

Teaching Beginners

TRUTHS

By Lynne Jackson

From day one, I aspire to offer my beginning instrumentalists information, pedagogy, and concepts that will sustain them throughout their musical career. *I strive to teach beginners truths.* What follows are several truths that have guided my work with beginners for over 50 years.

While many applications and methods can support these truths, I believe they are at the foundation of learning for young instrumentalists. If you are privileged to work with this amazing group of learners, consider how your approach can be led by these simple truths.

Truth: Music class should be taught as a fine arts learning community.

I stand in front of my students daily as a musician-teacher. My intent is to be an example to my students and to create a culture that feels uniquely beautiful and personal. The key element in the classroom is *respect*. I want students to develop a high regard for the information, processes, and details put before them. Additionally, we should help our students learn to celebrate their accomplishments and those of others. It is important to nurture a sense of *community* from the very beginning.

While it might sound simple, one of the first things I work on with beginners is teaching them to raise their hands. We practice it daily at the start of the year. The arm is fully extended and, more importantly, eye contact is made with the teacher. I like to teach these quiet, internal ways of demonstrating enthusiasm and appreciation, and the hand raise is a perfect place to start.

Also, when students work from the method book or a worksheet, I concurrently display that page for the class to see. I teach from the front of the room, heads are up, and eyes are lifted. This helps me have confidence that we are all on the same page. Teaching from the front of the room also develops a greater *sense of community*. When students are focused on the teacher and screen in

the front of the room instead of on their music stand, a sense of communal learning is created. With their eyes on the teacher and on the information being presented, they can't hide behind their music stands or fall behind because they selected the wrong music.

It's extremely important that each student I teach feels *valued and safe* in my class. My ultimate hope is that each experiences a personal connection to our class and finds joy through the study of music. I work to provide motivation that keeps all students engaged and experiencing a feeling of success regardless of their skill level. The classroom should be a safe place where judgement is replaced with encouragement and acceptance.

Truth: Telling is not teaching.

My beloved University of Michigan professor Elizabeth Green taught me that telling is not teaching. Information does not become knowledge until one can independently and successfully apply that information to their own experience. I work to ensure that from the start my students become critical thinkers and independent learners.

To that end, I frequently go on "fishing expeditions" in my classroom. I ask questions to search for understanding, comprehension, and application. "What is the lower neighbor of C?" or "Which position on the staff is the note B?" Even when students are playing, I'm fishing for their understanding. I might point to a note on the staff and ask the students to play it to learn who understands and who does not. Through this understanding I can help them in their musical growth as individuals and, by extension, as an ensemble.

A beginning band classroom of critical thinkers is a truly exciting community. In this environment, the study of music often becomes an irresistible muse even for young students. I believe that student retention is directly related to success in achieving this type of community within the music classroom.



Beginners come to us as blank slates. Why not fill their toolboxes with accessible, sustainable information and skills that support their musicianship for years to come?

Truth: A deep-seated knowledge of the music staff is necessary from the start.

Teaching beginners EGBDF and FACE does not suffice. I prefer to begin with the musical alphabet. Necessary vocabulary includes *ascending*, *descending*, *octave*, *upper neighbor*, and *lower neighbor*. The staff has five lines and four spaces. Begin

by having students confidently identify each of the nine positions on the staff. Next, have students identify upper neighbor and lower neighbor positions on the staff. I often go fishing to check understanding in this area. “What is the upper neighbor of space 4?”

Then add the clefs. I prefer to call the

treble clef the G clef and the bass clef the F clef. Those are the first notes I place on the staff. Next, critical thinking comes into play. We must use our knowledge of upper and lower neighbor positions/notes to complete naming notes within the staff.

With this approach, ledger lines appear as simple extensions of the staff.

I include a piano keyboard page in each student’s band notebook. Students can touch the page and identify upper and lower neighbor notes and recite the musical alphabet, ascending and descending. Later, the same verbal and tactile technique can be used for major, minor, and chromatic scales. Students should complete the first year of class with a deep-seated knowledge and understanding of the music staff and note reading.

