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# Bringing a Different Kind of Research into the Studio

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AS VOICE TEACHERS, WE SEEK THE kinds of pedagogic and practical insights into the voice that are found in this and other research journals. An ability to articulate to students and clients how to obtain technical freedom and fullness of expression becomes more clearly defined when keeping a finger on the pulse of ongoing voice research.

We know, however, that monitoring the evolution of voice pedagogy and voice science is not enough. While continuing to expand our knowledge of the voice, we also must explore new means of communicating that knowledge in the studio, skills that are just as valuable because they elevate our ability to transmit complex pedagogic ideas.

It is especially important to understand that today's students learn differently than students of even five years ago. Terry Heick, Founder and Director of TeachThought, states, "Teachers are the arbitrators of knowledge and culture. Knowledge and culture are each dynamic, endlessly crashing and churning. This makes teaching significantly important and difficult work."<sup>1</sup>

This article will highlight several dynamic tools that can enhance effectiveness as voice teachers, outline the studies that illuminate them, and model how they can be applied in the voice studio.

## TEACHING CURIOSITY

Teaching requires us to be curious. In August 2015 *The New York Times* published an article entitled "The Case for Teaching Ignorance." In it, the author states,

In the mid-1980's [*sic*], a University of Arizona surgery professor, Marlys H. Witte, proposed teaching a class entitled "Introduction to Medical and Other Ignorance." Her idea was not well received; at one foundation, an official told her he would rather resign than support a class on ignorance.

Dr. Witte was urged to alter the name of the course, but she wouldn't budge. Far too often, she believed, teachers fail to emphasize how much about a given topic is unknown . . . She wanted her students to recognize the limits of knowledge and to appreciate that the questions often deserve as much attention as answers. Eventually, the American Medical Association funded the class, which students would fondly remember as "Ignorance 101."<sup>2</sup>

There is often an unspoken power dynamic between teachers and students, despite our attempts to create a safe and nurturing environment. This dynamic is created, in part, as a result of the perceived divide between teacher

and student, knowledge and ignorance. Arthur Books, former CEO of the conservative think tank American Enterprise Institute, explains how our current populist culture can further widen this divide because of a fear of the competition of ideas.<sup>3</sup>

To return to *The New York Times* article cited above, Michael Smithson, a social scientist at Australian National University, uses an analogy to explain the relationship between knowledge and ignorance.

The larger the island of knowledge grows, the longer the shoreline—where knowledge meets ignorance—extends. The more we know, the more we can ask. Questions don't give way to answers as much as they proliferate together. Answers breed questions. Curiosity isn't merely a static disposition but rather a passion of the mind that is ceaselessly earned and nurtured.<sup>4</sup>

In his study, "The Power Game: Power Dynamics between the Teacher and the Students in a Graduate Seminar," researcher Gihan Silky explains why embracing the malleability of curiosity in a learning environment can be a challenge, especially for teachers.

Data analysis pointed out that [an] institution's expectations of both teachers and students set great constraints on power dynamics inside the classroom, and leave teachers with unsettling feelings whenever they try a new method that entails a change in the centers of power . . . The professor and a number of teachers expressed feeling intimidated by the judgment of their colleagues or those in charge in the institute where they work when they go against the current and try out new methods, even if these methods were effective and motivating for the students.<sup>5</sup>

And yet, research continues to underscore that being curious has tremendous benefits for the student. In a 2011 research article, "The Hungry Mind: Intellectual Curiosity is the Third Pillar of Academic Performance," Sophie von Stumm et al. performed a meta-analysis of 200 studies including 50,000 students and found that curiosity had as much an effect on performance as intelligence and conscientiousness.<sup>6</sup> Researchers at University of California Davis discovered that curiosity primes the brain for learning material of interest to the student and incidental material, both with longlasting effects. In addition to finding increased activity in the hippocampus, which aids in the consolidation of information,

they were able to prove that dopamine was released in the brain when subjects were curious, eliciting pleasure during the learning event.<sup>7</sup>

Following are some ways in which curiosity can be modeled for the student.

