



ABC in Perspective

by M. Max McKee

If you're not one for stories, then jump to the final paragraph and be done with it, because the following requires some rather extensive storytelling and a special kind of perspective.

Perspective is the most curious of bedfellows. It often requires total abandonment of a traditional viewpoint.

Take, for example, the fellow who went to the doctor wearing an enormous sombrero. When the doctor came in to the examining room and the man took off the sombrero, the doctor noticed that he had a huge frog growing right out of his forehead. The doctor circled the man three times with an ever-increasing look of disbelief on his face. Finally, he said, "So, how in the heck did that happen?"

Instantly, the frog spoke up and replied, "Well you see, Doc, it started out as this tiny wart on my left hip."

How we got to what the American Band College is today has a lot to do with that frog.

ABC would never take its concept to another university and ask them to use our model. Because its structure is so much outside the box, it would not be workable to have that school copy what we do. For that reason alone, it is equally inappropriate to ask us to copy them.

Administration

Think about the traditional structure of a university: It has an administration which includes a president, a director of finance, various service personnel and numerous deans. Next there are departments representing each discipline. Within those there is a department chair, a secretary, a building manager and, of course, the faculty.

ABC has three people who embody every one of those aspects; we administrate everything. While Scott, Paul and Max rely on certain directives from Southern Oregon University and the fantastic staff which implements everything that happens during ABC Summer, the three of us deal with virtually every facet of ABC operations: Administration, finance, service, departmental operations, chairmanships, secretarial duty and building management as well as the entire faculty. We are, as well, an integral part of the faculty teaching load.

On one hand we deal with recruitment, advertising and development. On the other, we are completely immersed in the successes and failures of each and every ABC candidate. There is simply no distance between the top of the ABC administration down to the exacting recognition of each student's position within our program.

Grading Scales

Because of our structure, we also view every aspect of grading and assessment in a totally non-traditional way. Our entrance exam measures nearly 40 areas pertinent to being a band director. The results of that exam form a benchmark tool that measures and re-measures everything that happens with a candidate in the ABC program. It is not a top-down, 100-90-80% tool and its very attainment-benchmark of 70% for each area tells you that it certainly doesn't fit into the traditional use of a bell curve. If it did, everyone would be considered ready to graduate with a C minus average!

Years ago, we developed an extremely complex internal evaluation/scoring system. It measures individual growth and hard work as viewed against an ever-changing, personalized composite. Because we plug everything into this system, we have an intimate knowledge and expectation (through written exams, conducting-based projects and conducting assignments) for each and every candidate.

In 2009 we actually found out just how powerful our evaluation system is in terms of grades. We had decided to make the Pedagogy course grades 20% conducting and 80% final exam plus attendance. As each person conducted, grades were given by the faculty member assessing each candidate. After ABC ended, we compared the effect of that mathematically. The result was that not ONE person's composite pedagogy grade was affected by as much as a plus or minus! Why? Because of the way our evaluation/scoring system works to continually assess and reassess each candidate in all facets of work within the program.

Recently while reading a book about China, I stumbled onto an interesting fact about measurement that fits perfectly as an example of how our system works. A distance known in Chinese as the *li* is generally (and officially) regarded to be about half a kilometer. However, by long-standing tradition the *li* can have a variable value based on how easy or difficult it is to walk long distance. If, for example, you are going to the next town and the distance is 4 *li*, many Chinese would reassess that distance based on the effort required to travel that distance. If the ground is flat for the entire duration of the trip, then 4 *li* is correct. If, on the other hand, there is a steep hill while walking the second *li*, the value of that segment could double, therefore increasing the distance to 5 *li*. However, if *li* 4 is down a very steep hill, the reverse is true and thus the distance would revert to 4 *li*.

Our concept of grading is exactly like that. By carefully observing the level of effort, coupled with extensive candidate-by-candidate comparison in relation to the benchmark, we derive a much more accurate grading scale than the traditional 100-90-80% bell curve system.

Teaching by Example

When I was a student at Washington State University in the 1960s, I got super lucky on many fronts with Randall Spicer as my band director, my clarinet teacher and soon-to-be father-in-law. Every spring he took me along when he went out to judge. He indicated that he wanted me to mock judge each of the bands or solos with the idea that on the way home he'd share his thoughts about why my adjudication didn't agree with his. What was so fantastic was that his viewpoint was often so radically different than my own as a young college student, I learned by example rather than by reading text in a book.

When in 1980 I decided to start Western International Band Clinic, I thought about that perspective

on learning. By watching the great teachers that I'd hired to conduct our WIBC Directors' Band or to present clinics, I made it a point to listen in a new way. Even if I didn't agree with something I saw or heard, I tried to grab concepts that were new to me or that were presented in a way I'd never thought of before. Today's ABC is all about that.

As the years went by and our set of undergraduate Band Director Prep courses of the early 80s morphed first into a dynamic 12-course undergraduate ABC and then into the 1992 ABC masters program, I continually looked at what had to be done to make my course of action more real world. It soon became obvious to me that traditional methods of teaching and evaluation served limited purpose.

