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# TEACHING PHILOSOPHY

*An twelve-page discussion on teaching practices and  
student involvement.*

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# Philosophy

*I believe we are all blessed with an ability to sing. To actually  
sing well - that is the true challenge!*

I've been singing professionally since I was a boy chorister at St. George's Windsor Castle in England. I received my musical training beginning at the young age of 7, which included music theory, diction, sight-reading, vocal technique and general musicianship. I have sung for most of my life and have also heard and worked with many a fine singer. When I started teaching in England in 1998, I discovered students with raw talent that became something much more; singers who enjoyed "singing in the shower" or "with the radio" - average people who lacked confidence to sing in public, to be heard, afraid of the sound of their own voices. I found myself wanting to teach more and more with every student that improved under my tutelage. I believe teaching voice is far more than just a career choice. It's a chance to explore the voice - take it to its limits. Each student has that 'potential voice' within; it just takes work. A major point - work!

Singing well is not something which can be achieved over night. It takes hard work, dedication and practice. You've got to want to be so much more and show it in how you sing, perform and vocalize. When you take your lessons with me, you'll go home having learnt something new. At home, you'll re-learn it and improve your own technique, then you'll come back to me and we'll move further and make a singer out of you yet!

When I first started teaching I was twenty years old. I started off teaching with a few private students, experimenting with different methods of teaching and technique. When I came to the United States, my first teaching position was with a company that hired teachers to go to and from students' homes giving them lessons. I also taught lessons in a music shop where students signed up for lessons. This was a few years ago, and back then my only students were kids, no adults. One thing I have noticed since then is that my teaching methods have completely changed...for the better. I found that private teaching, where my students were kids, really only involved teaching kids how to sing songs. There was no technique, in fact even if I tried to teach it, it wasn't taken in, and students were lost. I also found that these kids really weren't mature enough, *mentally, physically or vocally*. Singing requires all of that, and more.

I believe that in order to sing well, and maintain a decent singing voice, we must be fully involved in our own development and understand what must be done to achieve a good voice. *Mentally*, the child must be thinking how taking lessons will improve the voice. Taking singing lessons does not mean singing through songs; it means vocalizing, learning technique and immersing oneself in the art. *Physically*, in order to take on serious vocal lessons, the student must be of an age where biology is not an issue, for example, an six year old child cannot take lessons due to lack of physical development. They can learn songs, and have fun, but some singing techniques require the student to be of an age where physical constraints are not an issue. *Vocally*, tied into the physical aspect, students need to be fully developed in order to carry out the (sometimes) difficult techniques associated with singing.

Another consideration when it comes to teaching the voice is age. What age is considered the *correct* age for taking lessons? Puberty plays a major role in the development of the voice. I currently teach boy's voices, aged eight to thirteen in a specialized vocal choristers program. The kids have an intense learning curriculum and I am their vocal technique teacher. The younger kids, who do not yet have enough physical development, struggle with the tough exercises they are given, but they are getting a basic understanding of the voice and its capabilities. The older boys, who have nearly reached the peak of their voice, will soon have to worry about the voice breaking, but they have the ability to develop their voices to the full potential.

*The process of singing involves the three major forms of learning: cognitive (knowledge), psychomotor (skills), and affective (feelings and attitudes). Instruction in singing challenges students to grow in knowledge, to explore their feelings, and to learn expressive means of communicating through thoughts and emotions.*<sup>1</sup>

The main issue when it comes to teaching is how do students learn? What causes the students to understand the lessons and retain what they've learnt? Is it positive or negative teaching that influences their learning? I've been teaching now for over six years and even though that is a very short period, I have learnt quite a few methods of teaching that appear to work, but I also have many areas where I still need to improve.

**“If you can make students feel better about themselves, they'll learn better, sing better, and come away wanting more for their voices”.**

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<sup>1</sup> Kenneth H. Phillips, “Teaching Kids to Sing”. New York: Schirmer Books, a Division of Macmillan, Inc. (1992), p.106

# The New Student:

*Fortunate is the teacher who is first to work with a singer. There are no problems with preconceived notions about terminology, no need to reassess ingrained technical habits, and best of all, there is a non-jaded response to the ideas of basic vocal technique.<sup>2</sup>*

This year I have had quite a few new students who, as described by Richard Miller, are not jaded, willing to learn, full to respond with fresh enthusiasm and a new look at vocal technique. New students, especially kids and those who have never had lessons before are great because they are not tainted. Students, who come to you from other teachers who generally have issues with certain techniques, or who have been doing it “their way” for a long time, are hard to change. I’ll break up my teaching methods into two different methods; *the beginner student* (one with no prior singing experience) and *the tainted student* (one that has in the past, had lessons, or has been singing for a while with no assistance or guidance).

