

Teaching with D.E.P.T.H.

by Thomas Erik Angerhofer

For over four decades, I have been training and teaching martial arts alongside my musical practice. In a previous article, I mentioned a few of the lessons I learned in the dojo that share relevance with the work we do in the music studio. This time around, instead of sharing “ancient wisdom” from another discipline, I’d like to introduce you to the teaching methodology we used to break down and scaffold instruction. Not only is it easy to remember (which is particularly helpful to me), but it also helps guide your teaching in a way that is focused and disciplined while allowing for creativity and variation. Most of all, it encourages the type of deep practice that helps learners grow. Are you ready for the name of the system? It’s called D.E.P.T.H.

As far as acronyms go, this one is pretty much on the nose. “D” is for **Demonstrate**. When introducing something new, it is important for the learner to “begin with the end in mind,” as Stephen R. Covey says. Provide a model example of the end product: what the student should do and how they should do it. “E” is for **Explain**. When I was much younger, my mom worked in a retirement community. One day, a 97-year-old retired teacher approached me after learning that I was training to become a teacher. She asked, “Do you know why people become teachers? They fall in love with the sound of their own voice!” With this in mind, I strive to keep explanations as short as possible, describing the steps and actions in language that is relevant to the student while outlining the order of operations in a way that is easy to follow.

“P” is for **Perfect** (verb). Now the student is doing, and we want to get to this phase as quickly as possible. Here is where we break down the action into its individual parts, much like painting by numbers. Some actions might require drilling each step separately before adding the next. Others might require creating smaller exercises to train parts of a longer action. When you do it right, you disguise repetition to build skill in manageable chunks. “T” is for **Train**. We’ve built the exercise, and now we’re moving it through the range. You might have tools (one of my teachers called them “training wheels”) that the student can use for feedback or add-ins to mitigate challenges that present themselves along the way. Little by little, we start raising the training wheels and



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then remove them so that the student can move on to the “H” phase to **Hone** their developing skill.

Demonstrate, Explain, Perfect, Train, Hone. Sounds good, but now let’s go from the abstract to the concrete to see how it might work with an actual vocal exercise. To keep things simple, I’ll present it in the form of a monologue; in practice, guided inquiry and a heutagogical framework are encouraged. Let’s pretend the teacher and the student have reviewed a recording together, and the student has noticed that their timbre seems to change with nearly every vowel and that

they are experiencing difficulty moving into the upper part of their range on certain vowels.

“That’s great that you are able to pinpoint those challenges! Let’s learn a drill that will help you maintain a more uniform timbre across all your vowels while helping you move more easily into that upper range. Here’s how it goes.” (Teacher sings /aeiouoaei/ on the notes 123454321.) “Notice how I keep the jaw in the ‘sweet spot’ (not too open, not too closed), how the lips neither protrude nor pull the corners back, and how the tongue articulates up toward the roof of the mouth, where it is housed when the mouth is closed, rather than flattening, articulating forward, or pulling back? Let’s begin by finding the ‘home base’ (basis of articulation) for the tongue when singing. First, breathe in with a snore, then slide 1-3-1 on /ŋ/. Excellent! Let’s do a few more reps.

“Do you notice anything changing in your timbre when you do this? Let’s try pretending you’re drinking a glass of water as you ascend. Does that seem to help? Great! Let’s now find the ‘home base’ vowel, /a/. Let’s do the same exercise, adding 12321 on /a/ at the end. Rather than moving down, let’s try to raise the soft palate away from the tongue, keeping the outside edges of the tongue in contact with the upper molars as we move to /a/. (After some reps.) What are you noticing about the soft palate? Is it sealing the opening to the nose when you move to /a/? Let’s add a ‘double g’ (/g:g/) between the /ŋ/ and the /a/. (A few reps later.) Are you noticing how that ‘double g’ closes that opening? Great!

“You’re keeping the lips neutral, which seems to be working well. Do you notice the jaw moving when you change pitch? Let’s find that Goldilocks place for it by massaging the

masseter muscles with your index and middle fingers as you do the exercise. How is that working? Great. Let's add the first of the lip vowels. This means you'll only have to move the lips, mostly the upper one, creating a slightly smaller opening without puckering while maintaining that loose jaw and the /a/ shape of the tongue as you move to /o/. We'll simply add another 12321 on /o/ to the end of the exercise. (After reps, using feedback tools, etc.) I think we're ready to add /u/ into the mix. Let's change the /η/ slide to 1-5-1, followed by the 'double g,' and then 123454321 on /a-o-u-o-a/. Notice that I keep doing the same thing with my jaw and tongue throughout the whole exercise, but the opening gets even smaller for the /u/, maybe not quite as small as when you blow out a candle, but moving in that direction. Now you try..."

Depending on the student's current skill level, this might be as far as you get with the exercise. If so, take it to one of the songs you're currently working on. Do it on the melody in some of the easier sections, then move to more challenging ones. Then, using some of the tools you used during the "Train" phase, such as placing your fingers on the masseter, apply it to the vowels in the words. As you get farther into the initial exercise, you will introduce many other helpful tools. One I use frequently is the "inward sigh" to help find that Goldilocks pharyngeal space. Once students have the vowel shapes, they can "inward sigh" through them as they inhale, like when you hear juicy gossip or like the Tenacious D track "Inward Singing." It can be pitched lower in the range, at the sung pitch, or an octave below the sung pitch. If they're having trouble pitching it, they can do it on an inward "Darth Vader whisper," akin to what Ken Bozeman calls the "Chiaroscuro Whisper."

In any event, once the initial demonstration is performed, most of the action is done by the student. As much as possible, solicit feedback from the student on their own performance using appropriate tools for observation while developing a toolbox that helps the student guide themselves toward the desired learning outcomes. Using a system to organize your instruction, like D.E.P.T.H., can encourage deep



Thomas Erik Angerhofer instructing a group of students.

practice by having the student identify a spark that ignites their desire to grow, focus attention on fundamental actions, make adjustments that streamline related neural pathways, disguise repetition to strengthen those pathways, and come full circle through application. Add in the personalities of the teacher and student, and you also have a recipe for serious fun!

Thomas Erik Angerhofer is a teacher and singer based in Morgantown, West Virginia, and the greater Pittsburgh area. Originally from Rochester, New York, he has taught and performed throughout the United States, Europe, North Africa, and the Levant. He started voice lessons and martial arts training around the same time (for no particular reason) and has been doing both for more than forty years. His business, Zen Arts, provides voice, martial arts, and health and well-being instruction, combining classical wisdom with contemporary insight. In addition to his private studio, Erik teaches at WVU and has taught at UNA, Xavier University, CSU, Ithaca College, MSU Denver, and the Denver School of the Arts. His students have gone on to professional careers in Musical Theatre, Opera, Contemporary/Commercial Music, and Education. Erik holds degrees from CU Boulder (DMA, MM) and SUNY Fredonia (BA). When he's not doing music or ninja stuff, you can find him at the local skatepark carving up a bowl.