Research Report

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Everyday Social Change: The Importance of Daily Actions in the Choral Setting

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The current American Choral Directors Association (ACDA) Vision Statement positions choral musicians as having the potential to "create powerful artistic experiences" and become "advocates for cultural and educational change" with the hope that such practices "might transform people's lives."[1] In light of this vision, ACDA has developed numerous ways in which the organization and its members can respond to growing calls to pursue equity, accessibility, diversity, and inclusion through choral music.[2] This commitment has manifested at the ACDA national level, including through the creation of the Diversity Initiatives Committee and state-leveled subgroups that work to draft policies and practices that are more inclusive of multiple ways of knowing and making music in a myriad of settings.

While institutional change can be impactful, individual actions also matter. One way to frame localized change that focuses on the pursuit of equity, accessibility, diversity, and inclusion is through the lens of *social change*. We define social change as a series of ongoing, everyday practices that involve reflection and purposeful engagement with the community.[3] Social change has long been seen as central to arts education; however, guidance about *how* to participate in social change is limited.

We have observed similar questions about enacted social change in our work as choral educators. While students have expressed a growing interest in social change, they often lack strategies or practices to sustainably enact such ideas. Large-scale, structural change that impacts society as a whole is an ongoing process, and measured acts can provide sustainable actions that build the foundation for more impactful, long-term transformation. One way to approach such measured acts is through the lens of *everyday* social change.[4] We define everyday social change[5] as small steps that happen daily in classrooms, rehearsal spaces, performances, and community collaborations.

In this article, we offer practical starting points for thinking and acting through everyday social change and consider how such practices might be important to the work of the ACDA community. Drawing from a larger study on social change, we ask: (1) What could reflective and reflexive practice look like in choral music?, (2) What could community look like in choral spaces?, and (3) What could working with/for the broader community look like?

What Could Reflective and Reflexive Practice Look Like in Choral Music?

Reflective and reflexive practice are key to supporting social change in choral spaces. Though often used interchangeably, reflective and reflexive practice are not

the same. *Reflective* practice is often done after an event, rehearsal, or interaction has ended. It involves looking back on an experience to examine what went well and what might be done differently in the future. Taken critically, reflective practice can also include an examination of *why* certain choices were made and a deliberate exploration of whose experiences and voices were honored. *Reflexive* practice occurs in the moment and involves an individual's ability to evaluate a situation and make changes while the experience is occurring. This may include adapting a rehearsal plan, changing how one is dialoguing with others, or expressing vulnerability in response to something that is occurring.

Thinking reflectively and reflexively about social change requires a commitment to move beyond "checking the diversity box" through overly simplistic actions. Within choral settings, examples of simplistic actions[6] might include programming a single piece of literature by a composer of color (or solely for a Black/Latinx/Women/etc. History Month Concert) in order to meet diversity expectations. Social change requires a commitment to realizing that every action and decision plays into a larger purpose.

Repertoire can, and often does, play a foundational role in supporting social change goals. Imagine programming "One Foot/Lead with Love" by Melanie DeMore from the *Justice Choir Songbook.*[7] You believe that engaging with this piece of music will support singers' awareness of social movements throughout the world. To begin, you distribute the music and invite students to sightread using solfège, just as you do with most pieces. Singers are used to this process. One singer shares that this song feels more call-and-response in nature and suggests they might learn the song as such. Calling upon reflexive practice may lead you to acknowledge the singer's comment and switch, in the moment, to call-and-response. You notice that the singers are watching you model and, as your energy rises in the call, their energy also rises in the response.

In this example, embracing reflexivity involved taking a step back from predetermined pedagogical practices to support the learning and interest of the individuals in the room. Further, this decision also supported a way of teaching and learning that better aligned with the social movements that inspired the piece. Follow-

ing this rehearsal, you reflect on the experience, and you decide to begin the next rehearsal by presenting information about various social movements that have occurred in your local and national context.

In the next rehearsal, you share your research with the ensemble. One singer raises their hand and offers to share their story as a member of one of those social movements. You grow concerned, as you had not allotted time for a long story, and you ask the singer to hold their thought for another time. Following rehearsal, you reflect on the experience, realizing that by not responding reflexively in the moment, you may have missed an opportunity to support and honor the lived experiences of individuals within the group. The next rehearsal, you acknowledge your misstep and deliberately create space for this singer to share their experiences. In the process, the singers begin drawing connections between the story and the lines in the song, expressing a deepening awareness of how they are making meaning through this music. As a result, the musical experience is richer.

