Healing Our Singers, Healing Ourselves—Social and Emotional Learning in Choir

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An Intersection of Choral Singing and Social and Emotional Learning

The value of choral singing is not found solely in its aesthetic or educational worth. Singing has been shown to positively impact physical health by improving the cardiovascular system, elevating mood through the production of oxytocin, and increasing the body's immunological response. Singing with others in a school, community, or faith-based choir generates added benefits. In pursuit of a common goal—singing well together—the repeated acts of listening, creating, and experimenting bond choral musicians together, resulting in feelings of closeness, emotional connection, and inclusion. Choral singers have described feeling supported, seen, valued, and loved by others in the ensemble.[1] As singers self-identify as members of a particular group, a feeling of belonging emerges. At a fundamental level, choral singing reminds us that we are not alone. Another person hears me and responds to me.

But since February and March of this year, our society has been grappling with a reality of social, or physical, distancing in order to slow the spread of COVID-19. Students, educators, singers, and conductors were thrust into new learning environments virtually overnight without knowing when or how we will return to normal.

Some of our students have been removed from a safe and supportive school environment to what may feel like a chaotic and less-supportive home environment. Educators similarly are faced with upturned schedules and new stressors as we strive to remain flexible during this uncertain time. This has been an isolating, lonely experience for many of us. In this period of physical distancing, when mental and emotional health have become a growing concern, the social, emotional, and spiritual solace of group singing is more important than ever.

The global health crisis caused by COVID-19 certainly has amplified the need to attend to our students' physical and emotional needs. According to The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning's (CASEL) website, "When physical distancing is deemed necessary, social and emotional connectedness is even more crucial."[2]

Social and emotional learning helps people gain skills in five major competencies, as described by CASEL: *self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills,* and *responsible decision making.* SEL implements curricula and coursework to help students gain these competencies and must also be integrated by educators into their own lives, individual classrooms, and disciplines.

Analysis of SEL effects conducted in both 2011 and a metadata analysis in 2017 found that participation in high-quality SEL programs leads to student growth across academic fields, executive functioning, interpersonal skills, self-awareness, and satisfaction.[3] These empirical findings validate the opinions of teachers throughout the United States: students across demographics can benefit from wel-

limplemented SEL curricula, helping them move through school—from kindergarten through college—and into adult life.

Though one might argue that music and choral teachers have always been SEL teachers (active listening, channeling our emotions through musical expression, recognizing feelings in others and in music, and collaborating with others, to name just a few skills), this is an ideal time for us to cultivate the SEL skills inherent in choral singing more intentionally. But how can we sing together while physically distanced and while knowing the particular challenges posed by the growing evidence that COVID-19 may spread further when singing?

In speaking about choral singing during the COVID-19 pandemic, conductor and interdisciplinary artist Dr. Carmen Helena Tellez has noted that choral music has not died; just one mode of how it is presented has changed.[4] Through webinars, collaborative position papers, online conferences, and other much-needed resources, choral organizations and educators are creatively discussing how to continue building musical skills in a socially distanced, hybrid, or virtual teaching environment. As we move into new modes of choral music making, how can we continue to make the choral space a place where singers learn not only musical skills but also benefit emotionally and socially? What can we learn about ourselves and how can we build our own SEL skills?

Considering Teachers and Reflection

Any modification we make to curricula must be based on what our students need to be successful. CASEL also proposes designing opportunities for adults to heal, connect, and cultivate their own SEL competencies.[5] Without first examining and reflecting ourselves, we will not be able to attend adequately to our students' needs. Choral educators have a growing number of guidelines and resources to assist in planning and advocating for choral programs during the COVID-19 pandemic (e.g., ACDA's COVID-19 Response Committee Report).[6]

In addition to consulting these outside resources, choral educators may also benefit from taking time to reflect on their own experiences. A significant life event—such as adjusting to living during a pandemic—can cause us to question our beliefs and our understanding of the world around us. Through the process of critical self-reflection, these uncomfortable situations can help us understand the world and ourselves in new ways, transforming our perspectives.[7] In addition to being an SEL skill, reflecting on our own recent experiences may help us anticipate and innovate, as well as shifting our view of ourselves as educators.