1. **Maintain an active research practice to deepen the experience of what you understand and open doors to what you do not know.** We will continue to develop a deeper vocabulary for the work we do by immersing ourselves in different kinds of learning opportunities. Modeling curiosity is the surest way to inspire students.
2. **Encourage students to be curious about their own singing experience.** Challenge students to develop a kinesthetic awareness of their singing and create their own personal vocabulary for the sensations and images that come to them. This teaches us how the student processes information and helps the student digest technical concepts faster.
3. **Celebrate "mistakes" made by the teacher and student as a natural evolution in the process of finding an authentic sound.** It is inevitable that a particular exercise or directive will not yield the desired effect. When we dismiss this without discussion, students may feel as if they have failed. Our ability to address our own adjustments of approach will allow students to do the same in the practice room.

Teaching curiosity levels the playing field between teachers and students, treating everyone as a fellow seeker of knowledge, regardless of where they may be on the path. Albert Einstein stated, "The important thing is to not stop questioning. Curiosity has its own reason for existing."<sup>8</sup>

## TEACHING VULNERABILITY

Teaching curiosity requires us to be vulnerable. Vulnerability has a generally negative connotation and is not often a heralded attribute of teachers. In his eighteenth century treatise, *Observations on the Florid Song*, Pier Francesco Tosi outlined a teacher's proper demeanor.

Let [teachers]\* be moderately severe, making [themselves] feared, but not hated. I know it is not easy to find the mean between severity and mildness, but I know also

that both extremes are bad: too great severity creates stubbornness, and too great mildness contempt.<sup>9</sup>

\* language has been modified for inclusion.

While we recognize this as antiquated, to what extent do we allow ourselves to express our own vulnerability in teaching situations? And why is this important?

In *Fearless Creating: A Step-by-Step Guide to Starting and Completing Your Work of Art*, Eric Maisel states, “If you are to create you must invite anxiety in. But then you must manage it.”<sup>10</sup> Asking students to court anxiety through the vulnerability of singing means we must also give them tools to manage their anxiety. This process asks something personal of us.

Dr. Brené Brown is a research professor and Huffington Foundation Endowed Chair of the Graduate College of Social Work at the University of Houston. A *New York Times* best-selling author, much of Dr. Brown’s research has been focused on vulnerability and courage. In her book *Rising Strong*, Brown defines vulnerability as “not winning or losing; it’s having the courage to show up and be seen when we have no control over the outcome. Vulnerability is not weakness; it’s our greatest measure of courage.”<sup>11</sup>

Modeling vulnerability for students can encourage them to continue the delicate work of vocal coordination. Putting ourselves in a place of vulnerability, however, has consequences. Australian researchers Elizabeth Molloy and Margaret Bearman explain, “The tension between vulnerability and seeking credibility creates challenge for learning and teaching.”<sup>12</sup> Teachers who put themselves in a place of vulnerability expose their fallibility. This subverts the power dynamic discussed earlier and leaves the teacher open to judgment and even threat. Molloy and Bearman later state,

One means of embracing this tension between expressing vulnerability and appearing credible is “intellectual candour,” an improvisational expression of doubts, thoughts and problems with the dual purpose of learning and promoting others’ learning. Educators’ revelations of inner struggles are proposed as a means of inviting reciprocal vulnerability. This builds trust and a platform for learning, particularly of the transformative nature.<sup>13</sup>

Following are some ways in which vulnerability can be modeled for the student.

## 1. Share personal experiences of success and failure.

American psychologist Carl Rogers reflects,

I have found that the very feeling which has seemed to me most private, most personal and hence most incomprehensible by others, has turned out to be an expression for which there is a resonance in many other people. It has led me to believe that what is most personal and unique in each one of us is probably the very element which would, if it were shared or expressed, speak most deeply to others. This has helped me to understand artists and poets who have dared to express the unique in themselves.<sup>14</sup>

## 2. Regularly embrace the vulnerability of singing through private or public performance.

If we are to adequately recall the feelings of being wholly unmoored by the learning process, we must regularly put ourselves in similar postures of learning as our students, whether that be through regular private voice lessons or public performances.

