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Challenges in Beginning Trombone Pedagogy

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The development of strong fundamental skills is essential for success on any instrument. Beginning wind players must be carefully monitored so they can develop the good playing habits and basic skills that form the foundations of strong musicianship. Each instrument presents its own unique challenges. The trombone could be considered the most unique of the beginning band instruments due to size, slide, and technique. These challenges can lead to a number of problems that music educators must be able to recognize and correct. For this project, six music educators with experience teaching beginning trombone students were interviewed about common problems in trombone pedagogy. This paper examines three concepts identified in the interviews that young trombonists struggle with: breathing, slide technique, and the slur. It presents exercises aimed at addressing these issues that may serve as supplemental teaching material. Each section of this paper details the correct technique for these concepts, describes the errors young students often make when learning them, and provides an explanation for the corresponding exercises that appear in this paper’s appendix.

Breathing

Correct breathing is necessary for good intonation and the production of a full, characteristic tone quality. The right breath begins with the right posture. The head should be upright, supported by a straight spine and relaxed shoulders. If the player is seated, the back should not touch the chair, and the feet should be flat on the floor, not crossed or twisted (Jackson, 1981). Playing a wind instrument requires deep, voluntary breaths, not the shallow involuntary breaths taken by the body automatically. The downward motion of the diaphragm, a sheet-shaped muscle between the stomach and rib cage, expands the lungs, creating a pressure difference that draws in air (Jackson, 1981). In involuntary breathing, this muscle need only
move about one centimeter. Proper breathing on a wind instrument requires that it move about ten centimeters (Whitener, 2007). A full, musical breath causes the chest cavity to expand in all directions. Wind players should focus on the sensation of filling up with air from the bottom up, expanding in the upper abdomen, followed by the chest and back, and finally the upper chest and shoulders. While the shoulders should not become tense and scrunched towards the neck, they should naturally rise with a full breath, and this natural expansion should not be willfully avoided (Whitener, 2007).

Quality intake of breath is meaningless without quality exhalation of breath, since this is what produces the tone. The airstream must be fast and conceived of as passing through the instrument, not just into it. Arnold Jacobs, landmark brass pedagogue and tuba player, famously called the use of air in brass playing “wind.” This word implies the constant motion of air that is necessary for an appropriate sound (Whitener, 2007). In low brass playing, the airstream needs to be low in pressure and high in volume to produce a characteristic sound.

Young trombone players often display an airy, pinched, or weak sound due to problems with their breathing. A good sound takes years to cultivate, but students will find success sooner if they are taught proper breathing technique. They should work towards using their full lung capacity to create a fast, focused air stream. Issues with posture are a major source of problems with breathing in young trombone players. Smaller students may find the instrument too heavy and rest it or their elbow on their legs. Another common problem is angling the trombone too low, forcing the neck into a curved, inefficient path for the air to travel through and compressing the chest cavity. Leaning up against the back of the chair prevents the backward expansion of the chest and limits air intake. Beginning trombonists’ bad habits often hinder success before they have even played a single note.
The best way to combat posture problems is to prevent them from forming. Students should learn how to sit with correct posture in their first lesson and it must be constantly reinforced. When a student deviates from the correct posture, they should be corrected immediately. It is much easier to form good habits from the start than to try to correct bad ones.

The exercises created for this paper that address breathing are designed to be progressive. Once proper posture is established and students have learned the voluntary breathing technique necessary for musical breathing, they can begin applying that to playing their instrument. First, students should practice breathing alone. One way to accomplish this is by varying the number of counts students breathe in for before exhaling. By gradually decreasing the amount of time students have to breathe, it helps them practice breathing efficiently. In music, having four full counts to take a breath before playing is uncommon. Students must learn to take a proper breath in a short amount of time to prepare for realistic musical situations.

Next, students should practice buzzing on the mouthpiece. This bridges the connection between breathing and playing on the full instrument and allows the teacher to listen for the proper concept of buzzing and a steady stream of air. When buzzing on the mouthpiece, a reference pitch should be given for students to try to match. This helps develop pitch awareness and accurate buzzing on the full instrument. In a proper buzz, the airstream coming out of the back of the mouthpiece should be fast and vibrant. Students should be able to move a piece of paper held behind the mouthpiece with their buzz. This test of the airstream sets students up for the creation of a full, characteristic sound when they play the fully assembled trombone.

