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F. Burrack

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## Enhanced assessment in instrumental programs

### Abstract

Offered in this article are examples of student self and group assessments for use in an instrumental music performance classroom. The purpose is to provide instrumental music teachers an authentic context for applying self and group assessments. Prompted by an intensive, school-wide curriculum project, the instrumental music teachers in Carroll, Iowa expressed concerns relating to the development and documentation of students' musical understanding, aesthetic sensitivity, and critical listening skills. What developed was a curriculum project in which the instrumental students participated in music portfolio development which included self and group assessments.

## Enhanced assessment in instrumental programs

### Introduction

Within instrumental music instruction, enhancements in the assessment of student musical understanding and progress is an ongoing process. In my eighteen years of instrumental music teaching, it has been my observation that instrumental music programs in American schools have demonstrated strength in the quality development of performance skills, technical proficiency, and performance experiences. Curriculum documents exhibit learning objectives focused on performance skill development and are often subjectively assessed by the instructor. Instrumental music classes, when asked for evidence of music learning historically turn to the attendance record, the sound of the concert, the variety and range of music presented, or the frequency with which students perform.

Performance directors are driven to present fine concerts; that is how their success is judged....[This is] further intensified in the community of school music teachers, whose values, shaped by all the [surrounding] forces center strongly on producing the best possible players, singers, and groups....The emphasis in the music program is almost completely on performance, and that emphasis has over the years garnered strong support from both parents and school administrators. (Reimer, 1989)

Assessing student progress on attendance and technical skills are important aspects of instrumental music teaching, but other assessment possibilities exist which can provide opportunities to observe students' music learning in a broader context that can focus on higher order thinking skills, such as problem solving and creative thinking. In this article, a few ideas are presented, including self and group assessments as a vehicle for enhancing musical understanding, aesthetic sensitivity, and critical listening skills.

Prompted by an intensive, school-wide curriculum project, the instrumental music teachers in Carroll, Iowa expressed concerns relating to the development and documentation of students' musical understanding, aesthetic sensitivity, and critical listening skills. What developed was a curriculum project in which the instrumental students participated in music portfolio development which included self and group assessments. The self and group assessments, similar to ideas promoted in Arts PROPEL (Davidson, et al., 1992), have become a vital aspect

to the musical growth of the instrumental students in the Carroll Community Schools. I hope that the context provided will enable instrumental music teachers to expand upon the possibilities for the practical application of these forms of assessment.

### The Student Self-Assessment

The vertical sequence of self-assessment begins in the 5th grade. A student's first experience with self-assessment is initiated as a group process and then proceeds to the individual self-assessments. Once during their 5th grade and 6th grade, each student records portions of solo pieces and experiences listening to the taped performance. While they listen, the instructor guides the students' listening experience to promote understanding of the concepts associated with rhythm, pitch & tone, technique, and musicianship. While critically listening, the students write aural observations and make suggestions for improvement in each category included on the assessment form as seen figure 1. The instructor provides immediate feedback concerning the quality of the performance as it relates to each category, guiding appropriate context of the student's comments, and offering suggestions on how to improve the students' self-assessment abilities. The improvement goals set by the student on the self-assessment form are also enhanced by the teacher during discussion of the student's assessment and becomes the focus for future music lessons. The students place their tape and self-assessment form into their portfolio folder. The student and teacher periodically refer to the assessment form to assess progress toward the goals.

The process occurs twice annually in 7th and 8th grades. In high school, the taping and self-assessment is a portion of the academic requirements for band. At the beginning of each high school quarter, selected scales, and excerpts from the music studied in the band class are given to the students in preparation for taping later in the quarter. When the students feel that they are prepared to record the selections, they tape their individual playing following the instructions as seen in figure 2. The students are allowed to record the chosen sections as many times as they would like in order to achieve their desired outcome. The goal is to have one quality recording of each selection on the tape when they complete the recording. The student assesses their performance using the assessment form. The instructor provides constructive feedback to the students utilizing the rubric as shown in Figure 3.

Self-assessments are maintained in individual portfolios by each student. Periodically these assessment forms are reviewed in lessons for reflection of goals formerly set by the student and to establish new goals for the consecutive quarter.

### The Large Group Assessment

Another assessment for developing sensitivity in listening skills, awareness of musical concepts, and improvement in assessment skills is referred to as the “Group-Assessment” as seen in Figure 4. Since a similar form of evaluation is a part of the state large group contest, it seems appropriate to prepare the students for this type of evaluation by teaching them to similarly assess themselves.

