

# Reflecting, Rethinking, Revising, and Reframing

Matthew Hoch



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In this article, associate editor Matthew Hoch offers thoughts on how to reinvigorate one's teaching, artistry, and scholarship. Many seasoned pedagogues fall into routines that can become uninspired or stagnant if not intentionally revitalized. Conscious efforts to get out of one's comfort zone through embracing technology, being fully present, and staying up to date on recent scholarship and research can provide a pathway to explore new possibilities. Letting go of perfectionism through positive reframing can also enhance the learning environment. The author concludes with an invitation to follow one's passion and explore unanswered questions in the field of voice pedagogy.

**A**NOTHER ACADEMIC YEAR BEGINS. This fall marks the beginning of my twentieth year of full-time employment in higher education. Many of my friends and colleagues with whom I went to undergraduate school are celebrating similar milestones as teachers, whether they are teaching at a college or university, in a public school, or in their private studios.

Whenever I approach one of these notable “multiple-of-five” years—and I understand that twenty is considered to be one’s “china” anniversary—I can’t help but reflect upon how much I have learned and changed since I began my journey as an educator. The past two decades have in some ways moved quickly, but so much has also happened. We are formed and shaped by our experiences—for better and for worse. In some ways I am the same as I have always been, and in other ways I have been fundamentally altered by what I have lived through and learned. Like many, I have traded youthful energy and confidence for hard-earned wisdom and a more nuanced worldview. I am sure this trajectory will continue as I climb inevitably toward old age, should I have the good fortune to have another twenty years ahead of me.

I do not think my experience is unique. The Dunning–Kruger effect suggests that confidence and wisdom are inversely proportional to one another.<sup>1</sup> Albert Einstein famously stated, “The more I learn, the more I realize how much I don’t know,” and similar aphorisms can be found throughout history, ranging from Aristotle to Mark Twain to Tony Bennett.<sup>2</sup> As the world changes and our minds accumulate more information, it is also human nature to cling to what we know, what is familiar, and what has worked for us before. This editorial advocates resisting this temptation in exchange for exploring new ideas in our teaching, artistry, and research. The following are several ideas to consider as another year gets underway.

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## GET OUT OF YOUR COMFORT ZONE

For most of us, familiarity is comforting. Most people do not like to have their routines disturbed, and once we find our groove, we tend to stay in it. The majority of my colleagues at the university are using the same syllabi as they were five years ago; a new academic year is prepared by changing the semester and a few dates (and little more). I think this habit is true across all disciplines, but I believe that stagnancy is uniquely problematic in the field of voice pedagogy, when we are assailed by new studies and information about the human voice seemingly on a monthly basis.

Staying current in one's field involves the routine implementation of new concepts into one's pedagogic approach; voice pedagogy is no exception. This can be done through a creative or innovative teaching and learning model. A forthcoming article in this column will explore the benefits of a "flipped" voice pedagogy classroom, a model that gives the student a more active role in the learning process.<sup>3</sup> There are also tools available to revamp one's courses or syllabi, which ideally should be done on a regular basis. To cite one resource that is particularly relevant, the "NATS Science-Informed Pedagogy Resources" were unveiled in 2022 at the NATS national conference in Chicago.<sup>4</sup> The sample curricula posted on the NATS website, if consulted and digested, should have immediate and appreciable impact on our courses and syllabi.<sup>5</sup>

Reflecting on my own habits, one area which I intend to develop over the course of the coming year is shifting my approach to vocal warm-ups, both in applied instruction and choral contexts. Like many, I have fallen back on my favorites, and while there is a methodology behind why I do what I do, I would be remiss to ignore the wide volume of research that has been published on vocal warm-ups over the past decade.<sup>6</sup> I am certain these findings have implications for improvement; warm-ups I have used since the 2005–2006 academic year can and should be adapted for greater effectiveness in 2024–2025. I am eager to broaden my repertoire in this way, and it is long overdue.

