

Using Estill Voice Training in the middle school choral rehearsal

by

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Abstract

For my research I am interested in how the Estill Voice Training (EVT) can be used in the middle school choral rehearsal to help students better understand and use their vocal mechanism. What originally drew me to EVT was the focus on the anatomy of the voice. Often a voice teacher will ask a student to do something abstract with their voice this can leave the singing feeling like they are shooting in the dark to try to figure out what exactly is being asked of them. This is not to say that illustrative language has no place in vocal pedagogy, but that we as vocal instructors need to make sure we are tying that illustrative language to the physical vocal mechanism. For example, instead of saying “try that again but with a darker sound, like you’re a 45-year-old opera singer” I would say, “try that again but with a darker sound, keep your resonance forward but feel like you are yawning.” This gives the voice students something tangible they can manipulate and feel in their instrument. This project consists of two lessons where students are introduced to the Estill Voice Training method, explore three different vocal covers in warm-ups, then receive feedback in repertoire rehearsal that is based in EVT. My first lesson plan focuses on introducing EVT to my students and experimenting with a few different EVT styles including sob, speech and twang. In the next lesson plan, during repertoire rehearsal I will use feedback based in EVT to address any issues that arise in rehearsal. For the final lesson plan, we will use our repertoire to experiment with body covers, or different styles covered in EVT. This includes the different vocal styles students experiment with in the first lesson; sob, speech and twang.

When I started teaching EVT was something I wanted to include in my pedagogy but I was unsure how to take this method used in individual voice lessons and transfer it to the middle school ensemble. In the past I have used EVT sparingly in warm-ups and when rehearsing

repertoire but this project will help me find what EVT methods or tools work in my classroom so I can better incorporate them in my day to day teaching. My goal is to empower young vocal students to better understand and use their voice as not only an instrument but a muscle. During my time at Kansas State I have developed in my conducting and my rehearsal pacing. Being able to practice conducting in front of other music teachers and two master conductors really inspired me to be reflective of my conducting and make changes if a gesture is not working with my ensemble. After taking Theories of Music Teaching and Choral Rehearsal Techniques I have started planning more varied activities with a faster pace. Before I would stick to a very clear but simple regiment of warm-up, repertoire, and the occasional music theory or listening activity. But, after my time at Kansas State I am more adventurous in my lesson plans and try to include movement, and composition activities as well as more strategies to improve the sound of my choirs like singing through straws or singing in circles around the room.

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Dedication

For my parents Scott and Julie McEathron, for instilling in me a reverence for knowledge and hard work. This report would not be possible without you, thank you for your enduring support.

Chapter 1 - Teaching Philosophy

Like many music professionals, I was inspired to pursue music education because of the meaningful and positive experience I had in my K-12 music classes. I remember going to my first KMEA (Kansas Music Educators Association) conference my freshmen year of college and running into my elementary music teacher, Mrs Bonner. We hugged and Mrs Bonner commented that this is why she teaches music; for her students to grow up and become music educators themselves. This was significant to me in forming my philosophy of music education. I believe that all K-12 students should have access to a quality music education experience. Music educators should strive to not only program an array of challenging and culturally significant concert repertoire but should also actively involve students in the rehearsal and music-making process. This helps to create not only an effective learning environment but gives students the experience and knowledge they need to become life-long musicians and music appreciators.

We should have formal education systems to ensure that students are entering the workforce as well-rounded and well-prepared as possible. Millions of children attend school in the United States every year, and each of these children is coming from a unique background with skills and interests that are personal to them. How can a system of education reach all these children and prepare them to become responsible, adult citizens? By giving all children the opportunity to learn and explore various curricular subjects. In the past 20 years there has been a shift in education towards standardized test preparation, and standardized test subjects including math, reading/language arts, and science in some states. Funding is allocated to these subjects over others, such as history and the arts. Time is taken away from elective classes to allow for intervention or testing. While I agree that these things are valuable, arts education has declined in support because of it. The Center for Education Policy found that instructional time for school

