



# ORCHESTRA

## Students Helping Students: Maximizing Your Time in Groups

by Katie Gustafson

One of the biggest pedagogical challenges that school orchestra teachers face is seeing students only in large groups. Most string teachers will agree that the fine mechanical skills necessary to play a stringed instrument require one-on-one attention between teacher and student. However, when teaching in a large school orchestra program, the best that many teachers are allowed is group lessons or sectionals in addition to rehearsals, and some programs do not have lessons at all.

To make up for this, teachers must be very creative in how we teach and review material with students. When we teach in groups, it is common for some students to “fall through the cracks,” as we like to say. Maybe they missed the day we taught a certain skill, or they weren’t feeling well that day or just weren’t paying attention. In other cases, students did well at first, but as soon as we moved on to teaching other skills, the original skills become sloppy and bad habits creep in. As a teacher, it is easy for me to say that I taught students a correct bow hold, or how to count rhythms, or how to play in tune, but if students do not retain those skills over time, I need to be honest about whether I was truly successful in accomplishing those goals.

Here is one strategy that I like to use for reviewing and refining skills that students have already learned. If students are given a practice partner and a few minutes to work on a scale or short exercise, students can then help each other watch for the skills you would like them to review. Below I have outlined a possible procedure to follow:

1. Be strategic about partnering students. We often do this in seating charts already for classroom management purposes, but it can have other good results as well. Partnering a stronger player with a weaker player is tempting, but sometimes it makes the

weaker player feel self-conscious, and hinders their participation in the activity. On the other hand, placing two very weak players together can be like the blind leading the blind. Consider pairing by personality, considering which students will most likely feel comfortable helping each other (and weigh the risks of possible socializing).

2. Demonstrate respectful language and kindness before the activity starts. Remind students that when we need help, we appreciate someone being kind and encouraging, rather than critical or mean. Establish some guidelines, such as, “Use polite words and give one compliment for each criticism.”
3. Choose a scale or short musical excerpt that is simple or well enough learned that students will feel confident playing it. This will allow them to focus on refining techniques rather than feeling stressed about playing the notes correctly.
4. Choose a specific skill or skills for students to focus on while they work. (Or, have students brainstorm which skills they most need to work on.) I teach beginners at the elementary school level, so we often focus on things like posture, left hand position, or aiming our fingers for the finger tapes. Older students could focus on things like dynamics, bow contact point for tone quality, or shifting techniques.
5. Give students a short amount of time to play for each other and give each other feedback. You might structure this time differently depending on the age and ability of your players. My elementary students only get 2 minutes to play their scale for their partner and discuss before they switch and have the other person play. (Otherwise things descend quickly into mad-

ness.) However, you might choose to give older students a longer amount of time depending on their level of self-discipline and the number of skills that you want them to address.

6. While students are working, move quickly among the groups, coaching students on their work and complimenting their progress. Evaluate whether students need more direction or more time, and adjust your plan accordingly.
7. Once the time is up, have all students play the excerpt together, and then give them a chance to observe what improvements they heard in their own playing, or in the group.

There are a few reasons that I find this procedure useful. First, all students take their playing more seriously when they know they’re being watched. However, being watched by only one person is far less intimidating than being watched by many people, so they are more likely to be willing to participate. Second, when students are coaching each other, it allows them to naturally take ownership for remembering and executing good technique. Sometimes I even see them continue helping each other in later lessons. Third, it allows many students to get both positive and critical feedback in a short amount of time. Finally, it allows the class to quickly retouch on subjects that I want them to continue reviewing, without monopolizing too much class time.

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