



TECHNOLOGY

Ok, Google: Make My Students Practice

by Levi Comstock

I have finally crossed the Rubicon into the land of assigning weekly playing tests in all my orchestras, and I am never going back. On the weekends the instrument lockers look like a ghost town, and bow hands I had all but given up on are showing signs of new life. The best part is that I am leaving school no later than in years' past and I am volleying back feedback more promptly than ever before.

I have been using Google Classroom for several years as a platform for collecting and grading tests, but a few tweaks to my routine have made it possible to stay on top of 164 tests a week without pulling late nights of grading. The magic formula has been a pre-set calendar of short, specific tests, turned in on time, and self-graded by the performer before I look at them.

I have been working on developing a long-term plan for skills development since I discovered Christopher Selby's book, *Habits of a Successful Orchestra Director* two

years ago. I have been using both of his method books for warmups in all three levels of High School Orchestra at Champlin Park. This August, after seeing him present at the MNSOTA Conference, I was inspired to create a calendar of weekly, four-measure assessments that rotate through left-hand, right-hand and literacy skills. I gave the music, calendar and rubrics to the students at the beginning of the trimester so that they can plan ahead.

Tests are due by class time on Monday on Google Classroom, and if they aren't turned in they can perform them live in class. They record their live performance and post it to Google Classroom with their self-reflection, just as if they had done it at home. If there are more than five or six tests to do in class, we either break them up and do some the next day or have them play a few at a time. Having all the tests in on time makes the grading go much faster. I can click through the whole class, set the speed

to "double" and fill out the rubric as I listen.

Students self-assess when they turn the test in. I ask specific, objective questions like, "Out of 29 notes in this scale, how many are in tune?" or "Does your bow stay parallel to the bridge as you get to the frog?" Having them self-assess means that when it comes time to grade, my comments can often be more succinct. Students usually self-identify when they need to redo because they haven't really learned it yet, and they are seeking me or a friend out for help when they can't get it on their own.

It has been really fun to see students at all levels taking more ownership over their technique this year, learning how to practice efficiently, and hearing the payoff when everyone practices.

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