

REACHING CONSENSUS

Cort A. McClaren

Teachers and learners encounter new challenges, novel approaches, and sometimes-conflicting information every day. Teachers make decisions about curriculum. Learners develop filters allowing select information to penetrate while excluding other bits of knowledge. This dance of cerebral agility is regulated by something called insight. **Insight** is the quality of having a deep understanding of something, as of a complex problem or situation. The depth of insight one brings to an issue is dependent on experience, interest, and desire to learn.

Ever wonder why some students “get it” and others do not? Ask the same question about teachers, “why do some teachers “get it” and others do not?” When simultaneously exposed to identical information, members of a group will extract different information, since each person has different experiences and goals. Varying experience yields different results. To illustrate the point, consider the following question?

Question:

Which grip is best for beginning percussionists: traditional or matched?

Answer(s):

1. I think we can focus this discussion simply by getting clear about what “best” means.
2. Let the band director or percussion teacher decide which grip to start their students on.
3. Not to teach traditional grip to young students would be a travesty.
4. Bottom line – traditional makes absolutely no logical sense.

5. From a teacher’s perspective, the matched grip is more utilitarian, easier to teach, quicker to transfer.
6. I still think that there is a value in saying there is a particular way of playing that is logical and truly reflective of how the body works.
7. It seems obvious that both grips need explanation for different musical applications. I play and teach both grips as I feel they both have their place in the drum set world.

So, what is the answer – which grip is best for beginning percussionists? The answer depends on a person’s insight, i.e. the quality of having a deep understanding of the issue. The fictitious characters that provided answers applied different standards to the question. Each believes he/she is correct.

It is no surprise that noticeable diversity exists in the percussion community. Furthermore, the disparate groups generally do not communicate with one another. When the technical revolution of the 1970’s altered our perspective, a splintering occurred resulting in the emergence of specialization. Drum set styles increased, clearly defined marimba technique opened a new paradigm of potential, percussion ensemble and solo literature exploded, marching percussion began an unprecedented transition, steel drumming arrived, forms of ethnic drumming began to impact the percussion scene, and manufacturers and publishers jumped on the bandwagon of possibilities.

Life before the mid 1970's was simple compared to the complex array of ideas kaleidoscoping through the channels of communication today. A percussionist played traditional orchestra instruments, maybe a little drum set, and limited marimba. Although many percussionists teach general techniques today, they often have special interests that dictate their interest in learning about "other" aspects of the percussion world. Each specialty has its peculiar way of operating. For example, if an individual is primarily a snare drum specialist with a life goal of playing in an orchestra percussion section, without concerted effort to learn pedagogical approaches to other instruments, he/she might conceivably demonstrate limited or outdated knowledge and subsequent insight into broader aspects of percussion. Is this imaginary person more likely to produce percussionists that play in concert bands/orchestras, or will this person develop musicians capable of operating within a wide variety of musical settings including solo performance? Will this individual view student progress solely on the basis of snare drum performance? Will personal goals limit his/her scope of inquiry and subsequent learning? If so, why? The same idea might find credence when viewing any specialty.

The scenario given above may vary, but the underlying premise is the same. **Learning is a result of goal-seeking behavior.**

In direct conflict with the tendency toward specialization is a notion born in the 1970's suggesting that all teachers should develop "total" percussionists. Total Percussion was a marketing scheme of manufacturers as an effort to sell more instruments. "*Convince them that all students should play all instruments and they will buy more, more, more.*" Pedagogues jumped on the bandwagon without adequate materials, methodology, and means for achieving demonstrative results. Incidentally, twenty

to thirty years later, a large number of students graduated from high school still lacking even modest skills to confidently play in a community band. Conversely, some students demonstrated performance skills beyond our wildest dreams. Why the disparity?

The incredible diversity in the percussion community is evident when examining graduate courses in percussion pedagogy. Consider two broad-based outlines for such a course.

Graduate Pedagogy Course No. 1

1. Study of perception and concept development.
2. In-depth discussion of evaluation models.
3. Thorough analysis of all class percussion texts.
4. Influence of history on pedagogical approaches.
5. Relationships among literature, instrument development, and performance techniques.
6. Sequential curriculum applied to percussion.
7. Stages of Learning applied to percussion.
8. Techniques of reinforcement applied to teaching percussion.

Graduate Pedagogy Course No. 2

1. Snare drum grip
2. Importance of fulcrum
3. Basics of drum set and how to apply information to young drummers.
4. How to take an audition
5. Review snare drum methods
6. Review timpani methods
7. How to prepare for a recital
8. How to start a steel band

Each graduate pedagogy course above claims important information. However, the course outlines illustrate different approaches from individuals with different experiences. Question: With whom do you

wish to study? Which course better prepares today's percussion teacher? The teachers in this scenario will most likely select different marimba literature, different timpani literature, and different percussion ensemble literature for their programs. The teachers will likely impose varying importance on learning upper-level marimba literature, high-level percussion ensemble literature, on learning orchestral excerpts, on studying drum set, on keeping up with current trends or on relying on the past as a primary focus.

We find ourselves in a complex world of opposing alternatives: specialty vs. specialty, total percussion vs. up-to-date information, matched vs. traditional, to steel band vs. not to steel band, and so on, and so on. Our insight, or, the information that we bring to a situation, is based on our personal goals and experiences. Since our experiences are different, reaching consensus on critical issues presents enormous challenges. I am often amused when a "famous" percussionist attempts to make significant decisions about teaching young players. Why are we so surprised when the attempt so often fails? Because, interest in a subject must always have a solid foundation in the type of experience under scrutiny in order to achieve ultimate success.

Reaching consensus in our world of endless possibilities may be an unreachable dream. The idea of a unified group of single-minded individuals that band together for the common good does not exist at this point - that is, when considering the global community of percussionists. However, the disturbing barrage of opinions formed by each individual's background and experience can be addressed via appropriate communication. We can seek to open lines of communication and share critical information in efforts to expose students to a broader perspective. THEY will determine the future.

By the way, matched grip is the best!

Dr. Cort McClaren is the former Director of Percussion Studies at the University of North Carolina, President of C. Alan Publications, and Director of The National Conference on Percussion Pedagogy. Dr. McClaren frequently appears at music educators' conventions, presenting clinics on his "Common Elements" approach to teaching percussion. His innovative approach is evident in his book The Book of Percussion Pedagogy and the Book of Percussion Audition Music. He earned the Bachelor and Masters degree from Wichita State University and the Ph.D. from The University of Oklahoma.