ChoIr or ChorUS

What's in a Name?

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As ensemble leaders, we place value on the group experience. The result of our score study, rehearsal planning, and concert preparation is to create a meaningful experience for the ensemble members and for the audience. For those who guide ensembles in the schools, or work with inexperienced or developing musicians, the list of responsibilities includes not only large group leadership but also meaningful learning for each ensemble member. The group we guide is composed of individuals, each of whom must learn and grow, and use their individual skills to contribute to the final performance. A moving and enjoyable rehearsal experience may be rewarding, but can we ensure that the experience is also educationally sound? As we plan ensemble rehearsals that nourish the spirits of our singers, should we also provide experiences that educate them?

In our work to emphasize the unification of the group, we can overlook the individuals of whom the group is built. Ensemble music in the schools has the responsibility to provide lasting individual music learning for each individual student. Sadly, however "music performance instruction in North American schools typically involves large-group instruction in bands, choirs and orchestras where the needs and priorities of the ensemble can often outweigh those of any given individual."[1]

ChorUS or ChoIr

How do you refer to your ensembles? Do the terms you use to describe your groups accurately represent the individuals who sing in them? The terms we use for our ensembles may indicate differences that are overlooked but offer insights that could guide our practice and help us ensure the richest experience for each of our singers. Consider the two most commonly used terms: Chorus or Choir. The difference between these terms points to an important truth that should guide our preparations. There are actually two entities in our rehearsal room at the same time: 1) the choir, composed of the individuals in the room, and 2) the chorus, the group itself. While commonly used as synonyms, should they be? Careful consideration of these terms may provide important insight into aspects of our instruction and our students' ensemble experiences and learning.

Linguistically, these terms have strong and consistent interactions. Historically, however, they come from different environments that indicate some potentially important differences that can inform our practices. While over time each term has collected multiple definitions and usage, for this illustration we will focus on the chorus of Greek drama and the choir of the western cathedral tradition.

The *Khoros* of ancient Greek tragedy was a group of performers who dressed, moved, and spoke in unison to comment on the action of the main characters. There is some debate among academics of theater history, but members of the khoros may have dressed in identical robes and masks to hide their identities and underscore the non-individualized role of the group. In contrast, the *Choir*, as an architectural term, identifies the portion of the cathedral between the nave and the altar, and is also used to describe those who occupy that space. The choir was often furnished with choir stalls, which are elaborate, enclosed individual areas in which the clergy and singers could stand, sit, and kneel to carry out their individual duties during the service.

Each term contains an internal reference to the social context of its origin. The chorus contained an expectation of large group anonymity and collective action. The individual was minimized to heighten the effect and importance

of the assembled group as a unified body. The essential aspect of the chorus was the idea of "us," whereas, in organization, format, logistics, and even theology, the choir environment contains a foundational difference. It is a collection of individuals. From the individual placement of the singers in their stall, to the expectation that each person is acting in personal worship, the term choir contains an expectation of individual responsibility and individual action. Yes, there is an "I" in choir. While we are not advocating the use of one term over the other, the differences contained within our most commonly used terms may provide an important and useful insight to guide our teaching and ensemble leadership.

The Dualism of
the Choral Experience

This difference between these terms hints at a dualism in the choral experience that is frequently overlooked and often misunderstood. While we may assume that in most classes the individuals are learning, in an ensemble setting, our performance emphasis often reveals that the group is the focus of the experience. Most classrooms appear similar to an outsider: one teacher in the front leading a group of students who are all engaged in the same activity. Yet, there is an important aspect to our experience that makes it particularly challenging, valuable, and unique. All other classrooms in our schools, even those that employ "group learning" strategies, have a final outcome of an individual test. The teacher may speak to the group, and guide group discussion, and even guide well-organized team-based learning activities, but behind it all is the understanding that the final measure will be the student's proof of individual learning. Whereas, for almost all of our activities, the final measure is intended to be a collective outcome, an aggregate of the work contributed by each. Where all other learning experiences have an individual test as the intended result, the ensemble concert is unique in providing our students with a group or collective outcome.

