



On the Voice

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Group-Voice Pedagogy in the Choral Setting

by Amelia Rollings Bigler

Imagine a room where something remarkable happens—an energetic and engaging experience with the individualized attention of a one-to-one voice lesson and the collaborative spirit of a choral rehearsal. Singers engage in targeted, quick-paced, playful, and fun repetitions of exercises and short song cuts designed to help them achieve their individual vocal goals, but they do so together. They learn from each other and grow both as soloists and as members of an encouraging collective.

Group-voice classes uniquely focus on the individual while integrating group-pedagogical strategies that foster more effective learning and encourage social interaction and connection. This article examines the convergence of group-voice pedagogy and choral pedagogy. It offers practical strategies and resources for choral directors that aim to advance the vocal goals and development of each individual while reinforcing the cohesiveness and performance of the collective ensemble. Practitioners have emphasized the importance of integrating science-informed voice pedagogy and singing instruction inclusive of a wide range of genres into choral rehearsals and classrooms.¹ This article will explore different ways to accomplish these goals using

a group-voice pedagogical approach that fosters increased vocal growth, artistic freedom, and overall fulfillment in the choral setting.

Overview

Group-voice pedagogy has seen a resurgence of interest in recent years with new initiatives, workshops, and resources. In 2022, the National Association of Teachers of Singing (NATS) announced the Clifton Ware Group-Voice Pedagogy Award to support voice instruction in group settings.² At the 2024 NATS Conference in Knoxville, Tennessee, my colleagues and I led a premium workshop and a breakout panel on group-voice strategies for various settings and with singers at different ages and stages.³ My own passion for group-voice teaching began after attending a workshop with Clayne Robison at Brigham Young University.⁴ This transformative experience inspired further exploration of the topic throughout my graduate studies as I focused on how to integrate group-voice training into choral methods classes and with instrumental music education majors. Since that time, I have incorporated small and large group-voice curricula into my ac-

ademic applied voice studio and independent business and conducted mixed-methods, longitudinal research on student perceptions of a group-voice curriculum.⁵ In 2023, I established the Center for Group-Voice Pedagogy and Research at Coastal Carolina University and launched our summer Group-Voice Pedagogy Intensive, which features a dedicated session on applying group-voice teaching principles in the choral setting.⁶

What Is Group-Voice Pedagogy?

Cynthia Vaughn, coauthor of the popular class-voice textbook, *The Singing Book*, describes group voice as “not exactly like private lessons” and “not exactly like choir. It’s something different.”⁷ At its core, *group-voice pedagogy* refers to the study of the art, science, or practice of applied voice teaching in group settings.⁸ Unlike a one-to-one voice lesson between one singer and one voice teacher, group-voice teaching involves paired, small, and large groups of singers working toward solo singing outcomes together in a shared environment. Group-voice classes can provide a supportive and collaborative atmosphere where individuals can develop functional, observational, and artistic singing and performance skills . . . *together*.

Group-voice instruction has had a long-standing presence in voice pedagogy, although historically, the content of these classes may have been more focused on music reading and ensemble singing.⁹ Currently, practitioner-based articles and class-voice textbooks offer resources for group-voice study in various contexts.¹⁰ While many might assume that voice classes only include avocational singers, beginning singers, or nonvoice majors, some authors have also discussed the inclusion of group training with voice majors in academic settings.¹¹ However, research specifically focused on group-voice pedagogy remains limited.

Why Group-Voice Pedagogy in the Choral Setting?

Among voice professionals, choral conductors deeply understand both the benefits and challenges of teaching and directing singing in groups. In fact, some might argue that choral pedagogy *is* group-voice ped-

agogy. While elements of these two fields can be effectively merged (which is the focus of this article), an important distinction remains. Traditional choral pedagogy emphasizes creating a unified collective sound with necessary attention given to aspects of blend and balance. Group-voice pedagogy prioritizes the solo voice outcomes of singers training together in groups. Choral directors may spend time on vocal exercises and developmental voice training; however, it can be challenging to hear and give feedback to individual voices when the entire group sings together, especially in larger ensembles. By integrating principles from group-voice pedagogy, choral directors may be able to more effectively balance attention on individual voices while also engaging the entire group in repetitions of functional voice exercises and repertoire tasks.

