

Beyond the Choral Rehearsal: A Dialogical Journey

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“... I’m saying that I’ve awakened my confidence and voice, and know I can use my voice so that people can learn from me” – Samira, a sophomore

As educators, we hope that our students will begin to “... understand and engage the world around them, but also enable them to exercise the kind of courage needed to change the social order when necessary” (McLaren, 1989, p. 85). It was this hope that drove my passion to build a women’s chorus in a large, urban high school.

The students in this class had never been in a performing group; many had never received any “formal” music education. Some students were shy and did not participate; others outwardly showed they wanted to be anywhere but chorus.

The girls needed to sing something and feel okay about projecting their voices. I set aside my aspirations of singing in four-part harmony to embrace unison singing, folk songs, rounds and canons. I quickly realized that unison was exactly what this group needed: to be one voice and to have a voice.

The goal: gaining confidence

My primary objective for this ensemble became to foster a safe space for them to feel honored and to share themselves confidently through music. I knew this might ultimately result in beautiful singing.

School ensemble pedagogy is often modeled after the practices of a conductor and large performing group (Hoffer, 2008) who intend to replicate the traditions of large, professional ensembles where conductors make musical decisions and communicate them to the musicians. However, in this model there is a distinct lack of student input and voice in the performance class.

The overall preoccupation in most ensembles lies with the music making itself. Building character is often ignored (O’Toole, 2005). Yet, it would be beneficial for students to exercise their voice and character outside of music making and into their classes/communities (Woodford, 2005).

Students want to have a personal connection with their teachers. This happens when teachers acknowledge their presence, honor their intellect and respect them as human beings. They empower students by legitimizing their “voice” and visibility (Gay, 2000, p. 49). One

of the students in my women’s chorus, Ranjeet, shared, “If there’s no support system in the school, what are we gonna do? Our teachers are supposed to be there for us. We should be able to talk to them about stuff.”

The Index Card Project

It seemed important to build connection into my women’s chorus rehearsal, to provide an opportunity for the students to be heard. In order to spark ongoing dialogue between teacher and student and help to develop the student voice musically and extra-musically, I engaged in a year-long index card project with my women’s chorus.

I saw this project as an exercise in critical pedagogy – a way to honor the students’ voices and listen to them. I hoped to develop a “committed involvement” from each student (Freire, 1970, p. 69) through the process. Each week the students received an index card. They wrote a question or statement on one side of the card and I responded the following week on the other. [Note: I prefaced this project by telling students that while this exercise was open, I, as teacher, am a mandated reporter and although they can be open, any sense of abuse or personal issues that could cause harm would be reported.]

As this project commenced, students were unsure about what to write. They asked questions like, “What are we singing this year?” or “Are we taking any trips?” I responded by filling up the index card with answers to their questions and added questions for them. The students could choose to continue the conversation the following week, or start something new.

By week four, students’ questions or statements became longer, more narrative-based and detailed. Some wrote about their love of a piece of our repertoire. The cards provided an opportunity for an ongoing, open dialogue with the students, and helped them feel validated in their thoughts. An adult was listening and responding to them.

Participation improves

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Soon, I noticed an increase in student participation during rehearsal. Quieter students began answering questions and joining in discussions about interpretation of text or musical phrasing. Students were talking more about the music and fed off of each other's energy and responses. They located themselves in the music and how they connected to the pieces.

The group's singing became louder, stronger and more intentional as the months progressed. Two-part music became easy, as they relied on each other for strength in sound and ability. They were showing genuine care for the music and for each other by honoring each girl's addition to these conversations. Stephanie, a sophomore, reflected that she loved how the group takes "the time to listen to each other and talk about our thoughts. If someone's shy, we try to help them talk about themselves, too."

Through small and large group conversation, as well as written responses, the students reflected on how their class engagement might have changed over the year. All students answered that the index cards helped them to feel heard. Sarah, a junior, shared that she often felt silenced in her daily activities: "Sometimes I feel like no one ever wants to listen to me because I'm a child and I don't know what's best."

