

Vocal health and hygiene among classroom teachers

by

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Abstract

The voice is the choral musician's instrument, and it is just as surely the primary instrument of every teacher, whatever the subject. Yet it is remarkably vulnerable: an estimated 17.9 million adults in the United States report problems with their voice (National Institute on Deafness and Other Communication Disorders [NIDCD], 2016), and teachers are markedly overrepresented, with prevalence reported to be as high as 44% (Baghban et al., 2025). I found this disturbing. I began researching the most common causes and risks of vocal problems among teachers, as well as ways to improve the overall health and hygiene of our voices. For my project, I developed and presented a professional development session on vocal health and hygiene for teachers for our school district at the district-wide Professional Development Day. Attendance was lower than I expected, as many teachers were in required subject-area meetings. Therefore, if I were to do this project again, I would focus more on individual departments or site presentations rather than presenting it alongside so many competing required sessions.

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Chapter 1 - Teaching Philosophy

How My Philosophy Informs My Teaching

Introduction

As a choral music educator, I aim to perpetuate knowledge and inspire learning in the secondary choral classroom. Specifically, I introduce students to a rich canon of choral repertoire and invite them to articulate their reactions, not only to perform beautiful music but also to develop independent critical listening, vocal technique, ensemble musicianship, and expressive artistry. To this end, I seek a deliberate balance between focused, high-standard rehearsal and joyful opportunities for discovery, creativity, and student leadership. I encourage every singer to engage deeply with music, with me as their teacher-conductor, and with one another in the belief that powerful choral teaching thrives on vibrant intellectual, emotional, and artistic exchange. Teaching choral music is my chosen calling: a continuous adventure I undertake with love and imagination.

Why Formal Education?

I believe formal education should leave students as critical and creative thinkers who have learned to appreciate learning itself. In my rehearsal room, that means students who understand and enjoy music more than they did when they arrived. This conviction is not new. Philosophers have debated the purposes of formal education for millennia, tying it to human nature and the good life and society (Hodges, 2017). Plato viewed education as a process of drawing out what was already there and developing virtue and reason, preparing individuals to govern justly and to serve the common good. Education, for him, is the conversion of the soul from the realm of appearance to that of reality and justice (Plato, ca. 380 BCE/1997, 518c-d).

Aristotle, who continued this tradition, emphasized the cultivation of habits, intellectual and moral virtues, as necessary for the attainment of *eudaimonia*, or human flourishing (Aristotle, ca. 350 BCE/2002). He distinguished between liberal education, which develops the mind and character of free people, and more specialized vocational training, and stressed the significance of balancing personal development and public duty (Aristotle, ca. 350 BCE/1998, 1337a-1337b).

John Dewey speaks most directly to my own practice. Dewey had a major impact on modern progressive education and offered a more experiential viewpoint: education is growth through active problem solving in democratic communities, and schools must educate citizens for active engagement in society, linking individual growth with social requirements (Dewey, 1916/2016). His focus on learning by doing, and on education as a way of changing how we interact with the environment, is the active, experiential heart of every choir rehearsal I run.

Within these traditions, formal education seeks to achieve several central objectives (Curren, 2025). At its best, formal education helps students flourish as people, building knowledge, critical thinking, creativity, and wisdom. It also serves the wider community by teaching shared values, participation, and tolerance. And, though to a lesser degree, it prepares students for work and career. Formal schooling offers a clear path, guidance from professionals, access that is meant to be equal, and credentials the wider world recognizes. In practice, school speeds up the learning of skills like reading, math, and scientific reasoning. It puts students in a room with ideas and people they would not otherwise meet. And it does all of this at a scale no other institution can match.

Formal education also provides what no video or algorithm can: a sound structural path for beginning, and a teacher closing the loop. Music is not simple. A solid foundation teaches

students where to start and, just as important, why the content matters. A video can show a student what right sounds like; it cannot hear that student and correct them in the moment. The teacher is the feedback in the loop: immediate, specific, aimed at improvement. That is why I believe structure, differentiation, and assessment belong at the center of formal education. Assessing both where students are and where they have moved is how growth becomes visible, and formal education is the vehicle that makes this practical. This, too, is in line with what Dewey strived to teach.