Parker Palmer suggests that teaching is “a daily exercise in vulnerability.”<sup>15</sup> That vulnerability, when expressed, has the potential to free students and, in the end, their audiences.

## PRACTICING MINDFULNESS

Teaching vulnerability requires mindful presence. In his book *Wherever You Go, There You Are*, professor emeritus and author Jon Kabat-Zinn defines mindfulness as “paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally.”<sup>16</sup> Mindfulness stems from Buddhist meditation traditions and has been scientifically proven to promote changes in brain structure and improvements in cognitive processing. The practice of mindfulness has been most highly referenced as a tool for stress reduction, but it has many other positive results for the teacher and, by extension, the student.

A compilation of research essays entitled *Impacting Teaching and Learning: Contemplative Practices, Pedagogy, and Research in Education* suggests a number of additional benefits.

### • Enhances ability to foster supportive relationships with students.

Teaching is an emotional practice. Hargreaves (1998) argues, “Good teachers are not just well-oiled machines.

They are emotional, passionate beings who connect with their students and fill their work and their classes with pleasure, creativity, challenge, and joy.”<sup>17</sup>

- **Minimizes the transition from self to other.**

One of the most common and difficult transitions that teachers make is moving from concerns about the self, such as a focus on self-adequacy, to concerns about the other. When preservice teachers [or student teachers] actually confront the realities of teaching, there may be a tendency to seek basic survival skills at the expense of a deeper understanding of the complex interplay between teachers and students and teaching and learning. Indeed, during student teaching, preservice teachers tend to mimic a cooperating teacher’s often more traditional style, picking up conservative practices and focusing more on how to control students rather than on student learning.<sup>18</sup>

- **Affords an opportunity to develop reflective teaching.**

Mindful reflection is a skill that affords teachers the presence of mind to become aware of and respond adaptively to their unfolding external and internal environments. For example, mindful reflection may allow a teacher to notice the early somatic, cognitive, and emotional indicators of frustration and impatience.<sup>19</sup>

Most importantly, mindfulness helps maintain connection to our humanity. In *Radical Acceptance*, Buddhist psychologist and mindfulness meditation teacher Tara Brach relays a story about her client Jacob, who became disoriented at the precise moment he was to begin an address for over a hundred meditation students.

Putting his palms together at his heart, Jacob started naming out loud what was happening: “Afraid, embarrassed, confused, feeling like I’m failing, powerless, shaking, sense of dying, sinking, lost.” For several more minutes he sat, head slightly bowed, continuing to name his experience. As his body began to relax and his mind grew calmer, he also noted that aloud. At last Jacob lifted his head, looked slowly around at those gathered, and apologized. Many of the students were in tears. As one put it, “No one has ever taught us like this. Your presence has been the deepest teaching . . .” In some fundamental way [Jacob] didn’t create an adversary out of feelings of fear and confusion. He didn’t make anything wrong.<sup>20</sup>

Our mindful presence has the potential to positively impact students and their ability to overcome their own fear and confusion. Remaining connected to our

humanity also encourages singers to fold their humanity into their artistry.

Following are some ways in which we can practice mindfulness to the benefit of the student.

1. **Set aside ten minutes to meditate before the beginning of each teaching day.** Use guided or silent meditation as part of your own daily practice of getting centered so you can receive what the student has to share with you that day. A number of YouTube videos or apps are designed for this purpose.
2. **Incorporate different mindfulness exercises into the beginning of each lesson.** These can be very simple, based on exploring the five senses (e.g., What do you hear around you? How do your clothes feel on your skin? How do you experience your inhalation and exhalation?). This will not only ground your student, it will give you an opportunity to renew your presence.
3. **Name things that stand in the way of your being present for the student.** Without oversharing, it is possible to name our emotions in the presence of students so we can remain present for them and model healthy processing. Psychologist Daniel Siegel refers to this as “name it to tame it.”<sup>21</sup> For instance, rather than saying, “I’m having a great day, thanks!,” consider what it would feel like to actually say, “It’s been a challenging day, but I’m glad you’re here and I’m ready to work.”