We know that the sound of an ensemble depends on much more than the sum of its parts. As James Daugherty states, singers will sing differently in an ensemble than they do as soloists due to the unique acoustical, perceptual, and sociological elements present when singing in a group.¹² We cannot, therefore, assume that an ensemble of excellent solo voices will automatically have an excellent choral sound.¹³ And yet, we understand that each singer’s overall voice function, mastery of their instrument, and ability to technically and stylistically adapt to genres they wish to perform (including various genres of ensemble music) can lead to dramatic differences in the overall timbre and artistic flexibility of the group. Most singers will not be able to gain these skills through one-to-one voice lessons. The vocal instruction they receive in choral ensembles may be the only formal voice training they ever experience. Integrating group-voice instruction into choral rehearsals and choral programs can be one way to ensure all singers have access to quality voice instruction.

Choral directing demands a deep understanding of both voice and choral pedagogy. Similarly, group-voice pedagogy requires specialized knowledge, skills, and training that can differ from one-to-one voice instruction and traditional choral methods. This article cannot comprehensively address all the facets of group-voice pedagogy or describe in words the dynamic and complex interactions between individuals in group-voice classes. However, the following concepts can serve as a

starting point for further exploration.

Getting Started: Key Ideas

Alternate between the Group and Individuals

In group-fitness or dance classes, instructors can easily observe, assess, and provide feedback; however, things become much more challenging in group-music classes. Alternating between one singer and the group in a dynamic, rhythmic, and repetitive way will allow you to hear and monitor individual singers and the entire group without disturbing the flow by stopping to focus on one person for too long. This method can be used when exploring technical voice concepts at the beginning of rehearsal (commonly called “warm-ups”), during repertoire work, and when teaching almost anything in a group setting.

Find the Flow

When introducing a new skill, give the entire group multiple repetitions of the concept before calling on an individual. Without stopping and while staying in the tempo and meter of the exercise pattern, choose an individual who appears confident in that particular exercise. Alternatively, you might ask for a volunteer, although this might require you to wait briefly. After the singer performs the repetition, pause and offer simple, specific, and related feedback based on the directives you gave the group. Without losing momentum, say, “Everyone and then (the name of the singer you called)” and cue the next repetition with the piano, which gives the individual and the entire group a chance to integrate the feedback.

On the next repetition, call on the same singer one more time to assess improvement. You can give a quick, “Yes, nice onset!” for example, as you move on to the next repetition with the group or stop momentarily to give additional feedback or the next direction. Continue alternating between the group and individuals in this paced and rhythmic manner. You will see that by the time you call on the fifth or sixth singer, many have integrated the feedback you explored with the first few singers, and you can continue to scale the concept. During technical voice work, do not be con-

cerned about balance and blend. Instead, focus on the individual’s voice development and command of the instrument as a solo singer.

By using this “popcorn” approach, singers tend to be more engaged, as they expect to be called on to demonstrate at any time. There can be many variations of this concept; however, the primary goal is to be able to hear, instruct, and assess individuals while they learn from each other and practice repetitions as a group. Once you feel that many of the singers have learned the concept, you can do a quick “lightning round” assessment where each singer performs one repetition down the row or around the circle without stopping.

Pass and “Phone a Friend”

Some singers may be nervous to sing alone in a choral setting. Always offer an option to pass or “phone a friend” to sing with them on the repetition (using a phone gesture and pointing to another group member). If a singer chooses to pass or phone a friend, simply go to the next repetition with the pair or back to the entire group without hesitation or stopping the rhythmic repetition of the exercises. Typically, individuals will grow more comfortable with singing solo in front of each other as time progresses, especially when encouraged in a playful and supportive atmosphere.

Guided Self-Assessment, Feedback, and Peer-Teaching

Rather than giving feedback, you can also ask guided self-assessment questions (e.g., “did you feel that repetition was more breathy or pressed?”). Individuals can respond verbally, or the entire ensemble can use their hands to indicate the answer (e.g., thumbs up/thumbs down, using fingers to rank 1 to 10). Depending on the overall cohesion of the group, you might also have another singer provide guided feedback or include a peer-teaching moment (e.g., “what did you notice about the closure on that repetition?” and “what could we add to the exercise to make it even more efficient?”). Asking specific, guided questions helps focus the responses and prevents open-ended answers that could unintentionally upset another singer, especially if they do not know each other well. These approaches can help monitor individual progress, encourage critical thinking, and assess higher-order skills.

Rehearsing Repertoire

You can utilize the previously mentioned ideas in repertoire by rehearsing an interval, series of pitches, one phrase, or a section on a loop. Alternate between individuals and the group with quick, simple, and scaled directives and feedback. You can also include short cuts (8–10 measures) of transposable repertoire from a variety of genres as a way to explore specific concepts (e.g., Rihanna’s “Umbrella” for onsets or the Cranberries’ “Zombie” for registration). You can vary your approach depending on the unique vocal and musical goals, the level of the singers, and the stage of the rehearsal process.