music and art had been reduced by 22% in 2006 (Mark, 2008, pg. 113). This statistic is only four years after the No Child Left Behind Act was signed in 2002. The significance of this in arts education is illustrated by Andy Rooney in his *60 Minute* segment on April 9th, 2006, “The purpose of teaching is to provide an education, not to help kids pass a test... Subjects like science, art, history, and music are being taught very little in a lot of schools. We’re going to raise a generation of cultural idiots- people who don’t know Beethoven from Mozart, Cezanne from Van Gogh, or Albert Einstein from Charles Darwin” (Mark, 2008, pg. 113). In our modern world so much information is online and so much of a student's knowledge is from technology. While I believe that technology is a great tool for education, depending on it leaves out so much arts education and experience. Yes, students may take a virtual tour of a museum but this is not the same experience as going to a physical museum or attending a lecture about a specific artist or piece. Where I teach not every school has a music program, this includes at the elementary level. Many students do not have their first music class until middle school. This means that secondary teachers have to spend more time building students’ musical foundation rather than build upon it like they would if students had a strong general music program or experience. Having strong formal education systems in Nevada where arts allocations are funded and supported would mean giving students a stronger musical foundation that they can build off throughout their entire K-12 experience. This will empower students to become life-long music makers and appreciators.

Music education is a vital aspect of education overall. Even in Ancient Greece and Rome, music was essential to education. “The purpose of education was to develop citizens capable of actively participating in Greek society. The education system emphasized music, which included poetry, and was intended to influence both body and soul” (Mark, 2008, pg. 2). Yes, music can

connect to other curricular subjects but music's value lies in and of itself. Music is a tool for expression and creativity that people have to actively engage with to listen or to create. I believe that is one of the most important aspects of music that we pass on to our students, the importance of actively creating or actively listening. I teach at the middle school level and often my students are weary of participating in games, or singing in a small group or sometimes even saying "here" for attendance. Music is the perfect class to practice being engaged and being an active participant, this helps students build tenacity and confidence. While tenacity and confidence are not measured on standardized tests, they are two qualities that will help students become life-long learners and music enthusiasts. My philosophy is supported by Plato, who believed that children must learn music to develop a perception of idealized community life and to prepare them to participate actively as responsible citizens (Mark, 2008, pg. 2). I am also a proponent of praxialism which is a philosophy based in "doing" or experiencing and reflecting on subject matter first hand. A full understanding of the value of music cannot merely arise from thinking about it; one must be actively involved in music- composing, performing, conducting, listening, teaching, etc,. From a praxialist viewpoint, music is valued properly as we understand it intellectually, engage in it actively and reflect on our musical experiences thoughtfully (Hodges, 2017, pg. 201). Many music directors use the phrase, "this only works if you work" or "you will get out of this class what you put in", I think these two phrases show the significance of praxialism and being an active participant. A student who sits silently in choir, never raising their hand or singing along will not have the same educational experience as a student who does participate in class activities and music-making. On the other side of this spectrum of participating students is a child who may be singing along in class but is purposefully singing the wrong lyrics or singing more loudly than musically. Both the disruptive student and the bashful

student are not experiencing their music class to the fullest extent. This is significant since experience and “doing” is a core aspect of effective music education. David Elliott illustrates this in this segment from his book *Music Matters*, “An important point, then, is that ‘without some form of intentional human activity, there can be neither musical sounds nor works of musical sound. In short, *what music is, at root, is a human activity*’”(Hodges, 2017, pg. 39). This shows that music is an art that is based in humanity and in human creation or experience. This is why I believe it’s so important for students to sing repertoire that they can relate to and that students need to be active participants in the music classroom in order to have a fuller musical education and experience.

In the text I saw many connections between education in the Age of Progress, and the Industrial Revolution with my experience teaching in the 2020’s. The eighteenth century Enlightenment, or Age of Reason, gave way to the Age of Progress in nineteenth century America. The word “science” became synonymous with “progress,” meaning the new, as opposed to the old-fashioned or archaic (Mark, 2008, pg. 24). As the nation created an industrial society, school boards and administrators favored subjects that reflected the mechanization of the Industrial Revolution and that would prepare students for their future work. They wanted subjects organized scientifically and evaluated accurately (Mark, 2008, pg. 35). This is eerily similar to today’s booming technological industry; with the power of smart phones, app development, Artificial Intelligence, and more, there is a school of thought that we need to pivot education to prepare students to enter technological industries and to be prepared to face a rapidly changing world. This means more emphasis on science, technology, engineering, and math rather than the arts. Many of my students are very technologically literate; they can operate their smart phones and computers, they can get around district firewalls to play games on their

laptops, but they struggle to handwrite more than a sentence. Perhaps this is not a concern for future tech industry billionaires but it is a concern for educators who want to prepare students to be active and responsible citizens.