Of course, formal schooling has its critics. Some critics, such as Caplan (2018), argue that schooling functions less as genuine skill-building than as a costly signal: a credential that certifies to employers a graduate's ability and willingness to meet expectations without necessarily having built either. Others point to the risks of compliance, rote learning, and reinforcing inequality. Informal apprenticeships or self-directed learning might sometimes be more efficient at building practical wisdom. The rote learning these critics fear is exactly what Dewey's pragmatism answered. My own rehearsal room confirms it daily. Students act on a lesson, hear and feel the reality of it, and adjust, learning by doing rather than being told. Formal education, however, is a powerful and vital institution when intelligently structured with the principles of justice, relevance, and adaptability in mind, particularly in the age of AI and rapid technological change. It is paramount in my work as an educator and coach.

Why Music Education?

Music Education is special because it develops the full person. The ancient Greeks knew this well, seeing music as a formative power that changed character, morality, and even the soul (Hodges, 2017). For Plato, music was a moral technology for developing virtue and civic

responsibility; for Aristotle, it was meant to be enjoyed, to foster moral education, and to provide catharsis in moderation.

This historical belief about music doing something to us still informs my teaching. I have witnessed group singing develop resilience, discipline, teamwork, and emotional regulation, skills that translate far beyond the rehearsal room.

Modern philosophy endorses this view. Bennett Reimer's idea of Music Education as Aesthetic Education (MEAE) emphasizes music as a "presentational symbol" of changing forms of human feeling (Reimer, 2003/2022, p. 92). Reimer claimed that music education must foster the ability to engage in meaningful aesthetic experience in all students, not only for performance or technical mastery, but for profound perception, sensitivity, and the formation of personal meaning. He thought that all pupils, not just the brilliant, deserve rich artistic experiences that enrich their inner life (Reimer, 2003/2022).

I align strongly with Reimer's view. In rehearsals, I help students connect solid technique with genuine emotional expression, supported by healthy vocal practices. This balance between intellectual engagement (analysis of structure and phrasing) and emotional sensitivity reflects both Leonard Meyer's ideas on expectation and tension-resolution and Reimer's aesthetic framework (Hodges, 2017). As Foster McMurray noted, music education should heighten awareness of sound as an aesthetic experience and empower students to access its richness (Hodges, 2017).

Connections Between Education and Music Education

Through music, my classroom is a microcosm of the larger educational aims. Differentiation tactics (visual aids, kinesthetic exercises, peer mentoring, broad repertoire, multi-sensory approaches) ensure every student succeeds and contributes meaningfully. A polite,

organized, technology-driven atmosphere promotes musical excellence and personal development. Assessment is a balance of mastery of the skill and introspective progress. This method is rooted in historical and philosophical traditions. The Greeks had spoken about music's potential to shape character, and the Renaissance, notably the Florentine Camerata, was more inclined towards ideals of humanistic, emotional expression (Hodges, 2017). Reimer's aesthetic theory connects these traditions by emphasizing the importance of perception and emotional depth in music teaching. It motivates me to create experiences in which students are not only performing but also listening with sensitivity and finding personal meaning, always grounded in good vocal technique that supports true expression (Reimer, 2003/2022; Lines, 2022).

Aesthetics in music (focusing on beauty, meaning, and authentic emotional resonance) guides my practice: beauty often arises from heartfelt engagement rather than technical perfection alone.

Other Relevant Issues

I have two other focuses beyond music in my classroom: vocal health and hygiene and access for all students. I believe vocal health and hygiene is a basic component of responsible musicianship, especially for secondary students whose voices are changing so quickly in adolescence. I model and explicitly teach healthy habits in daily rehearsals (full warm-ups and cool-downs, good posture and breath support, continuous hydration, vocal rest, and strategies for handling voice shifts) while helping students notice early symptoms of strain (National Institute on Deafness and Other Communication Disorders, 2016). I incorporate vocal health into every rehearsal and provide one-on-one coaching to help singers improve sustainable technique, prevent damage, and sing with confidence and freedom. This same commitment extends to my professional development work; I recently presented on vocal health and hygiene to fellow

educators, recognizing that teachers' voices are among our most valuable professional assets and require the same care and knowledge; voice disorders are common among those who teach and sing for a living (Alharbi et al., 2024; Baghban et al., 2025). I also believe it is imperative that we make our music classrooms accessible to all students, including not only Special Education students but also English Language Learners (ELLs). Many of the techniques that we use daily to meet Special Education learners are appropriate for ELLs as well, such as visual representations, peer mentoring, and partner work. Along this line, it is also important that we do our best to represent ALL of our students in our repertoire choices.