Consider a typical math class. The instructor talks to the group, teaches to the group, and eventually tests the group. The instructor may answer individual questions to address individual problems as they arise. The instructor will likely check for understanding in a variety of ways including questioning strategies: "Any questions?" or "Tommy, are you with us on this?" followed by a head nod or thumbs-up. Regardless of teaching strategy or rhetoric, there remains an unspoken understanding that the onus is on each student, and each student knows it because the test is individually graded. A few gifted mathematicians don't help the room suddenly "math" better on tests. The final outcome is not determined by the group score.

In the choral setting a similar scenario might include, "Any questions in this section? It seems to be coming along." or "Tommy, are you finding your pitch going into the 'B' section?" To what end are these students preparing? Against what measure do these students compare their success? How do we show that each student is improving at choral singing? Many argue that our performances are our tests. While the conductor and the ensemble may be evaluated publicly, students are not graded individually in this public setting, not even a large-ensemble contest or festival. The job of each student in the math class is to absorb and process the material, even when presented to the group, so they can exhibit individual mastery. What is the job of each student in the ensemble? When the final measure for the chorus is the concert performance, what is the ultimate goal for the individual? Is it only to sing well in performance? What about the less-than-accurate singer or the extremely self-conscious voice? For those members, the goal is often to contribute what little they can—or think they can—to the whole or simply to stay out of the way. Take as an example this teaching sequence:

The director stops the group and asks them to repeat a section. This time, Tommy chooses not to sing and leaves out the musical element with which he has been struggling. After the repeat, the director enthusiastically praises the group on an improved sound. In fact, the group does sound better, but what has Tommy learned? Not how to improve individually, but instead, when not to sing. That is a significant but unintended consequence.

The dualism revealed in our classrooms takes the form of two simultaneous experiences: the group event, and a parallel individual event. These experiences, while reflected in our terminology, are often not represented in our actions. In fact, most are unaware that either event is taking place, yet the differing social contexts exist si-

multaneously in each moment of each rehearsal. Is the moment intended for a group outcome, or an individual outcome? Is it for the performance of the group, or the learning of the individual? This brings us to a key point that must guide our decisions. Groups don't learn, individuals do, and individuals within groups still learn individually.

Self-Regulated Learning

There is a growing body of intriguing research in an area of cognitive development that may provide a perspective on how individual learners within the ensemble acquire the tools necessary to monitor and control their own thoughts, behaviors, and attentional resources to improve their performance[2] Self-regulated learning (SRL) refers to a set of strategies or habits-of-mind that learners use to take control of their own learning. Schunk and Zimmerman define SRL as, "learning that occurs largely from the influence of students' self-generated thoughts, feelings, strategies, and behaviors, which are oriented toward the attainment of goals."[3] As one of the primary scholars in this area explains, "Self-regulation is not a mental ability or an academic performance skill; rather, it is the self-directive process by which learners transform their mental abilities into academic skills. Learning is viewed as an activity that students do for themselves in a proactive way rather than as a covert event that happens to them in reaction to teaching."[4]

In the music education literature, SRL has been investigated by some of the leading researchers in instrumental instruction. The research has revealed some important findings on practice strategies and individual development on the instrument. However, when considering the individual learning experiences that must take place in the large ensemble rehearsal, we believe it can also provide valuable insights to choral directors as we plan group rehearsals leading to the most effective individual learning experiences.

There are a few theoretical models of SRL, with subtle differences, but they all tend to agree on some central components. For this discussion we will focus on Zimmerman's social cognitive theory of self-regulated learning, which has developed as the most prevalent model in the music education literature. This model explains that

SRL, "unfolds in real-time as a cyclical process wherein a learner negotiates through three phases: forethought, performance, and self-reflection"[5] Within each phase the learner is engaged in personal actions that respond to internal dialogues and are shaped by feedback, both from the learner and from the teacher. It is our position that for this to be managed effectively, the ensemble director must establish and clearly maintain an environment that communicates the individual emphasis and nature of the learning outcomes of the rehearsal. Each phase requires specific and consistent actions by the director to build this individualized mind-set and maintain it throughout the rehearsal. Although the actions of SRL are strategies of the individual learner, when the social context is the full ensemble rehearsal, it is the responsibility of the director to communicate the expectation of individual growth for self-regulation. McPherson and Zimmerman suggest that "effective music teachers act like mentors to their students by stimulating and guiding their cognitive and technical skills in a nurturing but rigorous environment."[6] Rather than present a full exposition of the details of self-regulated learning, we refer the reader to DiBenedetto for a more in-depth discussion of the various components of self-regulated learning theory.[7]