Foster Group Cohesion, Camaraderie, and Fun

Cohesion and camaraderie in group classes begin with effective leadership. From the beginning, members of the ensemble need to know that the director has the best interest of the individual and the group in mind throughout every step of the process. Make sure to spend a little time in each rehearsal on a group cohesion activity so that singers can connect with one another (e.g., sharing their singing goals, something exciting they did last weekend, or their earliest memory of singing). Incorporate games, breakout moments, and small-group assignments that promote bonding and collaboration, such as designing a voice exercise together, sharing a list of their favorite singers, or encouraging them to eat lunch together. Create a positive and energetic atmosphere by playing their favorite songs during the beginning of rehearsals, physical warmups, breaks, and any other group cohesion activities. Model supportive reactions when individuals sing and applaud bravely when they take risks. Demonstrate how to give feedback appropriately. Urge students to clap when they notice significant improvements and high five after completing focused sections of work. Once students become more comfortable in the group, they will be more willing to sing in front of each other and engage in shared learning experiences.

Utilize Practice Teams and Small Groups in the Ensemble

Set up a row of “VIP seats” in front of the group. Ask for one volunteer or assign an individual from each voice section to move to a VIP seat for part of the class or the entire rehearsal. You might even include fun sunglasses, hats, boas, or costume pieces they can wear! Having these singers directly in front of you allows you to hear and assess them more closely. You can assign different singers to these seats at various times in order to give everyone a chance. Alternate instruction and repetitions between individuals in the small group of VIP seats and the group as a whole.

You can also assign small groups of practice teams with 3–4 singers from one voice section or one singer from each voice section. Encourage them to create a team name, break off for activities during class, practice together, and check in with each other during the week. Since group cohesion tends to be stronger in smaller

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groups, this strategy can help foster connection and collaboration.

Offer Group-Voice Lessons in Your Choral Program

Offering small or large group-voice lessons works well in various choral contexts, including religious, community, and educational settings. Some schools may already provide students with an opportunity to have one-to-one voice lessons during the school day with the choral director or other instructors; however, this model can pose challenges with scheduling and accommodating all interested students. It may also be exclusionary to those who cannot afford private instruction. As an alternative, offering small group-voice lessons (3–4 students) or a voice class (10–15 students) can be a more accessible option and allow students to receive more personalized voice instruction while also experiencing the educational and social benefits of learning in groups. Small group-voice lessons with students of similar voice types can be especially beneficial when preparing for competitions or festivals.

During these sessions, avoid master class format or having students observe. Instead, allow participants to sing most of the time as you alternate between individuals and the group. As Richard Rosewall described in 1984, “In class sessions we deal not with a set of miniature voice lessons given to individual students while others patiently watch, but a dynamic situation in which all persons present are participating all of the time.”¹⁴ Just like at the gym, watching others train will not be as productive—active participation drives progress.

Future Directions

In his 2016 call to reclaim group-voice instruction in music education, Patrick Freer emphasized the importance of educative singing that can “transfer across vocal platforms, genres, and activities.”¹⁵ Freer commented, “We encounter problems when we focus on the performance of choral music without emphasizing the underlying need to nurture the singing skills of all students.”¹⁶ Incorporating group-voice pedagogy into the choral setting can greatly improve both individual and ensemble vocal outcomes for *all* students. Imagine the

impact when each singer can vocally express themselves more immediately, efficiently, and most of all, artistically.


As William Sauerland pointed out, however, voice professionals need “training that is specific to group voice class instruction.”¹⁷ Impactful group-voice teaching requires additional knowledge and skills beyond those typically found in one-to-one voice pedagogy and choral pedagogy. Simply applying one-to-one methods with multiple singers or having the whole ensemble sing together for the entire rehearsal may not be the most efficient or effective approach when incorporating technical voice training with choirs.

University voice pedagogy courses may primarily focus on one-to-one voice instruction. Furthermore, some choral directors might not be required to take a class fully dedicated to voice pedagogy or the course(s) required may not offer in-depth coverage of group-voice pedagogy.¹⁸ For example, in the current NATS science-informed voice pedagogy resources, the proposed one-semester voice pedagogy syllabus includes a course outcome that students should be able to “teach voice lessons in one-on-one and/or group settings.”¹⁹ However, due to limited time and all of the important topics that must be covered, the proposed course schedule only dedicates one class to a practicum focused on group-voice teaching.²⁰

Based on our knowledge of the current and variable state of this type of training in college and university programs, it is possible that some readers may not have fully experienced group-voice teaching as described in the context of this article. For those seeking more information and professional development opportunities related to group-voice pedagogy, I encourage you to explore the resources referenced in this article and consider joining the NATS Group-Voice Pedagogy Affinity Group.²¹ Examine how this approach, including the practical steps detailed in this article, might inform your own professional practice.

