Whole-Hearted Teaching: Bringing a Different Kind of Science into the Studio

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After giving one of my private clients a minor adjustment to a phrase they were singing, they glared at me and said, "You know, you don't have to be so nice! You can tell me I suck - I know I do." I was stunned into silence. I wondered: "What narrative has this performer chosen to accept about their singing voice, and who helped them create or - at the very least - amplify that narrative?"

Twenty years earlier, I was in a similar place. I was a student in a graduate vocal program that was political and toxic to music making. I graduated receiving the silent but insidious message that perhaps I *shouldn't* sing in public. And so, without the constitution to contradict it, I embraced that narrative. For over 15 years, I was plagued by chronic sinus infections anytime I had to perform. There were points when I would literally wake up without a voice. It took years for me to undo the underlying narrative that kept me from singing.

As voice teachers, we concern ourselves with the latest pedagogical developments to benefit our students, and rightly so. We must also, however, continue exploring new ways of *communicating* that knowledge in the studio. This is especially important to understand because how we learned is not how today's student learns. It is important in the midst of long-overdue conversations about equity and inclusion. It is important because our words and actions matter - perhaps more profoundly than we could ever know.

Let us consider how we can make our voice studios safer places of learning for our students, using research as our guide. In particular, we will consider how curiosity, vulnerability, mindfulness, and self-care can transform our studios and our students' lives.

Curiosity

Teaching requires us to be endlessly curious.

Researchers at University of California Davis discovered that curiosity primes the brain for learning material of interest to the student and incidental material, both with long-lasting effects. In addition to finding increased activity in the hippocampus, which aids in the consolidation of information, they were able to prove that dopamine was released in the brain when subjects were curious, eliciting pleasure during the learning event.[1]

As voice teachers, we thrive on sharing the knowledge we have about the voice with our students and sparking their curiosity. But what about what we don't know?

Michael Smithson, a social scientist at Australian National University, used this analogy to explain the relationship between knowledge and ignorance.

> The larger the island of knowledge grows, the longer the shoreline—where knowledge meets ignorance—extends. The more we know, the more we can ask. Questions don't give way to answers as much as they proliferate together. Answers breed questions. Curiosity isn't merely a static disposition but rather a passion of the mind that is ceaselessly earned and nurtured.[2]

In his study, "The Power Game: Power Dynamics between the Teacher and the Students in a Graduate Seminar," researcher Gihan Sidky explains that it is often the perceived or real pressures of an institution's expectations that may keep teachers and students from going against the current and trying out new methods for fear of failure.[33]

Are we willing to subvert to the natural power dynamics of the teacher/student relationship in favor of helping students stay curious? Can we model the kind of curiosity we want our students to practice?

Let us consider the following opportunities for exploring curiosity in the studio.

Maintain an active research practice to deepen the experience of what we understand and open doors to what we do not know. By immersing ourselves in different kinds of learning opportunities and sharing our findings, we signal to our students that learning is a life-long vocation.

Encourage students to be curious about their own singing experience. In a 2013 NATS *Journal of Singing* article entitled "Improve Your Student's Learning by Improving Your Feedback," Lynn Maxfield explained that "feedback timing has been shown to have a significant impact on the acquisition and retention of new motor skills, such as those being trained in the studio."[44] He also explains that "delayed feedback of approximately three seconds following completion of the task seems to be the most beneficial to a student's ability to retain new motor skills."[55] This highlights the benefit of pausing for a moment and allowing the student to first reflect on their experience. It can help them develop a better kinesthetic awareness of their singing and digest technical concepts faster. It also teaches us how the student processes information.

Ask students if there are particular intersections of identity they would like to celebrate through the repertoire you choose together. We must ask ourselves what is most affirming to the student: inviting them to share their lived experience (should they feel comfortable to do so) or relying on our own perceptions of a student's identity and running the risk of assigning repertoire that causes harm? Asking a student to share their intersections of identity also teaches them to

celebrate their individuality and advocate for themselves. The National Center for Learning Disabilities states, "As more education reform efforts prioritize student voice and choice, it is essential to ensure that *all* learners have the opportunity to practice agency, especially within personalized learning systems."[66]

Brian Kremer, who is the Associate Program Director of the Musical Theatre Program at Elon University, created a list of questions to ask students to reflect on when discussing repertoire:

- How would this character, song, or role relate to your lived experience in a way you'd wish to examine?
- How would putting work into this role or piece allow you to explore your artistry, identity, and/or history?
- How would this role or piece support your learning goals?[77]

Curiosity inspires - it keeps us malleable. That is where teaching and learning can thrive.

