

Analysis of "The System" by Gary E. Smith

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Teachers are learners, not always a “more knowledgeable other.” Often educators search for role models. The marching band world is no exception. Gary E. Smith, the longtime director of the Marching Illini at the University of Illinois, had a highly successful career. His ensemble received many accolades, including the Sudler Trophy in 1983.<sup>1</sup> As his reputation grew, Mr. Smith became a highly sought after clinician. Many years of presentations and clinics led to the writing of his book, “The System.” The tome is intended for directors; chapters cover such topics as teaching music and marching, student leadership, the role of additional parts of the band like drum major, drum line, and guard, rehearsal organization and technique, show design, and aspects of administration. Three chapters bear merit for investigation under the lens of learning theories – Music, Marching, and Leadership.

The chapter about music breaks down numerous aspects of playing an instrument and fitting the individual into a group collective. The chapter is broken into several sections, each with specific steps and recommendations about teaching a topic. For example, the chapter addresses balance and gives a formula enhance instrumentalists’ awareness of balance. The key moment during the exercise is when the director uses their arms to signal the balance from the podium. The students are to adjust dynamics until the director signals they have reached the desired levels. A later section in the same chapter provides a step by step process for developing an internal sense of pulse. The chapter ends with a set of “Common Music Problems” and a prescribed set of solutions for the director to address the concerns.

The chapter concerning marching is set up in a similar manner to the chapter about music. The marching chapter describes a process for calling commands, specific steps the student should take when

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<sup>1</sup> “The Sudler Trophy is awarded annually to a college or university marching band which has demonstrated the highest musical standards and innovative marching routines and ideas, and which has made important contributions to the advancement of the performance standards of college marching bands over a period of years.” Definition quoted from the John Philip Sousa Foundation website.  
<http://www.sousafoundation.net/Default.aspx?ID=39>

vocally responding and moving to a command. The pages include pictures of the steps of the process to clarify what the student should look like during each subdivision of the response. Exercises are suggested to perfect each skill. The “Solutions to Common Marching Problems” section resides in the next chapter, but mirrors the “Common Music Problems” section of music in the nature of addressing flaws.

The author’s approach is decidedly fits the behaviorist learning theory. The concepts are based on how well each member of the marching band matches the whole and seeks to extinguish any motion or sound outside of the accepted norm. The prescribed solutions offer no room for improvisation or creativity by the instructor or the student. The behaviorist tact fits nicely because the book seeks to teach observable skills, movement, and music. The book encourages conditioning the students to generate specific reactions. For instance, the author suggests maintaining discipline by utilizing “various unison verbal responses from the group.” (Smith, p. 32) The product takes precedence; the students are conditioned to respond in specific manners without experimenting or creating new responses. The book implies that the instructor will encourage desired behaviors and discourage undesired ones. The question remains if the students learn anything.

The limitations of behaviorist learning theory occur due to the individual creativity needed in a marching band performance. Within a performance, each individual has a unique role. As the form shifts, each person determines how to transition, what step size to take, how to align with other people, what markers within the performance space help ensure the intended form is correct, and many other decisions. Musically, a person cannot play more than one part at a time.<sup>2</sup> Even through use of student leaders, there is not enough time to advise all individuals on every detail.

Other learning theories could be applied to the processes in teaching needed concepts. Before deciding on the learning theory to apply, a director should consider the following:

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<sup>2</sup> Pianos are too heavy to move around a football field or through a parade route.

- The culture of the band. What motivates the students? What work ethic drives the students?
- Time constraints imposed by rehearsal time, the number of performances, etc.
- The preparedness of student leaders.
- The goals of the director.

If any point is limited or incompatible, the student will have a difficult journey.

A constructivist approach is characterized by the concept that knowledge is created by each individual, not transferred from person to person. Each learner develops a personal set of meanings. (Schunk, p. 230) Marching band offers a wide variety of opportunity to include this approach. The students are presented with problems and projects. For instance, they need to make matching motions, but what should those motions be? Could the selected movements be different than the motion the band used in previous years, or different from other bands? What music should be selected? How should it be arranged? The instructor should scaffold projects. Student leaders act as instructors, deepening their knowledge and simultaneously bringing along less knowledgeable students.

The large group aspect<sup>3</sup> of marching band means that social constructivism fits markedly better than cognitive constructivism. An overwhelming majority of projects in a marching band curriculum are based on an individual working with a group. Student leaders could provide a model for the other students. Fitting with Wiggin's description of social constructivism, the students could make connections between their previous ideas of movement and music to form knowledge about future presentations. They could assess themselves and other learners within a safe environment. The director becomes a mentor instead of the source of all decisions.<sup>4</sup> Hopefully all interactions enhance the zone of proximal development.

Seeing marching band instructions through the social cognitive lens produces a foggier picture. The potential social interactions have already been discussed. However, where constructivism has a product as a result of the exchanges, cognitivism does not have a viewable product. (Schunk, p. 118) Certainly

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<sup>3</sup> Much of the appeal of marching band is the large number of people acting together toward group goals.

<sup>4</sup> Student leaders also become part of the scaffolding for less knowledgeable students. Additional duties will be discussed later in this paper.

some mental processes, such as memorizing music, could be modeled. Ultimately the difficulty lies in the fact that marching band is performance driven.<sup>5</sup>

Student leaders are an essential part to any successful marching band. Student leaders need an additional knowledge base. “The System” includes a chapter defining possible qualities and characteristics of successful student leaders. The book lists possible job duties, including motivation, section teaching, leading by example, problem solving, and monitoring discipline and attitude.<sup>6</sup> All of these duties necessitate separate training. (Smith, p. 9 – 11) Student leaders need knowledge about a wide variety of topics, including personalities and potential conflicts, teaching marching and playing basics, reading director expectations, and conflict resolution.

Learning theories should be applied to the training of student leaders. Behaviorist theory does not fit well; the situations faced by student leaders have a variety of solutions. Social constructivism and social cognitivism have potential to develop knowledge and give the learners future sources of knowledge. Cognitively, leaders need to develop processes to deal with expected and unexpected situations. They can use both other leaders as well as the director as a model. Social Constructivism could help in transferring issues dealing with group dynamics in marching band to the real world. Giving the students time to develop goals and the latitude to explore solutions and approaches to reaching goals not only builds knowledge, but enhances the trust the students have in a teacher.

Mr. Smith wrote a useful guide for future marching band directors to follow. The only downfall to “The System” is the limitation to a behaviorist learning theory. The potential of the students could be enhanced more when a director implements other learning theories.

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<sup>5</sup> Does a marching band exist that has no intention to perform?

<sup>6</sup> Student leaders should report any concerns to the director immediately and never be involved in handing out punishments to other students.

## Bibliography

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