Reflections on an individualized approach to music literacy in the secondary choral program.

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Abstract

In my lesson plan, you will see the unit I have designed to individualize sight singing practice and assessment for each student based on their current music reading level. The way ensembles are set up in my school, I have senior future music majors in the same choir as freshmen who have not taken a music class since 6th grade general music. As we practiced sight singing as a group at a median level for all students, I realized that the more experienced students were not getting the opportunity to build on their skills and the less experienced students needed additional practice at a more basic level. In this unit, the students' sight singing levels were evaluated at the beginning of the semester. Students were placed at a level that was comfortable, yet stretched them outside of their comfort zones, with a goal of increasing at least one level per assessment period. They had weekly assignments that were graded on completion, so as not to discourage the growth mindset, but with feedback. Their sight singing was evaluated for accuracy quarterly.

The master of music education program at Kansas State University has helped me to enhance my music teaching in many ways. The largest development in my teaching has been in my focus on process over product. In the past, I have sometimes let the desire for a great performance take precedence over taking the time to make sure students understand all the musical concepts in a piece and the reasons for making musical decisions or approaching technique in a certain way. Secondly, I have grown by giving up more control in order to allow students to take ownership of their program. I have done this by giving students more freedom in their musical decisions, literature selection, leadership positions, and community involvement.

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Dedication

To the memory of my late uncle, Daniel Huey, for passing his love of learning and passion for education on to me. This would not have been possible without his influence. To my husband, Chris Seidler, and my parents, James and Sondra Huey, for their unfailing love and support throughout this experience and all my endeavors.

Chapter 1 - Teaching Philosophy

There is a well-known quote from an unknown author that says, "Teaching is the one profession that creates all other professions." I think the American public would generally agree that the purpose of education is to prepare children for their future careers and help them become productive members of society. Without education, knowledge, cultures, governments, societies, customs, and so much more would not be passed down to future generations. Education is often said to provide a way forward and out for students who have grown up disadvantaged.

The founding of the American democracy was heavily influenced by the Enlightenment, a movement toward rational thought using science and reason to understand the world and our place in it. Knowledge was the basis of power (Mark, 2007, pg. 113). Prior to the Revolution, education was mainly for the rich. The few children who were educated were sent away to school in England. After the Revolution, education became more of a priority and was viewed as a means of preparing people for self-government. Schools in the United States evolved from Latin grammar schools used for college prep to the establishment of secular and practical academies led by Benjamin Franklin. Both systems had such high tuition that they did not meet the needs of the entire population. Towards the end of the 18th century and beginning of the 19th century, Thomas Jefferson began advocating for publicly funded schooling known as common schools. Those who could afford paying for school would, but those who could not were eligible to receive scholarships. These schools focused on teaching reading, writing, and arithmetic, however Jefferson also advocated for the addition of ethics and the arts. Through the leadership of Horace Mann and Henry Barnard, who were lawyers, legislators, school superintendents, and education reformers, free public school became a staple in the United States by 1840 (Mark, 2007).

Throughout the history of public education in the United States, education has been adjusted and reformed based on the needs of society. Similar recurring themes such as college and career readiness and STEM continue to come back time and time again. However, education does not seem to change as quickly as society changes. As most obviously evidenced in the constantly evolving field of technology, our world and society change rapidly. Knowledge acquired through education based on the needs of society at the time children are in school does not completely prepare them for the society they will live in as adults. So many of the careers our students will have do not even exist yet. I think the quote shared in the beginning should be replaced by this quote by educator and author A.J. Juliani, "Our job is not to prepare students for something, it is to prepare them for anything (2018)." In order to prepare students for a future society we cannot predict, educators must instead help students to become growth-minded, independent lifelong learners and problem solvers and who know how to interact with others respectfully regardless of their differences. While basic reading, writing, and arithmetic are important, educating the whole person to have the skills to learn and adapt on their own will prepare them to successfully navigate any situation they find themselves in.

Music is a subject that has always been known as a vehicle for educating the whole person. Music has existed and been a vital part of all cultures since the beginning of time. Nearly anywhere we go, music is all around us. We listen to it on our drive to work in the morning, in any store we set foot into, through movies and television, while working out, at sporting events, and concerts. It is inherently important to teach music because it can improve a person's mood and general outlook on life, thus improving the quality of life. Music education is important, not only for the marketable skills it teaches such as; creativity, discipline, flexibility, and the ability to cooperatively with others, but also because it simply makes life more enjoyable (Lehman).

