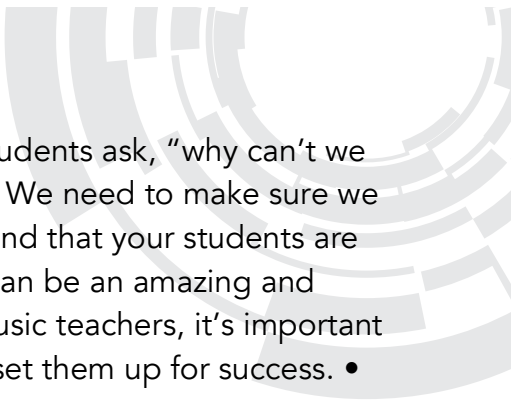
Consider this... The wind players have assigned seats and folders with their music inside. They don't move around, they play a single instrument throughout the entire rehearsal, and there is predictability between pieces. Percussionists share everything; they use the same instruments, sometimes play with the same mallets, read off of the same music and often need to shuffle around the section. This may seem simple, but it is a learned skill and needs to be explained. How to set up a functioning section in terms of instrument, mallet and music placement is not something that should be left unexplained. The issue of setting up a functioning percussion section is larger than the scope of this article, but I will leave you with a few helpful hints. Consider how the setup may vary based on your rehearsal space; organize your instruments in a manner that allows for easy flow between playing stations. I have had to change my perfect-scenario setup, to accommodate a room many times. Have a trap table near each playing station. When percussionists have a place to put mallets and accessories, it can make for easier playing situations and smoother transitions between instruments. Make sure they use folders for their music with some type of organization system. Assign a folder to each student, playing station, or piece; find what works best for you. Put your rehearsal order on the board, everyday, and remind them to look at it. Mental preparation and preparation of the physical space can make a big difference in the flow of a rehearsal.

My percussionists aren't listening. Why are they always playing fortissimo?


Consider this: every flute lesson utilizes the flute. A flutist practices all musical elements on the same instrument, every day. There is consistency. Now consider your percussion lessons. Do they practice on drum pads in their lessons and move to a snare drum in rehearsal? A drum pad is very forgiving in terms of how hard you can play before making your ears bleed; *mf* on the drum pad can easily translate into *ff* on the snare drum. Also, playing *ppp* and *ff* feels vastly different when moving from the pad to an actual drum. There is a tangible feel and touch that must be developed while playing on a concert instrument. Additionally, they are placed in the back of the band; simple location might make them feel like they need to overplay in order to be heard. I have found that giving them specific parts to listen to within the band can help them in the effort to effectively balance their sound.

My percussionists aren't making their lessons. Why?

In my experience, I rarely have a large percentage of percussion students miss lessons, but I've had some colleagues express this concern. Consider the following: when do you schedule percussion lessons? Do they happen to fall on Fridays? If we schedule our lessons in score order, that makes sense. It also makes sense that students might already have several tests on a Friday and/or are already thinking about the weekend. If you're having issues with lesson attendance/focus, consider a mid-week lesson as an experiment.



As an educator, you realize change is needed when your students ask, “why can’t we read notes?” or “why does the rest of the band understand this?” We need to make sure we aren’t our own worst enemies in this educational process. If you find that your students are struggling, it may be time to reevaluate the process. Drumming can be an amazing and inspiring tool, bringing children and young adults to music. As music teachers, it’s important to constantly reevaluate our methods. Let’s make it fun and let’s set them up for success. •



Thomas Marceau has been on the percussion faculty at Finger Lakes Community College, NEMC and held the assistantship for percussion at Ithaca College where he instructed percussion techniques. Tom is currently an adjunct instructor of percussion studies at Five Towns College as well as the director of bands at Mt. Sinai High School in Mt. Sinai, NY. As a composer for marimba, his works are used on collegiate and competition repertoire lists around the country. His first solo album for percussion, Moments, has recently been released and is now available through HoneyRock.net. Dr. Marceau holds degrees from Stony Brook University (DMA), Ithaca College (MM) and the Crane School of Music (BM). His percussion teachers include Dr. Robert Bridge, Pete DeSalvo, Gary Hodges, Eduardo Leandro, Ernest Muzquiz, James Petercsak and Gordon Stout. Tom is also a proud member of the Percussive Arts Education Committee.