

Inside the Choral Classroom: Advice for the First-Year Teacher (Part 1)

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The May, August, and September 2015 issues of *Choral Journal* featured a three-part series of interview articles with eleven choral teachers. The topic? Advice for the first-year choral teacher. We are reprising that series with a similar set of questions and a new set of interviewees. Participants received the Q&A form via email in January 2020, prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. We realize that these responses may not directly speak to the needs of our current climate, where you may find yourself doing more virtual teaching or spending less time in rehearsals and performances. We hope, however, this article series is still encouraging and helpful. Each question has answers from 5-6 respondents, and answers are listed in alphabetical order by last name.

Part 1 will answer the following questions:

Setting Expectations: How do I set realistic expectations for myself and my students during my first year of teaching? What should I be prioritizing?

Balance: How do I balance my personal life and the stress of a new job? How do I balance the roles of educator and musician? What boundaries should I establish between my work and home life?

Classroom Management: How can I best handle difficult classroom situations or difficult students? How do I establish and maintain authority while creating a safe space in my classroom?



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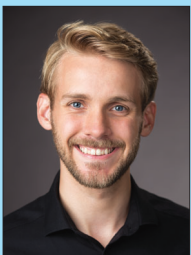
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QUESTION #1

SETTING EXPECTATIONS:

How do I set realistic expectations for myself and my students during my first year of teaching?
What should I be prioritizing?



JACKSON HILL

Each year, my first priority is helping my students understand my classroom expectations. Part of this is explaining the nuts and bolts of how my class works (where supplies are, where to turn in forms, where their personal belongings should go, etc.), and the other part is helping them understand my classroom culture (How are we allowed to speak to each other? How do we show respect during music rehearsal?). The clearer you are about what you expect from your students, the more easily they can meet your expectations. Once they have figured out the routines and have gotten into the habit of meeting our expectations, it becomes much easier to meaningfully explore music with them. If we are too eager to make music our main focus and overlook these steps, there is a higher likelihood we will face behavioral struggles throughout the year.



DEANNA JOSEPH

The first year of teaching is all about survival mode. You're learning so many things all at once plus acclimating to a new job—most days feel overwhelming and that's okay and totally normal. Prioritize building good relationships with the students, your faculty colleagues, the school administration, and with parents. Get the students excited about singing by choosing repertoire that is accessible for them—things that they will enjoy singing and that they will sound great on with relative ease. One of the biggest mistakes I see with first-year teachers is over programming both the amount of repertoire and the level of difficulty. Establish a routine for the way your classroom operates and teach

this to the students; i.e. what they do when they enter the room, the structure of your rehearsals, etc. By November, they should have a Pavlovian response to how to function from the moment they enter your classroom.



JOSEPH KEMPER

Prioritize equally your students' nourishment and success with your own personal health and well-being. Neither can thrive if the other is suffering. The tremendously talented singer-songwriter Melanie DeMore has a beautiful song called "One Foot" that I think of and sing often. The message of this song is a helpful mantra to embody during your first year of teaching: "You've gotta put one foot in front of the other and lead with love." Work hard, encourage yourself, encourage your students, take it day by day, and never forget to lead with love. Hold tightly to and follow the spark that brought you into this profession in the first place.

There are a few painful things you will need to accept: you will make many mistakes (some small, some big), and some students (and parents) won't like you no matter what due to the simple fact that you aren't your predecessor. Lastly, your first year will be your worst—and that's a good thing! If your first year was your best year of teaching, that would be terribly sad. After the first concert, I often tell my ensembles that this will be their worst performance of the year, to which I quickly annotate a reminder that the next concert will be stronger as they will have had more time and opportunity to work hard and grow.



JASON LEIGH

Something that helped me as a first-year teacher was learning that it was okay to allow expectations of both my students and myself to be flexible. Initially, I had very strong opinions and ideas about how I wanted to run both my classroom and my choirs. I also had strong expectations about what I wanted from my students and singers. Much of what I knew came from my col-

lege classroom observations, closely controlled teaching experiences, and my own imagination. Reality turned out to be very different when I was hired for my first job. I eventually learned to let go of trying to control everything and, in doing so, actually experienced better control. It may sound like a confounding concept, but it worked for me and I have noticed it works for many colleagues I admire.

