> "Questioning assumptions is a difficult process. It requires us to take inventory of the knowledge we teach, and holds us accountable to discard any moldy old ideas we passively perpetuate."

Diversity & Inclusion in the Independent Studio: Welcoming All Voices
by S. Rebeqa Rivers

Imagine that you know a young man who loves to sing. An amateur performer, he wishes he had more control over his voice. Finally, he plucks up the courage to research voice teachers and finds one who promises 'singing technique to avoid injury.' The young man schedules a lesson. He is nervous and excited to finally (finally!) take steps toward a more confident, capable singing voice. Lesson day arrives and he steps hesitantly into the studio.

At this point in the story, several things happen. The young man is primarily a rapper who writes his own songs. The voice teacher has 15 years experience teaching and firmly believes what he learned in conservatory – that Bel Canto is the pinnacle of singing technique. During their first lesson, when the student shares that he's a rapper and wants to prepare for an upcoming show, the voice teacher makes a remark close to "We do real singing in here." Then, when the young man raps an original piece to demonstrate his regular singing voice, the teacher directs him to smooth his rhythmic phrasing into a legato delivery.

Over the next several lessons, the young man trusts the teacher in good faith; but after being assigned an Italian art song for practice, he stops lessons in frustration. This teacher doesn't seem to understand his goals at all! Even worse, the young man spends the next several months trying to recover his rhythmic delivery because he started rapping in a legato style that doesn't fit his genre. For many years, this experience puts him off from attempting voice lessons again.

What went wrong in this pulled-from-real-life scenario? How might it have gone differently if the teacher knew technique other than Bel Canto? How might the teacher's assumption that Bel Canto is 'real singing' (while Rap is not) have impaired his judgment? What stopped the teacher from referring the student to a more appropriate teacher? Why did the voice teacher continue prescribing Bel Canto tools (Italian art songs) when his student wanted to work in another genre?

As a voice teacher working in the contemporary music industry, this is a scenario I've heard repeatedly from students recounting 'my previous voice teacher' stories to me. As a rock singer with a Bel Canto background, I have my own version of these stories. Thankfully, I've also had wonderful teachers who listened to my goals and partnered with me to develop my preferred voice.

Voice teachers encounter an incredibly broad spectrum of students. We are responsible to welcome students with whom we don't have much in common -- or at the very least, to respect their goals and refer them accordingly. One way we can prepare ourselves to meet the needs of diverse students is by interrogating our assumptions about voice technique, singing genres, 'good versus bad' singing, and the ways we present information in the studio. Unexamined assumptions cause us to miss learning opportunities, make poor judgment calls, and can even drive us to cause harm. Bluntly, if we refuse to interrogate assumptions, we choose not to create an inclusive space, and we miss out on professional growth and potential income.

Consider our original example: the teacher inherited a belief from conservatory that Bel Canto is better than Rap. Because of this unexamined belief, he did not consider Rap to be a legitimate form of singing and made no effort to find a Rap specialist who would be equipped to support the student's goals. Instead, the teacher mistook that his role was to convert the student to 'real singing' (which he defined as Bel Canto) instead of aligning to the student's actual goals. The teacher lost a paying client and, even worse, the student's technique was set off-track and he was scared away from voice lessons.

PROBLEM-POSING EDUCATION

In his book, Pedagogy of the Oppressed, Brazilian pedagogue Paolo Freire outlined a new way to think about education. Freire suggested that there are three parties in any educational transaction: the teacher, the student, and the established knowledge being taught. (Established knowledge refers to the knowledge that experts have identified as most valuable.) Around these three parties – teacher, student, and knowledge – Freire suggested two educational models:

1) Banking Education: the traditional model where the teacher 'deposits' knowledge into the student's mind, as though making a deposit at the bank. In this transaction: the knowledge is considered indisputable; the teacher's role is as subject matter expert; and the student's role is as passive recipient. The student must not question the validity of either the teacher or the knowledge. Perhaps you've known a teacher who responded to a student asking "Why?" with "Because I said so" - that is an example of banking education.

2) Problem-Posing Education: an investigative model where teacher and student collaboratively interrogate the knowledge through questions and dialogue. In this transaction: the knowl-

to bring a song from a genre they sing outside the studio and together compare the vocal requirements of that genre against their studio repertoire.

2) Pose questions about the student's relationship to the material to spark reflection. Ask students to describe how the material relates to them, if at all. Ask them to share their perceptions of what the material represents (you might be surprised!) Consider participating in critical thinking assignments where you each bring a song and investigate your relationships to the genre the other person chose. By demonstrating your own willingness to learn, you might inspire a reluctant student to open up - and learn their musical preferences in the process.

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edge is considered a starting point of investigation; the teacher's role is to present the knowledge and pose questions; and the student's role is as investigation partner. Both student and teacher are expected to learn during the investigation, sometimes adding to the knowledge for the benefit of future learners. Perhaps you've known a teacher who responded to "Why?" with "Good question, let's find out" - that is an example of problem-posing education.

Returning to our original story, what might have happened if the teacher had approached learning as an investigation? What if the teacher had posed questions about the differences between Bel Canto and Rap for them to investigate together? If the teacher had considered learning from students as an integral part of the education transaction, he might have seized the opportunity to learn about the vocal requirements of Rap from the expert in his studio.

SUGGESTED PEDAGOGICAL PRACTICES

So, how can we cultivate the practice of self-examination to prepare ourselves to include and welcome diverse students? Thankfully, there are many resources for educators to help with this. I will suggest a few pedagogical practices here, and also encourage you to invest in yourself by finding additional resources to expand your skill set.

1) Pose questions about the material to spark investigation. Compare and contrast the knowledge you're teaching with knowledge from other traditions. Consider asking the student

3) Monitor speaking times as a guide. When employing problem-posing and investigative dialogue, speaking times should be fairly evenly split between you and the student. If you find yourself doing more than 60% of the talking, there's a good chance there isn't much investigation happening.

4) Interrogate assumptions about the knowledge you teach by reflecting on the following questions:

- Do I assume that my preferred singing genre is better than other genres? If so, where did this belief come from? What criteria do I use to support this?

- Do I assume that my preferred singing technique is best for vocal health? If so, what other technical traditions have I researched to support this assumption (e.g. jazz, vocal percussion, Indian Aakar singing…)

- Do I assume that the repertoire I am used to is the best fit for most students?

5) Interrogate assumptions about students by reflecting on the following questions:

- Do I link certain individual characteristics with levels of intelligence and ability (e.g., political or religious beliefs, tattoos and piercings, etc.)?

- Do I assume that all students are heterosexual?

- Do I expect most students to come from traditional families?

- Do I think I can tell which students have physical, mental, or learning disabilities?

- Do I expect most students-of-color to come from lower in-come families or have weaker academic preparation?

Questioning assumptions is a difficult process. It requires us to take inventory of the knowledge we teach, and holds us account-able to discard any moldy old ideas we passively perpetuate. Despite the discomfort, challenging assumptions gives us the free-dom to step away from ideas that limit our options and to set our own direction. As educators, we are responsible to create a place where students can be vulnerable in order to learn. We can rise to this responsibility by preparing ourselves to welcome all voices with openness, so that when they ask "Why?" we respond "Good Question. Let's find out."

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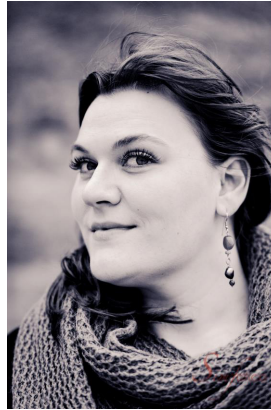
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