Conversations About Instructional Touch in the Voice Studio

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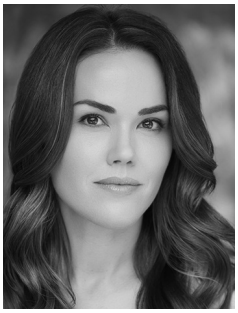

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Recent world events have left educators of embodied pedagogies pivoting their teaching approaches quickly. #MeToo has raised awareness about consent and abuses of power, the COVID-19 global pandemic has required teachers to develop virtual pedagogies, and the Black Lives Matter movement has amplified serious issues of systemic inequality in all facets of society, including education. In light of these lessons, many aspects of vocal education must be examined. One of these areas is the use of instructional touch in the voice studio.

Instructional touch is any physical contact made between instructor and student for the purpose of education.[1] Although this approach can come in many forms, it includes touch made by the teacher on the student's body or the student on the teacher's body. In singing training, this has mostly been used when teaching breath support, posture, and bringing awareness to other physical aspects of vocal production. Some of the areas of the body that are often touched in voice training are the ribs and back, throat and neck, legs and hips, face and jaw, abdominal area, hands, shoulders and arms, head, waist, upper chest, and mouth.

There currently are many conversations in the field of vocal training happening about the effectiveness and appropriateness of the use of instructional touch. Some advocate for a completely touchless experience in the voice studio, claiming that any touch between the instructor and student is unethical as it exploits the power dynamic in the room. Others argue that instructional touch provides faster learning and a more embodied experience for the student and that its use is not harming students. While both thoughts are understandable, to place a blanket statement on all instructional touch is problematic because context must be taken into consideration. Both approaches are viable if done with ethical intention, process, and research, and some students rely on one approach over the other, as is the case with some students with disabilities. Voice professionals should work to develop versatile and reliable touch and touchless pedagogies to be flexible and effective in the training needs of all students.

TOUCHLESS PEDAGOGY IN THE VOICE STUDIO

Touchless pedagogy (or "no-touch" instruction) is already being utilized by many instructors for in-person and virtual studios. The COVID-19 global pandemic has required many teachers to adapt to teaching voice over video

conferencing, necessitating the practice and development of this approach. This option is undoubtedly the most cautious, and in a post-COVID-19 world must be planned for.

Tools like visual aids, physical exercises, and imagery can be powerful instructional options that center the student and require no physical touch from the teacher. Plans for no-touch options must become commonplace for every instructor in a consent-based pedagogy. Here are some suggestions for beginning to develop touchless pedagogies.

Guided imagery: Guide students through breathing and vocal exercises using verbal prompts to illicit certain sensations and physical responses. For example, a teacher may say, "Imagine that you see a friend that you haven't seen in five years, and you are *surprised* and *excited* to see them. How does your breath respond to this surprise?"

Anatomic Visual Aids and Physical Models: Pictures and videos of the vocal mechanism and respiratory system easily can be found through a simple search online. These visual aids are an excellent way of helping students visualize what is happening within their body and can result in a positive physiological response. The use of physical models and detailed descriptions of the process can be equally useful, especially for visually impaired students.

Physical Positions and Postures: Guiding students through engaged physical postures and positions moves students into experiencing the desired physiological outcome without touch. Some useful positions include the dead-lift position, the lie down, standing against a wall, rolling up and down the spine, sitting in a chair while engaging a spinal twist, and hands to hips (superhero pose).

Since physical touch is removed from the approach, less formal preparation may be required; however, teachers should practice a variety of ways to communicate so they can reach each individual student and satisfy their learning style. Research in embodied pedagogies will be helpful for those looking to further develop this skill. It is essential that teachers are able to teach their students without the use of touch.

INSTRUCTIONAL TOUCH PEDAGOGY IN THE VOICE STUDIO

There are many benefits to using touch in the voice studio. Teachers can 1) make quick and immediate adjustments, specifically targeting a bodily area without any confusion or vagueness; 2) model successful vocal production by placing a student's hands on their own body; 3) identify problem areas in vocal production that may be missed if assessing production only visually and audially; and 4) fast-track a student's understanding by adding this additional sense. Positive and consent-based instructional touch can benefit both teacher and student.

Instructional touch not rooted in consent-based best practices, however, preys on issues surrounding the imbalance of power dynamic between teacher and student and removes student agency over their own body, boundaries, and educational experience. This is usually done unintentionally, as most voice teachers are not looking to harm their students, but touching a student without having an established consent-based process potentially can cause harm. The teacher cannot assume they know the student's boundaries based on what they perceive of them or what their own boundaries are.