## EMBRACE TECHNOLOGY

The COVID-19 pandemic forced the world of voice teaching online. While some singing teachers had a head

start and had been teaching online for years, many of us began grappling with remote teaching for the first time. For many of us, the technology fell short of meeting our needs, both because of our steep learning curve and the technology itself. While online teaching will no doubt continue to be refined, things have come a long way in four years. Pedagogues of all ages have improved their online teaching, and while many were eager to learn technological teaching methods, others were more reluctant to pivot. These respective cohorts had varying levels of success and experiences as we navigated our way through the official end of the pandemic in 2023.

In 2021, NATS conducted a survey to explore singing teachers' experiences with online teaching during the 2020–2021 academic year.<sup>7</sup> While a majority of the 1,538 respondents found working online "somewhat difficult" (44 percent) or "very difficult" (15 percent), a majority of those surveyed were able to successfully adapt to the new pedagogic landscape and planned to continue using online teaching platforms post pandemic. There was overwhelming consensus that moving forward online teaching will be an important modality for teachers and students of singing to embrace.<sup>8</sup>

Although online teaching is perhaps the first technological advancement that comes to mind in the context of voice pedagogy, online conferences and other web-based resources for singing teachers have also proliferated exponentially in recent years, offering a plethora of instantly available pedagogic knowledge. When I began my academic career in 2005, few singing teachers had personal websites; now the majority do. A social media presence has become almost mandatory, particularly for voice teachers with private studios. In 2021, the *Journal of Singing* published a series of three graduated essays devoted to practical science in the voice studio; the articles were categorized from "lo-tech" to "high-tech," making them accessible to any reader's current level of comfort.<sup>9</sup> No matter where one is on their technological journey, there is a place to begin.

## BE PRESENT: SLOW DOWN AND RETHINK MULTITASKING

In March of 2024, the *New York Times* published an article titled "Why We Can't Stop Rushing."<sup>10</sup> The writer, Melissa Kirsch, argued that happiness and success is

directly tied to slowing down and being present. As to why we feel the need to hurry from one thing to the next, she writes the following:

We rush because we're late. We also rush because we want to move quickly away from discomfort. We rush to come up with solutions to problems that would benefit from more sustained consideration. We rush into obligations or decisions or relationships because we want things settled. . . . Worrying is a kind of rushing: It's uncomfortable to sit in a state of uncertainty, so we fast-forward the tape, accelerating our lives past the present moment into fear-some imagined scenarios.<sup>11</sup>

Closely related to rushing is multitasking—trying to accomplish several things at once, usually because we have taken on more responsibility than our schedules permit. How many of us have texted while driving to work or surreptitiously sent an email or worked on a project while on a Zoom meeting?

“Multitasking” is something of a misnomer, because cognitively it is not possible for humans to attend to many things at once.<sup>12</sup> According to informatics expert Gloria Mark, “when people think they’re multitasking, they’re actually switching their attention back and forth between two separate tasks.”<sup>13</sup> This has many downsides, because this alternation of focus means that “the brain has to sort through competing information and separate goals.”<sup>14</sup> Mark adds, “Every time you switch your attention to a new task, your brain has to reorient itself.”<sup>15</sup> Psychologist Anthony Wagner refers to this “switch cost,” meaning that each activity is going to be “slower and less accurate than [it] would have been if [one] stayed on a single task.”<sup>16</sup>

These facts suggest we would benefit greatly from slowing down and focusing on one task at a time. This advice is particularly relevant to my quest for self-improvement, as admittedly I have spent much of my life rushing and multitasking. If this is the case, then the research infers that I consequently have spent much of my time not being as present as I could have been; the quality of my work has likely been compromised as a result of this lifestyle. Striving for this habitual change will surely be a priority for me over the course of the coming year. Yes, this means that things might take more time, but the science suggests that the qualitative difference that will result from being focused and in the moment will be worth this trade-off.