Vulnerability

Teaching curiosity requires us to be vulnerable.

In her book *Rising Strong*, researcher Dr. Brené Brown defines vulnerability as "not winning or losing; it's having the courage to show up and be seen when we have no control over the outcome."[88] To be clear, this does not include indiscriminate oversharing. Vulnerability is the essence of improvisation, leaving room for what may come.

Historically speaking, the master-apprentice model of teaching did not exactly leave room for vulnerability. In this age of student-centered learning, however, we are seeing more research emerge about the power of vulnerability.

Dr. Shannon Huddy explains, "True knowledge is intertwined with vulnerability because to learn something new, a learner must face uncertainty and the idea of not knowing something to be open to taking in a new perspective or new information."[99]

Through her two-stage factor analysis and interviews with instructors, Dr. Huddy made a direct correlation between the emotional vulnerability of instructors and their students' perceived ability to learn and attain greater academic achievement. Huddy cites three main contributors to a teacher's success:

1. The teacher is personable
2. The teacher shares real-life stories - sometimes ones that are less than favorable
3. The teacher creates a safe environment, allowing students to have a voice[1010]

Putting ourselves in a place of vulnerability, however, may have consequences. Australian researchers Elizabeth Molloy and Margaret Bearman explain, “The tension between vulnerability and seeking credibility creates challenge for learning and teaching.”[1111]

Teachers who put themselves in a place of vulnerability potentially expose their fallibility. This subverts the normal power dynamic discussed earlier and leaves the teacher open to judgment and even threat. Molloy and Bearman later state:

> One means of embracing this tension between expressing vulnerability and appearing credible is “intellectual candour,” an improvisational expression of doubts, thoughts and problems with the dual purpose of learning and promoting others’ learning. Educators’ revelations of inner struggles are proposed as a means of inviting reciprocal vulnerability. This builds trust and a platform for learning, particularly of the transformative nature.[1212]

This leads us to some thoughts on how we can bring vulnerability into the studio.

Share personal experiences of success and failure, as suggested by Dr. Huddy’s research. American psychologist Carl Rogers reflects:

> I have found that the very feeling which has seemed to me most private, most personal and hence most incomprehensible by others, has turned out to be an expression for which there is a resonance in many other people. It has led me to believe that what is most personal and unique in each one of us is probably the very element which would, if it were shared or expressed, speak most deeply to others. This has helped me to understand artists and poets who have dared to express the unique in themselves.[1313]

Celebrate “mistakes” made by the student and yourself as a natural evolution in the process of finding an authentic sound. It is inevitable that a particular exercise or directive we give to the student will not yield the desired effect. When we move on without further discussion, students may feel as if they have failed. Our ability to address our own adjustments of approach in the studio will allow students to do the same in the practice room.

Regularly embrace the vulnerability of singing through private or public performance. If we are to adequately recall the feelings of being wholly unmoored by the learning process, we must regularly put ourselves in similar postures of learning, whether that be through private voice lessons and workshops or public performances.

For my part, I decided I had to stop hiding behind the piano. This past June, I performed my first solo show in twenty years while remaining completely healthy. It was a momentous experience and I won't wait that long to do it again.

Consider the following question: How am I able and willing to prioritize my student's comfort over my own? The Performing arts industry is slowly taking steps to create more equity and inclusion, centering a diverse array of voices so that more people can see themselves not only represented but worthy of appreciation. That said, the industry is moving too slow - our institutions must be an active part of this change.

What might that look like from our perspective as studio teachers? Maybe it's having a conversation with your department about casting practices, allowing students to share who they feel they could embody in the world of an opera or musical rather than relying on casting by type, which has historically marginalized people of many intersections of background and identity. Maybe it's pooling pedagogical and repertoire resources with our colleagues in support of transgender, non-binary, and gender-expansive students. Maybe it's taking the time to explore campus resources that are available to a neurodiverse student and advocating *with* them if that support is lacking. Maybe it's educating ourselves about our own biases and creating a statement of inclusion that is then embedded in our syllabus.

