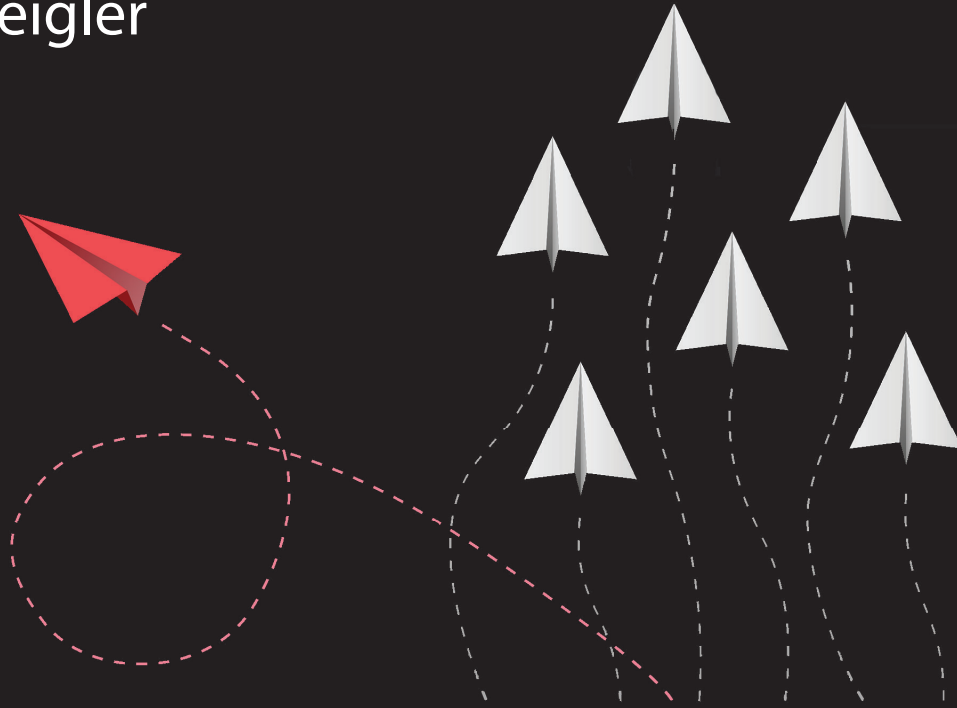


An Unconventional Approach to the Choral Music Classroom

By Odell Zeigler



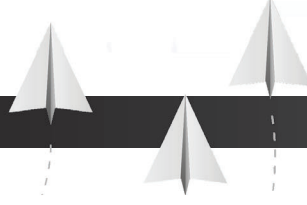
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When I was trying to build a successful choral program, I remember pulling out detailed notes from my choral methods class, revisiting recorded lectures from professors, and even speaking with other choral directors, but I was still constantly running into the same challenges. My insistence on teaching precisely how I read something in a book or how something was taught in my courses caused me to struggle. I admit that I used to bulldoze my way through choral lessons so that I could check off the sequential steps or feel like I honored the process I had learned.

I lost a lot by doing it that way. I found that I could not grow my programs, and students became uninterested because their needs were not being met. During graduate school, I spent quality time in various chorus classrooms across the states of Rhode Island and Massachusetts, where I was able to observe and teach in several school dis-

tricts. I went above the allotted full-time credit hours so I could formulate independent studies to get a taste for what leading choruses in various communities looked and felt like. I learned and gained a lot, but I realized that no program operates exactly like another, and that some choral programs might operate completely in an unconventional manner. I learned that pivoting and deviating from conventional approaches can bring about success.

As I reflect upon my teaching career, I think of all the moments I had to pivot and figure out how to modify pedagogical tools and modify resources. I learned that it was important to consider the setting in which I was teaching so that I could strategize and plan in a meaningful way. Though I believe we should subscribe to foundational principles and great teachings from our great schools of music and teachers, I want to share my unconventional approach. My experience is primarily from urban school districts, but I believe the approaches shared in this article can be applicable to any setting, specifically where there are students who struggle with music literacy.



Potential Challenges

I have found the following six issues consistently challenging in the choral classroom. Although these are also challenges that appear in *any* choral setting, in my experience these barriers can be especially hindering within a middle school or high school urban choral program.

