

Empathetic Connection in the Voice Studio

by Marisa Gray Atha

Several years ago I wrote a blog article called [“The 5-Minute Connection: Teaching the Whole Student.”](#) This post went unexpectedly viral amongst the independent voice teacher community, perhaps because it speaks so keenly to our experience as voice teachers — those first five minutes of a lesson serve as a check-in, an attunement, and an opportunity to form a genuine connection with our voice students, meeting them as whole beings. From the beginning of each lesson, and woven through ongoing relationship, the bond between teacher and student builds over time.



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lyrics onstage, when their voice cracks in a big belt moment, I commiserate. Beyond the musical, I also ride the waves of the snippets of life my students choose to share with me: romantic breakups, family members’ illness or death, a cancer diagnosis, milestones such as graduations, college applications, interviews for a new job or career change, retirement, births, pet shenanigans, descriptions of holidays, vacations, meaningful events, sports and extracurricular activities, physical health and fitness, mental wellness, emotional ups and downs... you name it, I’ve talked about it with a voice student.

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Sometimes a student will joke that I am like their therapist. We have a good laugh, nodding heads, with the clear understanding that I am not a licensed therapist, and I acknowledge my scope of practice, but nonetheless, our relationship holds so many threads of similarity to a therapy setting. My role as vocal technician, conveyor of theory/ear training, acting coach, genre specialist, etc. goes far beyond simply the musical and pedagogical. Like a therapist, mentor, life coach, or close friend, I am a repository for the goings-on of my students’ lives. I get to know them — their personality, sense of humor, age and maturity level, skills and abilities, challenges and obstacles, joys and celebrations. We see each other every week, in a focused, one-on-one setting, fundamentally comprised of deep listening — not even many close-knit adult friendships can boast this frequency and regularity that fosters the ongoing sense of being known.

When my students win the solo, are cast in their dream role, or produce their first original song, I get to cheer them on. When they are overlooked for the role, when they forget the

It takes a special person to be a voice teacher — someone who is gifted musically and knows how to teach, but also someone who can attune to each student, shifting oneself slightly to accommodate the other’s personhood, someone with emotional intelligence who can register the subtleties of a student. It also takes an awareness of how and when to draw professional boundaries.

Because the nature of the vocal instrument is so personal and vulnerable, aspects of a student’s emotional life often can’t help but bubble to the surface. A teacher must be aware when to hold safe space while a student has a necessary but messy moment, versus when it’s better to pull the student out of their negative, cyclical thought pattern and to focus on a manageable, tangible task. When a student tends to overshare, taking up large portions of the lesson time with tales of interpersonal drama, the teacher must be careful not to fall into a “friend” role and reciprocate with their own long-winded descriptions of baggage; like a therapist, coach, or mentor, a fine touch is needed to demonstrate knowledge of like experience with understanding, compassion, and empathy, but to let the student remain in the foreground, while gently steering the session back on task. Whether in regard to physical or mental health, a teacher must also consider what is beyond the scope of practice, and “when in doubt, refer out.” Akin to a referral to an ENT or laryngologist, if a teacher hears signs of vocal injury or disorder, a teacher may suggest a student contact a licensed therapist to address mental wellness; in circumstances of suspected abuse, a teacher may even need to serve as a mandated reporter, just as schoolteachers and sport coaches carry this responsibility. With such an often-intimate lens into a student’s life, the

voice teacher must maintain clarity, uprightness, and grounding, all the while holding a stable foundation for the student to learn and grow.

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A voice teacher holds a rather unique position as a trusted confidante, skilled mentor, proficient technician, and source of thoughtful consistency. During my years of vocal study, my favorite voice teachers were the ones who made me feel comfortable enough to make mistakes. They created an atmosphere of positivity, understanding, caring, humor, and unwavering support. They taught me the inner workings of my vocal instrument, but knew enough about the rest of my life to sense what kind of lesson I needed on a given day — exhausted and stressed out from midterms, maybe we just needed to let loose and sing the songs my voice loved best; well-rested and focused, maybe we take on the coloratura section of my newest aria.

From the first greeting and response to “How are you this week?”, through the opening warmups, an attuned voice teacher registers the subtle state of a student’s body, mind, and spirit, and gracefully steers the lesson, letting it unfold organically. Warm-ups and technique work are sculpted in real time: an overall sense of long-term direction and goals are interwoven with a present immediacy informed

by the state of being. Other aspects of the lesson unfold accordingly — song work, theory, expression, instrument development, foreign language diction, songwriting, audition preparation, etc. In contrast to an academic or group setting, the independent studio teacher is not confined to a set of expectations or standards to arrive at within a given time frame. The student leads with curiosity, and the teacher provides the continuum of scaffolding. From a heart-centered standpoint, the independent voice teacher grows to truly *know* the student, thereby facilitating the student’s freedom to learn, thrive, and express their own unique artistry through the medium of a fully embodied voice.

Marisa Gray Atha has enjoyed performing and teaching in the genres of musical theatre, classical, pop/rock, jazz, folk, and world since 2002. Appreciating a wide variety of genres, her performance experience includes solo recitals, operatic roles, choral concerts, community outreach programs, venue gigging, and recording. She is the owner of Three Sparrows Studio, providing private vocal instruction with a holistic approach that empowers her students to find and free their own natural sound. Marisa holds a Bachelor of Arts in music, with a concentration in vocal performance, Master of Music in classical vocal performance, bachelor’s degree in English, minor in psychology, and served as a vocal department artist-in-residence at school of the arts in San Francisco. She is a RYT-500 registered yoga teacher, CMT-200 certified meditation teacher, certified Core Singing voice instructor, charter member of the Speakeasy Cooperative for Independent Voice Teachers, and has 40 hours of Alexander Technique training. She has been published in the NATS Journal of Singing, NATS Inter Nos, OM Yoga & Lifestyle Magazine, and offers all manner of musical, mind/body, and wellness musings in her studio blog: threesparrowsstudio.com/blog.



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