There are many different paths toward equity. So, again, we must ask ourselves: How am I able and willing to prioritize my student's comfort over my own? This question is purposefully worded to acknowledge that we, as voice teachers, are sometimes just as disenfranchised. It is here I must acknowledge my privilege as a white, cisgender, male-identifying teacher. I simply ask us to consider accessing our vulnerability to move this conversation forward in a way that is meaningful to us and our students.

Parker Palmer suggests that teaching is "a daily exercise in vulnerability."[1414] That vulnerability, when expressed by us, has the potential to free students and, in the end, liberate their audiences.

Mindfulness

Being vulnerable requires us to practice mindfulness.

This past spring, I was preparing my student Caleb Ajao for his masters voice recital. Caleb was kind enough to recount an interaction we had in his lesson that underscored the need for continued mindful awareness:

> Caleb Ajao: A couple months ago, we were working on a new song from *Porgy and Bess* for my recital. It was the first time we were working with a new accompanist and, in the

first five or so minutes of tacking the song, there were a lot of issues with notes and rhythms.

David Sisco: I think I said something to you along the lines of: "I don't know if this is the best use of our time right now, given that we have your pianist. Why don't we take a look at this when you know it better." As soon as I said that, I could see that I had wounded you. That haunted me throughout the week, and I broached the subject in our next lesson. Can you talk about that?

CA: Looking back, I was grateful you did bring it up because it was something that hurt me quite a bit. I could tell there were so many external factors that were causing the decline of the piece as it went on. I was so used to singing the piece in a specific way and I don't think I ever mindfully focused on the specifics of the piece. So, in communicating that - the rhythm and flow of it - with the first time of singing this piece for you with a new accompanist all in one… It was a completely negative snowball effect that led to a showcase of an unprepared performance, even though I had prepared way more than what was being showcased in that moment.

DS: I will say to you now what I said to you then: "I'm sorry that I made an assumption about your preparedness." I was not very mindful in that moment and let my own anxiety about your recital (because teachers get anxious about their students' recitals) get in the way. As a result, I made assumptions about where you were in your process rather than asking you. That was a really great teaching moment for me and I thank you for the grace you offered me to have that conversation.[1515]

We must learn how to develop a sustainable way for regulating our thoughts, emotions, and behavior so we can prevent moments like the one above.

In his book *Wherever You Go, There You Are*, Jon Kabat-Zinn defines mindfulness as "paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally."[1616] The practice of mindfulness has been most highly referenced as a tool for stress reduction, but it has many other positive results for the teacher and, by extension, the student.

A compilation of research essays entitled *Impacting Teaching and Learning: Contemplative Practices, Pedagogy, and Research in Education*, suggests some important benefits:

- Minimizes the transition from self to other. One of the most common and difficult transitions that teachers make is moving from concerns about the self - such as a focus on self-adequacy - to concerns about the student. When we are mindful, we can keep the focus on the student, not on our desire to control particular outcomes.

- Affords an opportunity to develop reflective teaching. For instance, mindful reflection may allow a teacher to notice the early somatic, cognitive, and emotional indicators of frustration and impatience.
- Mindfulness helps maintain connection to our humanity. Remaining connected to our humanity automatically gives singers permission to fully express their artistry through their humanity.[1717]

Here are some thoughts about how we can bring mindfulness into our teaching practice.

Find a meditation practice that works for you.

Tara Brach is a Buddhist psychologist and mindfulness meditation teacher. Through her work, she created the RAIN of Self-Compassion, which stands for:

- Recognize what is going on
- Allow the experience to be there, just as it is
- Investigate with interest and care
- Nurture with self-compassion[1818]

This meditation practice acknowledges the challenges of life without dwelling on them. As such, it has the potential to provide healing and a reduction in anxiety.

Journal

In a 12-week trial of general medical patience, researchers discovered that participants who took part in Positive affect journaling - or "an emotion-focused self-regulation intervention" - found "less depressive symptoms and anxiety after 1 month and greater resilience after the first and second month, relative to [their] usual care."[1919]

Be curious about any resistance you may feel while teaching.

The Search Inside Yourself Leadership Institute states:

> Resistance fundamentally means you're saying to the world, "I don't like it the way it is." However, the world is *exactly* the way it is – which means the more you resist, the more unhappiness you create. Accepting things the way they are will not only allow you to enjoy life more, but also helps you facilitate change.[2020]

Try not to take things personally.