## RECAST CRITICISM THROUGH POSITIVE REFRAMING

Most musicians seem to suffer from perfectionism. While no professional basketball player makes every foul shot, performers routinely feel like failures over one poorly executed or out-of-tune note. Many of us feel we have to uphold perfectionism as a value to be at our best, but research suggests that there are healthier and more positive ways to go about achieving one’s goals. Psychologist Yuxin Sun states that perfectionism is “the feeling of never arriving to that place, never feeling good enough, never feeling adequate,” and Christina Caron personifies the same as “a harsh internal voice that belittles and chastises us.”<sup>17</sup> In sum, being a perfectionist is a profoundly *negative* way to live one’s life.

Recently over lunch, one of my colleagues recounted a workshop she once attended with sports psychologist Alma Thomas, coauthor (with Shirlee Emmons) of *Power Performance for Singers: Transcending the Barriers*.<sup>18</sup> Part of Thomas’s presentation focused on “positive reframing” within the context of the voice studio. In a nutshell, positive reframing is additive rather than subtractive. A singer, for instance, when asked how they should score their performance on a scale of 1 to 10, will likely take stock of what went *wrong* and then “subtract from 10.” Thus, a score of 7 out of 10 would be more about the three points deducted than the seven points earned. A positive reframing would, in contrast, focus on the “7” instead—i.e., what went *right* during (the majority of) the performance. The three yet-to-be-earned points can then be recast as goals toward which to strive as opposed to shortcomings to regret. This has significant implications for voice pedagogy, and I intend to devote an entire article to this topic in the coming months.<sup>19</sup>

## WHAT ARE OTHERS RESEARCHING?

Falling into a static routine sometimes means that we aren’t exposing ourselves to the current state of research in the field of voice pedagogy. To an extent, this is understandable, as staying up-to-date and informed often involves considerable time and expense. Few institutions provide enough financial resources to attend *every* symposium and conference offered by the Voice Foundation, PAVA, and NATS, and private studio teachers often have

no grants from which to draw—not to mention the revenue lost by taking a week off from teaching. Although I am on the faculty of an R1 institution, I routinely exhaust my travel funding. During my prepromotion years, I spent much of my own money attending these events, which turned out to be a wise academic decision despite being an irresponsible financial choice at times. Staying current through reading current research is also challenging as there are only so many hours in the day. There are other factors that intervene as well. After my last promotion in 2020, I found that my schedule at the university became flooded with institutional service, endeavors I somewhat enjoy but are nonetheless extremely time-consuming.

Staying current, however, is essential if we are to continue to pedagogically evolve. Online resources—including virtual conferences and social media chat groups—are some of the least expensive and easiest ways to stay involved. It costs nothing, for instance, to listen to Nicholas Perna’s “VocalFri” podcast, and online training, such as NYSTA’s long-running professional development program, are considerably more affordable than on-site training.<sup>20</sup> Since the pandemic, PAVA’s annual symposium has also provided a hybrid option. However, live events continue to be important, offering a personal touch and enhanced experience that only in-person events can provide. A biennial NATS conference can be inexpensive if one saves weekly over a two-year timespan, and—truthfully—all of us spend money on personal indulgences. As Mahatma Gandhi said, “Action expresses priorities.”<sup>21</sup>

### WHAT ARE OTHERS NOT RESEARCHING?

Perhaps even more important, what arouses your curiosity that is *not* currently being researched? Compared to many other disciplines, in my opinion, voice pedagogy as a field is still in its infancy in many ways. One only needs to look at the degree to which voice pedagogy books change and evolve every ten years to realize how exponentially our knowledge base is expanding. However, many unanswered questions still remain. What are *your* fundamental questions about singing? Ask them earnestly and structure studies to answer them. Additionally, much of the most important research that is currently taking place in our field is interdisciplinary and collaborative. If there is a topic that interests you

but you lack expertise in a dependent area, seek out a colleague to do a collaborative study. There is still much to learn and discover.