Scattered throughout rehearsals over the weeks of preparation for concerts or contests, the students listened recorded segments of their rehearsals. Students are encouraged to (a) listen for specific elements of tone quality, intonation, rhythm, balance and blend, technique, interpretation, and articulation, and (b) write at least one specific observation in each category on the assessment sheet. Immediately following the assessment, the students share their comments and suggestions. When the students verbally offer their suggestions for improvement and immediately apply these suggestions by performing the selection, they gain independence and self direction in the learning process and exhibit an enhanced performance quality.

In addition to the goals set by the students in the class discussion of their observations, the instructor compiles the students suggestions from the assessment forms and utilizes these in subsequent rehearsals as a reminder to the students of their own improvement goals. As with the self-assessment, the instructor reviews each completed assessment form and provides suggestions to each students for enhancement of listening and discrimination skills. The rubric utilized in the assessment project is shown in Figure 5.

All tapes are listened to and self-evaluations reviewed by the director once during the quarter for each student. Listening to nearly 100 tapes and reviewing the self-assessments totals to about 3 hours per quarter. As compared to an English teacher reading 20 or so term papers in a quarter, this seems a reasonable investment of time outside of class. The large group assessments takes place during the classroom period, except for the compilation of student goals. The student suggestions are useful in guiding future determinations of rehearsal content. The portfolios are

maintained by students.

#### How do these assessments fit into grading?

In order to be accepted equal to all other academic classes in the school curriculum, a well-defined grading scheme had to be presented. Progress toward this goal was achieved through a grant from the Iowa Arts Council and a program titled The Professional Development Residency Program. With the assistance of Dr. Darling from Luther College, a format for applying the self and group assessments into the grading procedures developed as seen in Figure 6. In response to this grading procedure, the administration and the school board shifted the credit received by students in instrumental programs equal to all other academic course offerings and included this credit on the student grade-point average.

A computer database is utilized to monitor individual and group lessons to provide weekly feedback to the students as well as provide the parents with student progress reports. A portion of a progress report is included in Figure 7. This data-base is later merged with a grading data-base to print out a quarterly report card for the band class as shown in Figure 8.

#### What did the Students Think of Assessments?

It appeared that the students recognize a relationship between the assessments and their progress in musical understanding. Students seem to develop a more profound musical understanding through the assessments than experiencing the music without such a process as demonstrated by their feedback. Some of the students view the assessments as a motivating tool: “It motivated those people to practice on those hard spots more, not that we should need motivation, but trust me, we do!” (name deleted for submission, 1998, p.117). The act of assessment can provide an incentive to enhance critical listening skills provided by the focus of the assessment structure. In reference to long-range curriculum planning, although an initial uneasiness was observed in students toward self taping, listening, and assessing, many students overcame this barrier and later became a stimulus for further enhancement:

The assessments were something I dreaded, but now I can really see how this was an effective teaching style providing me with the motivation to improve. Without the assessments, I am very sure that I would not have worked as hard on my own. (Burrack, 1998, pp.80, 81)

Through continued exposure, in agreement with Davidson et al. (1990), students learn to

listen critically to themselves through the guidance provided by the assessment forms. The primary improvement recognized by the students is listening with a conscious awareness to musical concepts. Learning what to listen for is one of the major contributions of the assessments. The element categories provide direction in student listening contributing to informed musical decisions by helping students focus on the concepts around which the music had been created and will be performed. Students come to understand the composer's intent in terms of the relationship of their individual part to the whole ensemble. They reveal an enhancement in understanding of ensemble playing: "It [group-assessment] has given me a wider appreciation of what it takes to make an ensemble work, and work well together" (Burrack, 1998, p.86), and of individual playing abilities: "Assessment through taping enabled me to hear the tiny things....The categories like tone, rhythm, articulation, etc. helped me identify the small things that I really needed to work on.... [Without these categories] I never would have noticed [the tiny things]" (Burrack, 1998, p.58). The categories enhance a transfer of understanding through guidance provided by the teacher supporting the findings of Beane (1995). Musical concepts brought to the awareness of the students, and enhanced through application, develop increasingly complex musical understandings:

There is no doubt in my mind that the taping and assessing had positively contributed to both my musical understanding and technical proficiency...I became more aware of correct or incorrect rhythms, tempos, and just overall ear training....Those tapes were the best ear training that I had had in my high school career. (Burrack, 1998, p.81)

