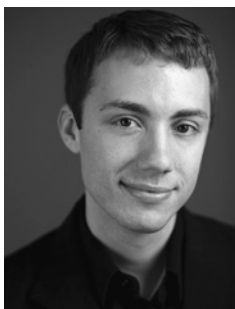


# Voice Class: A Learner-Centered Approach

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**M**ANY COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES offer classes in group voice instruction. Voice class enrollments typically consist of beginning voice students interested in singing and improving voice functionality. Sometimes these courses are made up of nonvoice major students fulfilling general education credits; other times, group voice instruction serves as a methods course for instrumental music majors to partially fulfill the requirements for a degree in music education. Often the overarching goal of a group voice course is to provide students with the basic foundations of singing technique along with an introduction to vocal performance, repertoire, and appreciation. This article examines scholarship related to group voice instruction and provides a model for learner-centered teaching in group voice instruction toward the goal of increased learning, student motivation, and student-teacher rapport.

## LEARNING OBJECTIVES AND BENEFITS

The curricular design of group voice instruction often seen in higher education is historically modeled on that presented in cathedral choir schools and other religious institutions.<sup>1</sup> An article from the mid-twentieth century in the *Music Educators Journal* (1945) provides the purposes, principles, and procedures of voice class teaching.

The fundamental purposes of voice training classes are (1) to present correct use of the singing and speaking voice, with a progressive study of good song literature and its intelligent interpretation; (2) to lay the groundwork for an appreciative concept of the art of singing and of fine repertoire, from the standpoint of the listener as well as the performer; (3) to provide further training and individual help for the more talented student who may become a professional singer and teacher.<sup>2</sup>

An article appearing in the same journal years later offers similar objectives for group voice instruction, including a greater appreciation of music, an improvement of the singing and speaking voice, development in poise and musicianship, and potential contribution to a school's choral program.<sup>3</sup> Recent scholarship remains analogous to the earlier research, suggesting that the objective of a voice class is to provide an introduction to "good breathing, posture, diction, and resonance, and to expose the students to vocal terminology and a wide variety of literature."<sup>4</sup> In the teaching of adult beginning singers, Jeanette Myers in the *Journal of Singing* suggests three basic objectives: breath support, reducing tensions, and vowels.<sup>5</sup> Myers also

provides a longer list of course objectives, including range development, balanced vocal onset, identifying voice types, dealing with performance anxiety, and the study of melody and lyrics.

Group voice class also has been discussed as a strategy for the teaching of first-year voice majors as an alternative to private instruction for small music departments. Katharine DeBoer provides a model for this kind of creative, productive, and effective sequence.<sup>6</sup> Students under DeBoer's design receive group instruction in vocal physiology, breath management, and performance etiquette, in addition to learning three pieces over the semester-long course. As a cohort of voice majors, students are able to learn from one another, and a spirit of camaraderie and collaboration is developed within the program. This form of instruction also serves as a benchmark for the voice degree, and allows faculty to thoroughly assess each student's needs, which benefits students and teachers when dividing students into voice studios after the initial semester of group teaching.

Benefits of group instruction are praised throughout the literature. In addition to the advantages DeBoer suggests, she also contends, "Class voice is a level playing field, where talent and hard work are applauded and admired, where students can share successes and challenges."<sup>7</sup> Students in voice class are able to learn from each other while they learn to identify and also experience similar technical difficulties.

In the teaching of older adults, Myers asserts, "Adults find it demoralizing to be on the one hand quick to understand what is being taught intellectually, while on the other hand frustratingly slow to implement the new concept."<sup>8</sup> The collaborative learning experience enables students to share in frustrations and acknowledge they are not isolated in their growth. Students are also able to "see, hear, and describe strengths and weaknesses and apply the principles" to their own performance.<sup>9</sup>

## CURRICULUM DESIGN

There are no nationally established standards for a curriculum of group voice instruction. Each instructor is responsible for defining and scaffolding the learning objectives, as well as deciding how to include related curriculum. Depending on the specific curricular design of each instructor, course objectives might include music

appreciation, literacy, and history. Musicianship skills, such as music notation, sight singing, and improvisation, might be considered important elements of a voice class. An instructor might also find it valuable to teach basic keyboard skills to promote home practice and independent music learning. Listening to, analyzing, and evaluating musical performances also could be included. Likewise, learning to connect music to other arts and cultures, and connecting music to one's own life, could be a benefit in creating lifelong music learners. To this end, while the focus in group singing instruction is to provide each student with the skills to become an improved singer, each unique instructor crafts the scope and sequence of this process.