How My Philosophy Informs My Teaching

My philosophy is reflected in this lesson through the way students are engaged in the rehearsal process. We have a strict warm-up procedure that is consistent from day to day. Students practice this warm-up procedure starting at the beginning of the school year and if I see that students are not following the established procedures or are not actively participating then those students are redirected to follow expectations and it's something we practice to re-establish classroom expectations. My philosophy is seen through my teaching presently through planning concert repertoire that will not only push my students musically but is music that my students can relate to. This helps my students find more personal meaning in the concert repertoire and helps build intrinsic motivation to participate and improve during rehearsal. It's important to me that in rehearsal while there are rules and procedures, students are an active part of the learning process. I try to differentiate our warm-up exercises throughout the week, ask students for rehearsal feedback or interpretation, and involve movement and creativity in rehearsal. I am always working towards improving my choir and my classroom management so that I can provide the best music education and choir experience that I can to my students.

Chapter 2 - Lesson Plan(s)

Lesson Plan 1

To start this lesson, I wanted to make sure that my students understood why we were learning about Estill Voice Training and how it could relate to what we do in rehearsal. When I went through the “Intro to EVT” PowerPoint I emphasized that what makes EVT unique is that it does not have an ideal sound or style that all students have to conform to. Because EVT is divided into vocal styles or covers, it can pertain to both the opera singer and the musical theater performer. While these two genres of music might use different vocal covers or configurations for a healthy and sustainable sound, they can both benefit from the use of EVT.

My classes are 42 minutes most days of the week, so I wanted to start with a focused objective in the first lesson. Lesson 1 acted purely as an introduction where students learned the origin of EVT, how it is used in voice lessons and in different styles, then we explored three different vocal covers in vocal warm-ups. I wanted students to have a strong foundation in EVT before adding it into my feedback during repertoire rehearsal. Reflecting on this lesson, I’d like to add a video example or two of someone who is certified in EVT demonstrating the different vocal covers. Many of the videos I found on EVT were on the purpose of the method or the value of it without any demonstration of the method itself.

2014 Music National Standards

MU:Pr4.3.E.8a: Demonstrate understanding and application of expressive qualities in a varied repertoire of music through prepared and improvised performances.

Students will be able to **identify and apply expressive qualities** such as phrasing, dynamics, and articulation to their singing

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.

Students will be able to **provide and receive constructive feedback** from peers to address technical issues like intonation or rhythm.

Prior Knowledge/Skills

Students are comfortable with our start of rehearsal procedures. Every day we start with going over the learning objective for the day along with any pertinent reminders about classroom expectations or upcoming events such as concerts. I try to vary the warm-ups from day to day to try to keep students engaged, sometimes we will do exercises that cater to tone or agility or breath control but the warmup procedure is always the same. First we move down the piano, then end the piano and then end with a tongue twister.

Rehearsal Objective

Students will be able to explain what EVT is and demonstrate the EVT styles of speech, twang and sob in vocal warm-ups.

Assessment of the Rehearsal

I will know if students have met the rehearsal standard through informal assessment. Once I have demonstrated the EVT styles of speech, twang and sob students will echo the sound back to me then perform those same sounds in warm-ups. I will listen to see if students are producing the sound I'm looking for and give feedback as necessary.

Relevant Contextual Factors and Modifications/Accommodations Needed

Instructional Materials, Resources and Technologies

Piano, promethean board with "What is EVT?" PowerPoint presentation.