The choral ensemble is a complex, dualistic social environment with many levels of interaction. Each singer has individual responsibilities, enacted within the larger social context of the choir, while simultaneously engaging with the director. The director establishes and reinforces the learning context and matching tasks, whether individual or group, for each student. This requires a multi-step process that is carefully planned and clearly articulated with a learning outcome, a clear statement of context for responsibilities and strategies, and a clearly articulated assessment strategy that matches the context of learning and action, individual or group. To maintain the environment for optimum self-regulation, the ensemble director must, (a) establish and maintain the individualized environment, (b) use individualized rhetoric to sustain individual focus, and (c) provide opportunities for reflection through individual assessment and self-assessment.

There are self-regulating students in our ensembles already. We often refer to them as gifted musicians. They engage more fully in rehearsal. They practice outside of

rehearsal. They spend much of their time creating music for themselves. They have set their own agenda in learning that is parallel to ours. They have an individual learning outcome. We may even offer them assistance outside of class that assists them in forethought, performance, and reflection. What about the rest of the ensemble members, those who make up the majority of the ensemble? What is each student learning about musicianship or the voice and how to use it in the ensemble setting? We can provide an environment that encourages them each to grow and fulfill their place in the ensemble.

Refining Instructional Rhetoric

To successfully communicate the learning context to students, we need to develop both verbal and non-verbal vocabulary skills, helping each student connect to the specific student's approach to skill building or singing, which in turn, helps each student develop the vocabulary skills that empower them to describe habits of thought, word, and deed during the rehearsal process.

An important first step is for you, the instructor, to develop two sets of descriptive and precise language and pedagogic gestures that align with your intended outcomes—one for the group and one for each of the individuals in it. Group gesture tends to be more embracing and less direct. They tend to use two hands rather than one, and is most often used with group terms like "we," section names (sopranos, tenors, and basses).

Individualized gestures tend to be more direct, will include more specific eye contact, use of more individual terms like "each," carefully using a student's name, and are often accompanied by a change of proximity toward the group of individuals you intend to address. A rhetorical example that highlights the issue is the use of the ever-problematic, "you." A broad gesture and a casual use of "you" establishes the group context. Whereas, changing proximity, a focused gesture, and a pointed "you," with change of tone, characterizes a singular "you." However, did the student addressed follow your intent? Pronouns are chosen to help each learner think independently, work independently, and reflect independently. Remember that the term "you" requires context and definition in order to be understood. When students walk into an ensemble setting, they tend to be automatically in group-mode. Thoughtful management of your rhetoric, gesture, eye contact, and proximity communicates an environment that heightens the students' self-regulation.

Creating a Welcoming and Empowering Individual Environment

Many of us work with choral singers who are self-conscious of, and perhaps uncomfortable with, their singing voice. This is especially true in beginning and developing ensembles, or ensembles with less-experienced singers like church or community groups, but it can be found in most groups. Every ensemble is composed of voices of all sizes, shapes, and timbres. Likewise, our singers have an equally wide array of attitudes toward their instruments. The ensemble experience can mask some voices, providing a safe environment for the less-confident singer while allowing other to shine. However, opportunities must be provided to encourage the full engagement of singers at all levels in processes that make each a more independent and collaborative musician.

> **The richness of the vocal ensemble is represented through the diversity of its individuals, not the homogeneity of its voices.**

While self-consciousness or discomfort with one's voice is common, the director needs to help overcome this by providing an environment in which to develop a healthy self-awareness of one's own instrument, its value to the ensemble, and the value of each person to the society. First, acknowledge and validate the fact that every choir has a variety of voices. These include a range of voices described as big, small, best, least-best, and so forth. We need not identify these voices by name, as that will only make individuals more self-conscious.

Each singer may identify who they are and into which category they fall. The richness of the vocal ensemble is represented through the diversity of its individuals, not the homogeneity of its voices. Our job is to help each person see the value and importance of the individual voice in the corporate sound and to encourage each singer to be more self-aware, self-reflective, and self-confident.