### LOOK TO YOUR JUNIOR COLLEAGUES FOR INSPIRATION

This subheading may initially seem to be the most controversial at first glance, as it subverts the traditional advice of “look to your elders” for wisdom. But any serious effort to break a routine that has become stale or reinvigorate one’s teaching depends upon exposure to new ideas and innovation. While the older generation of singing teachers has undoubtedly accumulated voluminous knowledge (and we should absolutely give our utmost respect and seek to learn from our senior colleagues), there is, in my view, no cohort that is more creative and innovative than the remarkable generation that is beginning their ascent through the ranks of our profession. It takes great humility to concede that someone who is twenty years younger and less experienced than you has something to teach you, but my personal observation—ranging from conference presentations, blogs and websites, to social media group discussions—suggests that this is indeed the case. In the realm of technology alone, I certainly have learned from them. (I didn’t even have a cell phone in college—no one I knew did!) Perhaps most important, the boundless enthusiasm of these young professionals is palpable and contagious. I could not be more excited about the future of our profession.

### BE TRUE TO YOURSELF

While it is healthy and wise to do all of the above, at the end of the day it is beneficial to reflect and ask yourself what truly energizes and interests you most. What are you most curious about? What genres of music do you genuinely love the most? If you truly had your wish, how would you spend your forty-plus-hour workweek? Where would you like to be and live, and alongside whom would you like to work? How would you spend your free time? (And we all have free time, even if we are reluctant to admit it.) Make answers to these questions your goals and strive toward a schedule, teaching load, or research program that bests reflects what is closest to your heart.

## CONCLUSION

Many of the thoughts expressed above are little more than personal musings and reflections from the vantage point of a mid-career academic. The reader of this article will no doubt have their own personal short list of goals as they seek to reinvigorate their own teaching. Over the past year, however, I have engaged in many conversations with colleagues that indicate they have had similar feelings of stagnancy as they have become more firmly entrenched in their professional routines.

Reinventing oneself is not easy; it is, in fact, very difficult and can even be frightening. Embracing change, however, is not merely desirable—it is *vital* and a critical part of our journey to be the best pedagogues that we can possibly be. It is the author's hope that this brief and incomplete list of possibilities will be seen as an invitation to begin an exciting new personal chapter in our ever-evolving profession.