## *The Beginner Student*

First lessons are always a challenge. The beginner student will generally have no prior knowledge about their instrument, its history, or any other valuable information. It is my job as their instructor to show them everything, in a quick hour lesson. When I teach the first lesson, unlike other teachers that only focus on one small, yet difficult challenge, I teach *everything* they will need to know, including posture, breathing, placement, vowels, support and other such related topics. I show them everything that it takes to achieve the

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<sup>2</sup> Richard Miller, “The Structure of Singing”. New York: Schirmer Books, (1986), p.207

goal of singing effectively. This approach allows the student to fully see *what they are getting into* as well as showing them how much work will be involved to get that far. Each additional lesson thereafter is broken down into small sections, focusing then on one or more of the topics listed above, but also with a general *touch-up* on the basics or breathing and support.

### *The Tainted Student*

New students who have had prior lessons are generally the most difficult to teach. They have prior knowledge, thoughts and ideas, and their own sets of schemas which they believe are correct – the issue is how to change those theories and ideas and make the students understand the correct methods associated with learning how to sing. Students, who have essentially *taught themselves to sing*, have no basis for example and no role-models to copy. To some, this method of learning through self-criticism is fine, but this creates issues. Learning requires the following stimuli: a positive environment, stimuli (such as materials), feedback, criticism, both positive and negative, and a general understanding of the material presented. A student that already has prior knowledge needs even more support, criticism and certainly encouragement to change what has already been learnt. Lessons with one of these students are pretty much the same as those for a complete beginner; the only difference in my teaching is that I have the student essentially *run* the initial lesson, explaining to me *how* they have been taught and showing me *what* they know. I, in turn, show them a different perspective of learning by giving them examples of how to, for example, breathe correctly, or support correctly, or even how to shape the vowel in different way.

For both kinds of student, at the end of the first lesson, each are given a *booklet* which reinforces what has just been taught to them. Within the booklet, there are written examples of how to breathe, support, and correctly position oneself for singing, as well as supporting diagrams of muscles and anatomy.

## **Increasing student motivation**

“If you can make a student feel better about themselves...”.

A lesson will go by so much better if the student is enjoying himself. If you are a teacher that believes punishment though teaching is a good method, then you will only get so far.

When I teach I use both positive and negative motivation to achieve my overall goal – a better sound, or the correct technique. I believe that responses to stimuli are strengthened when followed by satisfying consequences. This is true, and I will give some examples using both positive and negative approaches. I will also give an example of a failed lesson where negative criticism made the student never again wish to sing:

### *Positive Motivation*

Students who get regular positive comments/reinforcement are more motivated to learn, have an overall higher esteem and eventually, attain self-actualization. When I teach, although my positive comments do not come that often, when they *do* come in the form of either encouragement or praise, the reaction/result is very immediate. Often, the

student leaves the lesson feeling as if something has been accomplished, feeling a sense of great relief that improvement is being made. Here is an example:

A twelve year old student in a choir of boys, of which I am their vocal coach, was singing regular scale - he was doing just *okay*. Then, he reached some high notes, and I asked him to do it a different way - which he did - very well. Immediately, I told him "great job - that is the best I have ever heard you sing, in fact, your voice is probably one of the finest in this choir! Great! Now, do that upstairs and be a leader and I guarantee you'll be singing a lot more in the future". The next day, I got an email from his mother and she said "Andrew came home saying that he loves his lessons, and he's been singing non-stop since then. He says that he is looking forward to his next lesson. He says he is also going to practice every day. Whatever it was you did or said to him, thank you!"

With the parent being actively involved in the boys' motivational encouragement, the boy is far more likely to learn. Another type of cognitive-social learning is called *Latent Learning* – learning is which a new behavior is acquired but is not demonstrated until reinforcement is provided. Therefore, if a new behavior, such as singing a scale correctly is learned, it will not become obvious until it is reinforced – reinforced by continually singing scales. Students will only learn if they continue to practice vocalizes away from lessons. Also, using observational learning, student will learn better by observing others singing, reading books on vocal technique, hearing stories about the exercises and vocal technique will help in learning new information.