Throughout the example above, practices of reflexivity and reflection helped keep the singers at the forefront of the experience, centering them as they grew in their understanding of the various ways they fit into the larger world. Choosing to acknowledge rather than shy away from a misstep provided a model of the power of vulnerability for singers. While not every piece you explore throughout the year may be as directly related to social change as this one, learning to honor lived experience, support vulnerability, and create space for connections through dialogue are all practices that live on beyond this particular context. As such, the ensemble moves toward a realization that social change is not something to be strived for through a singular piece of music or concert cycle, but rather it is something embedded as a part of everyday life.

What Could Community
Look Like in Choral Spaces?

Community is critically important to understanding social change in choral spaces. While community can involve engaging beyond the ensemble (see next section), community can also be understood as the ways in

which relationships are cultivated *within* an ensemble. According to Deborah Bradley,[8] social change is predicated on a series of small steps that, over time, create change. Deliberately developing community within the ensemble can, and in many cases *must*, be one of those small steps.

Developing community within the ensembles often manifests as "learner-centered practices" (e.g., student selected repertoire), singer leadership opportunities (e.g., section leaders), and social activities outside the rehearsal (e.g., social mixers/events). While these experiences can help build community, finding ways to deepen communal relationships between singers can prove even more fruitful when seeking social change. As Rollo Dilworth discussed in a 2023 *Choral Journal* article, developing these relationships can allow organizations to "sort out and redefine what we think about the term 'collaboration' and understand that…there have to be shared goals…and an equal sense from the ensembles that there is a shared power in that infrastructure."[9] A deepened sense of community might focus on pedagogical strategies to support singer awareness about themselves, one another, and their world as they learn to dialogue with one another. These pedagogical strategies may include asking open questions in rehearsal that have multiple possible responses; modeling thoughtful disagreement that allows for various experiences to be considered; and encouraging singers to embody choral works through unchoreographed movement that can create a shared experience.

One way to deepen relationships and the sense of community through repertoire is by creating partnerships with artists outside of the ensemble. This can include, for example, commissioning a piece from a composer. Throughout the commissioning process, singers can be involved in making artistic decisions with the composer and/or artistic director(s), including text choice. In the same *Choral Journal* article, Thomas Lloyd remarked that within such partnerships, "You need to take the time to really listen and understand the perspective of an ensemble you hope to collaborate with."[10]

While a greater sense of community can be felt and achieved through commissions and partnerships with artists, we recognize that not every chorus has the ma-

terial resources to do so. One possibility in such situations is to partner with local composition students. Such a partnership has multiple advantages: composition students are given the opportunity to write for specific ensembles, and the chorus has the opportunity to gain a better understanding of place both within and beyond the community, something that Elizabeth Parker and others[11] have noted is central to community-based work.

Key to building community is also recognizing both the collective "we" within an ensemble as well as the unique individuals. Parker also noted that conductors often model care by caring for the ensemble as a whole, and they encourage singers to do the same.[12] While this can lead to a united belief in the chorus, it can also be a missed opportunity to care for and recognize the unique individuals within the ensemble. Caring for the individual might look like cultivating small group relationships within the choir, working to know each individual beyond their contribution to their voice part, and actively listening to the comments and ideas of individual singers.

What Could Working with/for the Broader Community Look Like?

Finally, social change might occur when organizations engage with the broader community outside of the chorus. This work must be a deliberate grassroots effort,[13] where organizations embed themselves within the city/town and foster community and relationships with others in homegrown, personal ways. In pursuit of this work, organizations can look inward and ask themselves what their role might be in the community. Asking such a question allows the organization to consider the ways they might serve a wide range of singers and stakeholders.

A first step toward connecting with and serving the larger community can occur through examining where and how the choir is present in that community. For example, in what ways does the chorus recruit singers? How might they seek to unravel barriers to participation? Where are concerts and rehearsals typically located? Might there be alternative locations that represent a larger portion of the city/town, specifically areas that

have historically been underrepresented? When choosing locations, it is important to use intimate knowledge of the landscape and consider potential barriers that might hinder welcoming everyone. Such actions recognize the importance of acting as ambassadors both within and beyond their communities.[14]

Similarly, organizations might take time to attend community events that are not directly related to the chorus. Attendance at such events can show the organization's presence and encourage building connections with those who may not be familiar with the chorus. This might include attending both arts and non-arts organization meetings, as well as city or town council meetings or social meet and greets. These moments can provide organizations opportunities to realize how the chorus fits meaningfully into the larger community narrative.

