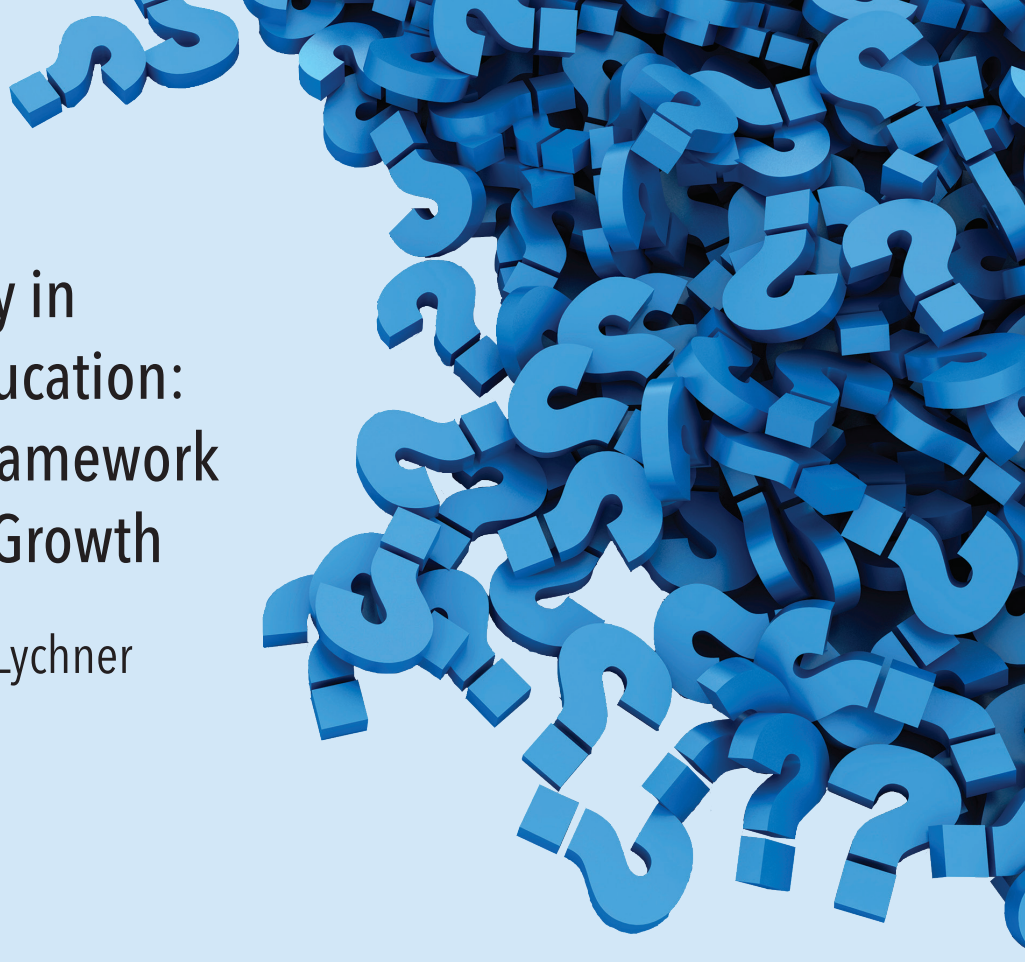


Teaching Identity in Choral Music Education: A Three-Phase Framework for Professional Growth

Greg LeFils and John Lychner

There is often a moment during a choral rehearsal when a decision must be made quickly: whether to stop and correct a musical detail, whether to adjust repertoire difficulty, or how to respond to a struggling singer. In these moments, decisions are rarely guided by technique alone. Instead, they draw upon something deeper—our teaching identity.

Brian C. Murray reminds us that a philosophy of music education should not be something written for a class or job application and then forgotten. Rather, it is a living statement of beliefs that evolves as educators grow and change.[1] A similar idea applies to teaching identity, which we define as the internal understanding of who we are as educators and why we teach the way we do. Teaching identity reflects the values that shape daily decisions in program design, repertoire selection, rehearsal, and assessment. It influences how educators balance musical excellence with student growth, how they define success in their programs, and how they respond to the many expectations placed upon school music programs.

Choral music educators constantly navigate competing expectations from administrators, parents, students, community members, and colleagues. Some stakeholders prioritize visible performance achievements such as festival ratings or public concerts, while others emphasize student development, community engagement, or inclusive participation. Without a clear sense of professional identity, these competing voices can create confusion or stress. When educators are grounded in a well-developed teaching identity, however, decision making becomes more coherent and purposeful.