Even when a student or colleague does something that is designed to provoke or harm us, we can operate from a place of centeredness and continue to set healthy boundaries for ourselves.

Practicing mindful teaching leaves room for the student to be exactly were they are at any given moment and gives us the opportunity to speak to them from that place.

Self-Care

If we are mindful, we must regularly practice self-care.

Skovhill and Trotter-Mathison, the authors of *The Resilient Practitioner*, explain:

> In the theater of life, the other becomes the illuminated part of the stage; our I is often outside the illumination. The lives of others—their hopes, ideas, goals, aspirations, pains, fears, despair, anger—are in focus. Like a leaf under a microscope, we see all of this in highly illuminated detail… Out of the illuminated microscope, we can easily lose sight of our own needs. We even lose sight of the need to not respond to all needs around us.[2121]

Given the personal relationships we develop with our students, it is essential for us to recognize that we are susceptible to secondary traumatic stress (STS) or vicarious trauma (VT), which essentially means that we are exposed to what our students are saying and not saying. Sometimes used interchangeably, STS and VT "can occur in professionals who work in high-stress and trauma-exposed fields, but it can also affect civilians who do not work in high-trauma fields but are deeply impacted by stories that they are exposed to."[2222] As teachers, we tend to be very empathic, which means we are more prone to what is known as compassion burnout.

In her book, *Trauma Stewardship*, Laura van Dernoot Lipsky writes:

> Many of us are familiar with living in our heads, depending on our intellect, and developing enough external architecture to function and get by. But if we are to truly care for ourselves in a sustainable way, let alone anyone else - if we are to thrive - then something greater is required of us. We must discover an awareness of what allows us to live, moment by moment, from a centered place, from an awakened heart.[2323]

We can practice self-care each day in the following ways.

Avoid centering your identity on your work. van Dernoot Lipsky notes, "Many people get hooked on being involved in others' lives: solving their problems, becoming a powerful figure

for them, getting increasingly attached to the feeling of being needed and useful… We need to acknowledge the value of what we bring without making our work be all about us."[2424]

Find a meditation practice that works for you.

Psychiatrist, researcher, and educator Bessel Van Der Kolk notes in his book, *The Body Keeps the Score*:

> If we are aware of the constant changes in our inner and outer environment, we can mobilize to manage them. But we can't do this unless our watchtower, the MPFC [Medial Prefrontal Cortex], learns to observe what is going on inside us. This is why mindfulness practice, which strengthens the MPFC, is a cornerstone of recovery from trauma.[2525]

Get outside or bring the outside in.

A 2020 article in *Monitor on Psychology* states, "There is mounting evidence, from dozens and dozens of researchers, that nature has benefits for both physical and psychological human wellbeing… You can boost your mood just by walking in nature, even in urban nature."[2626] Researchers have discovered that even simulated nature (in the form of 360-degree nature videos in virtual reality) have benefits.[2727]

In lieu of virtual reality devices, consider #FindtheLizard on Instagram and Twitter, which was created by herpetologist Dr. Earyn McGee. You may also think about getting some plants for your studio - they help too.

Maintain your sense of humor. There is little that helps to hit the reset button faster than laughter. Keeping connected to your sense of humor is a vital tool for staying grounded and offering self-care.

Conclusion

Science is now telling us that curiosity, vulnerability, mindfulness, and self-care matter. We must listen. That does not mean we disregard what we know in favor of this new information. It means we expand our island of knowledge and ignorance to grow with the changing times.

We may not perfectly execute these four new pillars of teaching, but we can learn to fail better, moving ourselves forward each day.

Dr. Brené Brown reminds us, "What we know matters but who we are matters more."[2828] Consider this again more deeply: What you know is important. Who you are is *more* important.

May we hold this as our framing device as we continue learning together. When we do, the power we extend to our students will be far beyond our own.

This balance of head and heart, intellect and humanity, which is at the very center of transformative singing is it not? It is what we venerate. It is literally *for the sake of music*. Setting healthy boundaries but still remaining vulnerable. Quieting our minds so we can perceive the process of another. Taking care of ourselves so we can creating safer spaces of learning, where our students can try, fail, question, and soar.

I believe this is what whole-hearted teaching is. And what a privilege.

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