Conclusion

Integrating group-voice strategies can enhance singing instruction in the choral setting by effectively balancing both individual and ensemble vocal outcomes. As we continue to explore the intersections of voice, choral, and group-voice pedagogies, sharing insights and in-

novations from our varied professional experiences will further strengthen our ability to nurture and inspire the voices in our studios, classrooms, and ensembles. 

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NOTES

¹ Patrick K. Freer, “Reclaiming Group Vocal Instruction,” *Canadian Music Educator* 57, no. 2 (2016): 42–47; David Harris, “Seven Essential Voice Science Tools for Choral Singing,” *Choral Journal* 59, no. 8 (2019): 47–58; and Brandon A. Magid, “Beyond Bel Canto: Applications of Contemporary Commercial Music (CCM) Voice Pedagogy in the Secondary Choral Classroom,” *Music Educators Journal* 110, no. 2 (2023): 54–58.

² “Clifton Ware Establishes Group-Voice Pedagogy Grants,” National Association of Teachers of Singing, January 18, 2022, https://www.nats.org/cgi/page.cgi/_article.html/What_s_New/Clifton_Ware_establishes_Group-Voice_Pedagogy_Grants; and “Clifton Ware Group-Voice Pedagogy Award,” National Association of Teachers of Singing, accessed September 15, 2024, https://www.nats.org/Clifton_Ware_Group-Voice_Pedagogy_Award.html.

³ Amelia Rollings Bigler, Dana Lentini, Craig Philip Price, and Cynthia Vaughn, “Better Together: Pedagogical Strategies for Group-Voice Instructors in Academic, Community, and Independent Settings” (premium workshop, 58th National Conference of the National Association of Teachers of Singing, Knoxville, TN, June 28, 2024); and Cynthia Vaughn, Dana Lentini, Craig Philip Price, Ayumi Nakamae, and Amelia Rollings Bigler, “Better Together: Exploring Group-Voice for All Ages and Stages,” (breakout presentation, 58th National Conference of the National Association of Teachers of Singing, Knoxville, TN, June 30, 2024). Recordings of these sessions may be available on the NATS Live Learning Center, see <https://nats.sclivelearningcenter.com/MVSite/Default.aspx>.

⁴ For more information on Clayne Robison and his group-voice teaching approach, see “Vocal Beauty Boot Camp,” accessed September 15, 2024, <https://www.beautifulsinging.com/book/ch11.php>; and “10-Fold Teacher Efficiency Through Vocal Boot Camp,” accessed September 15, 2024, <https://beautifulsinging.com/singing/>.

⁵ Amelia Rollings Bigler, “The Effects of Small and Large Group-Voice Instruction on University Student Perceptions: A Longitudinal, Mixed-Methods Study” (podium presentation, 52nd Annual Symposium: Care of the Professional Voice, Philadelphia, PA, June 4, 2023); and Amelia Rollings Bigler and Katherine Osborne, “Small and Large Group-Voice Instruction Strategies in a University Setting: A Collective Case Study” (podium presentation, 10th International Congress of Voice Teachers Symposium, Vienna, Austria, August 4, 2022).

⁶ To learn more about the Center and the Summer Group-Voice Pedagogy Intensive, see “The Center for Group-Voice Pedagogy and Research,” *Coastal Carolina University*, accessed September 15, 2024, <https://www.coastal.edu/humanities/centersandinitiatives/thecenterforgroup-voicepedagogyandresearch/>; and “CCU’s New Center for Group-Voice Pedagogy and Research to Hold Summer Program for Teachers,” *Coastal Carolina University*, April 14, 2023, <https://www.coastal.edu/ccustories/news/news-article/index.php?id=5549>.

⁷ Lisa Sain Odom, “Teaching Group Voice Lessons,” *CS Music*, July 1, 2023, <https://www.csmusic.net/content/articles/teaching-group-voice-lessons/>.

⁸ Merriam-Webster defines pedagogy as “the art, science, or profession of teaching.” See Merriam-Webster, “pedagogy,” accessed September 15, 2024, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/pedagogy>. The Oxford English Dictionary defines pedagogy as “the art, occupation, or practice of teaching.” See Oxford English Dictionary, s.v. “pedagogy (n.), sense 3,” accessed September 29, 2024, <https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/1029842480>.