Much of our learning as adults derives from life experiences. We can use these concrete experiences to help us understand ourselves and to make decisions about how to act in the future. David Kolb called this experiential learning.[8] As music teachers, we create opportunities for experiential learning each time we engage singers in activities like tuning a chord or clapping a rhythm. We also have our own concrete experiences, such as how we transitioned ensembles to work online during the pandemic, or how we navigated spring performances under social distancing restrictions. When we reflect critically on these episodes, we can turn our experiences into a source of knowledge.

Reflection does not happen automatically. Instead, we must be intentional about engaging in critically contemplative activities in order to make meaning from personal experiences. Consideration can begin with a review of our past actions and responses but should move into deeper levels of questioning, acknowledging our emotional reactions and intuitions, too. As adults engage in critical self-study, they question assumptions, construct new meanings, and generate new knowledge and ideas. This process, which helps a learner make sense of his or her intersubjective world, can be overwhelming and complex to navigate.[9]

Using an established reflective tool or process can facilitate learning. One useful structure for critical reflection is the ORID method. This method, based on Kolb's experiential learning theory, was developed by Laura Spencer.[10] The ORID method can encourage constructive thinking, holistic understanding, and creative decision making.

ORID is an acronym that stands for four stages of human inquiry (Figure 1 on page 11). These stages correspond to the manner in which the brain takes in information, makes sense of it, and makes decisions. This reflective method can be used by choral educators as a framework for examining their pandemic teaching experiences (Table 1 on page 11). For example, an interpretive question may ask "what is the same about my COVID-19 teaching and my pre-COVID-19 teaching?" When moving to the decisional phase, one might ponder the implications for structuring online rehearsals or group warm-ups.

The ORID framework can also be used to facilitate group reflection. Choir directors can make time and space for all members of the choir to explore a series of questions

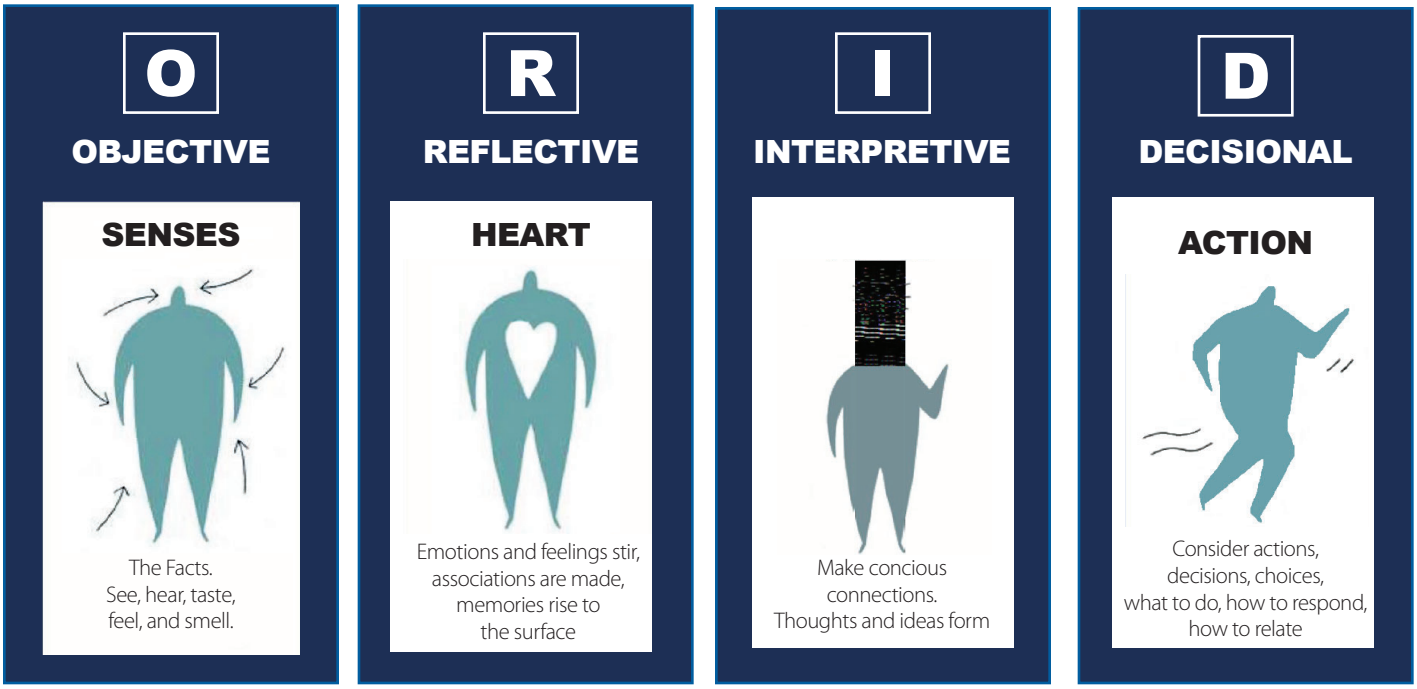

Figure 1. ORID method (ICA:UK the Institute of Cultural Affairs, 2014)[11]

