Bassoon 101 – A Bassoon Reference Guide

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# Bassoon 101 – A Bassoon Reference Guide

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CHOOSING A BASSOONIST

In general, it is important to recognize students who will be successful playing the bassoon. The following considerations will be beneficial in deciding which students should be a good choice for the bassoon.

Switching from another instrument:
The bassoon is **not** a beginning instrument. Before beginning on the bassoon, the student should have adequate facility on another instrument - the flute, clarinet or saxophone is a good choice. Flute is a good candidate due to the loose embouchure. Clarinet is a good candidate due to the low-octave fingerings being similar, however, the firm clarinet embouchure can be a challenge to overcome. Saxophone is a good candidate because of the looser embouchure then the clarinet. Saxophone/bassoon is also a good combination since it allows the opportunity for the student to perform saxophone in marching band and jazz ensembles and bassoon in orchestra.

Pitch flexibility:
Because of the flexibility of pitch on the bassoon, a student with a good ear is a MUST for success on this instrument.

Age and size consideration:
Due to the long reaches and stretches that the bassoon requires, the student should have medium to large hands (more importantly, LONG fingers) and is strong enough to hold and carry the instrument. I tend to use the age twelve as a good successful “switch-over” age (there are always exceptions.) Fox Products Corporation offers a special “short reach” bassoon for students with small hands, however, waiting until twelve years of age usually cancels out having to purchase such a bassoon.

Mouth/jaw:
A correct bassoon embouchure should have a slight overbite. Look for students that have an even jaw, a natural overbite or even a modest overbite. Avoid students with an underbite.

Bass clef:
Previous piano background to facilitate finger dexterity and bass clef reading is also helpful.

Financial consideration:
The bassoon has additional costs involved for the student and/or band director. Reeds range anywhere from $15.00 - $25.00 ($135.00 for a Lègére synthetic reed) and need to be replaced frequently for beginners. Bassoon music and accessories also tend to be more expensive then other instruments (do not forget the cost for private lessons!).
PURCHASING A BASSOON

German/Heckel-system bassoons:
Make sure when purchasing a bassoon that you buy a German or Heckel-system bassoon. The German/Heckel bassoon is used world-wide except for France and a few South American countries. (These countries are slowly replacing the French bassoon with the German/Heckel bassoon.)

Bassoon manufacturers:
There are several reliable bassoon companies that make student-line models. The only maker I have knowledge about is Fox/Renard, and I am consistently pleased with the quality and reliability of their products. Other reliable bassoon makers include; Heckel, Moosmann, and Püchner.

Plastic vs. wooden bassoon:
Plastic is cheaper and more durable while wood has better tone quality. Plastic Fox/Renard bassoons are known for having an even, in-tune scale (and even a pleasant tone quality). A Fox/Renard plastic bassoon is fine for middle school, junior high school, and even high school students (also college techniques classes). If you have a bassoon student looking purchase her/his own bassoon, I would recommend a wooden bassoon, especially for advanced players and/or those looking to major in music.

RECOMMENDED FOX/RENAUD MODELS
(Fox is the professional line; Renard, “Fox” in French, is the student-line)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Model</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>List price*</th>
<th>Purchase price*</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>51</td>
<td>Renard, plastic, short-reach model. Ideal for beginning, middle school students. (Beginner model)</td>
<td>$7,195</td>
<td>$4,199</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>41</td>
<td>Renard, plastic bassoon. Ideal for middle school and junior high school students. (Intermediate model)</td>
<td>$7,595</td>
<td>$4,399</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>222</td>
<td>Renard, standard wood bassoon. Ideal for junior high school students. (Intermediate model)</td>
<td>$9,750</td>
<td>$5,449</td>
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<tr>
<td>220</td>
<td>Renard, artist wood bassoon. Ideal for junior/senior high school students. (Intermediate/Advanced model)</td>
<td>$11,250</td>
<td>$6,999</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>240</td>
<td>Renard, artist (short bore) bassoon. Ideal for junior/senior high school student, and undergraduate bassoon majors. (Advanced model)</td>
<td>$12,500</td>
<td>$8,199</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV</td>
<td>Fox, plastic bassoon. Ideal for middle school, junior/senior high school students. (Intermediate model)</td>
<td>$7,995</td>
<td>$5,199</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III</td>
<td>Fox, plastic bassoon. Ideal for middle school, junior/senior high school students. (Intermediate model)</td>
<td>$9,595</td>
<td>$5,999</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>101, 201, 601 &amp; 660</td>
<td>Fox, wood bassoons. Ideal for advanced high school student looking to major in bassoon. Each of these models can be found in major US orchestras. (Professional models)</td>
<td>$20,000-$27,000</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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*Prices as of 04.09.14, quoted from Woodwind and Brasswind
OTHER FACTORS TO CONSIDER WHEN PURCHASING A BASSOON

