

Ghosted: When a Student Leaves the Studio

By: David Sisco

A couple of years ago, a new client came to me through a recommendation from a current student. We hit it off right away — they were progressing quickly and seemed enthusiastic about my song suggestions. One day, I reached out to ask how a particular audition went. Their response? Radio silence. I never heard from them again.

There is nothing quite like being ghosted by a student. It's like a pratfall into the abyss. It can be especially hard on the independent voice teacher, who prides themselves not only on cultivating a healthy, flourishing studio, but also on maintaining steady income through consistent clients.

I am struck by how rarely we discuss how to process a student leaving our studio, despite many of us having experienced it. What keeps us from having a frank conversation? Can we move past the vulnerability of perceived failure long enough to learn how to navigate this unfortunate — and hopefully rare — occurrence?

There are a couple reasons such a conversation might be challenging. For starters, many of us are deeply invested in our jobs — perhaps too invested. As Derek Thompson argues in an article for *The Atlantic*, “workism” — the act of centering one's identity around their vocation — has become an epidemic, especially among college-educated, white-collar workers. This is partially due to the fact we do not produce a concrete product — our work is more ephemeral.¹ Given this, we may be more prone to take failure personally. Psychologists offer the following definition of failure within a vocation:

Failure is defined as an experience in which (a) achievement is integral to one's personal identity and accompanying sense of self-worth; (b) one feels a personal sense of responsibility for the outcome; (c) lack of success has significant consequences in psychological, professional, and/or inter-personal domains; and (d) one's personal definition of self, the experience, and the success-failure continuum is integral to the process.²

Assuming we can acknowledge and move beyond these challenges, what are some practical solutions for handling



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the sting of a student leaving our studio? Let's consider some proactive measures and healthy responses.

Proactive Measures

First, as Thompson's article suggests, creating a work-life balance is a wonderful antidote. This includes things like setting healthy boundaries with clients, fostering relationships outside of the voice studio, and investing in regular self-care. Of course, these are easier said than done. I, for one, struggle with boundaries. I want to be seen as accommodating by my clients, and yet, this sometimes leads me to overextend

myself and feel resentful when it is not acknowledged. In her book, “Connected Teaching,” Harriet L. Schwartz discusses the importance of developing healthy boundaries while also allowing them to remain complex and evolving.³ This reminds us that work-life balance requires a similar blend of mindfulness and flexibility.

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Next, we can create an initial assessment process that is hospitable and is centered on our clients' goals and challenges. As Elizabeth L. Blades writes in *A Spectrum of Voices*, “The first meeting and lesson with a new student is very significant. It initiates the relationship between the student and teacher, establishes the learning climate, and serves as a catalyst for ensuing work.”⁴ How do we assess a new client's skills and opportunities for growth while still centering their own goals? How do we discuss our work as voice teachers and how this may intersect with the student's interests? How do we co-create a definition of safety in the voice studio, knowing every student is different? Developing a clear outline for the work to come may give both you and the client a sense of purpose and help develop a healthy, equitable student-teacher relationship.

When interviewing psychologist Dr. Ritu Agarwal for my podcast “Wholehearted Voice Pedagogy,” they noted following a research-based assessment framework while

asking clients, “How are things going for you?”⁵ What would it be like for us to adopt a similar framework in the voice studio? Can we ask clients for feedback on what’s working and what adjustments they may need as we continue? “The more opportunities we provide students to share input about their vocal journey, the better we can adjust our approach, which can strengthen the psychological contract.”⁶

Healthy Responses

There will be times, of course, when a client will leave us, regardless of any proactive measures we may take. Independent voice teacher Felix Graham offers this word of comfort:

It’s important to remember that, 99% of the time, it is not about you at all. It may be that the client has things going on in their life that make it not a good time to be working on this. A lot of times, there are financial considerations. Sometimes, you’re saying things they absolutely need to hear, but they’re not ready to internalize the process and they need to be at that point before they can move on. There’s also what I call “the specter of teachers past,” where there are things this person has going on in their experience that just prevent you from reaching them.⁷

Knowing this, how can we find closure? We might start by attempting to objectively assess the severed relationship. In a 2022 article, researchers outlined a Competence Measure of Individual Teacher-Student Relationships (COMMIT) questionnaire to assess three aspects of teacher competence: affect-motivation (attitudes or beliefs), knowledge of theories related to dyadic relationship-building (e.g. attachment theory, self-determination theory, etc.), and self-efficacy (keeping emotions in check during conflicts, etc.).⁸ While perhaps more academic than practical for our purposes, could we adapt the questionnaire into a simple SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats) analysis of our client relationship? What can we glean from this assessment and how might it inform our relationships with other clients?

Next, we can follow the advice of psychologist Nancy A. Newton and her colleagues, who outline how to navigate failure in the workplace:

- **Stop** — “Acknowledge failure in a timely way that minimizes negative impact on self and others. Maximize capacity for effective decision-making: gathering of relevant data, consultation with key players.”
- **Regroup** — “Establish emotional equilibrium. Instill a perspective that facilitates effective management of



the practice repercussions of failure and psychological integration of the experience.”

- **Lean** — “Restore and strengthen self esteem, developing a more accurate self-concept” and a “deeper commitment to transcendent personal values.”⁹

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Sometimes, time itself offers the best perspective. Luvada Harrison shares the story of a student who reached out to her several years after abruptly leaving her studio:

Fast-forward to 2021, that same young lady called me on my phone and said, “I know this is a shock. I just had to call you because I’m teaching now, and I hear your voice in my head. And I knew I had to call you and say, ‘I’m sorry.’ It was immaturity on my part with some of the things I said to you, because what you were doing was in my best interest. And now that I’ve matured and am teaching, I have a better understanding of the way you did things.” You could have picked me up off the floor. I never expected that.¹⁰

Losing a student may never feel comfortable, but I believe it can be less painful when we take proactive steps and

develop healthy responses. We hold the amazing capacity to simultaneously offer ourselves grace in the midst of failure while striving for excellence. Our ability to live within that duality will not only strengthen our resilience, it will keep us open to growing alongside our clients.

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