

## **ORCHESTRATING INTEREST IN MUNDANE TASKS**

By Leslie Long, Middle School and Upper School Band Director and Music Teacher

What is the effect of gamifying instrument practice on the self-motivation and musical curiosity of middle school boys?

### **AREA OF STUDY**

Through most of my 29 teaching years, I witnessed Middle School Band students regularly taking their instruments home over the weekend to practice their band music. I would simply point out passages that needed individual attention, and the student would go home and practice. Unfortunately, practicing at home has become almost non-existent. The band room storage cubbies are full of instruments on Friday afternoons. These boys are talented, and they could make great progress if they would practice more on their own. Our two-day-a-week rehearsals do not give them enough playing time to make real improvements.



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to practice outside our rehearsals. I wondered if by gamifying, or instituting an incentive program, I could re-energize their interest in practicing at home.

I reflected on my students' practice habits. We have a 34-member Middle School Band composed of fourteen 6th graders, six 7th graders, and fourteen 8th graders. Some boys were in Beginning Band in 4th grade, and some started in 5th grade. Not surprisingly, the 8th grade boys learn new music more quickly than the 6th graders. In Beginning Band, I have found in recent years that students get frustrated more easily than in the past. Learning to play an instrument is hard work, and when some students sense that they can't just pick it up and play, they give up rather than put in the necessary work.

I sensed that the boys needed extra motivation to practice outside our rehearsals. I wondered if by gamifying, or instituting an incentive program, I could re-energize their interest in practicing at home. I certainly knew that most of my students loved gaming. They understood the strategies and were energized by a potential win. In their world, they can play a game and start advancing in levels almost immediately. I wondered how I could motivate students to want to "level up" in playing their instruments.

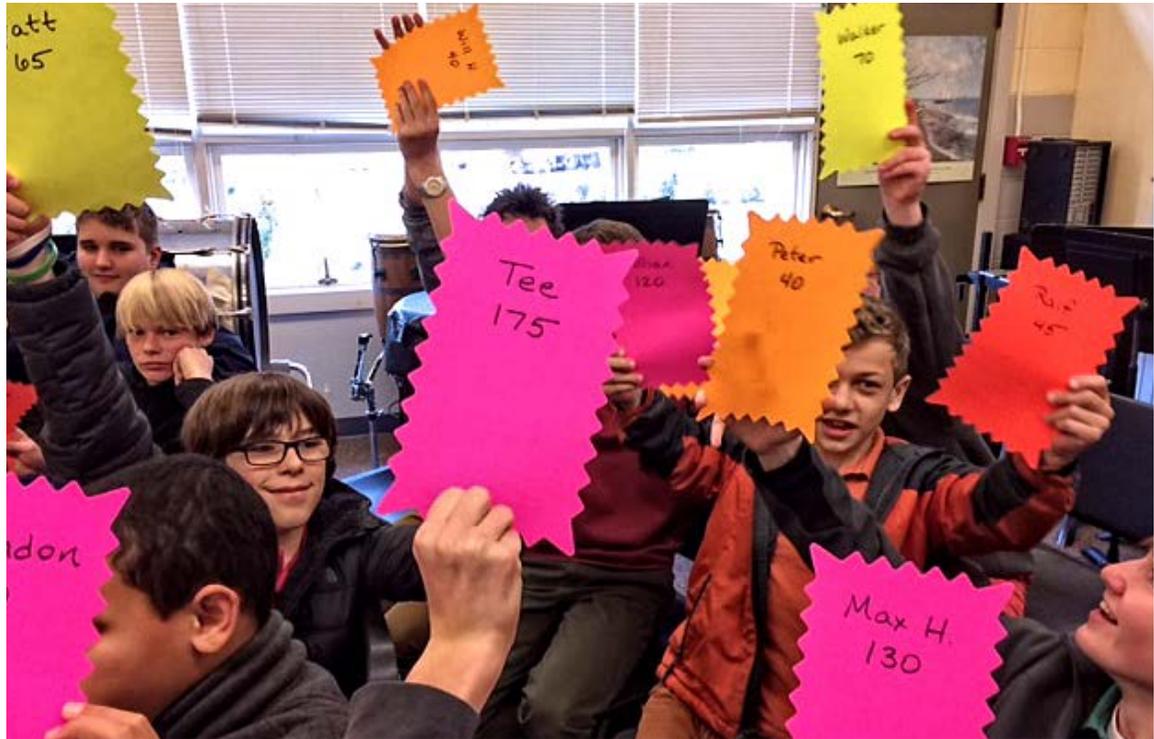
I also hoped that my students might go beyond just practicing. Could I revitalize the joy in playing their instrument and encourage musical curiosity? I wanted them to pick up their instruments at home and simply enjoy the process of making music. While some boys randomly pick out tunes on the guitar or piano, and others occasionally make spontaneous noise on a drum set, I was looking for more exploration with their instruments. For example, I would love to see and hear a boy pick out his favorite movie theme for a clarinet or trumpet.

