

Percussion Class Strategies

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Scenarios for Integrating Percussionists Into the Band Program

In my experience, I have seen a few different scenarios involving the scheduling logistics that arise with students in percussion classes. The outline below describes each scenario, and as we'll hopefully see later, each one can have a different impact on how your students contribute to the program at large and how they develop over 4 years as percussionists in high school. Here they are:

1. All percussionists enroll in percussion class as entering freshman. Aside from percussion class-specific activities, those students in concert band or symphonic band learn their band music during percussion class, and rehearse with the bands as needed before concerts. Wind Ensemble (top group) players do not register for percussion class, instead "moving up" into the top ensemble.
 - a. Pros Include:
 - i. More perceived instructional time with younger students (more on this later)
 - ii. Smaller class size in percussion class; more manageable and feasible with fewer instruments.
 - iii. Wind Ensemble (top group) players rehearse more with the band, resulting in more successful performances
 - b. Cons Include:
 - i. No upper level peer modeling for younger students – Percussion is a VISUAL art form as much as auditory. Younger students often respond and learn percussion techniques more immediately by **watching** a high level demonstration, as opposed to listening or having something described to them.
 - ii. Lack of leadership in the percussion class. If "getting out" of the percussion class is incentivized (the top group goes on trips, attends festivals, perhaps attends the state contest, bragging rights, etc.), those students with the work ethic, talent, and drive will do so, often leaving less-than-ideal role models for your incoming freshman and sophomores each year.
 - iii. Students *might* only ever experience a moderately challenging level of performance, even in the wind ensemble. The Percussion Class can be a place to really challenge your older, more experienced students in ways they might not have chances to do in the top group.
2. All percussionists enroll in Percussion Class each term, each year of their high school career. The students learn their band music in sectionals as part of the percussion class, and arrangements are made for them to attend either class time with the bands before concerts, or extra rehearsals are scheduled prior to concerts.
 - a. Pros Include:
 - i. Lots of peer modeling from upperclassmen to incoming freshman. This provides new students a more immediate impression of what the standards of the program are and what they need to do to rise to that level as they progress through school.

- ii. Stronger performances from the percussion ensemble. This model gives the ability to choose more advanced repertoire for the older students, and to raise the standards in the area of ensemble performance as well.
 - iii. Less “down time” for percussionists (even those in Wind Ensemble) during band classes. Engagement with percussionists can be problematic in all levels of the high school band program. Removing them from the daily band classes hopefully means they will be more constantly engaged during percussion classes instead.
 - iv. All percussionists have the opportunity to develop their specific skills to a higher level for **4 full years**, instead of perhaps only the first 2.
- b. Cons Include:
- i. No percussionists in your daily band rehearsals – you don’t get to integrate the percussion section into the band over a long period of time prior to each concert.
 - ii. Logistical difficulties with instruments in the percussion class when working on technique and ensemble music (more on this later).
3. All percussionists enroll in percussion class AND Wind Ensemble (top group) players enroll in band class.
- a. Pros Include:
- i. Both the Wind Ensemble and Percussion Class benefit from this arrangement.
 - ii. It is a win-win for the upper classmen because they have the opportunity to continue a more hands-on development of their playing, and the lower classmen have peers next to them from whom they can learn much faster.
 - iii. More successful performances for all ensembles.
- b. Cons Include:
- i. Increased workload and scheduling logistics for upper classmen.
 - ii. Logistical difficulties with instruments in the percussion class when working on technique and ensemble music (more on this later).
4. All freshman enroll in Percussion Class; after freshman year, all percussionists are placed in a band class. Freshman do not participate with the concert bands, but do learn and perform percussion ensemble music, and use the Percussion Class as a “crash course” in order to advance to the concert bands.
- a. Pros Include:
- i. Lots of hands-on for the new students in the program to learn skills.
 - ii. A less intimidating environment for incoming freshman, who may be nervous about the high school environment. This scenario allows them a “safe space” to try to dive into some of these techniques. (you’d be surprised how many young students are simply nervous or embarrassed about picking up the cymbals to try a crash. Most times, students have a hard time being put on the spot, and with percussion we rarely have doubling of any instruments in the concert setting.)
 - iii. Far smaller class size; much more manageable with the number of instruments generally available.
- b. Cons Include:
- i. No peer modeling of any kind.
 - ii. After freshman year, percussionists are no longer challenged in the same way – concert band music is “easy” (of course, it’s not really easy, but generally this becomes the prevailing perception among percussionists). This is why so many