The next exercises presented in this project are progressive long tone exercises. Long tones are important for beginners to play so they can strengthen the muscles used in producing a tone on their instrument. Consistent practice of long tones leads to the development of a quality
and characteristic tone color. In these exercises, students work to increase the length that they are able to sustain the long tones. They begin with four counts, then move up to six and eight counts. Building up to longer long tones increases breath efficiency, sound quality, and muscular endurance in beginning students.

**Slide Technique**

Development of proper slide technique is necessary for trombone players to play with clarity of articulation and correct intonation. A central concept of slide technique is that the slide must be in position before the air and tongue initiate a note, regardless of the tempo of the music being played (Whitener, 2007). The motion of the slide must be quick in order to reach each note in time, but it must also be relaxed and free of tension to prevent jerkiness that can affect the sound (Kagarice, 1984). The weight of the instrument must be supported by the left hand in order for the right hand to be free to operate the slide. Additionally, bearing weight with the right hand can bend the slide or exert force on the embouchure, potentially injuring the player (Kagarice, 1984). The slide should be gripped between the thumb and first two fingers of the right hand in a relaxed but controlled manner.

An important component of slide technique that must not be overlooked with beginners is the condition of the slide itself. Without proper slide maintenance, it can require great force to move, creating muscular tension in the arm of the student. This tension not only leads to poor slide technique, but can cause problems in breathing and tone production (Kagarice, 1984). Teaching and checking for slide maintenance is an important measure that prevents the development of detrimental habits in younger students.
The trombone’s slide adds a level of subjectivity to playing that does not exist in other instruments. To other wind players, a note’s fingering is not arbitrary – it is either correct or incorrect. On the trombone, there are an infinite number of slide positions that could be correct depending on musical context. Trombone players can still be incorrect by way of intonation even if they are correct by way of intent. For example, a young trombonist may read a C in their music, know that that pitch is in sixth position, and move the slide to where they think sixth position is – and yet fall short of success due to poor intonation.

The first six slide technique exercises in the appendix of this paper are designed to create repetition for the student. Simply put, the most effective way for students to develop slide technique is through repetition of the correct technique. By repeatedly practicing all possible combinations of slide movement, students develop muscle memory that they can rely on when playing. This lets them focus on reading the music instead of needing to hesitate and consider where their slide needs to travel. Exercises 1-3 cover all stepwise motion between the pitches Bb, C, D, Eb, and F. Each exercise becomes more challenging as students have to play increasingly shorter rhythmic durations, requiring them to move their slide more frequently. However, shorter rhythmic durations do not mean that the slide needs to move at a different speed. Students should move the slide exactly as quickly between two whole notes as they do between two quarter notes. Exercises 4-6 cover leaps between the pitches Bb, C, D, Eb, and F, and also follow the pattern of shortening rhythmic duration. Exercise 7 requires students to apply the principles of slide technique to playing melodically.

Exercises 8 and 9 focus on intonation, another important aspect of slide technique. In exercise 8, the teacher should play the bottom part on trombone, though piano or an electronic drone may be used instead. In this exercise, the student begins on the same pitch as the teacher,
then leaves that pitch for two beats before returning to it. The goal is for the student to listen and
match the pitch of the bottom part both times they are in unison. For this to be possible, the
student must return to the exact slide position they departed from. This exercise teaches slide
position consistency as well as aural awareness. Students must make minute slide adjustments to
line up their pitch with the bottom part. Exercise 9 is a duet that gives students a chance to play
melodically and takes pitch awareness a step further as students tune major and minor thirds and
unison pitches. Students should have the opportunity to play both parts of this duet, either with
the teacher or another student.

The Slur

One of the most difficult techniques on the trombone, even for advanced players, is the
slur. On other instruments, slurs are achieved when a player changes to a new pitch without an
articulation from the tongue. However, this cannot always be done on the trombone. Due to the
nature of the slide, how a player connects notes under a slur varies depending on the relationship
between the notes. If two slurred notes lie on different partials, a player may connect them
without tonguing, producing a natural slur. If the two notes lie on the same partial a legato
tongue must be used along with a quick slide motion in order to avoid a glissando. A legato
tonguing motion is similar to pronouncing the letter “L” instead of the usual “T,” creating
smaller deviations in air pressure and a smoother sound. A trombone player’s goal is to make
these two techniques sound exactly the same and create consistent connections between all
slurred notes (Whitener, 2007).

