

Vocal Health: Transforming the Pre-Show Lesson Week

By Kim Woycke

It was the week before the big show, and I realized I needed to do something completely different for my students. Our school was selected as part of MTI & Disney's "United States of Frozen" competition — and we were opening a six-show run of "FROZEN: the Broadway Musical." I am an independent voice teacher, specializing in musical theatre, teaching mostly middle and high school students in Lake Zurich, Illinois. Three days each week I teach at the high school, renting out a practice room and teaching singers during their lunch and study hall periods.



Kim Woycke

"Welcome to the Vocal Health Studio," I greeted my students as they walked into the High School Band Uniform Storage room for their voice lessons that week. They smiled. And exhaled.

"I have been waiting for this all week."

"This is NOT how I'd typically start my vocal lessons. But this week called for something different."

The lights were dimmed, two yoga mats were placed in the center of the room facing an iPad lined with flickering flameless candles.

"Can I interest you in some tea?" I asked.

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This particular show was bigger than anything our school had ever done. In a typical year we do three to four performances of our musicals. But the demand and energy surrounding this show left us with six sold-out performances in five days. AND if you're familiar with the music for "Frozen," it's extremely vocally demanding. The ensemble alone sings in 17 numbers and the leads sing high, contemporary musical theatre mix/belt music.

With all of the preparation for this show — my singers were TIRED.

As an independent studio owner working with musical theatre singers, it is always challenging to operate a business and teach during a show tech-week and run. I've read the comments in the online forums about canceled lessons, student burnout, and fear of the vocal, physical or mental strain just being too much on these kids! The demand placed on these singers is intense. At the high school level students are expected to be in academic classes all day and then in tech rehearsals or shows late into the evening. They're physically in the building for 12–15 hours a day and this doesn't account for the out-of-school homework and studying

requirements. What is even more challenging to calculate is the stress burden placed on the students who are trying to juggle pressures from various classes and teachers in addition to the show demands.

So, this begs the question: How can we, as voice teachers, support our singers when the demands outside of our studio cause us to think, "My students need to deprioritize their singing lesson and focus on themselves right now"?

One of the absolute gifts of being an independent studio teacher is the gift of flexibility. We can choose to do something differently. Because, as independent teachers, I feel our job is different, perhaps, than teachers who work in a formal education setting. The job of an independent voice teacher is to be a support to our students, to help them pursue their unique goals as an enhancement to their primary modes of education. For me, this means running very student-centered lessons.

So, when faced with a challenging pre-show week, I knew that the primary goal of my students at that time was to perform healthfully and exceptionally in their musical. And I knew that I didn't want my singers to be singing with me this week. I knew that added vocal rest would be beneficial for them. In years past, I allowed students to cancel lessons the week of the show, but it wasn't really what the students or my business needed.

Questions that I was receiving from my students included: "What can I do to rest my voice?" and "What should I be doing

to take care of my voice?" I realized that, having never faced a situation that placed this much demand on their vocal health, they didn't have many tools to draw from to make their vocal rest and recovery productive.

So for this week of the show, I decided that I would transform my lessons from the typical SINGING voice lesson, where we work on vocal technique and repertoire, and that I would instead offer non-singing lessons where students could learn tools to help their voice AND their bodies and minds recover.

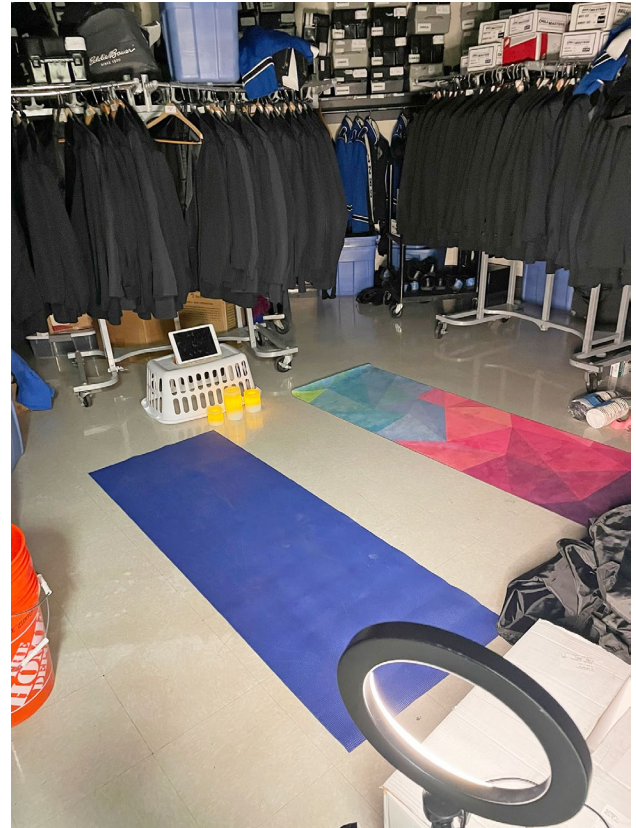
"How can we, as independent voice educators, support our singers when the demands outside of our studio cause us to think 'My students need to deprioritize their singing lesson and focus on themselves right now'?"