Another piece of advice I would give is to refrain from judging yourself too harshly for expectations that are not met. Be gentle with yourself. Reflect on what went wrong but do not linger on blame or doubt. Focus on what went wrong but try not to attach emotional content to it. Put your energy in what went right and how to expand on that. It is okay to be wrong. In fact, get used to it. There is valuable information in it. Unfortunately, these are difficult concepts to internalize when you are a new teacher and your professional life is coming at you fast.

In terms of what you should be prioritizing as a new teacher, I would recommend getting a handle on building a rapport with your students while still establishing firm boundaries. It truly is a delicate balance, and the teachers who get this right are really fun to watch. Their students trust them, hang on their every word, and cannot wait to participate. And yet, each student understands where the “line” is. I believe this comes from being authentic and sincere. Students will trust you if you give them an honest effort and are fair in your dealings with them. Pretending to be something different than what you are will not work in the long run. Again, it is a balancing act, but a solid rapport goes a long way and is a wise investment.



LULU MWANGI

It's important for you as a new teacher to take thorough inventory of the program, resources, and facilities you are inheriting. That will assist you in making decisions about the goals and needs of the program. Some questions to consider might be: Will the program need rebuilding, or is it a brand-new program? With that, it will be good to use the “by the book” steps outlined in your education courses, keeping goals simple,

and beginning with the end in mind. Is it a thriving program? In this scenario, it would be beneficial to see if there are systems in place that have worked well in previous years. From there, take what works for you and, with time, personalize it to make it your own. It helps to continue any traditions or aspects that foster a sense of belonging and ownership within the department, school, and community at large. It can be daunting to come into a situation where the program has been thriving; taking advantage of working systems, however, takes a lot of the pressure off, allowing you to focus on other aspects of the program. Forge positive relationships and communication strategies with other departments that may require compromise in terms of shared students/time such as sports, other musical ensembles, or school activities.



JELANI WATKINS

Going into my second year of teaching, I knew to expect two things: the unexpected and failure.

“Expect the unexpected.” At first glance, this quote may seem cliché or non-descript. However, it is this type of expectation that is most appropriate and realistic for any educator, especially a first-year music instructor. There are simply not enough chapters, articles, or journal excerpts in the world combined to adequately inform a teacher of the classroom environment they will enter on the first day school.

“Expect to fail.” It took me months to realize that a day of teaching is not a product you work to perfect with carefully scripted lesson plans. Instead, it is an ongoing process shared between students and their trusted facilitators of learning. Each day of teaching, even for the instructor, resembles the process of practicing forbearingly, not the concept of performing flawlessly. When practicing, student musicians learn to embrace the mistakes they will make. Teachers must maintain the same expectation, not only for their students, but for themselves.

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QUESTION #2

BALANCE:

How do I balance my personal life and the stress of a new job? How do I balance the roles of educator and musician? What boundaries should I establish between my work and home life?



CAROLYN GROSS

It's easy for teachers, especially music teachers, to become overwhelmed by our jobs, students, responsibilities, music making, performances, and growing our programs. It's important to leave work at work at the end of the day. It helps to have hobbies and interests outside of your job. It's also good to make friends with co-workers—that's huge for keeping the stress during the work day manageable. The challenge is that we have scheduled performances and spend a great deal of time with our students and their families. Keep your private life private and separate from your students.



JACKSON HILL

During my first year, I believed that spending more time prepping outside of class would automatically improve my students' learning experience in class. What wound up happening was that I spent so much time working after hours that I was less energized and engaged while actually teaching my students. I wish I had known that teaching is a marathon punctuated by sprints. There are times you will have to put in a fourteen-hour work day, so leave yourself some gas in the tank for when that time comes along. Distinguish the things you must do in order to have a working program from the things you would like to do.

It is easy to see flourishing programs that provide tons of additional opportunities for their students and think you should be doing those same things. That is not a fair comparison to make as a new teacher—especially if you don't have a highly supportive team

or mentor helping you. Give yourself time to figure out the day-to-day tasks that make your class a place where students want to be. For your own health, find an activity you enjoy outside of music or teaching. I enrolled in jiu jitsu classes recently, and I love it because it forces me to leave work at a certain time (which makes me work more effectively with the time I have), it helps me focus on my physical health, lets me interact with people in different social circles, and gives me something to talk about with my students other than music.



