

# ISOLATING SKILL SETS, TECHNIQUES, AND CONCEPTS WITH BEGINNING PERCUSSION

by Scott Brown

I am a big proponent of isolating skill sets, techniques, and concepts as much as possible in the beginning, or whenever learning something new. This philosophy applies to wind instruments, percussion ensemble, marching percussion, etc. For this article, I will focus on the use of isolation with beginning percussion and walk you through a typical year at Dickerson Middle School. We do have percussion separate from the winds, so you may have to be creative in applying these concepts to mixed classes.

The overarching goals of the year are to: learn to read rhythms, develop stroke/technique, learn to read pitches, and become familiar with the keyboard instruments. Of course, there is a lot more that the kids do, and learn, but these are the primary tasks for the first year of instruction.

We begin with hand drums. We are fortunate to have a set of Remo Tubano drums along with djembes and congas, but it is also possible to have the students play on their legs, a table, or chairs. After spending some time learning basic hand drum techniques and doing some basic drum circle activities, we start working on reading rhythms, typically using “A Fresh Approach to the Snare Drum” by Mark Wessels, although we occasionally use other texts. The main reason for starting with hand drums is to allow the students to focus on reading and understanding the rhythms without having to simultaneously think about their grip and stroke using a drum stick. As an added benefit, spending more time on hand drums helps students develop a relaxed wrist stroke with a natural forearm motion. Since the students are completely focused on learning to read rhythms, we are able to move very quickly, and within several weeks are up to 16th note/8th note combinations.

Once I feel comfortable with the students’ understanding of reading rhythms, we begin working on snare drum technique. We use pads with a wooden base and a rubber surface so that the students can learn to play with a full and confident stroke without having to worry about the volume. When beginning to work on technique, I teach everything by rote and play along with the students in order to demonstrate and provide a model. This allows each student to focus on the grip, stroke, and technique without having to worry about reading music. We start with basic 8 on a hand legato strokes then gradually progress through hand to hand 16th notes (legato) then accents and taps (non-accented notes), and up-strokes. We do this using various basic exercises typical of those used in marching percussion. When the students seem comfortable with the technique, we begin to combine drumming with reading rhythms. I give them copies of the exercises we used when developing technique, which are from “Field Level – The

Ultimate Band Director's Guide to Fielding the Ultimate Marching Percussion Section" by Mike Lynch and myself, and they begin learning solos out of "The Rudimental Cookbook" by Edward Freytag. Using "The Rudimental Cookbook" also allows us to start working on snare drum rudiments.

I feel that it is important to start with drumming skills as opposed to starting on keyboards. Starting with drumming allows the students to develop a good, confident stroke on a large surface, the drum pad. Developing a good up-down motion in the stroke is extremely important as is developing a comfortable grip using snare sticks, which take up more space in the student's hands than do keyboard mallets. I have found that in years where I did start students on keyboard percussion much earlier, they struggled to play the correct notes due to issues with their grip and/or stroke. In addition, developing the grip and stroke on one surface is much easier than trying to do so while moving side to side *to play keyboard instruments*.

We typically begin working on keyboard percussion in January, again isolating music reading and technique. Beginning in the first semester, the students work out of the Alfred's Music Theory book on days when we have an adjusted schedule, there is a substitute teacher, or for homework. By doing this, they are familiar with the staves, note names, and location on the keyboards well before we actually start to work on keyboard percussion. To strengthen this understanding, I sign out a computer lab for a week and have the kids "play" Mark Wessel's Speed Note Reading Video Game. The game features 10 levels with 100 answers each and starts off very simple and progresses in difficulty. At the end of each level I write down their score, in pencil, then they move on to the next, regardless of how low the score is. After they finish level 10, they are allowed to go back and begin replacing scores. I make it competitive and have prizes for those who achieve ten 100's; I share the site with them during the first semester so they can practice well ahead of time. Having the students work out of the theory books and spending a week playing the game allows them to understand and practice note recognition and keyboard layout without having to worry about playing wrong notes. Note, the game is typically found on the Vic Firth Website, but is currently unavailable on that site. It may be possible to contact Mark Wessels at [mwpublications.com](http://mwpublications.com) to get a link to the game.

After finishing the game, we move on to developing muscle memory and understanding of the keyboards themselves, as well as understanding and utilization of scales. These are all taught by rote so they can just focus on the skill sets and not worry about reading the music. We start learning scales using several different scale patterns that help them develop very specific skill sets. For example, "scale in thirds"(moving up and down the scale playing 8th notes with the mallets a third apart) is used to help them "see" and feel the shape of the scale on the keyboard while other patterns are used to help them focus on horizontal motion of the forearm to locate the note and vertical motion of the wrist to strike or developing the ability to "track" the mallets as they expand and contract intervals. "Instruction Course for Xylophone" by George Hamilton Green is an excellent source for these scale patterns.