Because I am a full believer that students (and really anyone) learn best when they are fully engaged, I decided to add a level of "enchantment" to the lessons and really make it a full vibe. I wanted the singers to come out of these lessons feeling refreshed and also empowered to use these tools on their own. I realized that even if they didn't practice these exercises on their own, I could use the time that we had together to productively offer them some true restorative care, instead of them sitting stressed-out in a study hall room or chatting with their friends in the lunchroom.

My objectives for these lessons were clear. I wanted them to learn tangible, replicable tools that they could apply throughout the run of the show and beyond. I wanted it to be based on a strong voice-body connection — with the recovery expanding into the entire physical body. And I wanted it to be guided, yet also personalized for the students' own areas of stress or tension.

Our lessons are typically 30 to 40 minutes, so I needed this to be efficient but also effective. So, I followed the following format:

Singers arrived in the "Vocal Health Studio" and then we completed a 4-minute empowering meditation based on a positive affirmation. This allowed students to connect to their breath and transition themselves into this "restorative" mode. I followed a series of meditations based on a single "I am ____" statement. And I allowed each student to select the word that spoke to them most in the moment. (Fun fact: each student who participated chose a different word!)



Band storage room set up for vocal health lessons.

We then moved into some gentle stretching and massage. We followed curated videos I gathered from YouTube. First with a shoulder, neck and jaw tensions release series. And then into a laryngeal self-massage series. We also took time to discuss the anatomy of the larynx, which isn't something we go into a lot of detail about in our lessons.

After the massage, I had students re-check in with their bodies and many reported feeling open, relaxed and so much better. I then asked students to let me know of any additional problems spots and we customized the rest of the session for that. Some did additional stretches. Some wanted some gentle phonation, and so I brought in straws and talked about the benefit of using a straw for SOVT work.

I was blown away by the response and how much my students learned during these lessons.

Sydney, a high school Junior who played Olaf and was struggling with some upper body and shoulder tension due to carrying an Olaf puppet said, "After a vocally exhausting week, these vocal massages and exercises were very helpful in providing me with some resilience to make it through the weekend. These exercises will definitely be put to use, especially if I'm having a vocally 'off week.'"



Sydney Pine as Olaf, Lake Zurich HS, Frozen The Musical

Katie, who played the role of Elsa in the production and is going on to major in performance said, "In my case, I not only learned techniques to take care of my voice, such as massaging and delicate warmups, I also learned the importance of connecting your entire health to your vocal health. For example, I focused on releasing tension throughout my whole body, especially my shoulders, and saw a complete difference in how I felt when I sang. I was then able to judge and limit when I do a physical activity, like running or working out, based on when I had to perform. You taught me that if I felt vocally tired, rest and yoga were the best solutions so I wouldn't strain anything. I am definitely going to continue focusing on the techniques and guidance you taught me in my future career."

Alaina, a junior, who struggles with some performance anxiety said, "I really liked learning the massage because I was able to use it backstage when we weren't able to sing, and it helped calm myself before walking on to perform. I also have continued meditation as it centers myself walking into performances and keeping myself from getting overwhelmed."

This feedback was incredible — and it left me feeling really aligned in my job as an educator.

It kind of surprised me! I felt the most aligned as a voice teacher after a week of teaching that involved no singing! It can be very easy as a voice teacher to feel like our job is to lead the students towards achieving musical excellence. That

our job is to create opportunities and assign them challenging material and drive our own personal agenda. But the more I teach privately, the more I find this to be untrue. I truly view the role of a private voice teacher to be a supporter of the student's goals, which sometimes includes musical excellence, and other times is about personal discovery, stress-relief, or the pursuit of JOY.

Sure, it's easy to be frustrated with the systems of the arts — the strain and stress that these models put on our student singers. But that frustration doesn't help anyone. Instead, I chose to see what small impact I could make on my students that week. To figure out how I could better equip them to handle the burden. I left feeling like I provided them with one of the most beneficial weeks of lessons of my career. I plan to make this a yearly occurrence within my studio and encourage other teachers to do the same.

Kim Woycke is an independent teacher and owner of Woycke Voice Studio in the Chicago suburb of Hawthorne Woods in Illinois. She has been teaching middle and high-school aged singers for more than 15 years. She holds a bachelor's degree in drama from New York University Tisch School of the Performing Arts where she studied musical theatre performance at CAP21. In addition to teaching voice, Woycke is a wife and mother of two (Carter age 10 and Summer age 6) and a wellness enthusiast, running a "Body, Mind, Sunshine" virtual wellness community. You can connect with Woycke online via Instagram @ WoyckeVoice or at singwithkim.com