Teaching identity also contributes to professional resilience. Educators who are grounded in their own priorities and beliefs are better equipped to navigate challenges and maintain long-term commitment to the profession.[2] Rather than reacting to every external pressure, they are able to interpret those pressures through the lens of their own educational values.

This article explores the concept of teaching identity for choral music educators as it develops across three identifiable phases of a choral educator's career: Pre-Service, Transition, and Career. Although these phases are presented sequentially, readers do not need to approach them linearly. Choral educators are encouraged to begin with the phase that best reflects their current career context, using the others as points of comparison, reflection, and long-term planning.

Five Questions to Clarify Your Teaching Identity

Before exploring the three phases of development, it is useful to pause and consider several foundational questions. Drawn from both common challenges in choral education and the authors' experience working with developing and practicing teachers, these questions highlight areas where beliefs most directly shape day-to-day decisions. Reflecting on them encourages educators to articulate the values that guide their teaching.

1. **What do I believe is the primary purpose of choral music education?** Is it to create excellent performances, develop musically literate singers, build community, provide emotional expression, or some meaningful combination of these goals?

2. **How do I balance performance excellence with student growth?** When these priorities conflict, which takes precedence and why?

3. **What role does repertoire selection play in expressing my values?** Does my repertoire reflect diversity of musical style, historical period, cultural perspective, pedagogical progression, or student engagement?

4. **How do I define success in my choral program?** What does success look like in my context—musically, educationally, and relationally? How, if at all, do I measure it? Is it reflected in festival ratings, student retention, musical growth, personal development, or something else entirely?

5. **What kind of musical community am I building?** Is my choir a family, a team, a class, a performance ensemble, or a unique combination shaped by my vision as a teacher?

Writing responses to these questions—and revisiting them periodically—can help clarify the identity that shapes teaching decisions. Many directors find that their answers evolve over time as their experience grows and as the needs of their students change.

Understanding the Three Phases of Teaching Identity

For the purposes of this discussion, we organize the development of teaching identity into three practical phases of a choral educator's professional life: Pre-Service, Transition, and Career. While every educator's journey is unique, these phases represent common developmental patterns that influence how teaching identity forms, evolves, and deepens. Teaching identity is not static. Instead, it develops through a continuous interaction between experience, reflection, and professional growth.

Phase One: Pre-Service

The pre-service phase is often characterized by excitement, curiosity, and a certain degree of impatience. Many future educators spend years observing teachers and ensemble directors and are eager to step into those roles themselves. Research suggests that much of a teacher's professional identity begins forming even before entering an undergraduate music education program.[3] Students bring with them years of experience as ensemble members, observing the rehearsal styles, expectations, and values of their own teachers. These early experiences often shape initial assumptions about what effective teaching looks like. Pre-service preparation, therefore, does not create identity from scratch; instead, it helps students examine, challenge, and refine the beliefs they already hold about teaching and learning.

One of the earliest opportunities for this reflection is the philosophy of music education statement. Writing such a statement requires students to articulate their beliefs about the purpose of music education and the role of the teacher in facilitating musical growth. Rather than viewing this as a one-time assignment, pre-service teachers benefit from revisiting and refining this philosophy throughout their preparation.

Fieldwork and student teaching provide especially powerful opportunities for identity development. These experiences place future teachers directly in rehearsal settings where they must translate philosophy into practice.[4] The decisions made during rehearsals—how to structure warm-ups, how to respond to student mis-

takes, how to select repertoire—reveal whether teaching actions align with underlying beliefs.

Several practical tools support identity development during this phase. Self-observation is one of the most valuable. Recording a rehearsal or teaching segment allows future educators to compare what they intended to do with what actually occurred. Although watching oneself teach can feel uncomfortable, it provides insight that is difficult to gain otherwise.

Observation by mentors and peers is equally valuable. Cooperating teachers, university supervisors, and fellow students can provide perspectives that help pre-service educators recognize strengths and areas for improvement. Reflection, however, must move beyond simple emotional reactions. Instead of asking, "Did that rehearsal feel good or bad?" educators should ask a deeper question: "Did my teaching decisions reflect the kind of choral educator I hope to become?" This shift from reaction to reflection helps ensure that teaching identity develops intentionally rather than accidentally.