As we begin learning scales, we use the Circle of 4ths and tetra chords. Try to make it simple. Start with C (no flats), count up four. F is the new scale and will have one flat. Count up four, there's your flat and the next scale, which has two, and so on. Learning the scales, and scale patterns, is again done by rote, without music. We write the key signatures on the white board as we learn the scales.

After applying the various scale patterns to the scales, and lots of repetition, they start to become comfortable with the layout of the notes on the keyboards. I should note that we have a system of pass-offs for rudiments, scales, and scale patterns in which students are able to place a sticker on our sticker charts as they reach a certain level of achievement. Again, I am a fan of competition, and try to have prizes for the leaders and use the charts to choose which students participate in certain events. Because to this, the students are fairly diligent in practicing at home or before school. Once they are comfortable with identifying notes on the staff, scales, and layout of the notes and scales on the keyboard, then we start to work on reading music while playing.

Since we don't physically touch the keyboard instruments when playing, we rely on our eyes and muscle memory to find the notes on the instrument. The more comfortable a student is with the layout of the keyboard, and the more comfortable they are identifying the notes on the staff, the more successful they will be with combining the two. I feel it's important to develop these skills separately and this seems to help eliminate some of the nervousness about playing keyboards, which I've found is the primary reason kids don't want to play mallets. If you consistently build confidence in an isolated fashion, it's been my experience that the students are very excited to play mallet percussion.

Developing a sense of confidence for young percussionists is essential to their future success. In a concert band setting, percussionists are typically soloists on their instruments from the very beginning! Isolating skill sets, techniques, and concepts allows students to find early success and gradually build a strong foundation without the frustration of trying to learn too much at once. Apply the concept to other areas as well. For example, when learning rudiments, we often isolate each hand or just work on the technique needed to play the rudiment. In percussion ensemble or concert band we will isolate the rhythms or the interplay of rhythms within the ensemble, then add pitches once everyone understands how the rhythms work. With four-mallet keyboard technique, we spend a good amount of time playing on the floor so that they can focus on the technique and not worry about playing the correct notes. When wind players in my concert bands are having trouble playing a certain passage, I will have them play "fingers only", no embouchure or air, just focusing on and listening to the rhythmic accuracy of their fingers and keys. Then we will do "air only", no fingers or instruments, just listening to the tongue interrupting the air. Obviously, the list of possible uses of isolation is large! I hope you found this article to be useful for you and your program and that you can use these concepts to help your students learn and develop with confidence!

#### AUTHOR BIO

**Scott Brown** is currently the Assistant Band Director at Dickerson M.S and Percussion Director at Walton H.S., both in Marietta, GA. Scott is Percussion Coordinator for the Music For All Summer Music Symposium Middle School Camp, Co-Director of the North Georgia Percussion Camp and Atlanta Percussion Symposium, and is a member of the Percussive Arts Society (PAS) International Percussion Ensemble Committee. He served for four years as Percussion Arranger and Consultant for Beatrix Drum & Bugle Corps from Hilversum, The Netherlands, winning the "High Percussion" award for Drum Corps Netherlands and Drum Corps Europe in 2010. Prior to his appointment at Walton, Scott spent 14 years with the 1998 & 2002 Bands of America Grand National Champion Lassiter High School Band and served on the instructional staffs of Spirit of Atlanta Drum & Bugle Corps, Atlanta CV Drum & Bugle Corps, CV Indoor Percussion, and the Kennesaw Mountain High School Band. In addition to the national championships, he has been fortunate to be a part of 9 BOA Regional Championships, The Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade (2x), the Tournament of Roses Parade (2x), the Waikiki Holiday Parade, and eight performances for The Midwest Clinic.

Mr. Brown is co-author of "Field Level – The Ultimate Band Director's Guide to fielding the Ultimate Marching Percussion Section" and composer of "Kumi-daiko", both published by Row-Loff Productions. His articles on percussion pedagogy have been published in Percussive Notes, Halftime, and School Band & Orchestra magazines. He is featured on the "Snare Drummer's Toolbox" dvd and has been featured in interviews for TV and Radio in The Netherlands, Colombia, and Malaysia. Active as a clinician, Scott has presented clinics for The Midwest Clinic, PASIC, MEA conventions in Georgia, Texas, and Ontario, and served as a clinician and/or adjudicator in The Netherlands, Belgium, Germany, Thailand, Brazil, Colombia, and Malaysia as well as guest clinician/lecturer at several universities.

Mr. Brown is a graduate of Western Carolina University, alumnus of Carolina Crown Drum & Bugle Corps, and an educational artist for Innovative Percussion, Mapex Drums, Majestic Percussion, Sabian Cymbals, and Row-Loff Productions.