- Solfège—singers may have always sung on words
- Sheet music—singers may have always been taught by rote without a score
- Sight-reading—this may be completely foreign
- Maintaining an arched soft-palate—it feels weird to sing like this
- Tongue placement—singers are not sure what this is
- Classical literature—singers are unfamiliar with the style

Unconventional Approaches

Teachers are always in reflection mode, and we must yield to our students' needs. You could jump right in and follow your script, your notes from your choral methods course, or utilize other traditional resources and approaches, but I want to encourage you to try the following:

- Make teaching personal and not general by building relationship with your singers.
- Find fun and unique ways to teach music literacy skills.
- Begin with rote teaching, if that is the method with which students are most familiar.

As cliché as it sounds, relationship building is number one on my list. Students will always try their best to succeed in a space where they feel valued and connected. Focus on individual relationships and being intentional about speaking to different students before the bell rings, during breaks, or after the closure of the lesson. I do not view general greetings such as, “Good morning, everyone,” or general questions such as, “How is everyone doing?” as an impactful way to build solid relationships. Instead, try to ask these

questions to each student independently when you get a chance and think of a few more casual conversation starters. The relationship piece supersedes all and will aid in every other solution you have in mind.

If your students have never sung on solfège, trying to introduce a new piece and having them sing it on solfège will not be successful. We are taught that this is one of the beginning steps when introducing a piece of music, and so we ask students to either sing a new piece on a neutral syllable or on solfège, but if the students in your ensemble have low music literacy skills, they will not be able to do this successfully. Then they may become bored and feel defeated because they are tasked to demonstrate a set of skills they still need to learn.

Next, we are often in grind mode, so I understand that we have deadlines and even deal with a certain allotment of time to prepare for performances, but we should be mindful that sheet music is not familiar to all singers. Our students come from various backgrounds, and perhaps some may have been in settings where lyric sheets were utilized. I encourage you to validate their experience first, then smoothly transition to sheet music as soon as possible. Rote teaching is a good thing. Remember that sound comes before symbols, the ear precedes the eye, and the rote comes before notes. Rote teaching is an ideal way to start in a choral setting where there are low music literacy skills. Notably, I strongly suggest rote teaching with students following with the score in their hands when rote teaching. Although I am singing and having students sing back what they hear me sing, they are still being assessed following the score. Teach them how to identify their place in the music. Begin by teaching the idea of the individual vocal staves, the linear progression of score reading, page numbers, systems in a score, and measure numbers. Do this and give them a practice quiz on the information in a few days.

Re-teach and refresh as much as possible until they understand the importance of following along in the score. There are so many assessments right within rote teaching with students following a score. All forms of literacy start without text or syntax.

Here are a few immediate assessments you can begin with:

1. Informally quiz students on systems in the score and measure numbers.

2. Guide students through tracking their vocal line on the correct staff.
3. Have students count the piano introduction and clap on the beat they come in to sing.
4. Have students clap the rhythm in a specified measure.
5. Ask students where the identical measures are in the piece. (See if they can give you a page number, followed by the system, then the measure number.)

This is a smooth way to rote teach while incorporating music literacy creatively so that students do not feel like they are in music theory class. The idea of music literacy in the secondary setting must be fun and creative. The creative part of the process is incorporating music literacy seamlessly and appropriately for their skillset. Eventually, your students will be able to transition from rote to note, but patience in the rote season is critical.

Sight-reading is vital to any ensemble in music, but our students need to have a solid rote background to succeed with sight-reading. If your students cannot successfully sing a major scale with good rhythmic flow and good intonation, they can't sight-read yet. I caution you to save sight-reading factory for later in the year. I usually incorporate sight-reading factory or some other consistent sight-reading program in March. From September until March, I am working diligently on good a capella major scale and la-based minor scale singing with hand signs.

In addition, I am introducing solfège pitches on the staff slowly. I start with sol-mi, la, do-re, fa, ti, low sol, etc. As I am slowly introducing pitches on the staff, I utilize various worksheets where students transfer interval identification to other key signatures. They need to understand that solfège is movable. I love Patti Dewitt's beginning books because you can open it right up and go from beginning to end without jumping around the textbook. There is no ideal way to teach sight-reading.

Vocal pedagogy and classical literature are two things that will have to grow on your students. This is something you will have to labor tediously on at times, but do not give up. Typically, I find myself on the stage during the first winter concert conducting and gesturing all types of vocal pedagogical things to steer my students in the moment because they may have drifted back to their familiar old habits. The good news

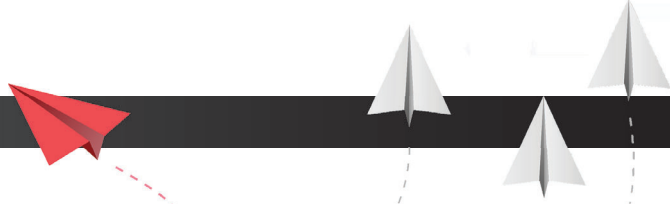
is that the consistency and steering pay off; the latter part of the year, students are singing correctly, and in a style they were not used to at first. They are becoming more and more passionate about choral literature and seeking more ways to grow and learn. Be consistent and patient. The more consistent and patient you are, the less challenging it becomes as students slowly get the idea.