Author Seymour Sarason reminds us, “If you do not know the minds and hearts of learners, you subvert productive learning”<sup>22</sup> The best way to do this is through mindfulness.

## PRACTICING SELF-CARE

If we are mindful, we must practice self-care. There are great costs to the high level of awareness demanded of us. Without daily self-care, our well-being will become compromised.

In the theater of life, the other becomes the illuminated part of the stage; our I is often outside the illumination. The lives of others—their hopes, ideas, goals, aspirations, pains, fears, despair, anger—are in focus. Like a leaf under a microscope, we see all of this in highly illuminated detail. As a counselor, therapist, educator, clergy member, or health practitioner, the other gets our attention. Out of the illuminated microscope, we can easily lose sight

of our own needs. We even lose sight of the need to not respond to all needs around us.<sup>23</sup>

While mindfulness meditation is one way to practice self-care, there are some broader ideas that can provide a healthier framework for teachers. In *Trauma Stewardship: An Everyday Guide to Caring for Self While Caring for Others*, Laura van Dernoot Lipsky writes about individuals who experience secondary trauma on a regular basis, such as emergency personnel. Even though our vocation is often not on the same level of trauma exposure, many of the daily coping mechanisms are applicable.

- **Continue to remember why we're doing what we're doing.**

When we carve out the time to contemplate our intentions, we renew our connection to the needs and desires that have shaped our experience. We remember that we can take action to alter the course of our lives. This will help us to alleviate the sensation of being tossed around in the waves of uncontrollable and overwhelming events.<sup>24</sup>

- **Don't center your entire identity around your work.**

Many people get hooked on being involved in others' lives: solving their problems, becoming a powerful figure for them, getting increasingly attached to the feeling of being needed and useful . . . We need to acknowledge the value of what we bring without making our work be all about us.<sup>25</sup>

- **Maintain a good sense of humor.**

Heather Anderson, who was interviewed for Lipsky's book says, "Humor gives me physical and psychological energy."<sup>26</sup> Indeed, researchers David Cheng and Lu Wang were able to prove that humor has the potential to increase an individual's persistence.<sup>27</sup>

In his book *The Wounded Healer*, Catholic priest and author Henri Nouen outlines three key qualities for today's leaders.

- **Be able to articulate inner events.**

"Those who avoid the painful encounter with the unseen are doomed to live a supercilious, boring, and superficial life."<sup>26</sup> In order to encourage others to do their work, we must, as he says, "enter into the core of our own existence and become familiar with the complexities of our own inner lives."<sup>28</sup>

- **Be compassionate.**

"Compassion must become the core, and even the nature, of authority."<sup>29</sup> When we practice empathy and allow ourselves to be vulnerable, where appropriate, it relays to our students that we have a vested interest in their success.

- **Be a contemplative critic.**

Nouen says that we must "look critically at what is going on and make decisions based on insight into [our] vocation, not on the desire for popularity or the fear of rejection."<sup>30</sup>

While this was a call to ministers of the 1970s, these three points are also wholly applicable to our profession as voice teachers.

## CONCLUSION

We are asked to wear many hats in our vocation: pedagogue, *répétiteur*, administrator, to name only a few. This requires we maintain an arsenal of tools at our disposal to be called upon at a moment's notice, and, further, adapt those tools for each individual with whom we come into contact. It's a lot to know.

Dr. Brené Brown writes, "What we know matters but who we are matters more."<sup>31</sup> Following this logic: What we say matters, but how we say it matters more.

For engaged teachers, an ardent pursuit of voice pedagogy and voice science should always be a cornerstone of our vocation. It is our understanding and exploration of curiosity, vulnerability, mindfulness, and self-care, however, that has the potential to further amplify our knowledge, profoundly changing the voices and lives of the students we teach.

## NOTES

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