Rehearsal Plan

Time	Activity	Purpose of Activity	Sequence	Assessment
8:17	Filling out planner with objective	Discuss the learning objective for rehearsal and any upcoming events or reminders.		
8:20	What is EVT? Introduction and discussion	I discuss with my students what EVT is, how it started and how singers and voice teachers utilize it.		
8:30	Warm-ups experimenting with EVT	Students hear me demonstrate the different EVT styles then have a chance to recreate them.		
8:40-9am	Repertoire rehearsal	Preparing music for upcoming Music in the parks festivals and our last concert of the year.		I use feedback that ties back to their vocal anatomy to help the ensemble create the sound that I am looking for.

Table 2.1 Rehearsal Plan

Lesson Plan 2

For lesson two I wanted to add a level of difficulty by using EVT covers and anatomical ques in my feedback during repertoire rehearsal. First, we reviewed the three different vocal covers we had explored in lesson one; speech, twang and sob. This way students could start the

repertoire rehearsal with the foundational understanding of EVT. At this point in the year we were practicing mostly contemporary music to prepare for the last concert of the year while reviewing a few more classical pieces for a music festival at Six Flags. Since we had so much repertoire to rehearse and polish I rehearsed them as normal; starting a section or piece, pausing to give feedback then reviewing whatever section needs the adjustment. I tried to make sure that as I was responding to what I hearing I was always tying my feedback to what I wanted my students to physically adjust in their instrument. For example, instead of asking for a darker or more rounded sound I asked my students to have more yawn space or space between their back molars. This way, students knew specially what I wanted them to change before singing the rehearsal section again.

2014 Music Standards Addressed

MU:Pr4.3.E.8a: Demonstrate understanding and application of expressive qualities in a varied repertoire of music through prepared and improvised performances.

Students will be able to **identify and apply expressive qualities** such as phrasing, dynamics, and articulation to their singing

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.

Students will be able to **provide and receive constructive feedback** from peers to address technical issues like intonation or rhythm.

Prior Knowledge/Skills

Students are comfortable with our warm-up procedure and many of the vocal warm-ups we use in day to day rehearsals. We have discussed what EVT is and practiced some sound qualities like speech, twang and sob.

Lesson Objective(s)

Students will be able to respond to feedback given in rehearsal by demonstrating the EVT styles of speech, twang and sob in vocal warm-ups and in selected parts of our concert repertoire

Assessment of the Lesson

Informal assessment, listening to see if students are creating the vocal styles I'm asking for including speech, twang and sob.

Relevant Contextual Factors and Needed Modifications/Accommodations**Instructional Resources, Materials and Technologies**

Piano, copies of repertoire for our last concert of the year, speaker to play backing tracks.

Lesson Sequence

Entry Activity/Warm-Up:

Activity #1 Objective: Filling out planner with objective

1. Step 1: I go over the information on the board which includes our learning objective for the day which students copy into their planners.
2. Step 2: Once students are done writing in their planners they are expected to go to the back of the room to retrieve their music folders.

Assessment: Informal assessment; I look around the room to see if there is anyone not retrieving their music or if there is anyone not following our start of rehearsal procedures.

Transition: I ask students to triple check that they have their music, they have spat out their gum, their phones are away and they are sitting up tall to begin singing.

Activity #2:

1. Step 1: warm-ups as practiced in class. We work up the piano then down the piano focusing on tone and articulation, and we always end with a tongue twister.
2. Step 2: reviewing the EVT sounds we had practiced previously and reviewing the vocalese we did to explore those styles.

Assessment: Informal assessment; listening and watching to see if my students remember what the EVT sounds are and if they can replicate them in the warm-up we practice them with.

Transition: I put a one-minute timer on the board and that is their time to take out the first piece of music and move to a standing position.

Activity #3:

1. Step 1: Sing through the beginning of “Man in the Mirror”
2. Step 2: the way that this piece is arranged the opening is higher than the original recording so I have had my students sign the opening two lines down the octave to better match the original. I told my students that this opening will feel like the “speech” EVT style. It is lower in their vocal range but there should not be any straining or tensing sensation in the voice.
3. Students sing the beginning of “Man in the Mirror” again but with a speech sound and the resulting sound is more confident and natural sounding.

Assessment: Informal assessment; I listen to them sing it before and after my EVT feedback to see if there are responding to it to make the auditory change I am looking for. I ask students if singing it the second time with a speech approach was easier for them and they agreed it did make singing the opening easier.

