



Teaching The New Recruit

By Greg Bassani
APBA Drumming Principal



Introduction

I have been teaching drummers for some thirty years now and this experience has allowed me to formulate an approach that I find successful when confronted with.....
..”the new recruit”.

I think that many of us have been in the position of having to take responsibility for teaching a new drumming recruit, and it can be an overwhelming task at first. However, I would encourage you to embrace the challenge because you, your band, and the learner will all benefit from your efforts, no matter how inefficiently you may go about the process at the start. Fundamentally, I believe that there is a bit of ‘teacher’ in all of us and also that each recruit has an inherent ability to learn. Bringing these two factors together under the right circumstances results in a keen teacher and a receptive learner which are the essential ingredients for progress.

Context

What I will outline in this short article is the approach that I have implemented at Scotch College Adelaide, and as many will know, this has been my major forum for teaching drummers for the past 18 years. I have had a number of generations of drummers pass through the band in this time and they have all been successful. It is important to note here that I don’t just define ‘success’ as being the results on the competition field. I define ‘success’ more broadly to include the development of a musical skill through application and self-discipline, and the resulting contribution to a team (the band). With this in mind, you can probably now appreciate how I have taught drummers over the years who have never performed in a band competition

but who have become ‘successful’ musicians in the band.

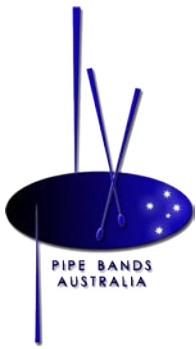
I accept drumming learners from year 5 onwards (ages 10 and up) and but put a major effort into recruiting from the Scotch Middle School (years 7 and 8). Usually, the students have the physical size to cope with carrying a drum at this age and they also have at least 4 years in front of them before finishing school.

Here are some guiding principles that I have adopted:

1. keep the students active with new and challenging things to do.
2. set the students up for early success not failure.
3. only teach essential music theory to students, and then in context, not by itself.
4. get the students playing on a drum as soon as possible.
5. have the students marching in the band as soon as possible, even before they can play correctly on a drum.
6. set goals for the students’ first band performance and work towards them.
7. continually reassess their performance and set new goals.

By way of clarification:-

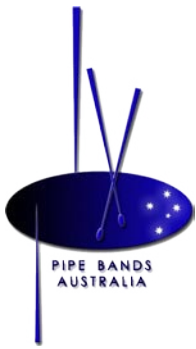
1. Keep the students active with new and challenging things to do. I consider that with new recruits, I have a fairly small opportunity to capture their interest and retain them in the learners program. I provide the students with a book of drumming exercises (I call it “*Drumming Rudiments for Survival in a Pipe Band*”) and make sure that I explain what the learning process is all about,



Teaching The New Recruit

including my expectations of their rate of progress. It's also nice to know what their expectations are, though often they are a bit reluctant to say much (assuming they have expectations). In my earlier days of teaching, I used to hammer the basic rudiments and then only progress to the next in the line when the current one had been mastered. We have moved on since then (fortunately!) and most of today's younger generation will not respond to this technique as it really only works with the most highly motivated students.

2. Set the students up for early success not failure. Uppermost in my mind is to recognise and reward success with all learners. As they say, "*from little things big things grow*", and the early achievement of success is a great boost for the students' confidence and motivation. All of my drumming students (bass, tenor, or snare) begin with a set of "Timing and Counting" exercises. The first couple of exercises really only assess if they are warm and breathing, and everyone is able to play them. However, it gives me the first major opportunity for positive feedback.....with a tiny bit of fault correction thrown in. This set of 6 exercises becomes a little more challenging towards the bottom of the page and so I sometimes have to look harder to find the good points for feedback. Basically, if the learning experience is made a negative one through too much criticism or even the lack of positive feedback, the learner with 'walk'. I believe this last point even relates to more senior players.
3. Only teach essential music theory to students, and then in context not by itself. My new drumming students at Scotch all have a basic appreciation of music theory. Sometimes it is nothing more than the knowledge of what a *note* is and what a *repeat* sign looks like, but at least it's a starting point. Gone are the days when I would sit the students down for a music theory lesson. They generally find it to be uninteresting ("*boring*") and too much like their academic lessons in school. Instead, I teach the fundamentals of note and rudiment recognition as they progressively learn to play more exercises and drum scores. The students are effectively developing 'pattern recognition' in the early stages. When they have become more senior players in the band, I will push the boundaries a little by encouraging them to understand some more music theory related to their instrument.
4. Get students playing on a drum as soon as possible. That's what they come along for and if it's delayed too much then they won't stay. Besides this point, there is the added advantage that they develop a feel for making a sound on the drum and controlling the actions of their sticks. This is totally contrary to my original approach when I first started teaching, but I am now very comfortable with it and find that the students appreciate being able to experience the drum, even on the first lesson in some cases.
5. Have the students marching in the band as soon as possible, even before they can play correctly on a drum. I suppose my overall approach could be classed as "multi-skilling", in some respects. There is no reason why the students shouldn't be learning the 'band-craft' things like marching in line, standing at attention, etc,



Teaching The New Recruit

at the same time that they are learning to play their first piece of music. At first, they will just march along with the band without a drum and concentrate on the basics, but I will get them to carry their drum within a few band practices. This does a lot to encourage them and they develop a real sense of being a part of the team from early in their drumming career.

6. Set goals for the students' first band performance and work towards them. The students are always keen to know how soon they can get into the performing band (the era of "give it to me right now!") and I am always keen to tell them. They remain (or become?) motivated when they know the date of their first band performance and this can push them along for several months. It might even be that they can only play a couple of pieces of music by the time the performance date arrives. That is no problem for me because they usually have so many other things to think about that they only have a little time left to play, in any case.

7. Continually reassess their performance and set new goals. This is a very important issue for me. I always try to present to students a *realistic* challenge while at the same time praising their efforts in meeting the current challenges. It usually consists of setting slightly more complex rudiments or pieces of music to learn, or even aiming to include them in more significant band events such as our annual "Taste of Scotch" concert (Friday 19th August) or in our country and interstate visits.

What I have presented here is not educational *rocket science* but merely a snapshot of how I go about the training process with new drummers in the Scotch College Adelaide Pipe Band. I have found this approach to be successful and is the result of some thirty years of teaching drumming (18 at Scotch) and I have no doubt that the process will continue to evolve. If you have any questions or comments, I would be happy to answer these for you. My contact details are on the Scotch College Adelaide web site or on the Australian Pipe Band Association web site. Happy Teaching!