The challenge of instructional touch in the voice studio is primarily wrapped up in the imbalance of power dynamics between student and teacher, and while touch can be valuable in voice training, it must be done in a thoughtful, intentional, and ethical way. The use of instructional touch requires an understanding of the moral and legal obligation of informed consent, a look at how necessary and often touch is needed for education, and an acknowledgement by teachers and institutions that certain students are existing within an inequitable system where they may be powerless to dissent.

Because of the commonplace nature of touch in the voice studio, singing students often assume that touch is included in the studio regardless of whether they consent or not. Additionally, if a student is receiving a grade and/or fears potential retaliation or negative consequence, the chance of voicing a boundary diminishes.

Some instructors have tried to solve this by creating a touch statement that they share with students to educate them on the benefits and uses of touch, while others worry that calling attention to it may open the door to unnecessary scrutiny or unintended legal implications. Developing practices for the use of instructional touch in the voice studio protects students, betters learning environments, places students at the center of their learning, provides clarification for instructors, and makes healthier institutions. This is especially important when working with young adults who are in the

process of discovering and determining those boundaries. Additionally, consent with minors is more complicated, and therefore contactless pedagogies should be the default. This ensures the safety of those who may not speak for themselves and safeguards the instructor.

Ethical practice for instructional touch requires teachers to understand and respect individual personal boundaries, students to provide informed consent for any physical contact, and a reevaluation of the power dynamics in the traditional student teacher relationship.

POWER DYNAMICS

In his article, "How Power Dynamics can undermine effective learning," Tom Haymes explores the effect of power dynamics on student outcomes.

> The industrial mode of teaching with the teacher as the font of wisdom standing in front of the class imposes severe power disparities within the classroom. Students are basically playing a zero-sum game. They can either submit to the power relationship that the professor establishes within the classroom or drop/fail the class. Most students accept this without question, but it severely impacts their capacity to grow and thrive as learners.[2]

The structure of the teacher and student relationship serves an important function in learning, but we must also examine who is at the center of the process as it sheds light on the power dynamics at play. Within the field of arts education, there is a long history of the master teacher, the maestro. The twentieth century encouraged this practice among teachers, along with an almost religious following.[3] This mentality was an emulation of the authoritarian leader, a model that rose in prominence in the early part of the century and was propagated by all areas of society as necessitated by the industrial revolution and ensuing wars.[4] The modern world needed leaders and workers. The arts were no exception. As conservatories developed in academia, the "master teachers" needed to prove and maintain their expertise or "god complex."[5] Creative genius was a romantic aspiration that was in turn coddled and even encouraged as colleges and universities competed "with their peer institutions to attract the most promising students."[6] Moreover, systemic issues of inequality and access create an even greater power imbalance for some students based on their individual identity and background.[7]

No matter how nice or well meaning the teacher, this top-down structure and issues of systemic inequality imbalance the power in the classroom, making students less likely or less able to advocate for themselves or voice a dissenting view. Striving for a more equitable and balanced learning environment gives students agency over their own learning and is a step toward ethical best practices.

PERSONAL BOUNDARIES

"Personal boundaries are the limits and rules we set for ourselves within relationships."[8] Each individual is responsible for establishing their own professional, personal, physical, and cultural boundaries, and to prioritize their own boundaries while respecting other's boundaries.[9]

The use of instructional touch has the potential to violate a student's physical and personal boundaries. Touching a student without immediate or prior consent is a violation, whether that harm was done intentionally or not. Teachers should provide students the opportunity to determine their own physical boundaries and allow changes to these boundaries at any time. Respecting those boundaries is both ethical and moral. Instructors should establish an environment in which each student's self-determined "boundaries are perfect the way they are,"[10] and not judge those boundaries as unreasonable or difficult. Rather, establishing clear boundaries is beneficial to both the teacher and student, as it relieves questions about what the nature of the boundaries are and takes the guesswork out of the expectations for both parties.

The teacher is responsible for establishing the learning environment, implementation, and confirmation of the student's physical boundaries.[11] The teacher also must not judge the boundaries as established by the student, because it is the right of each student to set their own boundaries. By normalizing this practice, the teacher shapes a studio culture that honors the needs of the student and demonstrates that their personal safety and well-being are respected.

INFORMED CONSENT

Because informed consent and policy surrounding its importance are still new concepts in academia and music

education, we must turn to the medical field and social sciences for guidance.

> Informed consent to medical treatment is fundamental in both ethics and law. Patients have the right to receive information and ask questions about recommended treatments so that they can make well-considered decisions about care. Successful communication in the patient-physician relationship fosters trust and supports shared decision making.[12]

In this method, relevant medical information must be explained to patients—including implications, risks, and process of treatment—in a way they can understand so they may make an informed decision about their own care. Documentation of patient consent is also listed in the medical record. This methodology can be translated to the voice studio to provide an environment that includes informed consent.