Transition: I put another one-minute timer on the board to give students time to transition to the next piece.

Closure/Summative Assessment: I give one last reminder about what we worked on in our concert repertoire and remind students of our upcoming Music in the Parks trip. Students have about three minutes to return their music folders to the cabinet and take a seat in their assigned chair before the end of class.

Chapter 3 - Reflections

Through my work in the Masters' Program at K-State in Music Education I have become a more confident and well-rounded educator. I am one of the directors of my schools' drama club and while we had been putting on plays, I was always weary of attempting a musical due to the amount of time and work that would go into adding in musical numbers and choreography to our production. However, after talking to my choral cohort in my second summer about their experiences putting on musicals I was inspired to talk to my co-director and it and we both agreed to doing a musical this spring. We advocated for funding from the PFA to pay for the scripts and licensing, we hired a sound professional to help with mics and sound cues and changed our rehearsal schedule to give us most of the school year to put the show together instead of one semester. After all the planning, our drama club students were able to perform *Mean Girls Jr* and they are excited to see what the musical will be next year.

I started my Masters's Program at K-State after my second year of teaching so even though I had survived my first year of teaching, I still felt very green and like I was still finding my voice as a teacher. Over the last three summers I have started the next school year feeling more secure in my pedagogy and content knowledge. Before I was focused on classroom management and concert repertoire in my lesson planning with activities sprinkled in throughout the year to practice theory concepts. As I've grown as an educator, I'm more focused on engaging my students in the learning process of rehearsal rather than what the end result will sound like at the concert. This has allowed me to let go of some of the pressure I put on myself to deliver high-caliber performances and focus on what skills my students were working on in rehearsal. When I was a younger teacher I believed that if my middle school choirs performed

like a high school choir it would grow my program but now I believe that involving and investing my students in rehearsal is more sustainable. My rehearsals are based around the routines and procedure we establish at the beginning of the year to keep the classroom organized and safe but I chose repertoire that I think will not only stretch my students' skills but music with lyrics or source material that they can relate to. I rotate through different rounds and warm-ups each day to try to keep students invested and I plan more activities with movement, friendly-competition or games. I am more confident and willing to try a new rehearsal strategy or game because I know that even if it does not go to plan that I will still learn something from that failure and can try a different approach in the next rehearsal.

As a younger teacher I was so concerned with being perfect; being competent in my content knowledge, my choirs singing like angels, recruiting more and more students so my program would grow. But, I was stunted by this need to be perfect, I was afraid to try something new or out of my comfort zone in rehearsal or in my repertoire selections. Now as I work towards completing my time at K-State I am motivated to continue to hone my craft but I understand that growing as a teacher and musician means trying new things and sometimes failing. I know that trying to create a safe environment where students can explore and develop a passion for music is better than pouring all my energy into making my choirs sound and act like the high-caliber ensembles I see other directors work with. This is not to say that I don't hold my students to a high standard or that I do not push them musically for each concert but my objective is to make sure that I have engaged every student in the music-making process rather than focus on the end result at the concert.

My time at K-State has shaped me into a music teacher who is more open to different pedagogies and ideas. My school put on a musical this year, I started going to music festivals in

my area and I started an A Cappella club after school. I learned something valuable from each of these experiences even if they all did not go the way I planned or didn't end up involving as many student's as I had hoped. As I continue in this profession I want to ensure that I keep being reflective about my teaching. Whether a rehearsal is successful or unsuccessful, there is always something to be learned from or something that I can change to try to make it more successful the next time. I want to continue to be curious about different music pedagogies and rehearsals strategies but most importantly I want to keep talking to my colleagues about their schools and experiences so I can continue to learn from them.

This program has developed my confidence and reflection as a music educator. I was hesitant to begin this project because I am not officially certified in Estill Voice Method, my only experience was through my own collegiate voice lessons and a EVT level one and two course I took in undergrad. Nevertheless, I felt confident based on feedback from my committee and my choral cohort. I'm glad I pushed myself to complete this action research because I believe this project has had a lasting impact on my teaching. I believe that using feedback in the choral classroom that relates the vocal mechanism anatomy and Estill Voice Method helps students understand what is being asked of them.

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