

# Stop Teaching! And Other Graduation Advice

Lynn Holding



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The season of this article's publication—spring—brings forth flowers, graduations, joy and student performances. But the season Editor in Chief Lynn Holding calls "Recital Season" can also bring farewells, stress, and the psychological phenomenon called "burnout" for teachers. Holding suggests a surprising solution based on principles from cognitive science which can blunt teacher burnout while simultaneously enhancing students' learning. By stopping teaching during "Recital Season," teachers may ironically provide singers what they actually need for optimal performance. Holding also announces a new future JOS column and a call for three new JOS writers.

**I**SSUE NUMBER FIVE OF OUR JOURNAL appears perennially, like flowers in May, and straddles June, the first month of summer. This two-month period is generally a celebratory time of year here in the United States, when high school and college students graduate and our schools let out for the summer. As such, for many teachers it can be the "most wonderful time of the year" (to quote the popular Christmas song), while for teachers who hold to an around-the-calendar work schedule, the arrival of spring may not signal much change. Yet spring and early summer for most voice teachers in all settings is spring production season (or what I call "Recital Season"), that time of year when our students show their work to live audiences in recitals, concerts, opera and musical theatre productions. And while we teachers often find this time of year to be one of the busiest, our day-to-day teaching should downshift—and even cease entirely—as student performances come into view. This latter claim may seem counterintuitive (or just wrong), but please note that the operative term here is specifically "teaching" and not simply "work." In terms of generic work, music teachers' overall workload often does increase in the spring, certainly due in part to attendance at all those performance dates that burst into bloom on the calendar, like so many spring daffodils. These extra attendance obligations can be occasions for joy and celebration, as well as stress.

Speaking of stress, there may be an additional psychological load for teachers that is unique to this season, because all those graduations are also marked by student anxiety over immediate concerns like exams and dissertations, and existential ones such as worries about their futures. In the "helping profession" that is teaching, we may unconsciously absorb our students' anxieties. Worse, teachers may bear their own special burden that is the noxious amalgamation of empathy and end-of-term exhaustion, leading to "job burnout," defined as a particular type of "stress linked to work."<sup>1</sup> Teaching, or any other kind of "working in a helping profession . . . that involves a lot of giving to others," is

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listed as a risk factor for this condition.<sup>2</sup> Teachers suffering severely from burnout are urged to seek professional help to address it.<sup>3</sup> For others, successfully running the gauntlet of Recital Season and reaching the far shore may provide enough relief to recharge when schedules return to normal.

But what if there was a way to blunt burnout while simultaneously enhancing our students' learning? That is, by literally stopping the teaching? And what if this cessation was neither an irresponsible act nor one of collapse brought on by burnout, but a conscious choice based on some basic principles from cognitive science?

Understanding these principles, and how to parlay them into positive acts, involves first understanding the definition of learning, which in its simplest form is this: "A process that results in a permanent change in behavior as a result of *experience*."<sup>4</sup> The definition of motor learning is almost entirely the same, except for the crucial difference of action: "A process that results in a permanent change in behavior as a result of *practice*."<sup>5</sup>

Next, teachers will want to dig into the differences between learning and performance, but not by our everyday understanding of these terms, which we often erroneously conflate and synonymize. Rather, when seen through the lens of cognitive science, and especially research in motor learning, these two modes turn out to be not only radically different, but polar opposites.

Learning is the process by which one acquires skill or knowledge. Performance refers to the manner in or quality with which someone functions. Remember: learning is dynamic, unstable, and messy. Performance, on the other hand, is like the freeze-frame button on a video projector—it captures where the learner stands at a certain point in time along the learning continuum.<sup>6</sup>

These principles—that learning is unstable while the goal of performance is the opposite of instability—are especially true in the motor realm. In the arena of skilled voice performance the overall goal is simply excellence; we try to be the best that we can be. But no performance goals can be met unless they are preceded by many sessions of trial and error, which by their very nature are messy. In motor learning literature, this messiness is termed *negative performance shifting*, and is often the sign that the unravelling of a previous (poor) habit is occurring.<sup>7</sup> The arena for messy experimentation is not

the stage, but the voice studio. Therefore it is critical that teachers are always clear—both with themselves and their students—about which arena they are in and under which principles they are operating. My advice for teachers in Recital Season starts with understanding that your student is in "performance mode," not "learning mode," and as such:

... the advice is simple: stop teaching! Starting from a few days to even some weeks out from a major performance, scale back your instruction to zero. Why is this? Because learning, at its core, is wobbly and unstable, and in order for students to regain their balance, they must find that balance on their own by processing all of the feedback they have garnered at that point in time. They must, to use our previous metaphor, push their own freeze-frame button.<sup>8</sup>

In Recital Season our work as teachers does not end, but shifts from the routines of one-on-one voice instruction in the studio to attendance at all the varied and unique performances of our student singers. While we may silently sing every note along with them, this is their moment to stop the messiness of learning and shine with whatever amount of luminescence they possess at that moment. In the days leading up to their performances, we guide them and use our expertise to assess what they actually need, which may be everything from dress and deportment to managing performance-day jitters. For more advanced or pre-professional singers, more subtle or nuanced support may be called for; simply assuring a mature client that they know what to do may be more powerful than preparation prescriptions or interventions. And if Recital Season is analogous with the final farewell to some of our students, teachers' words of inspiration, encouragement and advice may be a significant part of their experience.