Table 1. ORID Questions for Music Educators

Objective *Collecting information*	• What happened, and in what order? • What images, sounds, or words do you recall?
Reflective *Identifying emotions and reactions*	• How did this experience affect you as a teacher? • What were the emotional highs and lows? • How did singers react?
Interpretive *Finding significance*	• What was most meaningful in the experience? • What have you learned? What have your singers learned? • What can be applied in similar situations?
Decisional *Determining future action*	• What changes occurred as a result of this experience? • What will you do differently next time? • What improvements can be made?

from the four ORID categories, perhaps in small groups first, then with a full group debrief. This sharing can create an atmosphere in which members feel their personal voices—beyond just their singing voices—matter.

The ORID framework is just one example of a helpful protocol, grounded in adult learning theory, which can help us make sense of a concrete experience, interpret that experience, and plan for the future, either as an individual or as a group.

One critique of critical reflection is that it can tend to overemphasize analytical ways of understanding, neglecting the "powerful emotional context in which much of adult learning occurs."[12] We may not always have the words to explain highly disorienting experiences, like adapting to teaching during a global pandemic, and so we may feel stuck when using a method of rational reflection like the ORID framework.

Recent research in transformative learning confirms what most musicians have known for a long time: engaging in artistic expression can be a mode of deep learning that helps us explore our emotions, thereby fostering new self-knowledge and promoting personal transformation.[13] We may feel naturally drawn to musical expression, but other forms of creativity—such as painting, dance, storytelling, theatre, creative writing, drawing, collage, poetry, photography, and journaling—can also lead us to understand and articulate our experiences. For example, how might you draw or paint your reaction to the sudden loss of in-person choral singing as a result of COVID-19? What meanings emerge as you ponder your final drawing or painting? What have you learned about yourself by engaging your imagination like this? How might this knowledge open you up to new possibilities in your journey as a leader? This type of "learning through soul" can lead us to become more aware of our inner landscape as teachers.[14] Making space for thinking and feeling is important for teachers as we move through this uncertain time. Maybe we will find ourselves transformed as a result.

Considering Students and SEL

After and during a period of reflection, educators and conductors must begin to plan for our choruses. What will they look like? What are the practical considerations? Most importantly, what do our students need? During this transition to different models of classrooms and choirs—online and fully distanced, a hybrid of online and in-person learning, or in-person learning with restrictions—CASEL suggests educators pay particular attention to creating "emotionally and physically safe, supportive, and enjoyable learning environments."[15]

Developing a connected and safe environment requires building relationships and community, routine, and creating places for students to engage in, and practice, SEL (Social and Emotional Learning) skills and reflect on their experiences. These include support skills such as stress management, communication and listening, collaboration, help-providing, and help-seeking behaviors.

These SEL (Social and Emotional Learning) competencies can be taught and applied within any subject or discipline. While CASEL's recommendations for teaching the whole child break down into ten practices, we focus here on three that might be readily adapted to choral work (though all ten could be incorporated, particularly when working in an educational environment): cooperative learning, self-reflection and self-assessment, and balanced instruction.[16] Similarly, choral rehearsals could easily adapt to include spaces for students to engage in developmentally appropriate conversation and lessons surrounding world events and their feelings and experiences.

Cooperative learning allows students and teachers (including singers and conductors) to work together toward a common goal. "Teaching the Whole Child" suggests five elements of successful cooperative learning: positive interdependence, individual accountability, promoting one another's successes, applying interpersonal and social skills, group processing (the group discusses progress toward achieving a goal.)[17]

To be an effective SEL (Social and Emotional Learning) tool, cooperative learning requires both independence and collective learning while also allowing participants the ability to process how they are working together. Groups of students may work through a section of a song to see how they could create desired musical effects using dynamics and/or demonstrating different vocal colors with their voices.