The weekly exchanges helped her to realize that her voice mattered: "I think I've learned that I have a lot to say and that I can challenge myself to think outside the box a little bit, and I can also allow myself to just write thoughts that are simple." Within weeks of the project, Sarah was singing out more and sharing her ideas and connections to the repertoire.

Consistency and Trust

In order to foster change in both the students' singing voice and participating/confidence voice, I needed to establish a sense of trust with the students. Wis (2007) reminds us, "Every relationship, in order for it to be successful and enduring, must be built on trust" (p. 49). She further states, "Trust must precede change, at least significant change, if we are to be successful in the long run" (p. 52).

The index cards were a means of acknowledging each student individually in order to build trust. Over time, this transcended into music making. The young women felt valued by each other. Elena remarked, "Honestly, sometimes I think this is the only class where people listen and care about me and what I know. Like we

know we matter." This trust also impacted the rehearsal process, as we modeled questioning techniques and provided space for openness in song interpretation.

Consistency seems to be a critical component to gaining trust. This may be done through preparation, actions with people, and follow through. While it was sometimes disquieting for me to take time during rehearsal to pass out index cards, particularly as concert time loomed, it was always an indicator to the students that chorus was a safe, trustworthy place.

As a facilitator, I had to be consistent in order to foster an environment for students to be valued, honored and connected. Most important, in order to be connected, they needed to be heard. Listening to the students, valuing their thoughts and ideas was the critical part of empowering them to invest in one another and in the music-making process. Felipa added that the index cards and her participation in chorus made her "feel more comfortable with myself and with the group to share stories about my life and the music."

Key Points

- Novice ensemble success rests with building trust.
- Music making and character building can coexist.
- Consider innovative ways to create dialogue with students.
- Music making will improve and students will gain confidence.

Power and Possibilities for Transformation

Communication is the space for transformation (Dewey, 2004; Freire, 1970). While the index cards were the vehicles for honoring the students' worlds and acknowledging their voices, the space for dialogue, confidence and change trickled into the classroom. This, in turn, transformed the relationships among the students and between the students and me.

Here is an example. We had a discussion about a repertoire selection that pertained to peace. The young women analyzed the text by asking questions such as, What did the composer mean by peace? What does it mean to be peaceful? When and how do we have the opportunities to be spreaders or proponents of peace in our daily lives? Through these conversations, their connections to the music became greater and, ultimately, the singing became stronger and more passionate.

A freshman, Gigi, surprised herself in how she was able to think through such a complex topic and communicate it through speaking and performance: "I had just then understood what peace was, and what intent was. And I'm not only singing, I'm singing—we're singing—with a meaning now."

As the young women began to listen with care to one another's ideas, they became self-assured through their words. Carla described the choral classroom as a place that is "Carefree, there's no restrictions. It's not where

you'll get reprimanded for doing something. I developed a voice so much in this ensemble I feel somewhat powerful every time." This power is something that Carla may take beyond the choral classroom in order to affect change in other parts of her life.

Palmer (2007) posits, "Teachers possess the power to create conditions that can help students learn a great deal—or keep them from learning much at all" (p. 6). The index card project helped to foster an environment of space and trust and showed both the students and me some ways in which we may connect to each other, support one another, and provide confidence and love to inspire creativity, risk and power.

The ways in which these students constructed meaning about themselves from feeling a sense of self-worth and community through music far exceeded any performance of more difficult repertoire I could ever have chosen. The choice of meaningful, attainable repertoire, coupled with respectful, deliberate cultivation of the individual and collective voice of the students altered and enhanced their self-confidence and their understanding of what it means to be a meaningful member of a community.

The story of this women's chorus highlights the importance of honoring the students' world and moving beyond the boundaries of a traditional rehearsal setting to embrace pedagogies that serve particular student needs (cultural, social, economic and linguistic).

Providing space for dialogue, student involvement and voices to be heard can transform a group of singers into a community of artists. Through this space, students may acquire the tools to gain confidence and develop an independent voice that can be heard - provoking participation, questioning and change both within and beyond the classroom. Serious consideration should be given to pedagogical strategies outside of the typical rehearsal structure and the ways in which they may provide extra-musical (and musical) experiences for teachers to form deeper connections with students, and for students to more actively locate themselves in the learning process.

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