

The Theory and Practice of Clarinet Technique

"In theory, theory and practice are the same. In practice they are not"

PART A: THEORY of clarinet technique

1. Embouchure - we clarinets are different!

The "external" embouchure:

a) It's well-known that chin must be flat.

This helps to stretch flesh under the reed so that vibrations are not dampened. **This is different from all the other reed instruments** which sound best with some degree of cushioning (softer lip) around reed.

b) The amount of mouthpiece taken in the mouth affects the tone. Most students don't take in enough mouthpiece because it makes a bigger sound which feels insecure if they don't have control of the "internal" embouchure.

The "internal" embouchure:

It's perhaps less well-known that the oral cavity must be *small*. The syllable "eee" not "aah."

This helps to deliver a focused air stream before it enters the mouthpiece. **This is different from all the other reed instruments** which sound best with some degree of open-ness to the oral cavity (especially in the low notes).

2. Fingers - more of a problem for clarinets

Good sealing of holes is vitally important and very difficult for young players. **This is different from all the other reed instruments** which either have smaller holes or don't require fingers to cover the actual holes, but just to press pearls etc.

PART B: My “view from here” as a college professor

Being a band director is a much more difficult job than being a professor (!), and putting the above pedagogical theory into practice seems challenging.

Here are my experiences and observations of incoming freshmen (I don't, alas, have any magic solutions...):

The “external” embouchure:

a) While most teachers and students know about the importance of a “flat chin” (students will dutifully tell you that flat chin is important) most students don't *really* do that when they play. A strong clarinet embouchure requires close “policing” which is perhaps only really possible in one-on-one lessons (with a nagging, kind-but-strict teacher!!).

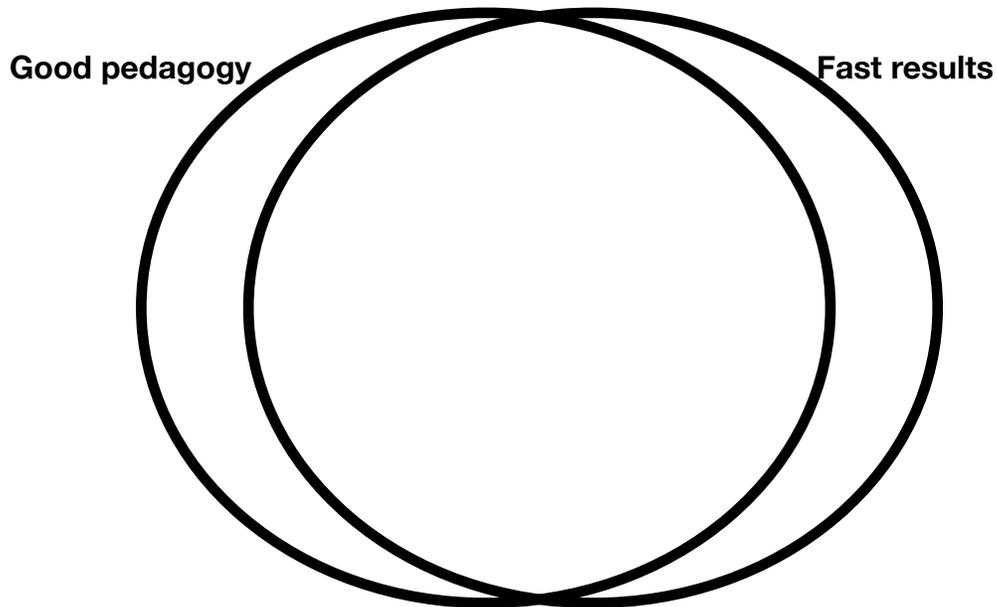
b) While the “paper between reed and mouthpiece” test supposedly tells us how much mouthpiece a student should take in, it seems an unreliable test to me, and students will generally take in too little mouthpiece regardless...

The “internal” embouchure:

This is VERY difficult to teach — I'm still figuring out ways to do this. It's impossible to see what the student is doing because it's inside the mouth. But at least we can insist that the student be aware of their tongue position and vowel sound.

Incomplete overlap between long-term and short-term

Part of the disconnect between pedagogical theory and day-to-day teaching also comes about because of what I see as an incomplete overlap between the best pedagogy and the need we all have for fast results, as shown below:



Some examples:

Teaching altissimo G fingering which is normally way too sharp to use, but sounds just about in tune because the student's embouchure is not correct.

Assigning a student to play bass clarinet because they have trouble playing the upper register on Bb, but sound great on bass.

Having a student play a harder reed because they choke off the tone by not taking in enough mouthpiece (or are biting), and the harder reed will let them get away with that.

Conclusion

Both students and teachers need results. It's ok, and necessary, to do what is best for the immediate needs of the student or ensemble (solo & ensemble or all-region audition is coming up, or contest). But ALSO, don't forget the long game — if you have the luxury of giving private lessons, insist on putting the theory better into practice.