**Bocals:**
Request a #2 and #3 bocal as these bocals will help with sharp intonation (suppliers usually include a #1 and #2 bocal but will gladly replace the #1 with a #3 at no added charge).

**Extra keys:**
Buying a bassoon is like buying a car, there are many extras that can be added (rollers, keys, locks, trill keys) and can quickly add thousands of dollars to the purchase price. A few keys no bassoonists should live without are the high D key, high E key, and whisper key lock. Both keys are essential to any intermediate/advanced student.

If possible, have bassoonist try the instrument before purchase, especially if the instrument is used.

**PURCHASING A BOCAL**

**High-quality bocals:**
It is crucial to have a high-quality bocal. A great bocal does not have to cost a lot of money ($300-$400) and can make the weakest bassoon a good bassoon. Bocals are the only way a bassoonist can control pitch (the higher the number stamped on the bocal, the longer the bocal, the flatter the pitch).

**Recommended bocals:**
Fox CVX; CVC; and R2 (#2 and #3)

**BASSOON/BOCAL SUPPLIERS**

When purchasing a bassoon and/or bocal be sure to get a minimum of three price quotes as you can literally save thousands of dollars. There can be a substantial waiting period (six months to one year) so be sure to ask how long it will take to ship the instrument.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The Woodwind and Brasswind</th>
<th>Frederic H. Weiner</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>wwandbw.com</td>
<td><a href="http://www.weinermusic.com">www.weinermusic.com</a></td>
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<tr>
<th>Midwest Musical Imports</th>
<th>Chuck Levin’s Washington Music Center</th>
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<tr>
<td><a href="http://www.mmimports.com">www.mmimports.com</a></td>
<td><a href="http://www.chucklevins.com">www.chucklevins.com</a></td>
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<tr>
<th>Forrests Music</th>
<th>Charles Double Reed</th>
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<tr>
<td><a href="http://www.forrestsmusic.com">www.forrestsmusic.com</a></td>
<td><a href="http://www.charlesmusic.com">www.charlesmusic.com</a></td>
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<tr>
<th>Miller Marketing (Moosmann bassoons only)</th>
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<tr>
<td><a href="http://www.millermarketingco.com">www.millermarketingco.com</a></td>
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SELECTING BASSOON REEDS FOR YOUR BASSOONIST

Handmade reeds:
Ideally, a hand-made reed adjusted for each particular student is best. Contacting your local university bassoon professor should yield good results. (I always have graduate students interested in selling excellent-quality reeds to bassoon students. In every case, my students are happy to sit side-by-side with the bassoon student and customize each reed for the student.)

Plastic, fiber-cane, and synthetic reeds:
Plastic or fiber-cane reeds should be avoided. However, Légère Reeds Ltd. recently began selling synthetic bassoon reeds, and, surprisingly, they are quite good (but, by no means a replacement for a handmade reed). Légère bassoon reeds are available at MillerMarketing.com; price is $135/reed (I recommend the soft strength).

The only mass-produced, hand-finished reeds I recommend are Dale Clark Reeds: ClarkReeds.com.

Hardness:
Most commercial bassoon reeds come in a variety of strengths ranging from soft to hard. I recommend medium or medium hard regardless of the student’s level. Soft reeds accomplish very little for beginners and often delay tone development and breath support.