In utilizing self/group assessments, teachers provide opportunities for students to assess themselves through the use of tape recordings which will enable them to authentically assess their performance beyond what was possible while they were playing. Some students recall that they initially did not take the assessments seriously, but when they came to hear difficulties in their playing, they referred to the experience as: "an awakening. It was mostly the feeling that I am not working like I should be....I now feel kind of bad as I look back wishing that I would have taken it more seriously" (Burrack, 1998, p.113). Others felt that the assessments enabled an increased responsibility toward his music learning:

Through verbalizing our observations in the assessments, the improvements became more evident to us, assigning more value to what the instructor told us....It made us responsible

for our learning by our actually taking part in that learning and not just being an instrument of the director. (Burrack, 1998, pp.64, 66)

An effective learning environment can be established by the assessments offering the opportunity for students to develop an awareness of the music which was initially inaccessible. Many students are not aware of many technical and expressive aspects in their playing until they listen to and evaluate the recording. This enhanced awareness presents the students with the opportunity to construct meaning of particular occurrences and, through further rehearsal, apply the isolated observations to the musical whole. These individual constructions exist in an interactive relationship of the student, their prior knowledge, and the assessment experience. Musical concepts are developed and refined within the assessment context developing a new and broader understanding of the relationship to the musical whole.

Assessments appear to enhance student ownership of the music learning. With independent musicianship as a goal, self/group assessments are a vehicle through which students perceive and reflect upon their individual and group performance thus answering the concerns by Wolf (1987/88). According to Wolf, if a student does not perceive a problem, or understand the solution, a barrier exists hindering student improvement. Music instructors should provide such opportunities for students to discover their capabilities through self/group assessments which will enable them to conquer their problems. In agreement with Goolsby (1995) and Pearse (1997), music teaching should include techniques that assist students in taking responsibility for music learning enabling them to become self-sufficient musicians. Educational strategies such as Arts PROPEL (Davidson, et al., 1992) and Dimensions of Learning (Marzano, et al. 1993) provide similar principles upon which to design assessment for a performance music classroom. The practical application of self & group assessments furnished in this article may provide instrumental music teachers an authentic reference upon which to establish their own assessments. Each teaching situation offers individualistic challenges in expectation and accomplishment. The assessments in this article are but one example of the variety of possibilities of educational tools to use which may enhance a student's understanding and relationship with music. Other contents of the portfolio included theory and music fundamental tests, student compositions, and memorabilia such as concert programs and newspaper articles. Goolsby (1995) provided further authentic examples of portfolio application in music education.

Strategies that personalize the music learning process, including self and group assessments, can enable the students' self-reflective capacity nurturing their musical self image supporting the findings of Jordan (1993) and Ericson (1996). Through exposing students to a variety of assessment methods, music teachers can encourage students to appreciate the importance and value of their own musical decision-making abilities. The teacher gradually can move out of the role of instructor into the role of mentor.

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### Figure Captions

Figure 1. Self-assessment form for taped segments

Figure 2. Instructions for the students on the self-assessment form

Figure 3. Self-assessment rubric for taped music segments

Figure 4. Group-assessment of the ensemble from taped recording

Figure 5. Group-assessment rubric of the ensemble from taped recording

Figure 6. Quarterly grading requirements

Figure 7. Student progress report

Figure 8. One version of the quarterly report card

Figure 1.

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

MUSIC PERFORMED: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**Tone Quality** (*overall control, warmth, clarity and consistency*)

  
\_\_\_\_\_

**Pitch Accuracy and Intonation** (*accuracy and intonation of all pitches in all registers*)

  
\_\_\_\_\_

**Rhythmic Accuracy** (*steadiness of beat and accuracy of the printed rhythms*)

  
\_\_\_\_\_

**Musical Interpretation** (*musicianship and presentation of musical ideas such as phrasing, tempo, style, and dynamics*)

  
\_\_\_\_\_

**Articulation and Technique** (*precision of marked articulations and appropriate interpretations of markings*)

  
\_\_\_\_\_

**Goals for Personal Improvement** (*specific ways that you can improve upon any aspect covered above and how you can personally contribute more to the large group setting*)

  
\_\_\_\_\_

Figure 2.