Consider that over 3 ABC summers there are usually 7 to 12 clinics in every instrument area, presented by at least 3 different renowned teachers, often with opposing ideas about teaching concepts. In rehearsal tech related clinics, there are over 20 teachers. All told, there are 120 clinics in 3 summers and 66 rehearsal environment sessions featuring over 200 different conductors. (Yes, it's true that 160 or so of those are colleagues enrolled in the ABC masters program. Read on.)

The first important thing to consider, then, is that learning opportunities at ABC come from nearly 300 people! Each and every instance provides a way to expand knowledge, reject things that don't seem to work or don't serve personal needs and to steal concepts that can make you a better teacher. Couple that with the countless opportunities to share ideas with any of those people during social hours on the campus or study time in the dorms.

Because of this, traditional syllabi and certain traditional aspects of assessment are pointless. The ABC version of a syllabus is a 500-page book filled with starting points to help convey each and every faculty member's personal teaching philosophy. What clinicians and conductors do and say in clinic/rehearsal sessions is guided not by "Part I, Section 3, Sub-category F" but by what can be gained in the moment. Classes often go in entirely different directions because of questions and subsequent interaction with the 200-plus attendees. Many of the very special things that happen can only be observed. Trying to write them down ahead of time would be impossible and often mean nothing.

Assessment is treated similarly in the ABC model. While we still have lots of specific grading (entrance exam, 3 final exams, 6 major projects, 3 conducting assignments and 3 start-up lessons), we also observe and consider the progress of each and every candidate on an individual basis: Our entrance exam is a benchmark. What happens in 3 summers is continually compared to that benchmark through written exams, projects and conducting.

More important, however, is how each candidate develops and approaches assignments. ABC is, after all, a self-starter program. We provide a vast array of tools. It is up to candidates to hone their skills and subsequently add them to their own personal toolboxes.

If working on a Practical Application, the candidate (not the faculty) is charged with creation, design and implementation of that project. The only direction by the faculty is that it needs to be of professional quality as per the many displayed examples of ABC candidate model projects from the previous year.

The same is true of conducting assignments. The candidate decides everything about the way in which the piece of music will be presented. Again, it must be done professionally. Obvious thoughts tell everyone that high-level preparation will require in-depth knowledge of the score, excellent conducting technique, proper cueing of important entrances, a correct tempo, control of the rehearsal environment, etc.

What is obvious, and what must be done with a project or a conducting assignment, forms the rubric by which candidates prepare, execute and are graded.

As a contest adjudicator for nearly 50 years, I found that good grading standards in music are universal. Every judge I've ever met made the final decision on the grade given to the student or ensemble based on obvious, professional and subjective guidelines, not the little boxes that we were all required to fill in when the performance ended. While there have been many attempts nationally to force the issue on this using descriptors to determine a final score, the reality is, even descriptors will always remain somewhat subjective and music as an art can never be anything else.

Comparison

In the final analysis, the most important thing to remember about the American Band College model is that nothing else is like it. What happens at ABC simply cannot be compared to any program anywhere in the world. Where else are there:

- 1 - Over 60 different world-class teachers presented as part of a single masters program?
- 2 - 3 to 6 clinicians from vastly different backgrounds presenting sessions on each instrument?
- 3 - Over 20 rehearsal tech conductor-teachers?
- 4 - 190 sessions presented in just 6 weeks of class (over 3 summers)?
- 5 - Culminating public concerts presented as a result of preparation work done by the candidates, with final presentation under the baton of renowned conductors and world-class soloists?
- 6 - Master degree programs where candidates learn to master what they don't know instead of what they already know?

In essence it is what happens in clinics, rehearsals and mentoring that show how different ABC really is. We suggest:

Clinics

The approach to observation and participation in clinics must be thought of in a different way. When a clinician is talking about a candidate's area of expertise, it becomes important to grab every possible concept that can build upon what you already know and how you are going to teach it to students. If something is presented that you don't like, discard it. If something is presented in a way you've never before utilized, consider how you might integrate the idea or steal a tiny concept for your own use.

It's important to enter a clinic without a set level of expectation. If the clinician isn't presenting what you thought he or she should present, it's easy to automatically dismiss it, so approach observations in a clinic to see what you may have missed. If you think a clinician is teaching the

same thing three times, consider the depth of what is being presented, the innuendo, the fine points that have developed that clinician's methodology. If you think the clinician's scope is narrow and not all encompassing of the subject, remember that ABC balances the clinician slate to find teachers who zero in on certain aspects of their subject in a special way. The next clinician in that area will likely have very different teaching points to complement what you heard in related clinics the year before.

If a person tells stories, try to determine what's important in that story. Figure out the point of that story. Many times the story contains what it is the clinician wants to get across by example. Sometimes YOU have to connect the dots.