As with the medical industry, instructional touch in the voice studio should begin with an explanation of the practice by the teacher to the student, articulated in a way that the student can understand. This opens the conversation between the instructor and the student about physical boundaries in the studio, and the student is then able to make an informed decision about if, when, where, and how they consent to this practice. These choices should then be documented by the teacher through a physical boundary checklist.

A physical boundary checklist is a way to record the student's consent to the use of instructional touch and list the student's self-determined physical boundaries. This checklist can be simple, listing or providing a diagram of the body where touch is most often used in voice training and the student then determines or "checks-off" whether they provide permission for the teacher to touch that area for the purpose of education. Note that this form should be revisited frequently as boundaries may change. This process positions the student to have the power to determine and take responsibility for their own boundaries, normalizes healthy discussions about instructional touch, and gives the instructor clear guidelines on the student's physical boundaries.[13]

Consent is contextual, conditional, and revocable.[14] If an area was deemed permissible by the student, it does not provide *carte blanche* for instructional touch for that area. Therefore, every time the teacher would like to use instructional touch in a voice lesson, they should explain in a clear and understandable way why that touch is necessary at that time and allow the student to determine whether it is currently permissible. Should the student decline, the teacher should find other ways to work that do not involve touch or which involve touch in another area of the body where informed consent is given.

TOOLS FOR CONSENT-BASED INSTRUCTIONAL TOUCH

Bringing this research and knowledge into the voice studio may feel overwhelming; however, there are already established tools that can be borrowed from other disciplines that are easily implemented in the voice studio. Theatrical Intimacy Education, a research organization founded by Laura Rikard and Chelsea Pace, which brings the best practices for staging theatrical intimacy to educational and professional organizations, has research-based tools for establishing boundaries and consent that can serve as a road map for developing a plan for using ethical instructional touch in the voice studio.[15]

The tools below are offered as ways to establish a personal, studio, or institutional plan and policy for instructional touch and best practices for the execution of its use. For each tool we include a general research-based principle, key components of evidence-based practice, and sample scripts and/or strategies that can be adapted for your purposes.

Establish Clear Expectations

Introduce the topic of physical boundaries in the first lesson, establishing clear expectations for the teacher and student. The teacher may say, "Instructional touch is sometimes used as a teaching aid in the voice studio. Instructional touch is any physical contact between you and me for the purposes of your education. I want you to know that I support you as you develop agency over your artistry and instrument. One way I do this is by asking you to establish physical boundaries so that I may have a reference when working with you. I also want you to know that 'your boundaries are perfect the way they are,'[16] and I will not judge them. If an occasion arises where I think instructional touch is helpful, I want you to be fully informed and able to consent or reject this touch without fear of retaliation. Please know that I can teach you well without ever using instructional touch."

Introduce a Physical Boundaries Checklist

Create and implement a physical boundaries checklist. This can become part of the intake form and serves as an excellent launch pad for continued discussion about physical boundaries and consent. The form should list and/or picture parts of the body most often touched in vocal training and provide space for students to identify physical boundaries.

The teacher may say, "Please fill out this physical boundary checklist along with your intake form so that I have a better understanding of your consent when it comes to the use of instructional touch. I will always ask permission when I think instructional touch may help our work, and you may change your consent and boundaries at any time. We will also revisit the physical boundaries checklist at regular intervals so you may adjust your choices. Discussing your boundaries ahead of time helps me be prepared to teach you well."

Use Explicit and Open Questions

Utilize explicit and open questions in the voice studio. Questions should begin open ended and end with an explicit explanation of why the touch is necessary.

When we use questions that are not open ended like, "Is it ok if . . . ?" or "Can I . . . ?," there is an implied expectation that the answer will be yes. This is due to the socialized agreement created by the imbalance of power in the classroom, where students are aiming to please their teachers and are graded based on complying with the "rules." Using open questions involving words like "work," "think," or "feel," helps students cognitively work through what is being asked and removes this socialized agreement from the equation. Phrases like "Does it work for you?" and "What are your thoughts on that?"[17] allow students space to think about what is being asked, removes the unspoken assumption of yes, and positions the student to answer honestly, all keys to practicing informed consent.

Conclude the question with an explanation of why instructional touch would be helpful at this time. "What are your thoughts on me touching your upper back?" is an open question, but it doesn't provide the student enough information to determine whether they consent to the touch. The better question would be, "What are your thoughts on me touching your upper back as I'm noticing you slouching and would like to bring attention to your posture?" This gives the student the information needed to make a truly informed decision about consent. Teachers also benefit from the space to breathe and listen in these moments.

Scenario: Teacher would like to use instructional touch on the ribcage of a student to bring the student's attention to this area when inhaling.

