

THIRTY-THREE WAYS TO IMPROVE YOUR BEGINNER TROMBONE CLASS

Joe Dixon

1. *Be Organized.* Have students expect that organization and discipline are necessary to learn a performance art.
2. Arrange students' chairs and stands to allow proper posture and horn angle, a safe distance between trombonists, and a neat and orderly learning environment. Do not allow the physical setup of the rehearsal room to visually undermine your efforts to teach organization and discipline.
3. From the first day students should learn proper behavior for rehearsals – the way we behave as trombonists and musicians; the way we rehearse and learn.
4. Teach a physical respect for the trombone from the beginning. For some children it is the most expensive possession they have ever owned that is exclusively theirs. Teach them to care for it, that it is fragile, and warn them of the dangers that can happen. No one else should ever hold or try to play their trombone.
5. Continue to “sell” the idea of trombone *after* the student has chosen the instrument. Help them achieve an identity as a trombonist. Teach them about the great players and teachers. Help students develop a pride in their choice of instrument.
6. Allow rest opportunities to compensate for the awkwardness of holding the trombone. Watch for problems with mouthpiece placement, posture, hand positions, etc., which the instrument's weight might cause.
7. *Teach Fundamentals.* Do not be a slave to a method book. Allow students to focus on new skills separately from their music. Avoid teaching new lines from a book and a new skill at the same time. Do not teach two new skills at once.
8. Nothing is more important to the young trombonist than developing tone quality, intonation, and articulation skills. If the trombone student moves too fast, too soon, it is difficult to correct these skills at a later point in the student's development. While the problems can be addressed in private lessons, the opportunity for effective daily monitoring is lost once the student enters a performing ensemble.
9. A student's ability level in slide action and intonation skills determines when it is appropriate for new rhythmic concepts to be *played* on the instrument. For young trombonists, mental comprehension of the material will usually be ahead of the physical skills that the trombone demands.
10. *Teach music theory.* Teach students note names, intervals, key signatures, scale construction, understanding of time signatures and pulse, rhythms (until they rival your percussionists), sight singing (until they rival your choir), musical terms, etc.
11. Rhythmic skills can be taught separately from the instrument. A student's comprehension of rhythm can progress well beyond their temporary lack of slide action or intonation skills.
12. Do not assume that once material has been presented that it was learned. Always respond to the student's attempt to use your information. Mostly, we teach students concepts that require years of constant feedback.
13. Make ear training an important part of your class. Teach your trombonists to hear and identify intervals.
14. Have students learn to vibrate correct pitches on the mouthpiece alone as a way to develop tone quality, ear training, and air usage. Use a piano to give a reference tone. It helps if the student trombonist has some piano skills and home access to a keyboard.

15. Always have students learn to (a) sing lines on correct pitches, (b) count lines while placing the slide, and (c) play the line vibrating exact pitches on the mouthpiece alone before performing with the instrument.
16. Unless you are teaching specific ensemble skills, listen to students play alone. Do not allow a group to hide an individual's problems or your ability to hear them.
17. Monitor embouchure, mouthpiece placement, posture, and hand position daily. Have the student bring a mirror to monitor facial movement (a clip-on car visor mirror is great).
18. *Quality requires constant monitoring.* If you play-along with your class they do not hear your playing and you cannot keep track of what your students are doing.
19. Learning intonation on trombone utilizes all three learning styles: auditory, kinesthetic, and visual. The student must hear the pitches/intervals, feel the arm angle, and visually monitor placement of positions. Posture and slide action are part of tuning.
20. Lip slurs are important exercises for improving tone, embouchure strength, flexibility, and range. Teach students to do lip slurs with minimal or no facial movement, no head or instrument movement, no breaks or bumps in the slurs when changing, and evenness of volume and tone color. Do not go faster, higher, or lower than a student can perform with correct physical fundamentals. Have the students use their mirrors.
21. Daily teach the concept of aural, visual, and physical effortless.
22. Do not teach slide action until you have taught proper lubrication of the hand slide. Monitor the condition of your students' trombone slides weekly.
23. Require practice cards.
24. Teach your students what practicing is, how to organize a practice session, and techniques that help them achieve their goals. If students do not learn to *identify* and *solve* musical and physical problems, then they are not practicing correctly.
25. Require your students to own a metronome. Teach them how to use it. If you do not regularly use a metronome in class – and furnish metronome markings for your students – they will not use them at home. Approach playing with metronome both as an ensemble skill and a way of learning “internal pulse.”
26. Teach students how to use a tuner as soon as they can make a centered sound. Small tuners are relatively inexpensive.
27. Discuss each item on the *Physical Skills Checklist* with your staff and private instructors. The staff must be uniform in their approach, rhetoric, and expected quality levels. The private instructor should be your specialist, however, if you cannot agree on concepts, do both yourself and your students a favor and find a new instructor. You want to be able to strongly support your private teaching staff.
28. Encourage students to use home audio and video equipment as a valuable practice tool. Do a video demonstration in class on spotting posture errors, embouchure problems, and any inconsistency of slide positions.
29. Encourage your students to own CDs or MP3s of great performers (my students have them on their phones or tablets – as do I). Help them choose models to emulate. Discuss with them the qualities that you admire in those performers. (This is also a great way to start listening to the instrument's literature and discussing various musical styles.)
30. Teach mental focus as a skill. Make your students aware that developing a high level of concentration is part of becoming a good performer. Insist on concentration in all learning and performing situations (classes, practice, rehearsals, performances, etc.). Waiting until the concert, contest, or audition is too late.