REED MAKING TOOLS

Essential reed making tools:
The following reed making tools should be kept with the bassoonist at all times. (Those marked with an asterisk can be found at any home improvement store, other tools need to be purchased from a double reed supplier.)

- Arrow-head bassoon plaque (or guitar pick)
- Reed knife (for advanced reed maker)
- Reamer
- Small blunt nose pliers*
- 22-gauge brass wire*
- Rat tail (needle) files*
- Wet-dry sandpaper (200, 320 & 400 grit)*
- Needle nose pliers (with wire cutter)*
- Metric ruler*
- Finger nail files (emery board)*
- Pipe cleaners*
DOUBLE REED SUPPLY COMPANIES

Below is a list of reputable double reed supply companies. It is best to compare several companies as prices can vary drastically from one company to another.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Company</th>
<th>Website</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Forrests Double Reed</td>
<td><a href="http://www.forestsmusic.com">www.forestsmusic.com</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charles Double Reed Company</td>
<td><a href="http://www.charlesdoublereed.com">www.charlesdoublereed.com</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Edmund Nielsen – Woodwinds</td>
<td><a href="http://www.nielsen-woodwinds.com">www.nielsen-woodwinds.com</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ann Hodge Double Reed Suppliers</td>
<td><a href="http://www.annhodge.com">www.annhodge.com</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miller Marketing</td>
<td><a href="http://www.millermarketingco.com">www.millermarketingco.com</a></td>
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<tr>
<td>Midwest Musical Imports</td>
<td><a href="http://www.mmimports.com">www.mmimports.com</a></td>
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<tr>
<td>Frederic H. Weiner</td>
<td><a href="http://www.weinermusic.com">www.weinermusic.com</a></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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COMMON ADJUSTMENTS FOR BASSOON REEDS

Since reeds are made from a natural material (Arundo donax, giant reed, or Spanish cane) they never respond exactly the same way twice. Therefore, reeds constantly need to be adjusted, scraped, or trimmed. It is best to find a private teacher for your bassoon student to help guarantee she/he will have a responsive, good-sounding reed.

Each bassoon student should always carry sand paper, pliers, plaque, and nail files with them at all times. These few, simple tools can drastically improve most reeds.

WIRE ADJUSTMENTS

There are a number of adjustments that can be made to a bassoon reed just by squeezing the wires. The wires on the reed should be slightly loose when the reed is dry. Wires should be snug once the reed is soaked, making sure the first wire is not constricting or cutting into the cane. When adjusting wires, hands can be adequate, however, for a more permanent solution, pliers should be used.

- **Tip too closed**, Lightly squeeze first wire on sides.
- **Tip too open**, Lightly squeeze first wire on top and bottom.
- **Flat pitch**, Squeeze second wire on top and bottom and first wire on sides.
- **Poor response (stuffy reed, thin sound) and/or Weak low notes**, Squeeze second wire on top and bottom. (If tip is too open, squeeze first wire on top and bottom.)
- **“Buzzy” reed (E in staff drops/sags in pitch) and/or Weak High notes**, Squeeze second wire on sides. (If tip is too closed, squeeze first wire on sides.)
- **Weak low notes**, Squeeze second wire on sides. (If tip first wire on side sides if tip is too closed.)
**SCRAPING ADJUSTMENTS**

If adequate improvements are not made with wire adjustments, scraping (files or reed knife) may be necessary. It takes years to perfect a flawless scrape, don’t be afraid of running the reed, it happens to the best of us.

Be sure to have a well-soaked reed before starting to scrape the blade of the reed AND to insert a plaque between the blades to minimize cracking the reed. When scraping a reed, keep in mind that you can always take off more cane but you can never replace cane. Minimal scraping should always be done, followed by playing the reed to see if more scraping is necessary.

**BASSOON REED ADJUSTING APPS, DVDs, ARTICLES, MANUALS & BOOKS**

**Apps:**
BassoonReeds ($0.99). This app quickly helps the bassoonist diagnose the problem(s) and offers diagrams, tips, and solutions to better adjust the reed. A “must” for any high school bassoonist!