Truth: The relationships among rhythms always stay the same.

A half note is called a half note because it is half of a whole note. A quarter note is called a quarter note because it is one-quarter of a whole note. These are eternal truths for music students. Additionally, teaching our students to subdivide rhythms strengthens the knowledge of rhythmic relationships. It is important to me that I begin teaching the eighth-note subdivision as soon as possible. Students who understand fractions grasp this quickly.

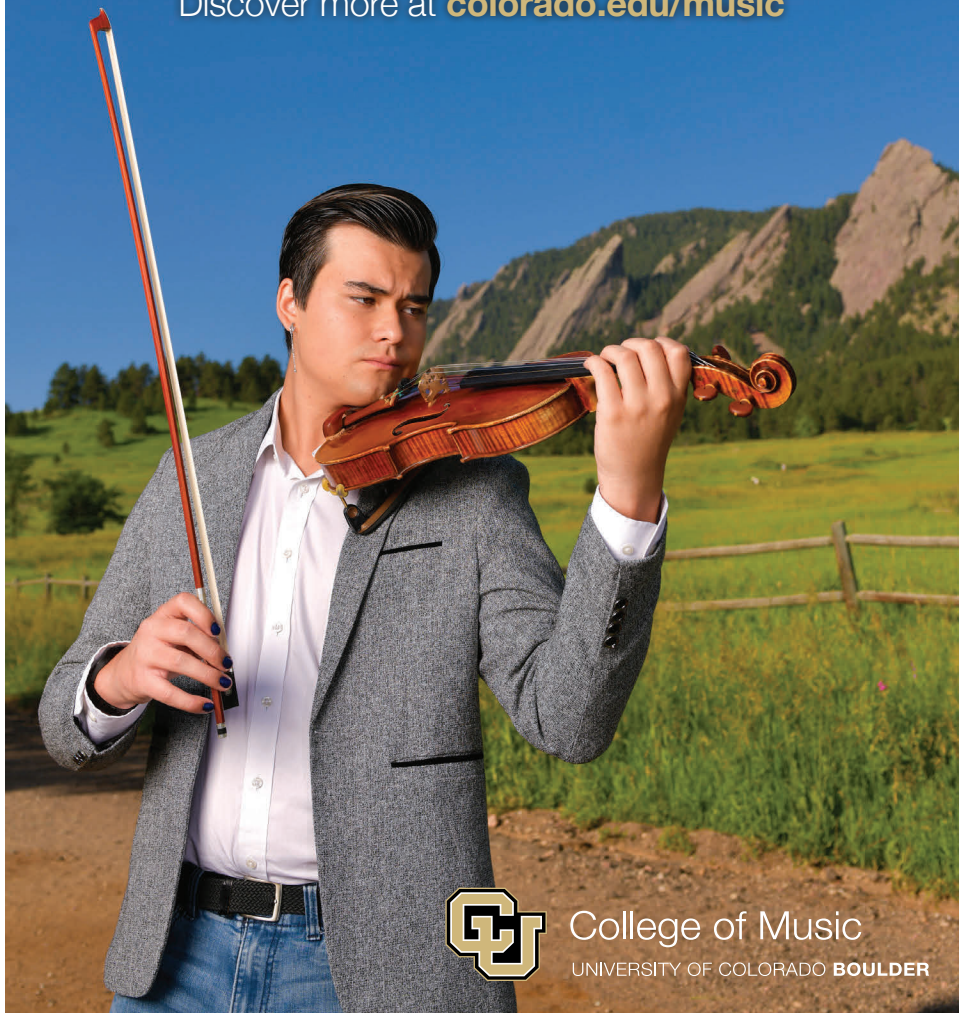
The foot tap is another tool that facilitates rhythmic prowess. I integrate it in my rhythmic pedagogy by calling the upbeat the “up” instead of the “and” of the beat. (1–Up, 2–Up, 3–Up, 4–Up). When I visit beginner band programs, I often observe that the foot tap is underdeveloped. The *up* aspect of the foot tap often does not appear as a rhythmic gesture. Everything we teach must be developed. The foot tap requires coordination that must be nurtured pedagogically, particularly in the early stages of musical development. This will help them as they begin to learn more complex rhythms.