Rehearsals

These are the most powerful of all our learning situations. At ABC you get the chance to sit in the performing group and observe first-hand how the master conductors got to where they are today. Note especially how each conductor handles discipline, classroom control. If that person seems gruff at the outset, note how it sets the stage for what is expected of each and every person. Having 200 conductors on our podium at ABC means that there are 200 ways in which control (and everything else in that rehearsal) can be established. It all means something (good or bad) and it can be extremely useful to you in forming your own approach.

Mentoring

In the final analysis, all of the above represents nothing more than specific "how tos." Far more important is that fact that ABC has been developed as one large family through mentoring.

It starts at the very top level where Scott, Paul and I spend time almost every day assisting someone with a technical issue, a personal problem or a congratulations for some job well done. An even more dynamic level of that is in the assigned role of every ABC staff member to the mentoring of ABC candidates. Because all are graduates of ABC, they understand needs and frustrations that allow them to immediately extend a helping hand in any area of candidate development.

But our favorite is the level in which candidates themselves quickly buy-in and serve as mentors peer to peer. New candidates soon find out that "ABC is not just about what can I get, it's about what I can do for someone else."

In fact, ABC is about all of these little, inexplicable pieces working in concert to hone skills and doing things that make directors better people.

Just at the moment the doctor stepped back and moved to the window of the examination room, completely raising the venetian blinds. Observing his patient with a look of total confusion on his face, he then said, "I could have sworn I saw. . . ."

"I know, Doc. I know what you're thinking. It's just that now you're seeing everything in a much different light."

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ABC Signature Quotes

To view a movie of related ABC moments click: *ABC Signature Video* (www.bandworld.org/Video/Signature.mov)

Patrick Sheridan

"There is no more practical and on-target program for band directors than ABC. And the students? They are the best in the business! You'd have to be dead not to be inspired by the ABC students. This is more fun than should be legal for school!"

Tuba soloist & Breathing Gym creator • Teaching at ABC since 2002

Tony Maiello

"It has been a life-changing experience for me to be part of ABC. I have never witnessed anything like it before in my 44 years of teaching music. ABC is a magical, magical place."

Director of Bands, George Mason University • Teaching at ABC since 2009

Lowell Graham

"Words just do not describe what is going on at ABC. I have made the comment — and I believe it is true — you are so far in the lead, that the industry cannot find your trail."

USAF Band Commander (ret.) • Teaching at ABC since 2006

Frederick Fennell

"What your ABC stands for is JOY, making it exciting to learn. Keep dreaming your dreams. Let nothing — and mostly nobody — try to blunt your greatest weapon: Enthusiasm."

Renowned conductor (1914-2004) • Taught at ABC in 1996

Jeff Tollefson

"ABC is not purely the experience that one has, but often the perspective from which one observes or participates in the experience that creates such an impact. For me, it was the impact of coming back to my home country, studying something that I love in a community of those who think the same, seeing top level professionals work their craft and throw in our independence day, and it was truly overwhelming."

Director of Bands, Quito, Ecuador • First year ABC candidate 2009

Harry Watters

"Being at ABC is certainly one of the highlights of my professional life . . . I'd like to serve as an ABC public relations ambassador."

Trombone soloist, U.S. Army Band • Teaching at ABC since 2007

Jim Walker

"This ABC thing is for real . . . Amazing work with such a beautiful concept!!
USC/Hollywood flutist • Teaching at ABC since 1996

Ray Cramer

"During my first time at ABC, I have been very impressed by the fantastic collaboration of academics, individual study and ensemble activity."

President, Midwest Band Clinic • Teaching at ABC since 2007

Elizabeth Lonergan

"I'm ever more thankful for the opportunity to be part of the magic that is ABC."
2002 ABC graduate • ABC staff member since 2003

Mike Bankhead

"It is a wonderful experience coming to ABC: The personal hospitality, the great students, wonderful friends. This is a magical place!"

USAF Band Commander (ret.) • Teaching at ABC since 1995

Steve Accatino

"I just concluded the most profound educational experience of my life. Never have I been a part of a program that has had such an immediate effect on my teaching of instrumental music."

1995 ABC graduate • ABC staff member since 2005

Allen Vizzutti

"ABC is an amazing event and great accomplishment for the benefit of all. I am happy to be a small part of it."

Trumpet soloist, University of Washington • Teaching at ABC since 1992

Nathan Haskew

"Words cannot express my appreciation to you and the American Band College! The past two weeks have been truly life altering. I would go back to school tomorrow and start back if I could!"

Band Director, Rainbow City, Alabama • First year ABC candidate 2009

Tim Lautzenheiser

"I often wish I had a small tape recorder to capture all the incredible unsolicited commentary I hear throughout the year (from all over the nation) that reflects the power of the ABC experience. It DOES change peoples' lives, and for the better. Yes, they get a degree. Yes, they get a ton of wonderful information they can integrate into their programs. Above all, they become reborn in their desire to bring excellence to their chosen mission."

Attitude Concepts for Today • Teaching at ABC since 1989