One of the best places to begin this process is during warm-up exercises. These are usually designed to build individual skill sets and understandings, which provides an excellent opportunity to establish individual rhetoric, context, and student-generated vocabulary. To establish whose knowledge-base your students are using, try the following activity with your ensemble.

Word Association Game

This game is revealing in one of two ways. Either the only words they know are the ones you taught them (deep, low, silent, etc.) or they are quite rich and descript, which is evidence of increasing self-regulating thought and vocabulary. Take note when students begin getting nervous as words are utilized, since no word is allowed to be repeated. The longer it takes for this to happen, the more independent the students. If students run out of words quickly, the knowledge was not theirs initially. The vocabulary was yours. Each has not developed a repertoire of words to describe breath or struggled to understand the significance of developing individual responses and to every question posed in rehearsal. The greater the response rate, the richer the vocabulary. Here is an example of student/teacher exchanges during this activity:

Teacher: Describe a musical breath using one or two adjectives. There are a couple of rules, however. You may not repeat words, and you may not say that another student took your word. Lastly, I will go rapid fire and will not take volunteers. Are you ready? Karla, you first.

Karla: Low

Teacher: Good. Sarah?

Sarah: Deep

Teacher: Ok. Todd?

Todd: Full

Teacher: Yes. Thank you. However, all of you are being a little safe in your responses. What else do you have? Khalil?

Khalil: Expectant

Teacher: Nice! Ginger?

Ginger: Suspense-filled

Teacher: Excellent! Francis?

Francis: Blue!

Teacher: Blue? Tell me more about blue breathing.

Francis: The text is, "My Lord, what a morning." I can see how blue the sky is and how awe inspiring it must be. I breathe blue.

Teacher: Very creative! I like this, Francis!

The quality of the answer is not as important as the originality and authenticity of the answer. A "correct" answer is even less important. The accuracy of the answer is not particularly important, at least early on. The originality and authenticity of the answer is of most importance, as is the manner in which you affirm a response and, perhaps, manipulate the answering process to establish comfort and buy-in from students. Work to avoid any judgement of the word you hear. Asking for an explanation shows your validation of the choice even if it doesn't make sense yet. This same type of activity can be used to describe tone, attack, phrase shape, vowel shape, posture. Remember, each may feel or hear "correct" differently. Our job is to help each student unpackage, understand, and develop personal vocabulary to describe what is happening so that it can be replicated in the future.

Establishing the Correct Learning Outcome for Each Task

Rather than working for a better or more correct sound, focus on making a *different* sound by the end of each rehearsal. *Better or correct* carries success and failure implications that *different* does not. Many of today's students equate incorrect with failure. This limits creativity at the same time that it exacerbates self-consciousness. Starting with *different* counteracts this sense of failure and frees each student to take risks and to use intuition and imagination to guide individual learning. In many ways we, as directors, create our own problems here. We tell students how to do something or what to feel before doing a task. Instead, ask each student to experiment with an idea or concept like tone production or phrase shape, perform the task incorporating the individual's experimental thought, then describe any changes the student felt. Knowing that something may be about to change and that one will be asked to describe or demonstrate this change keeps each student more engaged in the process of learning.

Personal Space Activity

Here is another activity to do with your ensemble. This is a two-step process. First, spread singers out with arms slightly extended to their sides. Ask them to turn around in place one time to draw a circle around themselves. Now each singer is inside a self-imposed personal space. Rhetoric at this point is critical.

Teacher instructions to each student: Erase everything you think you know about correct. Inside your space, no can hear you. You are not listening to anyone else. Create a space in front of you. Put your arms up like you are hugging a barrel.

This step is quite important because it changes the focus of each student from group (ChorUS) to the individual experience (ChoIr). Each is being asked not to listen to others for the next several minutes, simply focus on one's own singing. This activity can work very well to liberate the hesitant or self-conscious singer. You have now established an individual mind-set for an individual outcome. Next, change your proximity to the students.

Move directly to a student. Proximity, eye contact, and pronoun use are keys to student perception of learning outcome. This embodies individual outcome. An example of teacher speak follows:

Teacher: Ok, Wilson. I want you to fill this area, the one you just created around the barrel, with your sound. You are not worried about Tim's sound. Tim is filling his space with his sound. Fill your space with your sound.

Take one of your hands, move it around inside the circle created by his arms.