Like the priorities of general education in the public schools, the goal and importance of music education in public schools has changed throughout history based on the perceived needs of society. Music education in American public schools came out of the singing school movement. Singing schools were established to bring music education to the masses in order to improve singing in church congregations and choirs. Music was seen as a subject for educating the whole person and was required for four years in secondary schools. Unfortunately after World War II, due to a lack of funding and qualified teachers, music requirements were reduced from four credits to one and school ensembles were typically for the talented students, rather than all students. Not long after, due to the space race followed by No Child Left Behind, an increased emphasis on mathematics, science, and reading in the public schools further reduced funding and time for the arts in the school day . Additionally, because public school music education has not adapted with the music of the culture, focusing on traditional ensembles and avoiding the incorporation of popular styles, students have lost interest in participating.

Due to the work of NAfME to get music included as a core subject in the Every Student Succeeds Act, their advocacy efforts, and revisions of the standards to outline the creative process which can be adapted to any style of making music, I believe music education is heading in a better direction. If, through teaching using the 2014 music standards as a guide, music teachers can provide relevant and contextual music education for all students, we will see a growth in music education.

In my choral classroom, my goal is to help develop a community of respectful, growth-minded, independent learners with a lifelong love of music. In order for this to happen, I must provide a safe and welcoming environment for students to learn and grow. Our choral community is built upon a culture of respect and trust in both peer-to-peer and student-to-teacher

relationships. It is important for learning to take place in such an environment so that students are not only free to be themselves, but free to learn from their mistakes without fear of judgement. The bond of an ensemble allows them to come together and create a beautiful, authentic performance that is greater than what they could do on their own. However, while a beautiful performance is exhilarating and provides a sense of accomplishment, the performance is not the end all be all. For many, the joy of participating in the community and the relationships built are the reasons they choose to participate in music.

According to Jorgensen (1997, pg. 3), "a comparative and contextual study of world musics can help students understand cultures other than their own and intuitively and imaginatively grasp the perspectives and expressions of others– what people have in common and how they differ– and foster tolerance of cultural differences with people in other societies, thereby providing a better basis for cooperation." In order for students to be high-functioning, respectful, and cooperative members of our ensemble, school, local, national, and world communities, it is important that they study music from a variety of cultures, styles, genres, and time periods. In depth study of a variety of music helps them to understand the culture and history of people who are different from them, so they can interact with them respectfully and cooperatively. This helps them to be more well-rounded as musicians and as humans.

It is important for music education to be student-centered. In order for students to learn, they must be involved in their own education and have a say in what they are learning and how they learn and demonstrate that learning. The best learning happens when it is cooperative and collaborative in nature, letting students learn from each other and become more actively engaged in their learning. I take into account my students' abilities, interests, and learning styles as I teach, as well as provide students with multiple means of demonstrating their learning.

As a teacher, my goal is to be a facilitator of learning and a mediator of discourse rather than simply telling students what I want them to know. I can learn just as much from my students as they can learn from me, so I make sure to show them as much respect as they give me by allowing for free flow of students' ideas and interpretations. I do this by allowing students input in music selection and making musical decisions in the pieces we are working on. This allows them to take ownership in the music they are creating. Music can drive certain emotions and a certain piece can mean something different to each person. I strive to validate my students and their feelings about a piece by allowing them to share their personal connections so that students are able to combine their various experiences to create a deeper and broader interpretation of a piece.

One of the best and most unique parts of singing in a choir is that nothing else in the world involves the collaboration of a group of people creating something beautiful and bigger than themselves with only their voices. Though we are a team working toward a goal larger than an individual can accomplish, the team functions best when each member is at their best and working to be a stronger, more independent part of the team. Every day my students work toward being strong, independent musicians. Focusing on the process of developing music literacy and building ear training skills helps students learn the pitches and rhythms quicker, allowing them to spend more time on the expressive aspects of the music, which they often find more enjoyable. Additionally, having these skills mean that a student will be able to learn and understand music on their own without the guidance of a teacher, allowing them to continue their musicianship beyond the classroom and throughout their life.