**DVDs & YouTube:**
- *Improve Your Bassoon Reed* by Christopher Weait. Weait guides the bassoonist through the steps of assessing and improving the bassoon reed. weaitmusic.com
- British bassoonist Tom Hardy shows different techniques to improve the bassoon reed. http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3LZ4qXzvilg

**Online articles:**
- canit.se/~chrisdav/reedadj.html
- steesbassoon.com/reedmaking/adjusting_reeds.htm
- crookandstaple.com/how-to-adjust-bassoon-reeds

**Reed adjusting manuals:**

**Advanced books/manuals:**
BASSOON INTONATION

Fingering chart:
It seems basic, but a good fingering chart is paramount for good bassoon pitch. The only fingering chart I recommend is Let’s Play Bassoon (throw away all fingering charts included in band method books and etude books). This fingering chart (and bassoon instruction manual) is available as a FREE downloadable pdf at: foxproducts.com/pdfs/LetsPlayBassoon.pdf

Keys to successful bassoon intonation:
Before any reed adjustments should be made, it is imperative that the instrument is in good working condition and properly assembled. All joints should be pushed completely together, including the bocal. Check to make sure the embouchure is relaxed and open (have the student say “OH” or “AH”) and that the student is using good breath support and posture. Fast air is of the upmost importance on bassoon!!

ADJUSTMENTS NOT REQUIRING EQUIPMENT CHANGES

If the student is SHARP:
• Less reed in the mouth.
• Relax embouchure/open throat, “AH” or “OH”.
• No biting, the reed should move back and forth in the mouth while the student is playing.
• Relax shoulders.

If the student is FLAT:
• Use faster air stream (more support). (More often than not, the bassoon student is not using fast, well-supported air. It is surprising how much better the tone, intonation, and resonance will be once the student uses faster air.)
• More reed in mouth.

ADJUSTMENTS IN EQUIPMENT

If the student is SHARP:
• Open reed tip (see Wire Adjustments, pp. 7-8).
• Use longer bocal (the higher the number the longer the bocal the flatter the pitch). Always make sure the student is playing with a relaxed embouchure before switching bocals. If the student is playing with a firm, tight embouchure (biting) a longer bocal may bring down the pitch but will still allow the student to have an improper embouchure.

If the student is FLAT:
• Close reed (see Wire Adjustments, pp 7-. 8)
• Shorten the blade length by 1 mm.
• Use a shorter bocal. Make sure the embouchure and air stream are working properly to create a full, supported sound before making a bocal change. Typically if a bassoonist is flat, she/he is not using sufficient breath support.

**SPECIAL PITCH PROBLEMS**

**Sharp low register:**
- Make sure the bassoon is sealing properly (a repairman may be necessary).
- Use less reed in the mouth, say “TOE”.
- Pull out the long joint 1/2 inch.

**Sharp high register:**
- Keep embouchure as open as possible.
- Relax throat.
- Relax shoulders.

**Flat tenor register:**
- Faster air stream (breath support) is needed. This range can be extremely Flat. Make sure the student does not tighten embouchure, this will produce a thin, nasal tone.

**KEEPING YOUR JR/SR HIGH BASSOONIST ENGAGED AND EXCITED**

Let’s face it, much of the middle school, junior high school, and even high school band and orchestra literature has boring bassoon parts. If you have a talented bassoonist needing a challenge, give her/him and E-flat alto saxophone part and have her/him transpose it to bass clef and add three flats. For an even bigger challenge, providing she/he is competent in tenor clef, give her/him a B-flat clarinet part and instruct to transpose the part to tenor clef and add two flats.