At this time of year I offer formal exit interviews for my college students, scheduled weeks after all of their performances have concluded. They are "formal" because I require them to draw up an agenda (in writing) based on several self-assessment prompts such as "Did you meet your goals? If so, how; if not, what may have intervened?" and "What were three of the most valuable things you learned in your voice lessons; why are they valuable?" These prompts allow us to focus on the only knowable information at this juncture for most of them, which is simply this: what is your plan for the next step

in your singing journey? Or as Laurie Moss, the character in the opera *The Tender Land* sings on the eve of her high school graduation, “Now that all the learning’s done, oh, who knows what will now begin?”<sup>9</sup>

### CALL FOR JOS WRITERS! SEEKING THREE NEW ASSOCIATE EDITORS

I am happy to announce the birth of a new column, hopefully coming soon to our journal. “Diverse Voices” will be dedicated to shedding light on under-presented composers, vocal genres and singing styles to more fully embrace and support all of the varied voices that NATS currently represents. Thus we are seeking two authors for the positions of co-associate editors to help create and define the mission of this new column, guided by NATS values and commitment to diversity and inclusion.

I am also pleased to announce the third new position, that of Co-Associate Editor of the *JOS* column “The Media Gallery,” currently authored by Associate Editor Gregory Berg. The new co-associate editor will serve as an equal partner to Berg in expanding the column to encompass the many and varied vocal genres and singing styles embraced by NATS as an association. Please see the advertisement for all three of these positions in this issue, as well as the complete job description posted on the NATS Job Center.<sup>10</sup>

### NOTES

1. The Mayo Clinic, “Job Burnout: How to Spot It and Take Action,” accessed February 22, 2024, [mayoclinic.org](https://www.mayoclinic.org).
2. Ibid.
3. See Kate Butler, “Burnout: Risks, Applications, and Solutions for the Studio Voice Teacher,” *Journal of Singing* 73, No. 3 (January/February 2017): 317–324.

4. Lynn Holding, *The Musician’s Mind: Teaching, Learning, and Performance in the Age of Brain Science* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishing, 2020), 74.
5. Ibid. Note: there are many definitions of learning and motor learning in the the cognitive science literature, yet all retain the basic elements captured in these two distillations.
6. Ibid., 101.
7. Ibid., 107–108.
8. Ibid., 102
9. Aaron Copland (music) and libretto by Horace Everett (né Erik Johns); see <https://www.boosey.com/pages/opera/moredetails?musicid=835>, accessed February 23, 2024 and “Erik Johns, 74, Librettist of Copland’s ‘Tender Land’,” *The New York Times*, Dec. 18, 2001.
10. See NATS Job Center at <https://www.nats.org/cgi/page.cgi/job-center.html>.

**Lynn Holding**, founder and first author of the “Mindful Voice” column in the *Journal of Singing* from 2009–2017, is the author of *The Musician’s Mind: Teaching, Learning and Performance in the Age of Brain Science*, deemed “Essential” by *CHOICE Magazine*, “a unique and outstanding contribution to pedagogy” by *Voice and Speech Review* and “ground-breaking . . . [and] an invaluable contribution to the field of music pedagogy” by Renée Fleming. Her pedagogy honors include the 2005 Van Lawrence Voice Fellowship, membership in the American Academy of Teachers of Singing, and recognition as a “legendary figure in the field of voice pedagogy” by the Contemporary Commercial Music Vocal Pedagogy Institute at Shenandoah University, receiving their 2020 *Lifetime Achievement Award*. A committed teacher, Holding is a co-founder of the new NATS Science-Informed Voice Pedagogy Institute. Her stage credits include leading roles in opera, oratorio and musical theatre, and recitals featuring commissioned works and contemporary American music performed on multiple tours throughout the United States, Australia, England, France, Germany, Italy, Spain, and Iceland where her performances were broadcast on Icelandic National Radio. She is Professor of Practice in Vocal Arts and Opera and coordinator of Vocology and Voice Pedagogy at the University of Southern California Thornton School of Music. [www.lynnholding.com](http://www.lynnholding.com)