Improvement in speech is regarded as an objective in the mid-century scholarship, but, curiously, the art of public speaking as an objective in group voice instruction is absent in recent publications. Changes in this trend might stem from several different reasons, including voice teacher training or restraints in instructional time for group voice. The literature reviewed for this article provides no data for the reason in this change of the course objectives, nor is there evidence to indicate how much time was spent on public speaking versus singing instruction in the group voice instruction during the earlier twentieth century. Recent scholarship suggests a trend of focusing instruction on the art of singing.

There are several textbooks designed for teaching group voice class, and each is arranged to provide an overview of the technical issues of vocalizing, breathing, and diction.<sup>10</sup> Most of the main texts also provide a chapter or section on musicianship, as an initial step toward music literacy. Information on mental preparation for singing and tools for self-evaluation are often integrated. Selected songs are also included in most textbooks, providing students with a small standard anthology of repertoire. These texts seem to mainly focus on classical repertoire, or at least repertoire more aligned with *bel canto* singing. Early publications suggest a focus on ballads, light operetta, oratorio arias, and folksongs. Textbooks published more recently provide a selection of repertoire that ranges from canons and rounds to folksongs, jazz standards, art songs, and modern and classical music theater. In some textbooks, a song from either the soft rock or pop genre is included. Many textbooks intended for group voice class come with audio

files of melody and accompaniment tracks that enable rote learning and home practice. Though these books may aim to provide students with a wide range of styles and languages, the repertoire seems limited to songs in English. There is a need for more world music selections, in order to foster for a more inclusive and cross-cultural learning environment. There is also a notable absence of contemporary American music, such as appropriate repertoire from hip-hop, pop, R&B, rock, country, and contemporary Christian genres.

The literature on group singing instruction does not fully capture the multidimensional complexity of a voice class. Randall Allsup reminds us, “Students have very different expectations for what they want from a music class, and the teacher is reminded that there is nothing universal or inherent in the task at hand.”<sup>11</sup> Twenty-first century college students are often more interested in singing familiar repertoire than ballads and folksongs. Though many students are simply pleased to be singing, informal observation suggests that college students enroll in voice classes with already strongly formed opinions about music and singers. Depending on the makeup of the enrollment, students’ experiences in making music and singing can be widely varied. While some students may wish to learn a seventeenth century art song, other students might be more inspired by contemporary pop artists. Requiring a student not majoring in voice to sing a song (or two or three) from a relatively short list of repertoire typically assigned to classical voice majors could stymie student motivation. Engaging students in the learning process while concurrently and collaboratively exploring elements of efficient voice production through a wide range of music styles not only encourages student success, but also helps create a learner-centered environment.

## LEARNER-CENTERED TEACHING

The concept of learner-centered teaching was explored in Lucinda Mackworth-Young’s 1990 study of pupil-centered learning in private piano instruction. Her research indicates that students had increased enjoyment and motivation in their playing when they were given more choices and leadership in their lessons. The author also noted that teachers “may feel under considerable time-pressure to produce results, and

the mainstream of focus in piano pedagogy is, and has been, on how to teach note reading, technique, and interpretation, with little reference to the emotional and psychological factors involved.”<sup>12</sup> While Mackworth-Young’s observations are specific to private lessons, a group voice instructor might feel similar stress to be outcome oriented with regard to student performances. A learner-centered approach aims to promote student motivation, self-guided learning, and deeper engagement in the learning process. While the objective of group voice instruction is to guide students to healthy vocal technique and gain performance experience, the quality of a performance may not always capture the progress and growth of the student.

In *Learner-Centered Teaching: Five Key Changes to Practice*, Maryellen Weimer argues that teachers who cover substantial content over the length of the class might be doing a disservice to students; more content does not necessarily translate into more learning. Weimer also asserts, “students need not wait until they have developed expertise before they interact with content. They are encouraged to explore it, handle it, relate it to their own experience, and challenge it whatever their level of expertise.”<sup>13</sup> While not all students will be able to interact with vocal repertoire in the same way, students should be given the opportunity to engage in music making from the very start of the semester. While the foundations of physical alignment, breath management, and vocal exercises are paramount to optimal singing, waiting several class meetings to introduce repertoire or a creative project might stifle student motivation.