Students remain at the center of my planning. I strive to create an atmosphere that encourages enthusiastic participation, risk-taking, and collaboration. I remain flexible and responsive to the unique energy and needs of each ensemble, whether working with a large, mixed choir or a select chamber group. While I maintain high standards, I support growth through additional listening and practice opportunities, revision of performance goals, open office hours, and ongoing encouragement. Assessment reflects dual aims: mastery of technique, repertoire, and concepts alongside meaningful reflection that celebrates both personal and collective progress.

In Summary

I believe education, in every discipline I have taught, succeeds when students learn by doing and then adjusting. Music education carries this further, offering every student the chance to connect technical skill with personal meaning. My choral classroom is that process in miniature: learning built through shared experience. It is also a room where the focus on healthy singing builds responsible musicians, and every student, regardless of whether music feels like it is for them, finds a way in. The result is lifelong learners, with a love of music that outlasts any

repertoire. This lesson grew out of that belief. If protecting the voice is part of responsible musicianship, then it matters for every teacher, not just my singers, and that is why I built a professional-development session on vocal health for my colleagues.

Chapter 2 - Lesson Plan(s)

How We Got Here

During my second summer at Kansas State University, we took an Advanced Vocal Pedagogy class. We had to complete a presentation on various topics, and my topic was vocal health and hygiene. One recurring theme in my research on this topic, as well as in Dr. Patricia Thompson's work, was that it should not hurt to sing. If it does, there is an issue. This pricked at my subconscious because for years my voice would get tired and hurt when I sang or talked for any significant amount of time. I thought this was normal and had never considered that I had a problem. When I returned home from our summer residency, I scheduled an appointment with an otolaryngologist to see if we could get to the bottom of the problem. After doing a laryngoscopy, I was told I had muscle tension dysphonia, or extreme tension or strain of the muscles surrounding the larynx. I immediately began speech therapy with a speech therapist who specialized in helping teachers with similar issues. This led me to recognize the need for education for classroom teachers, whose voices are among their greatest assets. I presented a professional development presentation for our school district on this topic.

Lesson Plan

Video Demonstration

A recording of the professional development session is available here:

<https://youtu.be/oqzO8EPvLV0>

2014 Music National Standards

This lesson addresses the 2014 National Core Arts Standard MU:Pr5.3.E.5a, from the Traditional and Emerging Ensembles strand of the Performing artistic process, under the anchor standard to develop and refine artistic techniques and work for presentation (National Coalition

for Core Arts Standards [NCCAS], 2014): “Use self-reflection and peer feedback to refine individual and ensemble performances of a varied repertoire of music.” By guiding teachers to reflect on their own vocal use and to exchange feedback about healthy technique, the session builds the self-reflection and peer-feedback practices this standard identifies as central to refining performance.

Prior Knowledge/Skills

Teachers already use their voices daily. This is something that most people do instinctively. Teachers also know their own bodies and how their voices have responded to repetitive, daily use and, many times, overuse. Teachers also know their classroom environments and how these can affect them throughout the day.

Lesson Objective(s)

Participants will:

1. Identify at least three common vocal risks that teachers face in the classroom.
2. Describe the primary causes and warning symptoms of vocal distress, drawing on NIDCD guidance.
3. Demonstrate at least two vocal warm-ups and list practical vocal-hygiene strategies for daily use.
4. Draft a personal vocal-health action plan to apply in their own teaching.

Assessment of the Lesson

Students took a post-presentation survey to assess what they learned and what additional knowledge would have been helpful. Though attendance was lower than anticipated, the participants/educators who were present seemed to have taken something valuable from the presentation. Many teachers had never used vocal warm-ups as part of their daily routine and

planned to do so moving forward. Some teachers planned to buy amplification equipment for their classrooms to help mitigate shouting over students. If I were to present this again, the first thing I would change would be the avenue in which it was presented. Being in the middle of other sessions made it difficult to bring in a larger number of participants. If given the chance to present this in the future, I would try to tailor it to specific departments and/or schools to make it more focused. That being said, I believe I would add more warm-up examples, such as straw phonation. If I knew ahead of time how many participants I would have, I could have planned for enough supplies to include that activity. My focus was on warm-ups that could be done without preparation, but I now feel that more activities, such as the straw phonation, could have improved the presentation.