Finally, the truth about time signatures takes me back to my Vandercook College years. H.E. Nutt, an amazing teacher, stated that 3/4 time means that there are three quarter notes in each measure or anything equivalent in notes or rests. Often 3/4 time is played waltz-style, with one count in a measure; therefore, I prefer Nutt’s definition of a time signature as it remains reliable no matter how 3/4 time is played.

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Truth: Teachers must have a concept of the desired tone quality for each instrument they teach and be able to help students develop strengths and employ various techniques required to produce that desired tone quality.

Quite honestly, it takes years to be able to achieve the level of expertise required to become a master teacher in this area. If you are an early career teacher, begin by striving to understand the physics of each instrument to facilitate a better understanding of the technical aspects of what's required to achieve the desired tone.

When teaching tone production, I teach the individual in the classroom setting. That is because one size does not fit all. Each student has unique mental and physical qualities that require our individual attention. When working on instrument pedagogy with individuals, strive to engage the entire class in hopes that information or reparation can benefit others as well. The process of helping individuals can be arduous, but it's well worth it.

I generally spend the first semester helping wind instrumentalists develop their embouchures. Brass embouchures take longer to develop because we must "build

our reed." I am cautious about using too much air early with the brass because I do not want the volume of it to compromise muscle development. With woodwinds, I can focus more on air during the first semester, and then include that for brass in the second. But for all, once the embouchure is developed, *it's all about the air!*


Breathing and blowing must be taught. My priority is to produce a clear tone at the start of each note, sustain the vibration, and then create a beautiful release by leaving the sound *outside the bell*. Correct embouchures create a pathway to natural articulation. I like to think that the tongue "decorates" the air. The priority here is that the vibration does not stop when moving from note to note while slurring or tonguing. These concepts offer students gateways to musicianship.

Truth: Musicianship can be taught from Day 1.

When beginning to introduce musical ideas, I do a great deal of call and response playing with my students. I am sure to provide an example of a characteristic sound and articulation. This might mean I am using my primary instrument. I intensify repeated pitches and start to shape phrases

with arrival notes and up-notes. I might even start to move a bit while I demonstrate. I teach accents, staccato, and long lifted notes as shaped air. I also teach three kinds of breaths: the long breath, the in-time breath, and the quick breath.

Lastly, many of the teachers with whom I work tell me that teaching beginner instrumentalists is one of their greatest joys. These young students often come to us as blank slates. Why not fill their toolboxes with accessible, sustainable information and skills that support their musicianship for years to come?

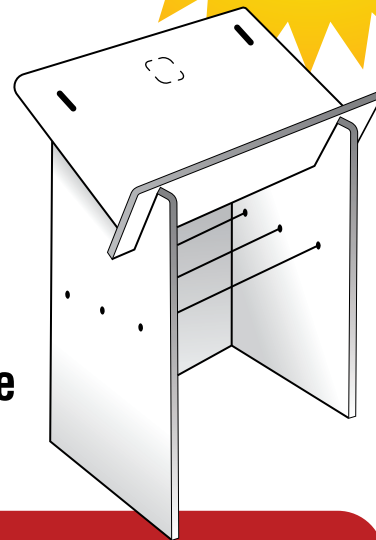
I always strive to teach the first-year students with the second year in mind. I believe that keeping your thoughts on this path will be useful in providing a great experience for students to thrive and grow and, consequently, have the desire to continue with music. 



Lynne Jackson teaches wind method and graduate music education classes at Southern Methodist University and serves as a wind pedagogy specialist for Richardson ISD.

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