- drummers are attracted to the marching band and indoor drumline activity. The perception of difficulty, of a challenge and of more involvement is attractive.
- iii. After freshman year, percussionists no longer have the same “lab” environment in which to focus specifically on their skills, unless they take private lessons. While private lessons are **always** the best way for a student to improve, the incentive of peer acceptance and modeling is a powerful force for teenagers, and having older, more experienced students to look up to can be a huge motivator for young students, in my observations.

Year-long unit planning

- Fall Season
 - Marching Band – How much to do during class time?
 - If you have a percussion staff, use the percussion class time in the fall to get a jump on techniques that the students will need all year, not just extra time to rehearse marching band. The rest of your band has been developing on their instruments all fall season. Your drumline members have been playing instruments that won’t directly transfer to your wind ensemble, concert band or orchestra right after marching season, and if they haven’t developed the other skills simultaneously, oftentimes the battery members from your fall season will continue playing the “drums” while the mallet players will stick to mallet parts. In the end, this doesn’t help either of them become well-rounded percussionists. Use the time during the fall to prepare them on a broad array of percussion techniques so they can be successful right when you begin working on wind ensemble or concert band repertoire.
 - If you don’t have a staff of instructors, try to split the time evenly so that your drumline/pit get some focused, hands on training, and also begin to develop the skills they will need as soon as marching band finishes.
 - Getting the hands moving
 - Rudimental exercises (packets)
 - Need Class sets of Pads and Sticks (very important)
 - Stroke Types
 - Building blocks – rolls, paradiddles, flams, ruffs
 - Mallet Exercises
 - Both 2 and 4 mallet – starting 4 mallets early is important
 - Scales, arpeggios (circle of 4ths), double verticals, single independent
 - Play all 2 mallet ex. holding 4
 - Timpani development
 - Singing!
 - A consistent method for tuning
 - Understanding the difference between timpani and other drums
 - Technique, intonation, sound concepts
 - Sight Reading
 - Use Goldenberg or Whaley method books for snare drum.
 - Use any sight reading books for mallets – flute, clarinet, etc.
 - Combination exercises
 - Tailor snare drum and timpani parts to mallet exercises.

- Clinics on all accessory instruments
 - Cymbals
 - How to make a good sounding crash – the fundamentals of sound
 - Longs/Shorts, dynamics
 - Bass Drum
 - Beating spots, muffling, rolls, beaters
 - Use SD etudes for interest
 - Tambourine
 - Loud, soft, rolls
 - Use SD etudes for interest
 - Triangle
 - Using the proper clip and beater, rolls, beating spots
 - Use SD etudes for interest
 - Wood blocks, temple blocks, suspended cymbal
 - This is the best opportunity to start engaging percussionists as you would any other musician – to challenge them to create a variety of sounds and articulations. This becomes educational as well and will set them up with a better understanding when it comes time to begin playing percussion ensemble and band music. Reinforce the ideas of legato, staccato, marcato, dolce along with dynamics.
- Introductory Percussion Ensemble
 - Finding pieces that work for the entire group (varies based on size)
 - Doubling parts can be most effective, especially with limited instruments
 - Substitutions are absolutely appropriate and sometimes necessary. i.e. double the bongo part with two tom toms, tuned up.
 - Usually applying the concepts being covered in the instrument clinics to one or two large, full group pieces will be more successful in the fall than splitting up into smaller groups. This allows the entire group to coalesce at first and can be a more stable environment to apply the skills being developed. Smaller ensembles are generally better for later in the year when students have built and/or solidified a foundation of skills.
 - Something perceived as “fun” can be very successful at first, such as bucket drumming pieces or similar “found instrument pieces.”
- Honor Band Auditions
 - Consider making it a requirement of all percussionists to submit district, state, or region honor band auditions. Usually these requirements include mallets, snare drum and timpani, which will create an external incentive for students to work on all three categories.