JOSEPH KEMPER

My first year was a near-perfect case study in the “overworking first-year teacher.” I often stayed at school far past my contract hours, sometimes as late as 9:00pm. If the building didn't have electricity, I would have figuratively and literally been burning the candle at both ends. When a colleague of mine in the district, Justin Chase, learned that I was staying at school to such ridiculous hours, he immediately organized a weekly Wednesday night post-school dinner to force me out of the building. This helped me realize the value of creating scheduled, structured, and non-negotiable “me” times during the chaos of the first year. I've learned that the most sustainable way to keep my fire and love of teaching burning bright is by creating these havens and pockets of time to recover and not think about teaching for a moment. Take time to connect with colleagues, friends, family, partners, and other communities. You will become a better teacher every day, week, month, and year by just showing up and working hard. Find as many moments as possible to be engrossed with your non-teaching hobbies and outlets. I love baking bread, composing music, gardening, and spending time with my wonderful wife.

During my first year of teaching I did not sing in a choir. I quickly realized how much singing in an ensemble fed my soul as a human and musician. If available, join a choir! Singing in a choir introduces you to new friends, keeps you in touch with what it's like to be on the other side of the podium, and provides great opportunities for flexing a different part

of your musicianship. I was so grateful to Kevin Fenton and the Festival Singers of Florida for being my choir home while I was teaching in Florida. Through that opportunity, I grew in ways I never would have on my own in the classroom.



EMILY MERCADO

During my early years of teaching, I set a reasonable research/writing schedule—my job is 40% teaching, 40% research, and 20% service. I made sure that my working hours reflected those percentages. During my first year, I found that I was easily devoting at least eight hours of work a week to service, so I started to say no to new service assignments. This allowed me to focus on my teaching and research without abandoning my personal life.

In terms of a good work/life balance, my boundaries are my weekends. Of course, some work on the weekends is inevitable, but I work very hard during the week so that I can preserve my weekends for my family and myself. I plan fun things to do with my family such as camping, hiking, and skiing. In addition, I make time during the week to do yoga and walk.



LULU MWANGI

I have found that preparation and boundaries are key. Preparation, preparation, preparation! It's helpful to use a planner that allows you to make annual, monthly, weekly, and daily goals. It helps me to schedule daily tasks by the hour with as much detail as possible, and gives me an opportunity to visually balance various aspects of life. It is important to keep lesson plans simple and impactful, rather than try too many new or complex things at the beginning. Less is more when approached with intentionality and clear purpose.

We tend to perform our best when we are well prepared, and that can help free up mind space for other aspects of adapting to a new situation without compromising quality of work. As musicians, we have to be particularly intentional about setting boundaries, because many times our passion, talent, profession, and ministry are intertwined. This can make it difficult to know

when to stop working/practicing. Setting a nonnegotiable stop time on the workday can help.

QUESTION #3

CLASSROOM MANAGEMENT:

How can I best handle difficult classroom situations or difficult students? How do I establish and maintain authority while creating a safe space in my classroom?



CAROLYN GROSS

One mistake young and new teachers make is trying to be the student's friend. While you are a friendly and safe adult in their life, you can't really be their friend because you do have to establish authority. This goes back to boundary issues and being consistent. When you take the time to establish consistent routines, choose challenging repertoire, keep pacing appropriate, and show kids that you care about them and their learning, many discipline issues are solved before they even start. There will always be situations that arise to challenge a teacher. Approach students with respect and concern. And keep in mind, you are not alone at a school. Use the resources of a mentor teacher, the assistant principal, other teachers, counselors, and parents to give you insight and solutions to challenging situations.



DEANNA JOSEPH

I believe the word *management* is the key piece to classroom management; in other words, think of overseeing behavior and/or creating a class and rehearsal environment wherein the student's behavior will be best on track. If you find yourself reacting to a lot of behavior issues and disciplining students frequently, take that as a sign that you've not setup successful circumstances in your classroom and that your classroom management plan needs to be re-tooled.

Ways to effectively manage classroom and rehearsal

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behavior include training the students on how to behave and what to do when they arrive to your rehearsal room and throughout your class during the first few weeks of the semester; creating a set of classroom rules and/or a code of conduct—perhaps together with the students—and posting them in clear view in the classroom; leading rehearsals that are beautifully paced with little or no lag time between topics; and praising in public and reprimanding in private whenever possible—reinforcing the good behavior, tends to breed more of it.