1. Get your tape from the portfolios.
2. Check to make sure the tape is at the end of the last recorded section (do not record over previous sections please).
3. Place the recorder number counter on 000 so you will know where to rewind to.
4. Record the section as many times as it takes to play it well. Note and counting mistakes are not acceptable. Dynamics and other expressive elements are expected.
5. Rewind the final recording and assess your recorded sections using the form supplied. Please use musical terminology in your written assessment with as much detail as possible. Incomplete assessments will not be acceptable.
6. Rewind the final recording again so it is ready to be listened to by the director.
7. Replace the tape in your portfolio. Tapes will be listened to and assessments read by the director and returned to you as soon as possible.

Figure 3.

(25 points total)

**Tone Quality :**

5=Characteristic sound in all registers; 4=Some inconsistency in registers; 3=Acceptable quality with inconsistent qualities between registers; 2=Poor quality a good deal of the time; 1= Poor tone quality most of the time

Comments:

**Note Accuracy :**

5=Virtually note perfect; 4=Strong performance w/minute flaws; 3=Generally accurate:note/pitch flaws; 2=Recognizable but technically flawed; 1=Basically not recognizable and shows lack of preparation

Comments:

**Rhythmic Accuracy :**

5=Correct rhythms and steady pulse; 4=Minute rhythmic errors/steady pulse; 3=Some rhythmic and/or pulse errors; 2=Several rhythmic/pulse errors; 1=Unsteady pulse

Comments:

**Expressive Quality :**

5=Consistent performance of musical line, phrasing, and nuance; 4=Fairly consistent awareness of line, phrasing, and nuance; 3=lacking in conviction of expression; 2=technically accurate without expression; 1=performance flaws overshadow expressiveness

Comments:

**Articulation :**

5=No difficulties due to articulation; 4=Some difficulties due to articulation; 3=Articulation causes tone distortion; 2=Inaccurate Articulation; 1=Articulation is non-existent

Comments:

**Rubric for Students' Written Self Assessment 25 pointadd up total reference points in each category**

1 pt for each

- specific reference including measure number;
- detailed description of the problem;
- the solution to the problem;
- goals in achieving better results;
- legible writing

Figure 4.

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◇ **Tone Quality:** Consider:  
resonance, control, clarity,  
focus, consistency, warmth

---

◇ **Intonation:** Consider: within  
ensemble, accuracy to  
printed pitches

---

◇ **Rhythm:** Consider: accuracy  
of note and rest values,  
duration, pulse, steadiness,  
correctness of meters

---

◇ **Balance, Blend:** Consider:  
likeness of qualities,  
awareness of ensemble,  
accompaniment

---

◇ **Technique**  
**(facility/accuracy)**  
Consider: artistry, attacks,  
releases, control of ranges,  
musical and/or mechanical  
skill.

---

◇ **Interpretation:**  
Musicianship: Consider:  
style, phrasing, tempo,  
dynamics, emotional  
involvement

---

◇ **Articulation:** Accurate  
following of marked  
articulations and appropriate  
interpretation in relation to  
the style.

---

Figure 5.

---

**National Standard Number : 6****Achievement Standard Letter : b**

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**Assessment strategy :**

Using the video or audio tape of a performance, have the students listen to themselves and evaluate the performance for: Tone Quality; Rhythmic Accuracy; Intonation; Balance and Blend; Technical Accuracy; and Musical Interpretation. There should be at least one description in each category, (similar to a large group contest evaluation). Keep the evaluations in the student's portfolio to compare improvements in listening and assessments with future evaluations.

---

**Description of basic level student response :**

1. The descriptions in the evaluations are written in complete sentences.
  2. The student describes technical imperfections in the performance. Although problems are identified, specific descriptions of measure numbers and rhythmic placement is lacking.
  3. The descriptions use musical terminology.
  4. Descriptions of balance uses words such as: "Trumpets are too loud", "the clarinets are out of tune"
  5. Analyzations are centered around technical proficiency and lacking in tonal quality and musical interpretation.
- 

**Description of proficient level student response :**

1. The student identifies successes as well as problems in the performance.
  2. Specific placement of problems are identified.
  3. Terminology such as: "Depth of tone", "The clarinets kept their tone dark in the lyrical section", "The clarinets need to adjust their intonation bringing their highest tone up to the center of the pitch" ; identifying specific solutions.
  4. Expressive elements are identified with terminology such as crescendo, rallentando, etc.
- 

**Description of advanced level student response :**

1. The student begins to share feeling they have in relation to the performance. "The crescendo in the trumpet section after E gave me goose bumps", "The climax of the piece was expressed well in the low brass section".
2. The student annualization is so complete that there is not enough space supplied for this evaluation.
3. The student identifies cadences, harmonic tension, and makes comparison to historical genre of the composition.
4. The student spends more time on expressive elements than on technical proficiency.