After giving this presentation, I plan to strategically incorporate more vocal health and hygiene practices and information into my choir room, rather than simply mentioning them in passing or as a fleeting thought. By being more deliberate, students will realize the importance of protecting their voices for current and future use.

Relevant Contextual Factors and Needed Modifications/Accommodations

This presentation was given on an all-district professional development day. Multiple sessions of professional development, in both subject-specific and general applications, were offered simultaneously. Many departments required their teachers to be in the subject-specific sessions.

Instructional Resources, Materials and Technologies

Instructional Resources included a smart board for playing the Presentation, a straw and a small cup of water for demonstrating the warm-up technique, and a voice amplifier as an

example of possible amplifiers for saving one's voice. Participants also used their smartphones to access the surveys before and after the presentation.

Lesson Sequence

Entry Activity/Warm-Up. *Objective:* Survey participants' own vocal-health experiences and expectations so the session could address their real concerns. *Steps:* In the week before the presentation, participants completed a brief pre-session survey, reflecting on their daily vocal use, symptoms they had noticed, and what they hoped to gain. Sample questions included how often they experienced vocal fatigue (hoarseness, strained voice, loss of pitch) during or after work; whether their voice had become deeper, raspy, or less able to reach certain notes; whether they often used their voice while sick; and what they hoped to learn or improve. These baseline responses let me gauge the room in advance and gave a point of comparison for the closing survey.

Activity 1: Interactive Lecture (approx. 20 minutes). *Objective:* Build participants' understanding of how vocal misuse happens, how to recognize it, and how to protect against it. *Steps:* Participants engaged with an interactive lecture supported by a PowerPoint. The lecture moved through key statistics and facts about vocal misuse; the common risks and causes of vocal issues; a symptoms and self-assessment quiz; a brief turn-and-talk about vocal hygiene; tips and tricks for protecting the voice; and a discussion of possible warm-ups. The interactive elements, the self-assessment quiz and the turn-and-talk, kept participants applying the material to their own experience rather than only listening.

Activity 2: Guided Vocal Warm-Ups (approx. 10 minutes). *Objective:* Give participants no-equipment warm-ups they could use immediately, in the car or the classroom. *Steps:* Led by the instructor, participants worked through humming, lip trills, sirens, and gentle

glides. I chose warm-ups that require no supplies or preparation so participants could adopt them the very next morning without any barrier.

Activity 3: Table Discussion (approx. 5 minutes). *Objective:* Move participants from awareness to commitment. *Steps:* Participants discussed with their tablemates at least one major takeaway they planned to put into practice starting the next day, naming a specific change rather than a general intention.

Closure/Summative Assessment. *Objective:* Capture what participants learned and what they intended to apply, and give me a post-session comparison against the entry survey. *Steps:* Following the presentation, participants completed a follow-up survey summarizing what they learned and any questions they still had. Its central question asked which practices they planned to put into use over the next week: hydrate better, use amplification, start the day with warm-ups, avoid harmful habits, or seek help early.

Reflection on This Lesson

My goals in doing this lesson were to address the common issue of vocal strain, give suggestions for how to mitigate it, and provide vocal warm-ups that participants could do easily, without outside help. The participants learned the risks of vocal abuse and what they could do to protect their voices from the potential damage. I used a pre- and post-session assessment to gauge what was learned and what I could do better in future sessions, as well as a video of the session to see, after the fact, what I might be able to change. In the future, I will make the session more hands-on and less lecture-based. Secondly, I will try to give this presentation within departments or within certain school faculties so I am not fighting against mandatory requirements for participants.

Chapter 3 - Reflections

I am in a unique situation compared to others in my program; I am not currently teaching in the music field. For the past 13 years, I have worked in the general education field, including elementary education, teaching history, and English Language Learners at the middle and high school levels. Prior to this, I taught choir for 14 years. My intention has been to get back into the choir classroom, which is happening this next school year. What I have learned over the past several years is that good, solid teaching is good teaching: the subject area does not matter. However, my love and passion have always been in Choral Music. I began this program, two years ago, with the desire to return to choral music and improve the techniques I previously used.