Ultimately, my role as a music educator is to facilitate learning and discourse and prepare students to be growth-minded, lifelong learners and lovers of music. Through music, I engage

students in activities that require them to be creative, disciplined, flexible, and work cooperatively with others. I also help them explore the emotions that various songs or types of music bring them and help them learn to articulate what they feel and why. Lastly, my role is to educate students about other cultures so that they learn to see the world through another's eyes and can appreciate other ways of thinking and living.

How My Philosophy Informs My Teaching

In music education, it is easy to focus on the needs of the ensemble over the needs of the individual, operating under the Gestalt theory that the whole is greater than its parts ("Gestalt Psychology," 2020). While I do believe that we can achieve more together, I also believe it is important to address the needs of the individual. In preparing students for their future, regardless of their career, the ability to read music will help them to continue their musicianship throughout their whole life. The unit below focuses on developing independent musicianship. Additionally, the focus on setting individual goals for growth in music literacy and working to achieve them will help students build confidence in their ability to set and achieve goals in other aspects of life.

Chapter 2 - Lesson Plan

Sight Singing Unit

2014 Music National Standards

MU:Pr4.2.E.5a Demonstrate, using music reading skills where appropriate, how knowledge of formal aspects in musical works inform prepared or improvised performances (Music Standards-Ensemble, 2014).

MU:Pr5.3.E.8a Develop strategies to address technical challenges in a varied repertoire of music and evaluate their success using feedback from ensemble peers and other sources to refine performances (Music Standards-Ensemble, 2014).

MU:Pr6.1.E.5a Demonstrate attention to technical accuracy and expressive qualities in prepared and improvised performances of a varied repertoire of music (Music Standards-Ensemble, 2014).

Prior Knowledge/Skills

Students at my school have varying levels of knowledge and skills in the way of sight singing. At minimum, all students are familiar with the major solfege syllables and can sing a diatonic major scale on solfege. All students can count up to 16th note rhythms in 2/4, 3/4, and 4/4 time. During the first two weeks of school, all students go through a music reading and sight singing "boot camp" in order to introduce (for new students) and review (for returning students) the basics and procedures.

Unit Objective

Students will improve their individual sight singing skills throughout the school year by at least one level in Sight Reading Factory per semester. The student will successfully complete

examples in both major and minor keys and simple and compound meter with at least 80% accuracy.

Assessment

Students will be assessed informally throughout their individual and in-class group sight singing practice. Students will be assessed formally through their individual online sight singing submissions three times per semester and in person once per semester.

Relevant Contextual Factors and Modifications/Accommodations Needed

`This is an un-auditioned choir with 30 students grades 9-12. The class meets every other day for 85 minutes. Each student has a school-issued Chromebook to use to complete schoolwork at both school and home.

Instructional Materials, Resources and Technologies

Chromebooks, Sight Reading Factory memberships for both teacher and students

Unit Sequence

I.   Week 3 of the School Year

      A.   Diagnostic Assessment

            1.   Each student's sight singing level will be determined as they sing through examples from each level for the teacher 1 on 1. The student will be placed at a level that is approachable, yet slightly challenging for him or her. If the student seems to be in between levels, he or she will be given the option to choose between the two levels.

II.   Weekly throughout the School Year

      A.   Small Group Practice

1.	During the first class period of each week, students will be placed in groups based on their level to practice sight reading with printed examples generated by Sight Reading Factory. Students will first diagram the rhythms and write in the solfege, checking their answers with each other. Then students will then follow the steps for sight reading set forth during bootcamp and followed in all class sight reading activities:

    a)	Sing sequence for establishing the key

    b)	Clap and count the passage

    c)	Speak the solfege in rhythm

    d)	Sing the sequence for establishing the key again

    e)	Sing the pitches on solfege out of time

    f)	Sing the passage on solfege and in time with a metronome

    g)	Take a minute to practice any challenging intervals or rhythms individually

    h)	Sing the passage again on solfege and in time with a metronome

2.	The teacher will go around to each group and aid with new or challenging rhythms or intervals.

B.	Full Class Practice

1.	During all class periods, the full choir will sight read together using the same sequence above. The average sight singing level of the class will be used. Keys and time signatures will be the same as pieces the choir is working on at the time.

C.	Individual Practice

1.   Each student will have one online Sight Reading Factory assignment to complete per week at their designated level. The student will receive written feedback on each assignment. The assignment will be graded on completion for a practice grade. The last assignment of each month will be graded for accuracy. One point will be given for each beat of correct pitch and one point will be given for each beat of correct rhythm.