Getting Students Interested in Singing

I believe in setting big goals and setting high standards for my students. My department chair reminds staff that students do not know what is hard until we tell them. I include goals, standards, and other typical things in my choral handbook, but I begin with a vignette and vision for the program, which set the stage for the year. I want my students to understand the concept and goals of the program. Furthermore, I want my students interested in singing choral music before I start trying to operate out of formality. How do we get students interested in something they are not familiar with? We know that buy-in is of the utmost importance.

Here are a few ideas that can be helpful when it comes to getting your students interested and familiar with choral singing:

1. Creative programming—collaborating with orchestra, band, dance, or theater.
2. Play a video recording from a variety of different groups, genres, and styles.
3. Invite a retired choral director or reputable choral person to speak with your students about their culture's presence in choral music.
4. Initiate a side-by-side with a rehearsal with an HBCU choir or minority choir, so the students are sitting amongst the visiting choir. (Thanks to Dr. Edryn Coleman for this suggestion; see paragraph below for more specifics.)
5. Have a minority classically trained vocalist come in to do some one-on-one voice lessons and demonstrate their fabulous instrument for the students.
6. Provide students with several performance opportunities



in the community so they see the appreciation for their choral singing.

7. Ask for song suggestions.

A side-by-side rehearsal with an HBCU choir or minority choir is impactful, revitalizing, and memorable for students. To a certain extent, it's a natural kind of love when students collaborate with others during the music-making process. There is joy in group singing, and one of the biggest highlights of joy for the director and students is getting to be involved with a successful collaboration. If the collaboration is with a college choir, middle and high school students can get a glimpse of what it may look like for them at the next level.

Most importantly, students can see the sincerity and passion that minority collegiate choristers bring into the rehearsal space and their love for singing classical literature (which is really the main reason for this collaboration). These things directly impact students when they sit amongst a collegiate choir. Regarding leading the rehearsal, both the middle school/high school and college director can work this piece out in several ways. Here are a few suggestions: 1) The high school director and the college director can lead the rehearsal together; 2) The college director can lead while the high director sits amongst the group; or 3) The high school director can lead while the college director sits amongst the group. I like to explore these three options, and each allows for students to see leaders working together for a common goal.

The repertoire can be decided early in the year between both conductors. Depending on scheduling and events for the year, and if time is at a premium, I have college students join in on one of our pieces since they are likely better readers. During the side-by-side rehearsal, the secondary director hopes students gain a better appreciation of classical literature, feel more comfortable singing in this style, develop a better awareness of vocal pedagogical issues, and trust that they will leave this experience with a new mindset for singing choral music.

When it comes to creative programming, you will find that students love collaborating with other students on campus. If you can find a piece that your chorus and orchestra or chorus and band can perform together, that would get students more interested. For example, I have done pieces where we used our school's dance team and theater team simultaneously, which was unconventional, to say the least, and it was electrifying. Students still talk about it to this day.

These collaboration efforts will bring buy-in immediately. Students can see a bigger picture regarding the aestheticism of performing, find their passion, and grow a stronger interest in singing choral music.

Lastly, and this can be tricky, I ask for song suggestions so that my students feel they have a voice. If you ask, you should choose at least one. Here's what I do: I look at the list of songs suggested and choose between three and five songs that I feel are appropriate and doable. Then I have the class vote to select one of those. Again, I suggest being transparent and allowing students to see how democracy works. You can use a Google Doc or a Microsoft Form to have them vote. I keep all voting anonymous, so no names are shared, then once the voting poll closes, I show the results. This will eliminate students thinking negatively or criticizing the process. They can see their vote and the decision of the majority.

Conclusion

The unconventional approach is not supposed to replace the conventional or foundational way of teaching chorus, but it can be a jump-start to the traditional method. Buy-in is necessary before we try to introduce something that may be completely foreign. Once students have bought in, they are ready to learn anything from you! They will certainly try their best! Nevertheless, I want to encourage you to think about the population you serve and ask yourself, "What is best for this group and my program as a whole?" Only you will know this answer. **CT**