**ADDITIONAL BASSOON-RELATED READING**

INTONATION GUIDES


BASSOON REPERTOIRE

BEGINNER THROUGH ADVANCED HIGH SCHOOL

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>TITLE</th>
<th>COMPOSER</th>
<th>PUBLISHER</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>BASSOON GUIDES</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Let’s Play Bassoon*</td>
<td>Hugo Fox</td>
<td>Fox Products Corp.</td>
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<tr>
<td>The Art of Bassoon Playing*</td>
<td>William Spencer</td>
<td>Summy-Birchard</td>
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<tr>
<td>Guide to Teaching the Woodwinds*</td>
<td>Frederick Westphal</td>
<td>McGraw-Hill</td>
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<td>Teacher’s Guide to the Bassoon*</td>
<td>Homer Pence</td>
<td>Selmer</td>
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<td><strong>BEGINNER/JUNIOR HIGH</strong></td>
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<td><strong>METHOD BOOKS</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Rubank – Elementary, Intermediate and Advanced Methods*</td>
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<tr>
<td>Melodious &amp; Progressive Studies, vol. 1*</td>
<td>Alan Hawkins</td>
<td>Southern</td>
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<tr>
<td>Practical Method for Bassoon*</td>
<td>Julius Weissenborn</td>
<td>Carl Fischer</td>
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<td><strong>ANTHOLOGY</strong></td>
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<td>Faber</td>
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<td>Solos for the Bassoon Player* (Intermediate) comes with CD accompaniment and recording</td>
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<td>Hal Leonard</td>
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<td>Song of the Troubadour</td>
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<td>March of the Marionette</td>
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<td>Four Sketches</td>
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<td>Asleep in the Deep</td>
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<td>Polichinelle</td>
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<td>Two Short Pieces</td>
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<td>Jabberwocky</td>
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<td><strong>INTERMEDIATE/JUNIOR HIGH or HIGH SCHOOL</strong></td>
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<td>Introducing the Tenor Clef for Trombone</td>
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<td>Daily Exercises*</td>
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<td><strong>SOLOS</strong></td>
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<td>Cello Suites (Some movements are not accessible on bassoon)</td>
<td>JS Bach</td>
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<td>Bassoonata (piano or band accompaniment)*</td>
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<td>Bassoon Sonatas*</td>
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<td>Bassoon Sonata in d minor*</td>
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<td>Sonata in g minor</td>
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Biography:

Dr. Albie Micklich is Associate Professor of Bassoon at Arizona State University. Prior to this appointment he was on the faculty of Indiana University of Pennsylvania, University of Missouri-Columbia, Michigan State University, and University of Nebraska-Lincoln. Albie holds degrees from Michigan State University, Indiana University of Pennsylvania, and The Juilliard School.

An active member in the International Double Reed Society (IDRS), Albie was co-host of the 2011 IDRS conference in Tempe, AZ. Other IDRS conference performances include; Redlands University, CA; Miami University, OH; Birmingham Conservatoire, England; BYU, UT; Ball State University, IN; Melbourne, Australia; University of North Carolina-Greensboro; and the University of West Virginia.

Albie served as Co-Principal Bassoon with ProMusica Chamber Orchestra (Columbus, OH) from 2007-2010 and as Principal Bassoon with Lincoln Symphony from 2001-2007. As winner of Juilliard’s concerto competition, he gave his Avery Fisher Hall solo debut performing the New York premier of Ellen Taaffe Zwilich’s Bassoon Concerto with Stanislaw Skrowaczewski conducting.

An active chamber musician, Albie is currently bassoonist with the Ocotillo Winds, taught and performed at the Ameropa Chamber Music Festival in the Czech Republic, and has performed at the International Clarinet Association conferences in Assisi, Italy; Lincoln, Nebraska; Los Angeles, CA; Porto, Portugal; Kansas City; and Tokyo, Japan. He has also performed at the College Music Society conferences in San Antonio, TX, Madrid, Spain, and Quebec City, Canada.

He can be heard performing world premiere performances on MSR Classics, SUMMIT, Crystal Records, and Albany Records. He is a Fox Bassoon Artist performing on a red maple 201.

Copies of Bassoon 101 – A Bassoon Reference Guide, can be printed from my website until June 1, 2014
www.public.asu.edu/~amicklic/ASU_Bassoon_Studio/Teaching.html