- Winter Season
 - Preparing for Solo/Ensemble
 - Solo/Ensemble is the best way for percussionists to develop their playing.
 - Consider making solo pieces part of the grade for the course.
 - Students should especially learn a snare drum (rudimental or orchestral) and mallet solo piece.
 - All students can learn the same pieces, to facilitate group coaching.
 - All students perform one piece of their choice on the same concert as the percussion ensemble.
 - Progress on solo pieces can be evaluated through regular playing tests
 - Percussion Ensemble
 - Smaller Ensembles are more conducive to development.
 - Can create more logistical challenges for rehearsals
 - Try addressing this by splitting the class into two or three groups – one group rehearses their piece while others work in groups on a solo piece (Class set of pads is huge!)
 - Usually with smaller ensembles, the individual players have more to do. This can help with the perception of difficulty issue and also create more incentive for students to practice and perfect their parts.
 - Programming larger ensembles
 - Consider doubling parts of smaller pieces, or splitting parts. With younger players, it can be helpful at first to focus only on one instrument at a time. Doubling parts provides some security in the ensemble.
 - District Band/State Band Festivals and Contests
 - Having covered all the bases during the fall on the concert instruments, learning music for the bands to take to festival or contest should be a much faster and more enjoyable process.
 - Winter Drumline
 - Again, if you have a winter drumline that rehearses outside of school, don't use percussion class time as "extra hours." Remember, the end goal is to have students develop into well-rounded players on their instrument **over 4 years**. Their "instrument" is ALL of the percussion instruments, not just one.
- Spring Season
 - Continuation of Winter Season Percussion Ensemble activities.
 - More advanced or smaller chamber repertoire, giving the more advanced players opportunities to play advanced repertoire in smaller groups.
 - Continuing to review fundamentals on all of the "Big 3" instruments plus accessories.
 - Spring is a great time to go back to basics, especially after the usually packed Winter season.
 - Creating a rotation of technique days and music days can keep things fresh.
 - Parade season
 - This can be a great opportunity to get incoming freshman involved, either by setting up rehearsals for them to attend and play with the high school students, or even having them participate in the drumline.
 - Try to have students play different instruments. Just like with concert band, the tendency is to develop "snare drummers" or "tenor drummers" or "bass

drummers” or “cymbal players.” This tends to limit the development of those players, as each instrument presents its own challenges and difficulties. Try to give each student the chance to play multiple instruments during their time in high school. The playing concepts are applicable to any of the marching instruments.

Working with Limited Instruments

- A class set of snare drum practice pads is a must!
 - These can be used in the obvious settings (snare drum warm-ups/technique) but also to facilitate sessions on other instruments.
 - When doing clinics on the accessory instruments (tambourine, triangle, bass drum, woodblock, etc.) the pads can be used by most of the class while the actual instruments get traded around.
- A comprehensive technique training program.
 - Develop exercises that allow you to split your class into thirds to work on the “big 3” instruments simultaneously.
 - A potential twice-weekly plan could include splitting the class in thirds and doing 20 minute rotations on snare drum (pads), mallets and timpani (pads).
 - Coordinate exercises so that the entire group can play at the same time. Players can be doubled on mallet instruments.
 - As the program develops, accessory instruments can be included (playing snare drum exercises).
 - Whichever group is playing timpani rotates players – one student plays, while the others play on pads and sing!
 - Much of the timpani exercises should revolve around the development of the ear, and singing and matching pitches is crucial. All percussion students should have this training regularly – don’t just assign one student as “the timpanist!”
 - It takes time and repetition for students to understand which pitches work on which drums and how to “assign” pitches to the correct timpani. All percussion students should be able to recite the ranges of each of the 4 standard timpani sizes.
 - While this can seem silly at first, with reinforcement students typically get past the initial shyness and eventually will engage in this activity with confidence.
- Using practice pads to “double” parts in percussion ensemble settings.
 - Allows you to keep the whole group together. Some players play the rhythms and dynamics of another player’s part as a way to keep them involved in the class activities.