Lastly, partnering with other local choruses that have different lived experiences can be a fruitful endeavor to connect with different parts of the community. This might occur through a performance partnership or organizing and volunteering together for non-music community events. Further, organizations might look at the needs of their singers outside of the rehearsal

What Could Reflective and Reflexive Practice Look Like?

1. Keep the singers at the forefront of the experience.

2. Consider programming repertoire that may honor the lived experiences of singers within and beyond the ensemble.

3. Reconsider "tried-and-true" pedagogical approaches that may not be responsive to the singers in the room.

4. Embrace and model vulnerability by acknowledging actions, missteps, and feelings.

What Could Community Look Like?

1. Use pedagogical strategies that support singer awareness.

2. Create partnerships with artists outside the organization, including composers and university students.

3. Recognize the role both individuals and groups play within the organization or ensemble.

What Could Working with/for the Broader Community Look Like?

1. Examine how the choir is present in the larger community.

2. Attend community events that may not be directly related to the chorus.

3. Partner with other local choruses.

setting and partner with the community to support those needs. For example, students in a children's chorus might need assistance applying for college or transitioning into university settings. Soliciting assistance from those in the larger community can help singers mitigate this challenge.

What Might Social Change Mean for Each of Us?

Social change, particularly on the local everyday level, looks different for everyone. For some, a commitment to reflexive and reflective practice may be a place to begin. A decision to employ such action may offer opportunities to embody an approach to choral music that honors singers' past and current experiences. For others, there may be a desire to begin with community. As noted, deep engagement with community is central to understanding everyday social change.

A commitment to small steps over time can help singers and conductors foster social responsibility and change.[15] Everyday social change cannot be the result of idealized rhetorical or isolated accomplishments but must be an ongoing practice of localized interactions.[16] It is these interactions that can, as the ACDA Vision Statement states, help "create powerful artistic experiences," encourage individuals to become "advocates for cultural and educational change," and move toward practices that "might transform people's lives."[17] CJ

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NOTES

[1] American Choral Directors Association, Vision Statement, https://acda.org/about-us.

[2] American Choral Directors Association, "ACDA Strategic Plan," 2021, p.1, https://acda-communications.s3.us-east-2.amazonaws.com/ACDA+Strategic+Plan+2021.pdf

[3] Kelly Bylica and Cara Faith Bernard, "Singing Social Change: An Investigation of Two U. S. Children's Choruses," *Bulletin of the Council for Research in Music Education* no. 240 (2024): 7-24. https://doi.org/10.5406/21627223.240.01

[4] Ibid.

[5] Ibid.

[6] Sara Ahmed, *On Being Included: Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012).

[7] "Justice Choir Songbook," Justice Choir, 2024, https://justicechoir.org/songbook

[8] Deborah Bradley, "Artistic Citizenship: Escaping the Violence of the Normative (?)," *Action, Criticism & Theory for Music Education* 17 no. 2 (2018): 71-91. https://doi.org/10.22176/act17.1.71

[9] J. Donald Dumpson, Thomas Lloyd, and Wendy K. Moy, "Voices of Change: Impacting the Communities We Serve–Part 2," *Choral Journal* 64, no. 3 (October 2023), 58.

[10] Ibid.

[11] Elizabeth Cassidy Parker, "The Experience of Creating Community: An Intrinsic Case Study of Four Midwestern Public School Choral Teachers," *Journal of Research in Music Education* 64, no. 2 (2016): 220-237; Kelly Bylica and Cara Faith Bernard, "Singing Social Change."

[12] Elizabeth Cassidy Parker, "The Experience of Creating Community."

[13] bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress* (New York: Routledge, 2014).

[14] Elizabeth Hogan McFarland, "School-Community Partnerships in Community Children's Choir Organizations" (PhD diss., University of Missouri, Columbia, 2017).

[15] Deborah Bradley, "Artistic Citizenship."

[16] Kelly Bylica and Cara Faith Bernard, "Singing Social Change."

[17] American Choral Directors Association, Vision Statement.