#### *Use of humor for Motivation*

When a student of mine sings a something which to my ears sounds very bad, I will generally tell them bluntly that is sounds terrible. A common example of something I say in a lesson to a student is “well, you reached the high note, but you sounded like a squealing pig (followed by a ‘like’ sound)”. This is a relatively negative comment,

which could be taken very badly by the student. The motivation comes from me turning this around so that it will encourage the student to sing better: “*well, you reached the high note, but you sounded like a squealing pig (followed by a ‘like’ sound)*” – this sentence is said with a smile on my face, instead of an angry disappointed look, and I say “how about you try singing that high note *this way*”, giving a new method. After the student manages this correctly, he is given high praise. This method, which I use quite often, lets the student correct themselves in their own way, even though initially they were scorned; they eventually learn a better way to sing it. They are then motivated, every time to sing it correctly because they *remember* what they used to sound like. It also encourages the student to relax and laugh, and especially smile – making the whole nervous lessons feeling disappear.

Another part of motivating the student is to encourage self-efficacy.

*Students enter learning situations with a sense of self-efficacy for learning based on prior experiences, personal qualities, and social support mechanisms.*<sup>3</sup>

When I teach lessons, I often encourage other students to model for their fellow peers. I do this by having the student demonstrate effectively how to support correctly in front of his friends. In doing the task successfully, other students are more likely to wish to achieve the same level as the model student.

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<sup>3</sup> Dale H. Schunk, *Learning Theories: An educational perspective*, edited by Kevin Davis. New Jersey: Pearson Education, inc. (2004) p.364

# Student/Teacher Modeling

One of the main ways that I teach is through modeling; modeling for the student the correct ways to sing. Both children and adults benefit from the constant modeling of the teacher. I use two methods for teaching using modeling. The first approach is *false modeling* where I incorrectly model an example for the student with a hope that the student will correct me. The second approach is *correct modeling* where I show the student how to correctly perform the assigned exercise.

## *False Modeling*

A student makes a mistake in technique while performing in a lesson. I mirror his mistake and ask if his method is the correct one. The student himself learns enactively by doing the exercise, especially after learning the correct way. The student has the opportunity to correct the teacher.

## *Correct Modeling*

Incorporating the previous scenario, when the student doesn't do the exercise correctly, the teacher will give an example of how it is to be done correctly and the student will therefore learn vicariously through watching the model teacher. Another way to look at this: The teacher imitates the student by performing the exercise incorrectly, and also over-exaggerates the consequences of doing the exercise incorrectly. Immediately following this, the teacher sings the correct techniques associated with the singing scale. The student therefore learns the behavior and exercise through imitation, observing the correct technique and understanding the correct consequences that arise from performing the correct exercise.

# Getting Students to learn

## & Making Material Meaningful

Students learn in different ways and as a teacher we must know when to use a different method so that each student learns the best way. In my teaching, some students do better knowing all about their body, learning about *anatomy*. Others need to visualize *pictures* to be able to understand how to do an exercise, and some even work by *thinking* about the task. Many students require all three to achieve their goals. Using Gestalt theory and organization, elaboration and schemata, we know that in giving the student organized vocalizes specific to the learning, they will learn the technique faster. There are several examples of elaboration that are commonly used in the teaching or learning process:

### *Using pictures*

Students often learn best through imagery; seeing the picture of the exercise before singing it. Here are some examples of this:

- Breathe deep – Imagine you weigh 300lbs more than you do now – take in all that air and fill all the space.
- Sing in the head voice – imagine singing though the eye-balls.
- Breath again – imagine your air is like a balloon – air easily flows out – let it – don't constrict it.
- Posture – see a balloon floating above your head, with a string hanging – the string must remain straight, also allowing your body to do the same.

### *Describing singing using ideas*

Using the same method as above, telling students the *concept* of the idea may make it easier to understand. Here are some ideas:

- Sing into the head voice – use a ^ (v-shape) - pointed ^ towards the fore-head.

- Open your throat – yawn for a lower relaxed through – yawn and smile to open on higher notes (think ah-haaa?)

### *Anatomy*

Many students would rather understand their body and put into action the various muscles groups that are associated with exercise. I believe that this will only allow for minimal growth in the voice. A well rounded student will use all three of the above methods to understand their voice and use it fully.

## **Conclusions:**

Finally, I recently started a new teaching method where the student is the model. This is where learners become actively involved in the materials and use the environment to learn actively. I record all lessons on Digital Camcorder. Each student then, after two lessons, gets a DVD of their lessons. They therefore learn through listening to themselves, observing their mistakes and correcting themselves. This method of teaching, I have found to be the most beneficial idea that I have ever started for the student, and I hope it will continue to improve their personal learning. I also have a website which is interactive for the student. The student is able to look up their lesson plans, exercises for the week and homework, as well as listen to music clips for the repertoire on which they are working. Their learning is further reinforced with the Student Handbook & Singing Reference Booklet which is given to every student. Maintaining an organized, structured lesson with structured homework and assignments will only continue to help the student learn.

**“If you can make a student feel better about themselves, they’ll learn better, sing better, and come away wanting more for their voices”.**