## WHAT RESEARCH TELLS US

When students are in the early stages of learning to play instruments, the teacher's role is to foster interest and enthusiasm. I belong to a Facebook group with over 20,000 band directors from around the world, and there is a universal theme within our discussion threads: finding ways to motivate students to practice is one of the great mysteries of the profession. Band directors use all types of methods, from practice cards to group competitions to gamifying, with mixed results.

In the TedEd Talk, *How to Practice Effectively...for Just About Anything*, Dr. Greene, a peak performance psychologist, explains how the brain is hard at work during practice of an instrument. Practicing builds up a layer of myelin which protects axons in the brain. These axons send electrical signals from the brain to our muscles, and this extra myelin makes for much more efficient communication. He describes an "information superhighway" between muscles and our brains (Bosler & Greene, 2017). Therefore, it's imperative that the boys practice with consistency and focus, constantly pushing themselves.

Gamification has been defined in several different ways, but I prefer this definition: "the process of making activities more game-like" (Werbach, 2014). Gamified instruction gives a reward for repeating a task. It is successful because it helps motivate and engage the student, and it helps them develop persistence and self-discipline. Gamifying content allows students to take charge of their learning (Christo & Darina, 2017). Ideally, game elements will immerse the student in their learning experience, and they will stay engaged in the activity for a longer period of time.



Boys in particular can benefit from the incorporation of games in the classroom. A 2018 qualitative study by Engerman, MacAllan, and Carr-Chellman finds that engaged learning can occur for boys through game playing. Games can also motivate boys and influence the effort they will put into a task. In their book *Reaching Boys, Teaching Boys: Strategies That Work – and Why*, Michael Reichert and Richard Hawley (2010) discuss how use of games in the classroom can help boys with independent discovery, allowing them to complete tasks individually at their own pace. I was anxious to discover if games might have the same effect on the boys' instrument practice.

## METHOD

Before beginning my action, I gathered some baseline information from the boys. I interviewed nine students and asked them how often they practiced. Of the nine boys, six said they do not practice regularly at home, explaining that it is difficult to transport the instruments along with their backpacks and sports bags. One boy said he might consider practicing if it was for a graded assignment, or if he could get candy. The boys who did regularly practice said they did it because they enjoy playing their instruments. I was interested in figuring out how to get everyone else to share this sentiment.

I created a Band Buck\$ chart that showed how many Buck\$ could be earned based on specific tasks. Some of the enriching activities included practicing for several days in a row, playing musical scales, going to a concert, playing a movie theme, or performing in a concert. Boys had two months to complete tasks and earn Buck\$.

I monitored the boys' progress throughout the project. Each boy received a chart and kept track of the tasks he completed by marking the completion date. Some tasks required a parent signature, and some I signed. As a boy showed me his chart, I wrote the information on a Post-It note and recorded it on a spreadsheet. This way I could have a running total of each boy's earnings. A few weeks before the end of the program, I sent out a "Top 5" list and let each boy

know how much he had earned. I was hoping this would motivate them to keep at it, and it worked for a few of them. I also tried to make a brief announcement at the beginning or end of our rehearsals to remind them about upcoming concerts or easy ways to earn Buck\$.