31. Do not wait until students are in a performing band to teach ensemble skills. Expect students to learn to watch the conductor, start notes together, move together, release together, match pitches, etc.

32. Students know when they are learning and when their time is being wasted. The best solution for keeping quality students in your program is to teach them how to play their instruments.

33. Frustration is often created by unreasonable expectations. Give students positive feedback on progress and help them learn patience. Let them know that various skills will require different periods of time to show solid improvement. Help students identify improvement in their attempts. "You don't have to be perfect to be better."

JOE DIXON is well known as a trombonist, brass clinician, instructor, and lecturer. He currently serves as a Master Clinician / Consultant for school music programs throughout Texas. His students have been welcomed at many of the world's great music schools including *The Juilliard School*, *Manhattan School of Music*, *Yale University*, *Indiana University*, *Harvard University*, and the *Royal Academy of Music* in London. His students have performed with the *St. Louis Symphony Orchestra*, the *Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra*, the *New York Philharmonic*, the *San Antonio Symphony Orchestra*, the *English Chamber Orchestra*, the *Italian National Radio Orchestra*, the *San Francisco Ballet Orchestra*, *I Solisti Veneti*, the *Kennedy Center Orchestra*, *Orquesta Sinfonica del Estado de Mexico*, and numerous other orchestras and chamber ensembles in North & South America, Europe, and Japan.

JOE DIXON's teachers included LEON BROWN (*University of North Texas*), ALLEN OSTRANDER (Bass Trombone, *New York Philharmonic*; *NBC Symphony* under Toscanini; *Juilliard*), and ROGER SMITH (Solo Trombone, *Metropolitan Opera Orchestra*; Solo Euphonium & Assistant Conductor, *The Goldman Band*; *Juilliard*). He was a composition student of electronic music pioneer MERRILL ELLIS (1916-1981) and toured with Prof. ELLIS as a soloist and ensemble member of his *New Music Group*. JOE DIXON began private teaching trumpet and trombone at the age of 16 and by the age of 19 maintained a private studio of 120 students. He has taught in the United States and Europe. As a trombonist, his performance experience includes symphony, opera, ballet, chamber music and appearances as a soloist.

JOE DIXON has presented hundreds of teacher training programs and has given Master Classes and lectures on brass pedagogy at numerous universities, specialist schools as well as national music educator conventions. His Master Classes and mini-residencies have included visits to *Indiana University*, the *University of Houston*, the *University of Texas*, and presentations in Germany and Italy. In 2002 he was a panelist for the *Music Educators National Conference (MENC) Biennial* in Nashville, Tennessee. He has presented lectures for the "Careers in Music" program at *Southern Methodist University*, as well as lectures for its Brass Methods Classes. Recently, he has presented clinics for the *Texas Bandmasters Association*.

JOE DIXON was a Session Producer and/or sound engineer for critically acclaimed recordings by EDDIE GREEN and TOM BENNETT conducting the *University of Houston Wind Ensemble*, including the series of recordings for the *International Grainger Society* of wind works by Percy Grainger. The Ensemble's recording of "The Planets" (Holst) and "Appalachian Spring" (Copland) was honored as a semifinalist in three categories for a 1999 Grammy Award (Best Classical Recording, Best Orchestral Performance and Best Engineered Album, Classical) as well as a listing in the *Stereophile* magazine "Records to Die For" category. His project - music of Vittorio Giannini - was released by *Naxos* label in 2006.

JOE DIXON is a Lifetime Member of the *International Trombone Association* and a member of the *British Trombone Society*.