JASON LEIGH

This is without a doubt one of the most challenging aspects of teaching, and it certainly is the biggest challenge at the beginning of a career. I start every year with the premise that every student has a right to learn. That sounds trite to say, but there are some powerful truths buried in that simple statement. It seems like an obvious proposition in a school. Of course, everyone has a right to learn. However, with classes of over thirty students you will quickly realize that your emotional and professional resources as a teacher are finite and certain students will draw on those resources more than others. But that does not change anything. All students in the class should have access to your best effort.

In order to make this clear, I begin every year, in each class, discussing this exact concept openly in class. I do not have a list of rules hanging in my class or in a notebook or posted online. That might be a good idea if you are just starting out, but if you manage to navigate those early waters wisely, you may discover that your classroom management doesn't come from a poster or a piece of paper but rather an understanding of how your classroom functions. If you have an open discussion with your students about how you are there to serve all of them, I always believe that is an act of good faith students pick up on, especially when you are being your sincere, authentic self. Do not be afraid to show your humanity and your humor. You might think this could show weakness but students, *all* students, need to know they are safe in your class.



EMILY MERCADO

I'll answer the first part of that question—difficult situations—by telling a story about how I poorly handled a difficult situation. I found out a student was lying to me about why she was missing rehearsals. When I approached her, she continued to lie, and so I came down hard and “unearthed” my evidence. She became defensive and teary eyed but begrudgingly agreed to come to the remaining rehearsals. Then, she tore into me in my student evaluations and did not enroll in choir the next semester. Looking back, I regret how I handled that situation. I should have first asked her how she was doing, if there was anything going on that was preventing her from attending class, and if I could help her in anyway. People lie for a variety of reasons—some good, some bad. In addition, she was taking choir because it was a requirement of her degree program. Her poor attendance was not necessarily a reflection of my teaching, and I did not need to get defensive. My main advice is not to try and “handle” or “take control” of difficult situations. First, try to listen to and understand the student's perspective, then include the student in a discussion of how to improve the situation.

Finally, I have learned to never handle difficult situations over email. First, if I say something stupid when I am upset, then that is forever in print. Second, emotions cannot always be accurately portrayed over email and intent/meaning can be misinterpreted. During my first year teaching public school, I had a difficult situation with another teacher. She wrote me an angry email, and I fired back with another angry email. However, right before hitting “send” I asked another teacher to read the email. She said, “You are right to be angry. Now hit delete and go talk to her face to face.”



JELANI WATKINS

I believe the primary responsibility of a music educator is to connect with students and provide them with the tools to create positive connections with other members of their community and society. As such, I find the classroom management strategies and recommendations posed by Dr.


Jill Reese to be highly practical and supportive of my mission as an educator. Each of her “Four C’s of Successful Classroom Management” not only helps in particularly challenging classroom situations, but also helps to establish and maintain authority while creating a safe space in the classroom.

First, it is important to regularly “commend” students as you connect with them on a daily basis. Although it is important to praise your students in public, it is equally important to reach out to them privately and create a one-to-one connection, shining a positive light on a specific action or behavior they exhibited. This connection establishes a level of respect that helps maintain the type of environment desired in the classroom.

Secondly, I find it important to “communicate” with students and parents using weekly or bi-weekly email updates. I realize some teachers prefer to consistently check in with parents via phone calls or in-person meetings. I have found that any form of communication can help support the management of classroom behavior as long as it is consistent, specific, concise, and intentional.

As mentioned with communication and commendation, “consistency” is key. At the beginning of the school

year, I shared a list of five rules and additional general procedures that shape the norms and environment of our classroom. The five rules were short and could even fit on a single index card. I assessed the comprehension of the rules in an intentionally easy formal assessment given one week after the start of classes. Whenever a classroom rule is broken or a procedure is not followed, I can consistently call attention to the specific infraction, because the students comprehend the previously set expectations.

Finally, but perhaps most importantly, I have found that the students within the classroom want to engage in music “content.” They may all have different preferences for how they engage in music, but they all want to actively engage. Therefore, the best way to maintain the desired culture of the classroom is to keep all student musicians busy making music. I try to have as little downtime as possible during rehearsal and to find ways for the students to share their concepts of successful music making. When my students are actively engaged in an activity they find purposeful in the creation of musical content, I find it is actually harder to get them to slow down rather than encourage them to start. 



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