Weimer suggests class meetings should not primarily be for covering content, but for encouraging students to be lifelong, independent learners. Weimer affirms, “First, content is not covered; it is used to develop a knowledge base. Second, content is used to develop learning skills, and finally, is it used to create learner awareness. These changes are accomplished through active learning strategies that allow students firsthand experience with the content.”<sup>14</sup> While for music instructors it might feel more appropriate to teach music reading by introducing pitches and rhythms as abstract concepts, students might be more motivated to explore music literacy by learning a piece by rote and analyzing the theoretical components along the way. Ken Bain, author of *What the Best College Teachers Do*, indicates a similar notion

by asking, “In short, what can we do in class to help students learn outside of class?”<sup>15</sup> Bain also emphasizes that every student is unique and may require individualized attention; thus, a teacher’s approach must be flexible to meet the different learning needs of all students.

### STRATEGIES FOR LEARNER-CENTERED TEACHING IN VOICE CLASS

There are many approaches to creating a learner-centered environment in group voice instruction without differentiating the overall course objectives of learning the fundamentals of singing and gaining performance experience. Creating assignments that meet students’ interests and giving them choice, not only within an assignment, but offering them a selection of assignments as well, enables them to tailor their learning. While this might seem challenging to organize, if each assignment is given structure within the syllabus, students learn a valuable lesson in self-direction and self-guided learning. While students might initially be challenged by the array of possible projects, they will eventually gravitate toward assignments that fit their learning style and interests. In Weimer’s speech class, every student is required to present a persuasive speech to the class by the end of the semester. All other assignments lead students to develop better public speaking skills, whether through engaging in discourse, reading, or writing. Weimer assigns explicit parameters and benchmarks to each assignment, including due dates, but students are individually responsible for choosing the assignments they will complete. Also, assessing each assignment on a rubric, created by the teacher or the students, provides greater transparency in the grading system, and students can track their grades as the course progresses.

Crafting a syllabus with creative, student-driven assignments that build fundamental skills in vocal technique and performance puts the students in a place of leadership within group instruction. Though classes might be structured around general vocal exercises and considerations for vocal growth, assignments should be constructed so that they allow students to be explorative and creative at their level in the learning process. While many of the proposed assignments are already common to group voice instruction, offering students the opportunity to select or craft their assignments in

their course of study fosters both student engagement and student-teacher rapport. The following strategies for learner-centered teaching include:

1. In-Class Solo Presentations
  - Perform a solo song in class from the textbook or a repertoire list.
  - Perform a second solo (or third) song in class of student’s choice (pending instructor approval).
  - Perform a spoken word piece in class (song lyrics or poem, approved by instructor).
  - Compose and perform an original song written in Western notation or non-Western notation (à la John Cage’s *Sculptures Musicales*).
  - Perform a monologue from a play.
  - Design and perform an improvisational song in class.
  - Sing and record a song and present the recording in class.
2. Small Group Experiences
  - Perform a round or canon singing with one or two singers on a part.
  - Perform a duet or trio in class.
  - Perform a choral piece (of at least four parts) with four classmates in class.
  - Prepare and teach a short lesson on vocal anatomy to the class.
  - Lead a group warm-up providing a list of vocal exercises and the purposes of each exercise to the instructor in advance.
3. Observations and Analysis
  - Video record an in-class performance of yourself and write a reflection.
  - Attend a vocal master class and write a short summary.
  - Observe a private voice lesson and write a short summary.
  - Attend a choral or vocal recital and write a short summary.
  - Complete a text analysis for song lyrics or a poem.
  - Complete a self-guided unit on the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA).
  - Write out a song text or poem using IPA.
  - Complete a practice log/journal.
4. Music Appreciation/History

- Write an essay about a song, providing historical information regarding the composer and lyricist and why the song was composed.
  - Write an essay about a musical genre or style of singing.
  - Write an essay about a song composer or performer.
5. Musicianship/Music Theory
- Complete a Western notation/music theory assignment.
  - Take an examination on the fundamentals of Western notation/music theory (based on the previous assignment).
  - Complete a theoretical analysis of a song (for students enrolled or having completed a music theory class, or similar prerequisite).
  - Learn and perform a short piece on the piano, guitar, or other instrument (repertoire approved by instructor, based on student's previous abilities).