As I moved throughout this program, many courses have shaped my current teaching practices and guided what I hope to be my future processes. One of my first courses was Organization and Administration of Successful School Music Programs with Dr. Frank Tracz. One of the significant lessons I took from his class was that leadership can be taught and learned. In the past, I saw my student leaders as only those who were natural leaders, ones who did things instinctively rather than through a learning process. Since Dr. Tracz's class, I have looked further into teaching leadership, specifically into the Leader in Me program. This program is based on Stephen Covey's 7 Habits of Highly Effective People. Through the principles taught by Dr. Tracz and the Leader in Me framework, I have begun building the middle school's philanthropic program; I have also been leading our National Junior Honor Society chapter. My hope is to see continued growth in both the programs and the students taking on leadership in both organizations.

Another early course was Theories of Music Teaching, with Dr. Phillip Payne. This class reminded me to focus more on how students learn. This was especially poignant to me when I considered how I had previously taught music literacy through sight-reading skills.

During my History of School Choral Music class with Dr. Jamie Bunce, I began to focus on my programming choices. It became apparent to me that, though I often had varied pieces and time periods, I was rarely deliberate about it. This course helped me realize the need to plan out my hopes for programming. If I simply programmed based on what sounded good to me at the time, I was failing to introduce my singers to the full range of time periods, types of composers, etc., that make music so interesting. My future goal is to plan my programming by time period for specific concerts so that, over the 4 years that many of them are with me, they will experience a variety of genres, time periods, and composers. I am doing my students a disservice by not exposing them to this type of variety.

Another class that had a profound effect on me and my teaching techniques was Advanced Choral Conducting with Dr. Jamie Bunce and Dr. Jacob Narverud. Throughout this course, various methods of score study and conducting techniques were used. I had never been in a course that did any in-depth score study, so it gave me a new perspective on how to approach a choral music score by looking beyond just notes and rhythms and focusing more on the musicality of it all, before even standing in front of a choir. In the past, I had focused so much on the musicality of my singers that I failed to realize the extent to which my gestures, or lack thereof, were contributing to the sounds they made. By focusing on the small gestures, I began to realize how little things could bring great clarity or confusion to a piece and the ensemble trying to perform it. Prior to this, I felt I was a solid conductor who brought great musicality out of my

singers, but realizing that if I do not focus on how my conducting is perceived, I will never get any better, and my ensembles will become stagnant at some point as well.

The class that has had the greatest effect on me, however, has to be Advanced Vocal Pedagogy with Dr. Patricia Thompson. Over the course of that class, we learned about the mechanism of the voice, as well as ways to identify issues and begin addressing them. We were then asked to do a presentation on a given subject. I chose vocal health and hygiene. One of the major points that kept coming up was, “It should not hurt to speak or sing, and if it does, there is an issue.” When I first came upon that idea, I dismissed it because I had been having pain when I sang for years. This worsened if I was speaking over top of crowds all day. After reading this concept a third time, I had to re-evaluate my situation. The pain I felt after speaking too much or singing too much was an issue I could no longer ignore. After my second summer residency at Kansas State, I contacted my doctor for a referral to an otolaryngologist. My doctor noticed that I had muscle tension dysphonia on top of narrow airways. Muscle tension dysphonia is a disorder characterized by excessive tension in the muscles around the larynx. This can cause vocal fatigue or a strained, hoarse, or breathy voice, often accompanied by pain. In my case, it was likely the result of my acid reflux, asthmatic cough, and allergies, causing me to overcompensate through these issues. The otolaryngologist then referred me to a speech pathologist to help me learn to speak without the tension in my throat.

This was motivation to begin to dive deeper in the project to the causes of muscle tension dysphonia and vocal issues in teachers. It was through this project that I learned how widespread the problem is. The National Institute on Deafness and Other Communication Disorders (NIDCD, 2016) estimates that 17.9 million U.S. adults experience voice problems, with causes ranging from vocal overuse to upper respiratory infections, vocal nodules and other growths, and

even laryngeal cancer. Baghban et al. (2025) describe voice disorders among teachers as a “silent epidemic” that threatens their professional performance and well-being, with prevalence reaching as high as 44 percent; they attribute teachers’ elevated risk to prolonged voice use, high classroom noise levels, and too little opportunity for vocal rest. Many teachers, especially music teachers, overuse their voices, causing hoarseness, vocal tension, and worse. It became obvious to me that more than just music educators needed this information; all teachers could benefit. So it became important to me to share my knowledge with others, which led me to give a professional development presentation to people in our school district.

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