Question that is not explicit or open-ended: "Can I touch your ribs?"

Question that is explicit and open-ended: "Does it work for you if I touch the back and sides of your ribcage with the palm of my hand to bring attention to the expansion of this area when you inhale for singing?"

Scenario: Teacher would like to use instructional touch on the shoulders of a student to release tension.

Question that is not explicit or open-ended: "Is it okay if I touch your shoulders?"

Question that is explicit and open-ended: "How would you feel I place my hands on the front of your shoulders in order to release tension?"

Use Anatomic and Deloaded Language

When referring to the body, use anatomic and/or desexualized language.[18] Words like breastplate or butt can hold weight, make students uncomfortable, and further identity-based biases, while the use of anatomic and desexualized language places the attention on the process of producing sound and leads to a safer and more professional classroom. Instead of breastplate, you may use front of chest, or instead of butt, try back of pelvis or glutes. If you cannot think of a neutral, anatomic word for a place on the body, point to it on yourself.

The teacher may say, "What would you think about me placing the palm of my hand at the top of your chest or clavicle in order to assist you in releasing tension in that area while you're singing?," or "Would it work for you if I use my hands to adjust the position of your hip girdle in order to position your alignment for more effective breath support?"

Self-care Cue or "Button"

Normalize articulating boundaries in the studio by using a self-care cue. This is a word or physical action expressed by the student that informs the teacher that they may need to clarify a boundary, think through the process in which

they are engaged, remove prior given consent, and/or take a more substantial break. As generous and clear as the instructor may be, the power dynamic in the room can make articulating a need difficult as the word "no" can hold negative weight.[19] Many students who have achieved even a small amount of success most likely have trained the word "no" out of their vocabulary. While a teacher can say, "Tell me *no* if it doesn't work for you," the reality of students speaking up is rare.[20]

Creating an environment where students are empowered to take responsibility for their own boundaries and encouraged to voice those boundaries regularly takes work and practice.[21] To take a developmental risk, a singer may need a moment to make a fully informed decision. A student may also experience confusion about what is being asked or may be uncertain if a boundary is crossed. The self-care cue is a solution for a variety of reasons, but one of the compelling arguments for its use is found in neuroscience. As stated by Chelsea Pace, "[h]eightened states affect cognition."[22] In heightened emotional moments, if a threat is perceived, the primitive part of the brain is activated. This phenomenon is known as the Flight, Fight or Freeze response. When in this state, the part of the brain responsible for language and problem solving takes a back seat to the survival mode that has turned on.[23]

The self-care cue gives students agency and power to make their own choices and allows space for a breath. Any word can be used and should be arranged between the teacher and student before the voice lesson. Theatrical Intimacy Education (TIE) recommends using the word "button," for its neutrality, developmentally easy plosive construction, and active nature. However, you may choose another word, but make certain it is not a word that is commonly used in voice pedagogy or daily life. A physical self-care cue may also be used as language may be difficult to use when a student is activated. TIE recommends the double clap.[24] To help students practice voicing a boundary or asking for a moment, a self-care cue is a tool that can be introduced and practiced in a way that is not disruptive to the learning process.[25]

Lesson Journal and Documentation

Ask students to keep a journal. Include reflections on what was accomplished during the lesson, what was discussed, and plans for the next lesson. This allows additional space for students to reflect their personal boundaries and articulate their discoveries. Because practicing boundaries and consent takes daily effort, this practice will help students take greater responsibility for their own process and better recognize how and when their boundaries change.

Teachers should also keep a record of what transpired in the lesson and review the student reflections regularly. Any areas of confusion or concern can be clarified, and the teacher can also stay continually apprised of the student's boundaries. Additionally, should any issue or confusion arise, this documentation provides an accurate and timely record of the lessons, reflecting on the efficacy of the culture of consent being cultivated.

CONCLUSION

When investigating pedagogic approaches, one size does not fit all. Student learning needs are diverse, affected by individual identity, societal influences, and personal experiences. Students rely on their instructors finding the best way to service their individual learning needs. Teachers should work to develop a variety of approaches including touch and touchless pedagogies.

Contactless pedagogy is useful, safe, and effective, and has proven its value especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. Ethical use of instructional touch requires effort, intentional planning, and an understanding of informed consent-based practices and continues to have worth.

Continuing conversations surrounding the use of touch and touchless pedagogies in the voice studio will contribute to large and positive shifts in the field of music and music education and will benefit the learning needs and environments of voice students.

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The Bird her punctual music brings
And lays it in its place –
Its place is in the Human Heart
And in the Heavenly Grace –
What respite from her thrilling toil
Did Beauty ever take –
But Work might be electric Rest
To those that Magic make –

Emily Dickinson,
"The Bird her punctual music brings"