### **STRUCTURAL NEEDS AND POSITIVE OUTCOMES**

Students in such a learner-centered course might be initially overwhelmed by the possibility of assignments, but in the end, Weimer found they come to appreciate the ability to tailor their learning experience. While this approach is perhaps unconventional, all the above assignments help guide students to understand more about music and the art of singing. In varied-level classes, intermediate and advanced students will be able to challenge themselves through more advanced assignments, and beginning students will appreciate being able to work on projects suited to their level of experience, while also deriving the additional benefit of observing process and outcomes experienced by the more advanced students of the class.

Depending on the number of class meetings and assigned credit hours, instructors should be realistic in determining the appropriate amount of required assignments. Also, care should be taken in scheduling class meetings to avoid too many in-class presentations during the last few class sessions. While in the proposed learner-centered teaching model students are given the freedom to choose assignments, the instructor should be transparent with due dates and expectations for assessments through rubrics. Allowing students

to state their goals at the beginning of the course and select assignments in the pursuit of achieving those goals helps provide necessary structure in this learning environment, as well as helps to build student-teacher rapport. This model of pedagogy allows students with a specific target, such as preparing for an audition or an upcoming performance, to design their assignments toward achieving this objective. Although students are working on different assignments over the duration of the semester, like Weimer's speech class, there is the collective objective of all students working toward an in-class live solo performance.

### **CONCLUSION AND FURTHER RESEARCH**

While every group voice instructor must serve as their own guide in designing a voice class, creating an engaging and student-centered learning environment enables each student to flourish and develop at a level congruent with their experience and abilities. The above suggested activities serve only as a model for possible projects, and every instructor should design assignments to match the culture of the school and students.

There is a need for training that is specific to group voice class instruction. Personal observation suggests that many current instructors were themselves advanced singers when beginning college and perhaps never took a voice class or received training in group instruction. A group voice class modeled on a voice pedagogy or studio performance class targeted for voice majors is unlikely to meet the needs of all students enrolled in a more general group voice class. Not only is there the challenge of structuring group instruction, there is also the difficulty of meeting students' interests and musical tastes, which can be more diverse than a cohort of voice majors mostly working toward a classical voice recital.

The proposed learner-centered approach fosters critical thinking and learning while concomitantly exposing students to an expansive range of material, giving them an opportunity to engage both broadly and deeply. Additionally, a learner-centered class can also promote multicultural repertoire and diverse learning strategies, which is paramount in twenty-first century instruction. Group voice instruction provides music departments the opportunity to nurture emerging artists and encourage collaborative learning in a supportive environment.

Finally, the metacognitive processing and critical thinking skills inherent in choosing their own course projects will serve the students beyond the musical skills they will achieve in a learner-centered group voice class.

## NOTES

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Praised by the *San Francisco Chronicle* for his "limpid tone and astonishing eloquence," as a countertenor, Mr. Sauerland's recent solo appearances include the American Bach Soloists, Festival Opera Company, Folger Consort, Handel Opera Project, Musica Angelica Baroque Orchestra, and Oakland Symphony Orchestra. As a former member of the Grammy Award-winning vocal ensemble Chanticleer, Mr. Sauerland has sung throughout the United States, Europe, and Asia.

Mr. Sauerland has presented at national conferences for the American Choral Directors Association (2015), Chorus America (2017), and the Society for Music Teacher Education (2017). His doctoral dissertation examines the experiences of trans and gender nonconforming singers and their teachers in the applied voice studio. Mr. Sauerland will receive the Doctorate of Education in Music and Music Education from Teachers College, Columbia University in May 2018. As a Marshall Scholar recipient, he earned a Master's degree in Advanced Vocal Performance from the Royal College of Music in London. Originally from a small dairy farm in Ohio, he received a Bachelor of Music from Miami University.

O Month when they who love must love and wed!  
 Were one to go to worlds where May is naught,  
 And seek to tell the memories he had brought  
 From earth of thee, what were most fitly said?  
 I know not if the rosy showers shed  
 From apple-boughs, or if the soft green wrought  
 In fields, or if the robin's call be fraught  
 The most with thy delight. Perhaps they read  
 Thee best who in the ancient time did say  
 Thou wert the sacred month unto the old:  
 No blossom blooms upon thy brightest day  
 So subtly sweet as memories which unfold  
 In aged hearts which in thy sunshine lie,  
 To sun themselves once more before they die.

Helen Hunt Jackson,  
 "A Calendar of Sonnets: May"