Adapting Drumming for Individuals with Special Needs

BY REX BACON, MT-BC

As a percussionist and music therapist, I am often asked to provide drumming instruction for students who have special needs. Individuals with special needs may have deficits in emotional, behavioral, or physical areas. There are already organizations that use drumming to benefit individuals with special needs, including the Rhythmic Arts Project and the Disabled Drummers Association. In both the clinical and the educational setting, individuals with special needs can benefit from learning how to play hand drums or drumset. Drumming can help various problem areas including improving focus to task, developing frustration tolerance, and providing physical rehabilitation in addition to learning basic music skills.

Dr. Kenneth Bruscia, Professor of Music Therapy at Temple University, defined adaptive music instruction as “the teacher or therapist uses adaptive or compensatory techniques to facilitate or maximize the private music studies of students with disabilities” (Defining Music Therapy, 1998). Music educators and recreational drumming facilitators may be asked to work with individuals with special needs. Through my clinical work with many clients in the music therapy setting, I have found the following ideas, concepts and techniques very useful.

ASSESSMENT

It may be helpful to consult with someone who knows the student and how his or her particular disability affects the skills required to play percussion instruments. Family members or staff who work with the student may be able to give you a sense of the student’s immediate capabilities. Also, performing some kind of initial assessment in the lesson setting will provide the teacher and student a starting point. Learning to play a drum requires physical effort and coordination as well as being able to understand instructional materials such as verbal directions and printed music. Depending on what the student wants to learn, it may be helpful to observe areas such as attention, physical coordination, receptive communication, and the understanding of symbols. An example of skills to observe in an assessment lesson may include:

• sitting at the drumset
• demonstrating the best posture to play the drumset
• demonstrating the best manner of holding the drumsticks
• demonstrating the best manner to play all the drumset components such as kick drum, cymbals, hi-hat, and toms
• playing a steady rhythm on the snare drum
• repeating rhythms demonstrated by the teacher (“echoes”)
• reading different forms of notation

CONSISTENCY

In order for learning to occur and skills to develop in this context, it is important that the experience be as consistent as possible. This includes the format of the lesson, the exercises that are practiced, and the reward the instructor uses to reinforce progress gained. When there is a level of predictability, the student becomes more at ease and therefore more receptive to the experience. If the lesson has too many differences or fluctuations, this may cause some anxiety in the student.

The teacher should take skill areas and set small, achievable goals that lead to mastery. For example, the student can work towards three-way coordination of playing hi-hat, bass drum, and snare drum by practicing two-way coordination with two of the three sound sources. Also, repeating the same exercises for many lessons will help the student consistently develop and retain skills while creating a feeling of mastery.

It is important to balance repeated exercises that develop core skills with new experiences so that the student remains focused on the task and eager to learn. The teacher may want to explore what the student enjoys most about drumming. This could be improvising with the teacher, playing along to music, or watching an instructional DVD. The teacher can develop a reward system based upon completion of exercises and reinforce the achievement with praise and an activity that the student enjoys.

It is important to recognize that the drum lesson can be a place where a student with special needs feels a genuine sense of accomplishment and validation, which may be difficult to receive in other settings. Here is an example of a 45-minute adapted lesson format:

Check in (5–10 minutes): review of lesson’s format, purpose of exercise to be played, and reinforcement utilized for successful completion.

Echoes (10 minutes): Teacher plays rhythms on a conga drum or bell and the student repeats them on drumset or a hand drum.

Exercises (15 minutes): Teacher and student practice exercises related to lesson material, such as basic timekeeping grooves.

Reward (10 minutes): Student’s choice for successful completion of exercises.

ADAPTATIONS

It may be helpful to adapt traditional instructional materials at first in order for the student to experience some immediate level of success. I often replace traditional notation systems with alternative notation systems that utilize much more basic concepts like colors, words, or letters. Instead of traditional printed sheet music, I use the time-unit box system that is frequently used for writing hand drum music. Teachers can place words like “bass” and “snare” in the boxes or abbreviate it to just single letters like B and S (Example 1).

Teachers can substitute High and Low or H and L if working on other instruments instead of a drumset.