Student Engagement

- A Place for Everything and Everything in Its Place
- Perceived Difficulty
 - In my observations, students at this level place value on challenge. Or, more accurately, the perception of challenge. Something perceived to be easy has less value to most teenagers than something perceived to be difficult. Generally, students want to feel that they have to figure something out, or that they have to improve their skills in order to play a part. Many times with percussion parts, especially in the concert band and wind ensemble setting, the parts are simple in nature. Grabbing the triangle beater and hitting quarter notes doesn't seem like a challenge. This is perceived as "easy" by most students and thus, they figure it's not worth caring about much. But, most high school players don't know how to create a **great** sound on the triangle or even the larger "big 3" instruments. Some ideas for addressing this central issue:
 - Paying Attention
 - The percussion parts are down at the bottom of the score, and usually as long as they're doing something that sort of resembles the part, there are bigger fish to fry. But, over time this can create disillusionment with percussionists because they don't feel engaged or challenged.
 - Try to always make sure students are playing the instruments correctly – don't let them hold the cymbals incorrectly, hang the triangle by a shoestring, roll near the center of the timpani (or suspended cymbal), play with marching sticks on the concert snare drum, etc. The devil is in the details and the more we demonstrate as educators that those little things matter, the more responsibility our students will take for them.
 - Nomenclature
 - It is crucial to treat **ALL** of the percussion instruments the same way you would a clarinet, violin, flute, trumpet or tuba.
 - What are some common words we use to commonly describe percussion instruments?
 - Toys
 - Junk
 - Noisemakers
 - All of these names contribute to an attitude that these instruments are just a joke – that the sounds they make don't really matter the same way most instruments do. Avoid using these terms to categorize musical instruments.
 - Sound Concepts
 - "It's just a beat, right?"
 - As percussionists, we always have to try to get just the right sound for the given situation. Too often we as teachers, and then by extension students, just grab the closest thing we have and make something *close* to the desired sound. Percussionists have to be very *discerning*, which is an attitude that has to start with us as teachers.

- A couple of great sayings –
 - “Percussion instruments are the easiest instruments to make a bad, noisy sound on.”
 - Reinforce that any instrument can make a *bad* sound or a *good* sound, especially the percussion instruments. Try to create an atmosphere where the students are listening to the sound they’re creating, not just hitting something and making rhythm. This concept can be powerful – it exposes to students the real challenge in much of percussion playing, which is always playing with a great sound. Simple, but not easy.
 - “There’s no such thing as an easy part.”
 - Often, the difficulty with percussion lies in creating the right sound, not just the right rhythm. As educators, we often treat the percussion instruments as purely rhythmic instruments, but they are so much more diverse than that.
 - The woodblock (or any percussion instrument) can be played staccato, but can also be played legato, dolce, marcato and more. This begets a conversation about phrasing, and can be a powerful way to sneak some musicianship into your percussion section.
 - It’s an attitude about the type of sound being created and giving your percussionists a challenge beyond just hitting an instrument. High school percussionists are just as capable of understanding and applying these concepts as any of the other instrumentalists.
- Incentives
 - In most programs, percussionists and drummers compete to become the drummer in the jazz band. The same should hold true for positions throughout the concert bands.
 - Chair placement, etc. along with timpanist(s)
 - Bragging rights after playing tests
 - These are especially helpful if you decide to have the entire class learn the same solo pieces or etudes.
 - Another internal motivator is crossover between instruments. Many of the concepts taught on marimba end up applying to the drumset, or concepts from snare drum apply to timpani or multiple percussion. We are all naturally drawn to some instruments over others as percussionists and it can be helpful to make those connections for students who might not want to delve into areas they are not interested in.
 - Some things work for some programs that don’t for others. The key is for you to find the incentive that gets your percussionist to care about the total package, and to realize that there is a broad world of percussion playing that is really fantastic and wonderful out there.