Figure 6.

**Technical Proficiency and Improvement divided as follows:**

**10%-Ensemble Playing** (graded during the band class period)

**25%-Lesson Grade** Graded on 7 lessons in a nine-week period

*50 points per lesson : Lessons are graded on improvement based on the following:*

*Technical Proficiency {Tuning, Articulation, Fingering, Embouchure, Scales, etc.}*

*Musical Proficiency {Breath Support, Tone Quality, Dynamics, Style}*

**15%-Technical Proficiency** of the selected sections from the band pieces listed below. This may be done during your lesson time or own your own.

**Critical listening** {describing, analyzing, and interpreting}

**10%**-Self-assessment of the tape recorded excerpts listed above. *Follow the instructions on the back of the assessment sheets. Complete sentences and legible writing is required.*

**10%**-Performance Critique following our concert (take place during the band rehearsal). *Graded on completeness, use of appropriate musical terminology, and observable analytical skills.*

**10%-Community Service** - play one of the three pep bands scheduled during this quarter

**20% - Two projects** to be selected from the following: (10% per project)

- Study a **solo** during the quarter for contest, church, or for your lesson. (Self assessment and reflection is required for grade)
- Participation and study of Jazz** through participation in a Jazz ensemble.
- Participation in the **Chamber Ensemble** {7th Period Band only}
- Private study of student conducting** with the band instructor and conduct a piece on a concert. (Self evaluation and reflection is required for credit)
- Private study of theories of teaching and **teaching of a private lesson** at the middle school. (documentation of lessons, and reflection is required for credit) You must have your own transportation and parent permission.

- Write a **research paper** using as a theme one of the styles of music we are playing in band, a composer of one of the pieces we are playing, your instrument, or a selected topic as approved by the band instructor. This paper will have to be a minimum of 2 typed pages and 1 bibliography page, double spaced, Geneva font, size 12. Appropriate footnote style, grammar and spelling.
- Compose a piece of music** : Jazz, Instrumental, Piano, Computer, (you may use the Computer Programs available)(*Final product in the form of either printed music or cassette*)
- Write a letter to one of our music's publishers, composers, or arrangers**. Ask them any questions you may have about the music industry, composing music, or the music we are actually playing. Present a copy of the Letter to your band instructor and he will make sure that it is sent to the proper address.
- Write one or two paragraphs** about any of the pieces we are studying to be read at the concert. These must be concise, but interesting paragraphs about pertinent information about any of the pieces we are studying.
- Play **all of the Pep Band Scheduled** times

Figure 7.

Thu, Nov 7, 1996		music 1	We will concentrate on tone quality improvement and musical expression in a future lesson.	42
	technique 1	Just notes for precision and accuracy.		
Thu, Nov 14, 1996		music 2	We found a difficulty in air flow consistency. As you play higher you must increase your air flow. This will enable you to play with a more relaxed and open tone.	44
	technique 2	Follow the articulation. These are the directions which you must follow as instructions given by the composer.		
	Lip Slurs, Worked on relaxing the embouchure and making even pressure. Christmas Fantasia.			
Thu, Nov 21, 1996		music 3	Let your tone play with less effort. Just Blow	44
	technique 3	Not to bad. you were having trouble the the high G. keep working on making your air flow stronger without squeezing.		
	Christmas Fantasia, Old Scottish Melody, Carol of the Drum			
Thu, Dec 5, 1996		music 4	The tone quality will improve with a stronger air flow. Move your air so your sound projects across the room. Blow with a relaxed throat.	44
	technique 4	The technical proficiency of note accuracy must be improved upon. The major aspect in the the area of tone quality		
	Worked on the C, F, and D Scales. Assigned memorization. Than ran But Not For Me			

Figure 8.

A16 Percussion		Lesson
Class room percentage up to 10 percent	8%	He is a fine musician which has difficulties in reading rhythms accurately but we are working toward this goal. There is also too much enthusiasm in band rehearsal for having fun beyond playing the instrument which disrupts the class.
Lesson grade up to 25 percent	24%	
Technical Proficiency from taping up to 15 percent	13%	
Critical Listening from Self evaluation up to 20 percent	10%	
Community Service pepband up to 10 percent	10%	
Final 20 percent projects	20%	
{All Pep Bands, Letter to Composer, Paragraph for Concert, Study solo or ensemble, or Jazz 2}		
Final Percentage	85%	
Final Grade	B	

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