If the student is struggling with the adapted notation, the teacher may want to place whatever symbols he or she is using on the actual instrument. An example would be writing the words or letters on a piece of paper and sticking that on the drum. I have written bass in the middle of my hand drum and tone on the edge in order for students to understand where those sounds are played.
It may be useful to focus on quarter note and eighth note rhythms when using this alternative box notation system depending on the student’s ability to comprehend rhythm and subdivisions. The teacher can help students develop their technique by exploring ways to rearrange exercises that have already been played correctly by maintaining the same rhythm but altering the sounds or tones (Example 2).

As the rhythms become more complex, eighth notes can be represented with two small symbols in each box (Example 3). As the student becomes more proficient, you can introduce a multiple-row box system to begin practicing striking two sounds at the same time (Example 4) or playing more than just two sounds (Example 5).

Another technique I use with my students is an echo game where I play rhythms on a hand drum and the student repeats the rhythm either on the drumset or another hand drum. Initially, I play a single measure of rhythms, careful to end all of the rhythms on beat 4, which gives students a moment to recognize the end of the phrase. This reinforces a sense of phrase and length of the measure. I encourage students to try to focus playing the rhythm as accurately as possible instead of replicating the tones perfectly. If they are comfortable with this technique, I ask them to either avoid watching my hands or close their eyes to help develop their listening skills. Gradually, I extend the phrases and make them slightly more complex.

The teacher can explore different musical concepts using this simple call-and-response form. Students can recognize dynamics by how loud or soft the echoes are played. I may begin very softly and gradually increase the volume to demonstrate crescendos or play one note much louder than the rest to introduce accents.

You can encourage creativity by having a student respond to alternate ways of playing a drum such as scratching the head or flicking the fingers into the drumhead. Again, with these exercises I believe it is important to focus on basic rhythms like half, quarter, and eighth notes. This technique allows students to develop a rhythmic vocabulary, begin to utilize basic music elements, and develop an understanding of the different sounds of a drum.

**LEARNING**

Individuals with special needs have different ways of learning. It is the teacher’s responsibility to find which way they learn the best. Some students may understand communicated ideas from verbal explanation, others may respond better to seeing the idea physically modeled, while others learn best by slowly walking through the physical motions themselves. (For more information on learning, check out Howard Gardner’s book *Frames of Mind: the Theory of Multiple Intelligences.* Ideally, a good assessment will provide at least an initial starting point, and as time progresses, the student’s strengths and learning style will appear.

Dr. Robert Krout is a music therapist who has written adaptive method books for learning guitar. His ideas and techniques are also adaptable to drum lessons. Teachers will help students progress in the most efficient fashion if they use any and all adaptive tools available. Teachers can help choose the most accessible playing devices, which could be sticks, rods, hands, mallets, or Blades. Music distribution companies are now selling adaptable playing devices like mallets with Velcro straps and “hand tone” Blades. Some examples of teaching aids that are easily accessible are:

- Having the student slowly count, sing or say the rhythm before playing it
- Modeling *exactly* what you wish the student to play
- Using a variety of prompts such as verbal reminders, modeling the skill, or placing your hands over the student’s hands and performing the physical motions necessary. (It is important to ask the student’s and parent’s permission before doing this.)

Finally, I suggest that the teacher think of the student’s develop-
ment as a continuum by recognizing where the student is during each particular lesson instead of where he or she should be after so many lessons. This will help both parties realize that learning can occur as a gradual progression instead of the stepwise achievements that traditional instruction facilitates. Meeting the individual where he or she is instead of trying to fit someone with disabilities into a specific regimen of drumming allows for individuals with special needs to experience the enjoyment of making music at many different levels.

REFERENCE
Bruscia, K. Defining Music Therapy (1998), Barcelona Publishers

Rex Bacon is a board certified music therapist, professional drummer, and drum circle facilitator. Rex received his B.A. in Music Therapy from the University of Dayton in 1997. As a full-time music therapist, Rex has specialized in using drumming as a primary intervention in various healthcare settings including a mental health center, children’s home, alternative school, and a prison. He has presented drumming workshops on special need populations to colleges, social service agencies, and music therapy conferences. Rex is a member of the American Music Therapy Association, PAS, and the Disabled Drummers Association.

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