The complex nature of the slur presents a challenge for the beginning trombonist. The
ability to discern between which slurs are natural slurs and which slurs require tongue is often
too advanced for beginning students, leading many directors to use a simplified set of rules when
playing slurs. Even among the interviews conducted for this project, there was great variation in how slurs were taught to young trombone players. One educator teaches students to slur only when two slurred notes are in the same position. Another teaches students to articulate the first note of a slur with “too” and all others under the slur with “doo.” Two others introduce the legato tongue technique in instructional time with trombones alone.

Independent of the challenge of teaching a concept differently between different sections of the band, the slur technique presents many opportunities for bad habits to develop. Young trombone players often struggle to play with a legato tongue or a quick slide, resulting in a glissando. Fearing this glissando, some students will stop their airstream between notes. However, interrupting the airstream is not correct and gives rise to major problems with note response and musical phrasing. A constantly flowing stream of air is essential for the proper execution of slurs (Whitener, 2007).

Exercise 1 in the appendix of this document introduces legato tongue technique by contrasting it with a more familiar and heavier tongue technique. Students first play four quarter notes and a whole note with a “too” articulation, then play four quarter notes and a whole note with a “doo” articulation. Using “doo” instead of “too” allows the air to flow more smoothly. The syllable “loo” produces an even smoother articulation, but can lead some students to move their jaw, which should be avoided. Showing the direct contrast in these two types of articulations focuses students’ attention on the execution of these differences.

Exercise 2 again shows contrast and encourages students to continue the airstream through the slur. This time, the contrast highlighted is between the glissando and the slur. Playing glissandos is only possible when the airstream is maintained while moving the slide. This aspect of the glissando is correct when slurring. What the students must add to turn the
glissando into a slur is the “doo” articulation from Exercise 1 and the fundamentals of slide technique explored in the previous section of the exercises.

Exercises 3 and 4 apply the slur concepts to melodic playing, and are progressive. Exercise 3 contrasts non-slurred and slurred passages and features 2-bar phrasing. Exercise 4 consists of two 4-bar phrases and is slurred all the way through. Neither use natural slurs, which are not addressed until the next exercise.

Exercise 5 has students play each natural slur that is possible between Bb, C, D, Eb, and F. The concept of natural and non-natural slurs is more advanced and should not be taught too soon. Students need to be well-practiced in non-natural slurs before introducing this second type of slur. In Exercise 6, students apply this the concept of the two types of slurs to a melody. This exercise should be worked through slowly, and each slur should be isolated and identified as either natural or non-natural. Exercise 7 incorporates a new pitch, G, and presents the opportunity for many more natural slurs. As with the previous exercise, students should identify each slur in Exercise 7 before playing it.

**Conclusion**

Though frequently taught all at once, each band instrument comes with its own unique challenges that must be addressed to help students achieve success. As a large wind instrument with a slide instead of valves or keys, the trombone presents a special challenge to the young students who aspire to play it, and music educators must be equipped to teach correct technique. When taught proper breathing, slide technique, and slur technique, students are able to reach higher levels of musicianship. By focusing on the individual needs of instruments, teachers can work towards providing the most enriching educational experience possible for their students.
References


APPENDIX:

**Breathing:**

1. Breathing exercises:

2. On the mouthpiece. Aim for a fast airstream you can feel coming out the back of the mouthpiece.

3. On the mouthpiece.

4. On the full trombone. 4-count long tones.

5. 6-count long tones

6. 8-count long tones
Slide Technique

Name note names and slide along before playing. Aim for a quick motion that is not jerky.

1. Steps – whole notes

2. Steps – half notes

3. Steps – quarter notes

4a. Leaps – whole notes

4b. Leaps – whole notes

5. Leaps – half notes

6. Leaps – quarter notes

7. (Based on an etude from Arban’s Method for Trombone)
8. The bottom line should be played by the teacher on trombone or piano. An electronic drone may be used.

9. “Lightly Row” from Bruce Pearson’s *Standard of Excellence*
The Slur

1. Use “too” for notes without slurs and “doo” for notes with slurs. Do not stop the airstream between notes.

2. Use a quick, but not tense, slide with the “doo” tongue from exercise 1 to turn the glissandos into slurs.

3. Breathe where indicated and aim for contrast between non-slurred and slurred phrases.

4. Melodic slurs with 4-bar phrasing.

5. Natural slurs – These are slurs across partials that do not require the tongue.
6. (Based on an etude from Rochut’s *Melodious Etudes for Trombone*)

Before playing, circle the natural slurs – remember that these notes do not require the legato tongue.

7. Slurred melody with G – circle the natural slurs before playing.