III.   End of Each Quarter

A.   Summative Assessment

1.   Each student will sing an example from his or her designated level for the teacher 1 on 1. The teacher will provide feedback in person and will determine whether the student is ready to move up to the next level.

Unit Reflection

Throughout my teaching career, I have had un-auditioned 9-12 high school choral ensembles with vast differences in their music literacy and sight singing ability. I have always made sure to have students sight singing every day as a class, but with excerpts at the average ability level of the class. The result was that some of my beginners needed extra time on more basic skills and my more experienced students were not progressing as far as they had the potential to. I also found that the few times a year I assessed my students' sight singing individually, they often nervously shared that they could sight sing much more accurately in the choir than they could on their own.

Through my graduate studies, my goal has been to refine my teaching to emphasize the process of learning and performing music over a polished product. I want my students to develop

a growth mindset and become independent learners, in both music and life, in a community where they feel safety and belonging. To help each student along their process of becoming an independent musician, I have to come alongside them and help them each to grow in their individual music literacy. This way they can interpret the music placed in front of them and make their best musical contribution to their choral community.

The goal of this year-long unit is to meet each student where they are in terms of their sight singing ability so that they can make greater progress in their literacy throughout the year. This unit takes the sight-singing process the students are already used to using when sight singing as a class, but adds small group and individual practice at a level appropriate for their skill level. This will keep students engaged in their learning because they are working at a level where they can see progress. The small group and individual practice will help scaffold their learning and build confidence in their individual singing.

At the beginning of the unit, each student is assessed with a diagnostic test to determine his or her level in Sight Reading Factory. Each week, students will have opportunities to practice their sight singing skills with the full choir, in a small group of students at their level, and individually. Each class, the full choir will practice sight singing together at the average level of the class with examples that include concepts from the literature they are preparing. This will afford students the safety of practicing in numbers, while also practicing concepts that appear in their music. During the first class period of each week, students will spend time practicing in small groups with students at their level. I will rotate between the groups to introduce new concepts and provide feedback. Students will also have a weekly individual sight singing assignment on Sight Reading Factory. The full and small group sight singing activities will be assessed informally through observation and immediate verbal feedback. Students will receive

written feedback on each individual assignment. The assignment will be graded on completion for a practice grade. The last assignment of each month will be graded for accuracy. One point will be given for each beat of correct pitch and one point will be given for each beat of correct rhythm. At the end of each quarter, students will be formally evaluated 1 on 1 to determine their level for the following quarter.

I had planned to pilot this unit during the fourth quarter of this school year. My reasoning for that was to give students a taste of what I was planning for next school year and to figure out any issues with the plan so I could revise them for the start of next year. I had completed the diagnostic assessment and had students signed up for their own Sight Reading Factory accounts, so that we were prepared to start after spring break. Unfortunately due to COVID-19, we never went back to school after spring break and we were unable to pilot the unit as I had intended.

Since we went to online learning, I was unable to execute the full and small group practice components. I decided to try out the individual practice component, but allowed students to choose their own level since they were unable to receive as much guidance as they would if we were in the regular classroom. I provided tutorial videos and did several examples via Zoom to help make sure students were comfortable with the program and process. The results in our e-learning format were mixed. Many of my more experienced students had great success and even pushed themselves to try more difficult levels. However, I also had freshmen who had a lot of anxiety about using the platform and recording their voices.

When implementing this unit in the future, there are several things I will do to help make my less experienced students feel more comfortable. First, I would walk students through the program together in class. I would have them follow along and click each button along with me. I would also have the students complete their first week of recordings in their small groups on

one person's computer, then with a partner before moving on to individual recordings. Overall, I do think this unit can be successful and am excited to implement it fully when in-person classes resume.

I have always said that one day I want to be able to get my students to a level of independent musicianship where by the end of their time with me they do not need me anymore. I would love to be able to hand a group of seniors a new piece of music, walk to the back of the classroom, have a seat, and watch them dive into the piece and figure it out together without my help. Throughout the last several years, I have realized that my approach to sight singing in the classroom was not helping my students make as much progress in their literacy skills as I had hoped. My graduating seniors were not leaving me as independent and confident in their skills as they should be. The creation of this unit helped me to think through a process to meet each individual student where they were rather than using only a whole group approach to music literacy. It has helped me to realize my students may not truly understand what they know and what is out there to learn. Through this individualized approach students can get an idea of where they are, set goals, and be motivated to grow. The addition of small group practice will allow students to learn from each other while also building confidence in their ability to sight sing independently. This will help solve the issue I discovered of students feeling confident in their sight singing skills with the full choir, but not individually.

