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A Constructivist Approach with Choruses

by Patrick K. Freer, Georgia State University

Many of the ideas found in the accompanying article can be adapted to the choral rehearsal environment. Some of the constructivist-oriented approaches can be replicated in any setting—orchestral, choral, or band—while others require a bit of modification for choral situations. Here are some learner-centered rehearsal strategies that I have used with a variety of ages, from elementary through high school.

Selecting Repertoire

Range inspector: Assuming that students are aware of their current ranges and tessituras, students can examine potential pieces for singability. This allows students to have substantive input regarding repertoire used in class. Teachers can certainly limit the choices to ensure specific styles or genres are included in the repertory.

Rehearsal Engagement

Opposing teams: Begin by dividing the choir into two or three groups (by voice part or ensembles) and have students sing only when conducted by you. Turn to each group at varying times (by phrase or page) to alternate between different groups. This will force students to “audiate” (hear the music internally) when not singing. For an extra challenge, assign a blank wall as a group; silence will ensue when you “conduct” the wall for a phrase. Dividing the ensemble into equal choirs (rather than voice parts) can be a strategy to help students understand the concepts of “ensemble” and “blend.”

Substitute plans: Imagine (if necessary) that you will not be present for the next day’s rehearsal. Ask students to write the lesson plan that the substitute teacher will need to follow. Be as specific about methods, techniques, and time limits as practical. When you arrive the next day, teach the lesson exactly as the students indicated. Discuss afterward about how to improve on the lesson plan next time.

Timekeeper: Give a specific amount of time to rehearsal segments; let a student tell you when time is up; if time expires, you need to ask permission to borrow more time. This works especially well with a student who has attentional difficulties!

Singing circles: Have students arranged in single-file circles (small or large, homogeneous or heterogeneous). Each voice part may form an individual circle, or you might have multiple concentric circles. Singing into the center of the circle helps students hear others within the circle, while standing with backs toward the center of the circle—perhaps facing the wall—encourages students to listen carefully to others in the ensemble, since they will lack the visual cues they may have previously relied upon.

Physical Response to Music

Dynamic feet: Have students stamp (lightly!) their feet to the rhythm of their vocal line while remaining vocally silent. The stamping should reflect the dynamics of the printed vocal line, including crescendos, decrescendos, and so on. This works especially well with polyphonic music. The accompaniment might be played if applicable.

Encouraging Musical Independence

Musical prediction: Before handing out a new piece of music, read the text aloud. Have students predict how the composer would have set each musical element (melody, harmony, rhythm, timbre, texture, form, dynamics) based on the text only. Compare the predictions with the printed score.

Become the composer: Distribute a new piece of music. From the printed score alone (no sound), ask students how the composer set each musical element and how they arrived at their answers. This facilitates the navigating of choral scores. Use a system for identifying locations within the music, such as by page-system-measure ("2-3-5" equals page 2, system 3, measure 5).

Jump start: When students are in groups, each group can ask for a specified number of "jump starts." These will be moments of teacher assistance (scaffolding) that you will provide in response to specific needs identified by the students.

Detail detector: Let students examine the score of a new piece for any markings or notation that they do not understand. This will give an indication of what concepts and skills need to be taught before the piece itself.