Throughout the study, I kept a journal to record my observations regarding how the boys were responding to the incentive program. The end of band rehearsal coincides with the mid-morning break, allowing boys to hangout in the band room if they wished. I noticed more boys staying after rehearsal to play their instruments. I documented instances of boys trying out new things on keyboard instruments or an impromptu jam session led by 8th graders.

At the conclusion of the project, the boys participated in a videotaped interview or filled out a survey so I could gather their reflections on Band Buck\$ and how it affected their instrument practice.

## FINDINGS

All boys took part in the Band Buck\$ program, and most boys reported that this program motivated them to practice. They earned Buck\$ ranging between \$40 to \$765. One 6th-grade boy said he really enjoyed practicing on a non-band day, and he felt like Band Buck\$ inspired him to practice. While 92% of the students agreed that reward systems can help with practice, only 50% said they practiced because they knew there would be a reward. I was also pleased with how well they played during our December concert. I sense that a resurgence in enthusiasm towards playing their instruments contributed to their performance.

**THE BOYS WHO PARTICIPATED OVERWHELMINGLY SAID THEY played with a high level of confidence in the concert.**

The boys particularly enjoyed the culminating auction activity. There was a very excited atmosphere in the band room, as a group of lively and energized boys bid on auction items. (The most popular items were gift cards, a small basketball, and a Star Wars Pop figure bobble head.) A group of 6th graders realized part way through the auction that they could pool their earnings for a better prize that they could share; collaboration was truly part of the day!

Some Band Buck\$ activities were more popular than others. In a written survey, boys agreed that the online options were an easy way to earn Buck\$. They could go to a couple of different note-naming websites to practice their music reading skills. Other boys talked about how much they liked attending concerts where they could hear their instrument being played. While neither of these Band Buck\$ options seemed to help boys learn skills regarding playing instruments, they are very helpful in developing well-rounded musicians. They also contributed to the boys' musical curiosity. I was glad to hear in student interviews that several of the boys mentioned figuring out a movie theme as being their favorite practice task.

Musical curiosity is difficult to measure. As a music teacher, I like to see students involved in music activities that interest them. One goal of Band Buck\$ was to show the students that there are multiple ways to have fun with music on their band instrument. Everyone does not need to gravitate to the drum set or guitar; a student can just as easily pick up his trumpet or flute and sound out a tune. Months after the research period, I am still seeing students exploring a little more. Some boys truly enjoy playing their instruments. I still don't know if musical curiosity is something I can actually engineer, but it is certainly something I am happy to encourage.

The boys had several recommendations for future versions of the BandBuck\$ program. An 8th-grader said he thought the program would benefit from having the boys encourage each other

in the competition for Buck\$ in order to make it less teacher-driven. Some of the boys said they did not really understand what items would be at the auction, so they were not convinced they would be interested in the auction. However, final surveys showed that 89% of the boys said they liked the auction and thought it was a fun way to wrap up the Band Buck\$ program.

### PUTTING FINDINGS INTO PRACTICE

There are conflicting studies on whether incentives in the classroom can help or inhibit learning; however, in the case of Middle School Band, it was helpful to have the motivation in place as we prepared for our December concert. The boys who participated overwhelmingly said they played with a high level of confidence in the concert, and I definitely feel that gamifying practice helped them achieve this level of comfort.

As the majority of the of the boys said they would like to see the program repeated, I will use the Band Buck\$ program again next fall. It's a great way to create a fun attitude towards practice in preparation for winter concerts. There will be a core group of boys who have already been through the program, and they will keep the enthusiasm high as we try again. (They already have ideas for prizes!) I will re-work the list of tasks so it will feel new to everyone, and I will continue my quest to develop musical curiosity in the boys by providing opportunities to get them to play outside of our regular rehearsals. The hope is that the more they play, the more fun they will have, and then they will want to play more.

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