Singers might then explore various configurations of the group's inter-relational dynamics and consider what methods seem most effective. Is each person offering a suggestion, trying it, and then assessing it? Has the group designated roles for each person? Is everyone's voice and/or suggestion being heard? Incorporating self-reflection and self-assessment is not simply a question of getting it right or wrong ("did we sing the pitches accurately?"), but rather assessing work against a more rigorous standard, either provided by

the teacher or co-created with choristers.

Self-reflection and self-assessment also require goal making and considering how to achieve these goals. Choir members might search to discover what needs to change to create the sudden pianissimo in bar 34, for instance. Do they need to have a louder dynamic in the measures leading up to 34? Perhaps they need to release more air to allow for the pianissimo to have substance and be in tune. Maybe each singer needs to employ a slightly different approach to create the group effect.

Balanced instruction refers to teachers and conductors using an "appropriate balance of active instruction and direct instruction as well as appropriate balance between individual and collaborative learning."[18] "Balanced" should not be mistaken for "equal parts." Rather, most SEL programs call for varied and active forms of instruction, such as project-based work.

In a physically distanced choral setting, perhaps this might mean small groups of singers working together to understand the text and history of a piece of music and then interpreting it musically. How should it sound? What should the dynamics be? How can the placement of group breaths help convey the song's meaning? Perhaps singers can record themselves individually singing the passage. Of course, singers and students would need instruction and exposure to this type of analysis which aligns with balanced instruction. They need access and exposure to tools and skills that will allow them to solve these types of problems.

Although a traditional choral rehearsal room does not immediately conjure up images of discourse, our rooms can become spaces for conversation about world events and their effects on students' lives and emotions. The lyrics of our songs may allow open spaces of dialogue and could serve as a choral or classroom community's *Third Thing.* Described by Parker Palmer, a *Third Thing* within a community helps give members a "common ground to explore issues."[19]

It may take the form of a poem, a teaching story, a case study from the profession, a piece of music or a work of art. It offers members of the group something with which to interact other than the facilitator and participants. People may view the work of art and discuss its meaning. Through this *third thing* we begin to share vulnerabilities and create community. Through discussions of what words, phrases, and moments stand out, we discover where the artistic work takes us. Individuals in the community are invited to interact with this third thing as they "would a living being, get inside it and let it get inside of them."[20] What better work of art to use as a third thing than the composition a group is exploring?

Additionally, classrooms and rehearsal rooms will benefit from establishing consistent routines that allow for flexibility.[21] These predictable structures will help everyone regain a sense of calm and control. In pre-pandemic times, choral spaces were ripe with routine. We typically began with a greeting, a vocal warmup, and then moved on to work on repertoire.

What could routines look like if we are not allowed to sing together? Of course, each routine must serve the needs of the group, but perhaps it begins with exploring a section of vocal technique. Maybe it is a video or a reflection on what students learned while doing independent work since the last meeting. Or perhaps it is simply an opportunity for members to check in with their experiences and feelings. Regardless, the choral room is organized with various routines that may be adapted with a touch of pliability and thought.

Conclusion

Flexibility and resilience are common skills of educators and musicians. Yet the questions and challenges we now face surpass what most of us could have imagined mere months ago. Of course, we will persevere; we will find new methods and adjust old ones. However, it may serve us well to acknowledge and hold space for the changes and stressors we have all experienced over the last several months or longer.

Perhaps utilizing a developed reflective tool in tandem with teaching resources will allow choral educators to feel more prepared and effective as they walk on new instructional pathways. Our students' needs drive how we implement our curricula. Those designing and implementing curricula need to attend to their own needs, as well.

We start by reflecting with heart and with mind, perhaps using tools such as those offered in transformative learning and ORID. We create spaces for ourselves, as educators and leaders, to process what has happened and how it affects what we do in our classrooms and rehearsal spaces. We extend that space to our singers, creating reflective and flexible routines, perhaps using a "third thing."

We build community and include times for self-reflection and self-assessment with balanced instruction and cooperative learning. We need to re-envision what a traditional choral room looks like, and we don't know how long we will have to adhere to these new strategies.

Perhaps some of what we implement now will prove to be healing and powerful. Maybe we will discover the value of

these tools—reflection, transformative learning, and SEL—within the choral rooms. It is possible that they will serve us so well that we continue to implement them even after we are back to more "normal" ways of singing together. CT

NOTES

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[11] Ibid.

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