## NOTES

1. David Dunning, "The Dunning-Kruger Effect: On Being Ignorant of One's Own Ignorance," *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology* 44 (January 2011): 247–96.
2. Aristotle's quote is translated variously from passages in *Metaphysics*. The remark attributed to Mark Twain is the following: "When I was a boy of fourteen, my father was so ignorant I could hardly stand to have the old man around. But when I got to be twenty-one, I was astonished at how much he had learned in seven years." The exact origin and authenticity of this quotation, however, is in dispute. Tony Bennett, in his 2012 autobiography *The Good Life*, wrote, "I can't ask for more out of life, and the more I learn, the less I know."
3. Nicholas Perna, Yvonne Gonzales Redman, and Joshua D. Glasner, "Flipping the Voice Pedagogy Frame: Background, Foundation, and Framework," *Journal of Singing* 81, no. 2 (November/December 2024): *forthcoming*.
4. "NATS Launches Science-Informed Pedagogy Resources," National Association of Teachers of Singing (NATS), August 9, 2022, [https://www.nats.org/cgi/page.cgi/\\_article.html/What\\_s\\_New/NATS\\_launches\\_science-informed\\_voice\\_pedagogy\\_resources](https://www.nats.org/cgi/page.cgi/_article.html/What_s_New/NATS_launches_science-informed_voice_pedagogy_resources).
5. "Science-Informed Pedagogy Resources," National Association of Teachers of Singing (NATS), accessed April 14, 2024, [https://www.nats.org/cgi/page.cgi/Science-Informed\\_Voice\\_Pedagogy\\_Resources.html](https://www.nats.org/cgi/page.cgi/Science-Informed_Voice_Pedagogy_Resources.html).
6. Several of numerous studies on the vocal warm-up include the following: Jennifer Trost, "The Aging Voice: Challenges and Exercises," *Choral Journal* 63, no. 4 (November/December 2022): 24–33; Christopher Loftin and Matthew Hoch, "Attention or Autopilot? Motor Learning and the Choral Warm-Up," *Choral Journal* 62, no. 7 (March/April 2022): 41–47; Chiara Mezzedimi, Maria Carla Spinosi, Tommaso Massaro, Fabio Ferretti, and Jacopo Cambi, "Singing Voice: Acoustic Parameters after Vocal Warm-Up and Cool-Down," *Logopedics Phoniatrics Vocology* 45, no. 2 (2020): 57–65; Matthew Hoch and Mary J. Sandage, "Exercise Science Principles and the Vocal Warm-Up: Implications for Singing Voice Pedagogy," *Journal of Voice* 32, No. 1 (January 2018): 79–84.
7. "Majority of Singing Teachers Plan to Teach Online Post-Pandemic, According to Survey," <https://www.nats.org>, National Association of Teachers of Singing, August 27, 2021, [https://www.nats.org/cgi/page.cgi/\\_article.html/What\\_s\\_New/Majority\\_of\\_singing\\_teachers\\_plan\\_to\\_teach\\_online\\_post-pandemic\\_according\\_to\\_survey](https://www.nats.org/cgi/page.cgi/_article.html/What_s_New/Majority_of_singing_teachers_plan_to_teach_online_post-pandemic_according_to_survey).
8. "COVID-19 Pandemic Survey Report: Over 1,500 Singing Industry Professionals Share Insights and Lessons Learned," <https://www.nats.org>, National Association of Teachers of Singing, accessed June 8, 2024, [https://www.nats.org/\\_Library/COVID\\_19\\_Resource\\_Docs/2021\\_COVID\\_Pandemic\\_Survey\\_Report\\_v19\\_HiRes.pdf](https://www.nats.org/_Library/COVID_19_Resource_Docs/2021_COVID_Pandemic_Survey_Report_v19_HiRes.pdf).
9. David Meyer and Lynn Holding, "Practical Science in the Studio: 'No-Tech' Strategies," *Journal of Singing* 77, no. 3 (January/February 2021): 359–67; John Nix, David Meyer, Ron Scherer, and Deirdre Michael, "Practical Science in the Studio, Part 2: 'Low-Tech' Strategies," *Journal of Singing* 77, no. 4 (March/April 2021): 509–13; David Meyer, John Nix, and David Okerlund, "Practical Science in the Studio, Part 3, 'High-Tech' Strategies," *Journal of Singing* 77, no. 5 (May/June 2021): 633–43.
10. Melissa Kirsch, "Why We Can't Stop Rushing," *New York Times*, March 3, 2024, <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/03/02/briefing/why-we-cant-stop-rushing.html>.
11. *Ibid.*
12. The exception to this rule is when at least one of the activities does not require much thinking and can be performed almost automatically. For example, it is comparatively easy to take a walk while listening to music, whereas communicating with someone in a foreign language while following an instruction manual to put together a piece of furniture would be considerably more difficult (if not impossible).
13. As quoted in Anna Borges, "A Multitasker's Guide to Regaining Focus," *New York Times*, March 11, 2024, <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/03/11/well/mind/multitasking-tips.html>.
14. *Ibid.*

15. Ibid.
16. Ibid.
17. Christina Caron, "Perfectionism Is a Trap—Here's How to Escape," *New York Times*, April 11, 2024, <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/04/11/well/mind/perfectionism-social-comparison.html>.
18. Shirlee Emmons and Alma Thomas, *Power Performance for Singers: Transcending the Barriers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998).
19. While writing this editorial, I was also finishing work as editor of the fourth edition of *The Singing Book* by Cynthia Vaughn and Meribeth Dayme (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2024). Throughout the entirety of this two-year project, I was continually impressed by its consistent theme of positivity as a crucial component of learning. Few pedagogy texts have emphasized this approach to the degree which these coauthors and Emmons/Thomas have in their respective works.
20. "VocalFri Podcast," <https://www.vocalfri.com>, accessed April 28, 2024; "Professional Development Program," New York Singing Teachers Association (NYSTA), <https://nysta.org/professional-development-program/>, accessed April 28, 2024.
21. This quotation is ubiquitous.

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