⁹ Richard Rosewall, “Voice Class: Approach for the Eighties,” *NATS Bulletin* 40, no. 3 (March/April 1984): 34–37.

¹⁰ For example, see Cynthia Vaughn and Meribeth Dayme, *The Singing Book*, 4th ed., ed. Matthew Hoch (Rowman & Littlefield, 2024); Clifton Ware, *Adventures in Singing: A Process for Exploring, Discovering, and Developing Vocal Po-*

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- ¹¹ Katharine DeBoer, “Smart Strategies for Small Departments: Class Voice for Freshman Voice Majors,” *Journal of Singing* 68, no. 3 (2021), 273–77; Robert B. Holden, “A New Model for Training the Collegiate Voice Student,” *Journal of Singing* 58, no. 4 (2002): 299–303; Robison, “Vocal Beauty Boot Camp” and “10-Fold Teacher Efficiency Through Vocal Boot Camp”; Amelia Rollings Bigler, “The Effects of Small and Large Group-Voice Instruction on University Student Perceptions”; and Amelia Rollings Bigler and Katherine Osborne, “Small and Large Group-Voice Instruction Strategies in a University Setting.”
- ¹² James F. Daugherty, “Rethinking How Voices Work In a Choral Ensemble,” *Choral Journal* 42, no. 5 (2001): 69–75.
- ¹³ Ibid.
- ¹⁴ Richard Rosewall, “Voice Class,” 35.
- ¹⁵ Patrick K. Freer, “Reclaiming Group Vocal Instruction,” 46.
- ¹⁶ Ibid., 42.
- ¹⁷ William Sauerland, “Voice Class: A Learner-Centered Approach,” *Journal of Singing* 74, no. 5 (2018), 531.
- ¹⁸ Joshua Chism, “An Examination of Undergraduate Vocal Pedagogy Courses for Preservice Choral Music Educators” (paper presentation, 2020 ACDA Symposium on Research in Choral Singing, Atlanta, GA, May 1–2, 2020). This session has been archived via the following YouTube link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Rp-EDXN-0hU>; Melissa L. Grady and Melissa C. Brunkan, “Teaching What We Were Taught: A Survey of Choral Music Educators on Vocal Health, Anatomy, and Pedagogy,” *International Journal of Research in Choral Singing* 10, (2022), 136–62.
- ¹⁹ “NATS Pedagogy Working Group I: Undergraduate Syllabus 1 of 1 (‘One Course Wonder’),” National Association of Teachers of Singing, accessed September 17, 2024, https://www.nats.org/_Library/Science_Informed_Voice_Pedagogy_Resource/Voice_Pedagogy_Syllabus_for_a_One-Course_Curriculum.pdf.
- ²⁰ “1 Semester Course Day-By-Day Plan,” National Association of Teachers of Singing, accessed September 17, 2024, https://www.nats.org/_Library/Science_Informed_Voice_Pedagogy_Resource/Voice_Pedagogy_Syllabus_for_a_One-Course_Curriculum.pdf. The suggested two-semester syllabus includes one class on group-voice methods and two weeks of group-voice teaching practicum; however, 70 percent of teachers reported that their university only offered one-semester of voice pedagogy at the undergraduate level. See “Executive Summary: NATS Survey on Pedagogy Instruction, Fall 2021,” National Association of Teachers of Singing, accessed June 11, 2025, https://www.nats.org/_Library/Science_Informed_Voice_Pedagogy_Resource/NATS_Voice_Pedagogy_Survey_Results.pdf; “NATS Pedagogy Working Group 1: Undergraduate Syllabus 1 of 2,” National Association of Teachers of Singing, accessed June 11, 2025, https://www.nats.org/_Library/Science_Informed_Voice_Pedagogy_Resource/Voice_Pedagogy_Syllabus_for_a_Two-Course_Curriculum-First_Semester.pdf; “NATS Pedagogy Working Group 1: Undergraduate Syllabus 2 of 2,” National Association of Teachers of Singing, accessed June 11, 2025, https://www.nats.org/_Library/Science_Informed_Voice_Pedagogy_Resource/Voice_Pedagogy_Syllabus_for_a_Two-Course_Curriculum-Second_Semester_practicum_.pdf.
- ²¹ For more information about the NATS Group-Voice Pedagogy Affinity Group, see <https://www.nats.org/affinitygroups.html>.