Chapter 3 - Reflections

The master of music education program at Kansas State University has helped me to enhance my music teaching in many ways. The largest development in my teaching has been in my focus on process over product. In the past, I have sometimes let the desire for a great performance take precedence over taking the time to make sure students understand all the musical concepts in a piece and the reasons for making musical decisions or approaching technique in a certain way. Secondly, I have grown by giving up more control in order to allow students to take ownership of their program. I have done this by giving students more freedom in their musical decisions, literature selection, leadership positions, and community involvement. Students' ownership of their program is important because it helps them be more invested and committed to its success, motivated to dive deeper into their learning, and to create more authentic performances.

The History of School Choral Music, Vocal Music for Adolescent Singers, and Advanced Conducting courses have been the most influential for me as far as refocusing myself on the process of making music over the product. I previously thought my teaching was process-oriented because of the procedures I have set up for sight-singing and how I have students transfer that process to how they begin learning a new piece. However, that is about where my focus on the process ended. After learning the pitches and rhythms, I have a tendency to dictate the elements of expression without providing reasoning or allowing enough student input in order to get to a beautiful performance as quickly as possible.

Through these courses, I was reminded that the process should begin with my music selection- both for my choirs and for my solo singers. In the past, I have chosen music based on these criteria: voicing, range, tessitura, rhythmic and harmonic language, relatable text, and if it

was moving for me and could be moving for my students. While all these factors are important, I was missing a key factor: what musical concepts the students could learn through the piece. I have since begun doing more thorough score study before even selecting a piece.

These courses have also helped me to improve how I score study. Previously my score study consisted of learning all the parts, researching the history, finding pronunciations and translations, and marking entrances, cut-offs, tempi, and dynamics. Through our discussions in these courses, I have been reminded to spend more time pulling out concepts to teach, finding areas that may cause difficulty, and brainstorming multiple ways to teach those concepts. This has changed the way I lesson plan and allowed me to be more efficient. Which in turn has helped me to feel like I can take the time to really dig into the part of music that draws us in- the story and the musicality. I now frequently allow students to experiment with dynamics, text stress, and phrasing within the piece. We try each phrase several different ways and vote on which version they like the best and stick with it for the performance. I also am allocating more rehearsal time for students to unpack the author's meaning of the text and discuss how it relates to their own lives. Giving students more ownership in their musicality and interpretation of the text has lead to much more authentic performances.

I have always been fascinated by the science of how the voice works and how it changes throughout a person's lifetime and have had a strong desire to learn more. Through the vocal pedagogy course, I gained a stronger understanding of breath, how the vocal mechanism works, and the stages in both the male and female voice change. In the past, I have taught breathing and vocal technique through lots of kinesthetic movements and metaphors. This year I have had the knowledge and taken more time to explain how and why behind the breathing and vocal techniques I teach. My students are also tracking their vocal range and determining where they

are in the voice change process. These changes to how I teach vocal technique have helped kids to understand the importance of good vocal technique and therefore commit to using good technique more consistently. Through having a better understanding of the voice change, students are getting less discouraged about some of the challenges they face because they know that they are temporary.

In the Organization and Administration of School Music Programs course, I realized how much of the organization of my high school choral and music theatre program I was controlling myself that I did not need to be. As much as I wish it were not true, a part of me has always operated by the old adage, "If you want something done right, do it yourself." By doing this I have prevented my students from building their leadership skills and taking ownership of the program. Since taking the course, I have revised how I run my leadership teams. I now define their roles based on the strengths of each student on the team, rather than trying to fit the student to the role. I have more students organizing music, uniforms, costumes, and props, designing sets, teaching choreography, doing public relations, and even finding us gigs than I ever have before. It has been incredibly neat to see my students take ownership and pride in their program.

My experience in the master's of music education program at Kansas State University has changed my mindset as a teacher. The knowledge and skills I have gained have allowed me to focus more on the process of making quality music rather than the product. By focusing on the growth and the journey, my students are not just learning songs any more. They are learning skills, building relationships, becoming leaders, and taking ownership of their program and their music-making. As a result, they are making some pretty beautiful music, too.

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