Phase Two: Transition

The first two to five years of teaching represent a critical transition period. During this phase, new educators are fully responsible for their own classrooms while still learning many aspects of the profession through experience. The transition from preparation to professional practice can be challenging. New choral directors must navigate administrative expectations, parent communication, scheduling complexities, and the day-to-day realities of managing multiple ensembles.

For many new directors, the transition also involves building or reshaping a program. A teacher may inherit ensembles with uneven skill levels, limited rehearsal time, or few established traditions. In these circumstances it becomes tempting to focus on short-term solutions that produce immediate results rather than long-term musical growth. Having a clear teaching identity serves as an anchor during this period. When faced with competing demands, educators who understand their professional values are better positioned to make consistent decisions. Clarity of identity has also been linked to increased confidence and professional self-efficacy among music educators.[5]

Professional community plays a crucial role in supporting educators during this transition. Mentors, colleagues, and professional organizations provide both encouragement and perspective. Participation in state and national professional communities, such as ACDA, allows newer teachers to learn from experienced educators who have navigated similar challenges.

Teachers who successfully navigate this phase often maintain several habits established during their preparation. Two of the most consistent are reflective self-observation—recording rehearsals, analyzing teaching decisions, and identifying areas for improvement—and the active cultivation of professional relationships that provide support, feedback, and inspiration.

Phase Three: Career

The career phase often brings greater stability and confidence. With experience comes a deeper understanding of repertoire, rehearsal pacing, vocal pedagogy, and program management. However, this phase introduces a different challenge: maintaining curiosity and professional growth over time. Without intentional renewal, routines can become stagnant. For this reason, continued exploration of teaching identity remains essential.

Reinvention in the career phase can take many



forms. Some directors pursue new repertoire traditions; programming works by living composers or exploring choral music from cultures previously absent from their concerts. Others experiment with rehearsal structure, incorporating student leadership, peer sectionals, or student-led programming decisions. Some teachers develop additional ensembles—such as chamber choirs, vocal jazz groups, or contemporary a cappella ensembles—to meet evolving student interests.

Another valuable practice during the career phase is revisiting and rewriting one's philosophy of music education. Returning to this document after several years often reveals how professional beliefs have evolved through experience.

Professional engagement beyond one's own classroom can also provide renewal. Serving as a clinician, adjudicator, guest conductor, or community ensemble director allows educators to contribute to the broader musical community while gaining new perspectives on their own teaching. Scholars of music teacher development note that professional identity continues to evolve across a teacher's career through reflection, community engagement, and ongoing learning.[6] The same lifelong learning we encourage in our students should remain central to our own professional lives.

Conclusion

Teaching identity should be a framework that evolves throughout a professional lifetime. By recognizing the phases of pre-service preparation, early-career transition, and long-term professional practice, choral educators can better understand how their identity develops and how it continues to change.

Returning periodically to the reflective questions presented in this article can help educators remain grounded in their values. Through observation, reflection, and engagement with professional communities, teaching identity becomes clearer and stronger.

The question for choral educators is not whether they have a teaching identity—every teacher does. The question is whether that identity is being shaped intentionally. In the end, teaching identity is the throughline connecting every rehearsal, every performance, and every student interaction. Nurturing that identity allows choral educators to grow not only as musicians and teachers but as leaders who shape vibrant musical communities. CJ

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NOTES

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[2] Paul J. Mayhew, "Choosing to Thrive: A Music Teaching Career Based on Core Values," *Music Educators Journal* 112, no. 1 (2025): 30–37.

[3] Paul Woodford, "The Social Construction of Music Teacher Identity in Undergraduate Music Education Majors," in *The New Handbook of Research on Music Teaching and Learning: A Project of the Music Educators National Conference,* ed. Richard Colwell and Carol Richardson (Oxford Academic, 2004), 675–94.

[4] O. G. Tucker, "Preservice Music Teacher Occupational Identity Development in an Early Field Experience," *Journal of Music Teacher Education* 30, no. 1 (2020): 39–52.

[5] Cynthia L. Wagoner, "Measuring Music Teacher Identity: Self-Efficacy and Commitment Among Music Teachers," *Bulletin of the Council for Research in Music Education,* no. 205 (2015): 27–49.

[6] S. L. Chua and G. F. Welch, "A Lifelong Perspective for Growing Music Teacher Identity," *Research Studies in Music Education* 43, no. 3 (2021): 329–46.