Do the same with a few more students, perhaps one in each section, then repeat while motioning to each person in the room.

Performing the Singing or Learning Activity

This is an individual activity with an individual outcome, and each student will be asked to talk about the experience when finished. The key here is to reiterate that each student should be in individual task mode and that the choral teacher's role in minimal.

Providing Opportunities for Reflection

This exercise almost always results in a difference in both tone and production. The next step is critical. Avoid telling them what you, as the director, heard. It doesn't matter what you heard. Ask them what they heard and what each experienced. Ask students to self-assess and reflect on any changes they perceived in production, then ask students to describe the difference in the production. Ask for direct answers not correct answers. Early-on they will be self-conscious about responding. Ask students to avoid quality judgements for the ensemble. Sounding better or worse is not the outcome. Describing the difference is what matters.

Strategy for success: Early in this process, ask group questions, such as describing the difference in the sound. Soon, begin to ask more individually. "Tim, did you do anything differently this time?" Always encourage self-reflection and self-description when answering. It

is not important that each person answer each question out loud, but it is important that each person develop an answer to each question that is considered, honest, and authentic.

The same process is followed for each component of rehearsing: sight reading and literacy building, phrase building, blend, building the repertoire, and even the performance itself.

Step 1: Contextualize the learning moment (aligns with forethought from SRL). Is the student being asked to act in group or individual mode? How did you express your intended outcome? How did you check for student perception? Identify each student's role in the learning activity about to be performed.

Step 2: Perform the learning activity. Sing through the vocalise, prepare for the first reading of new music, prepare to sing through a segment of the repertoire for the next concert, consistently emphasizing each student's self-awareness and regulation.

Step 3: Provide opportunity for reflection. Assess the outcome of the activity. How did we do? What changed? How was it different? What, if anything, did you do that was different? Sometimes, take real "snapshots" of the learning. Have individuals record and self-assess. Record the group and have individuals discuss. Do the same with sections. Guide each student's ability to assess and reflect accurately. Remember, they are often harder on themselves. Encourage each to express and define differences rather than making quality judgements.

Music educators aware of our dualism effectively communicate, both verbally and nonverbally, the expected outcomes for both the individuals and group. The cycle is completed when the singer is aware and confident of the improvement made, and intentionally incorporates the new skill into a rehearsal or performance. This requires risk-taking and demonstrates learning. The only thing remaining is to take some kind of snapshot of the student using the skill—an individual assessment—which documents the learning. As you continue to use this process in your rehearsals, remember, the director's responsibility is group sound. Each student's responsi-

bility is the individual product. When you hear a group sound that aligns with your expectation, commend the group, but immediately ask individuals to describe what happened or how something felt as opposed to telling the group. This encourages the development of a vocabulary of words and gestures that you and your students can use in future rehearsals and while conducting. The process will empower each student to new and more independent levels of contribution to the whole. 𝐂𝐉

NOTES

[1] Peter Miksza (et. al.) *Connecting Self-regulated Learning and Performance with Instruction Across High School Content Areas* (Jersey City, N.J.: Springer, 2018), 339.

[2] Gary McPherson, and Barry Zimmerman, "Self-Regulation of Musical Learning: A Social Cognitive Perspective on Developing Performance Skills" in Richard Colwell and Peter Webster (Eds.), *MENC Handbook of Research on Music Learning, Volume 2: Applications* (pp. 130–175). (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 131.

[3] Dale Schunk and Barry Zimmerman, eds. *Self-Regulated Learning: From Teaching to Self-Reflective Practice* (New York: Guilford Press,1998).

[4] Barry Zimmerman, "Becoming a self-regulated learner: An overview" in *theory into practice, 41*:2 (2002), 64-70, DOI: 10.1207/s15430421tip4102_2: 65.

[5] Barry Zimmerman, "Attaining Self-Regulation: A Social Cognitive Perspective" in Monique Boekaerts, Paul R. Pintrich, and Moshe Zeidner (Eds.), *Handbook of Self-Regulation* (13–39) (New York: Academic Press, 2000).

[6] McPherson and Zimmerman, 156.

[7] Maria DiBenedetto, ed., *Connecting Self-Regulated Learning and Performance with Instruction Across High School Content Areas* (Dordrecht, The Netherlands: Springer International Publishing, 2018).