

Sure, I'm a Singer!: The Empowering Effect of Vocal Portfolios at the Secondary School Level

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The Identity Crisis of "the Singer"

What exactly are the qualifications of a singer? More importantly, when does one really start to think of oneself as such? Can people call themselves "singers" if they sing in a music class, in a choir, in a recital hall, around the campfire, or even in the car along with the radio? It is interesting to think of how many people participate in organised or independent singing activities such as the examples mentioned above, yet many of those people, if asked, would not call themselves "singers."

Applying this thought to the secondary school environment, do students who take vocal music classes necessarily consider themselves singers? I would argue that they do not automatically designate themselves as singers or even musicians. Students should be encouraged to apply musical curriculum ideas, critical thinking skills and their own musicianship in a variety of ways outside of the music classroom; however, if they do not think of themselves as musicians or singers, this does not seem likely to occur. If music educators are to be encouraging and instilling a love of music and song in students, this idea of identity needs to be further explored. This paper will focus on the use of vocal portfolios to develop a musical identity: to foster vocal development, self-assessment skills, and lifelong musical learning in the secondary school music classroom. The ideas presented can certainly be applied to any learning environment to encourage and foster the same goals.

Performance-based Assessment

Portfolios in the educational context are described as purposeful collections of student work that provide evidence of learning and exhibit a student's effort, progress, and achievement. Portfolios often include a wide range of material to demonstrate learning over a period of time in one or more curriculum areas (Rolheiser, Bower, & Stevahn, 2000, p. 2). Due to the shift in educational philosophy away from traditional *paper and pencil* assessments and towards more authentic assessments (also called performance-based assessments), portfolios have become more widely used in the

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classroom in recent years as an assessment tool and also as an effective means of communicating student progress to parents.

Through performance-based assessments, the focus of the assessment shifts away from single skill learning to a more foundational view of process, understanding, and application (Mullen, Britten, & McFadden, 2005, p. 4). This type of assessment also allows students the opportunity to reflect on their learning and emphasizes the importance of the process as opposed to the final product as the goal. Performance-based assessment is an effective means of providing encouragement as well as providing a model for continued learning. This form of assessment also works well because it takes into account the uniqueness of each learner. All students, despite their differences in musical skill, background, learning styles, and abilities, can create a portfolio within the set assessment structure.

In his reflections on education, Eisner (1998) expands on this important idea:

Another factor that undermines the aesthetic is that the rewards that are emphasized in class are rewards emanating from test performance. What far too many teachers and students care about almost solely is how well they do on tests. Again, the focus is on the short-term and the instrumental. Yet the enduring outcomes of educations are to be found in consummatory satisfactions—the joy of the ride, not simply arriving at the destination (p. 42).

What does the portfolio look like?

Musicians seem to be the great collectors of music scores, concert programs, newspaper reviews, and CD recordings. Perhaps some of us can recall parents gathering up evidence of our childhoods in baby books or photo albums. These two examples of collecting can be thought of as a form of portfolio: the collection portfolio where one simply collects many artifacts about a person or subject.

It is important to remember that the look and type of portfolio can vary with the subject area or focus. A more traditional portfolio might be presented in binder, duotang, or file folder format; however, this is not the only presentation method. Portfolios could be presented in various formats such as scrapbooks, shoeboxes, photo albums, or envelopes. Technology has also allowed the development of online portfolios, website portfolios, and CD portfolios. There are no right or wrong portfolio formats, but it is suggested to choose the format according to the focus of the portfolio.

There can be many focuses to portfolios, such as a collection portfolio, which consists of many pieces of student work and minimum amount of reflection; a skills portfolio, which is used to demonstrate the skill of the student over a period of time; a showcase portfolio, which contains the best work of a student over a period of time; and a growth portfolio, which aims to demonstrate student progress over a period of time (Rolheiser, Bower, & Stevahn, 2000, p. 3). Certain models of portfolios will include more emphasis on reflection than others. It is up to educators to determine what type of portfolio best suits the needs and goals of their students.

Brain research and reflective learning

Reflective learning is an important part of the portfolio process. It is through reflection and analysis on their artifacts that students begin to make connections, develop new ideas, and continue to grow as learners and musicians. Students need to be guided in their reflective responses and taught that reflections are not simply summaries, but that reflections analyze and synthesize knowledge (Cole, 2000, p. 16).

According to research, reflective learning develops self-confidence in setting future learning goals and in accomplishing these goals as well as the ability to set realistic yet challenging goals. Reflective learning can also develop such critical thinking skills as problem solving, decision making skills, and the ability to self-evaluate (Rolheiser, Bower, & Stevahn, 2000, p. 37). The ability to set realistic goals is directly linked to the confidence level of a student in their musical development. This sense of confidence can lead to their identity building as a singer. As well, the critical thinking skills developed through reflective learning are essential to encourage independent artistic decisions and ideas to be made by the students and thus, independent musicianship and the ability to be a lifelong learner and musician.

How do portfolios foster vocal development?

Portfolios are excellent learning and assessment tools in secondary school music classrooms that also serve to encourage vocal development and build this sense of identity as a singer in young people. Here are four concrete examples of how portfolios can foster vocal development in a secondary classroom.

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Portfolios illustrate progress over a period of time

The nature of any process-based assessment, such as the portfolio, is to show development over a period of time. It is sometimes difficult for young musicians to distance themselves from their daily music classes, choral rehearsals, and practice sessions in order to see the growth and development that they are constantly making. A portfolio can illustrate this for the student at any time through the year as they look through their portfolio to see what they have accomplished and where they still have room for growth in order to meet their goals.

This artifact is a very crucial part of my vocal development because it is somewhat of a progress check with my voice and has helped me realize the kind of developments my voice has gone through over the past three years. In this song, I was having trouble using chest voice versus head voice the whole way through and with my breathing. Now when I sing it, I can sing in a sturdy head voice the whole way through and am able to make longer phrases (Grade 12 music student, personal communication).

Portfolios encourage more real life singing opportunities

Sometimes students seem to make music with joy in music classes, but do not carry this enthusiasm and pride in music-making outside the classroom. Or in some cases, students are making music outside of the music classroom, but do not realize the link or value that informal music-making can have on their identities as musicians. An example of this would be a student who sings a solo in a religious service or a group of students who create informal bands and sing popular songs for fun rather than for marks or as part of a practice routine. Such real life singing opportunities are an important part of the musical development of a student and often the classroom music teacher is unaware of these events.

One of Eisner's (1998) eight criteria for creating and appraising new assessment practices is that the tasks used to assess what students know and can do need to reflect the tasks they will encounter in the world outside schools, not merely those limited to the schools themselves (p. 140). Through the use of a portfolio, students could reflect on all singing experiences in a formal manner.

I am personally proud of my performance although the [Canadian Idol] judge did not agree with the tone that I have, and this is quite a big milestone for me as I need to learn how to accept criticism well (Grade 12 music student, personal communication).

Portfolios instil pride in music-making

One of the ways in which students become proud of a creation or performance is when they are able to take ownership of it. Portfolios allow students to take ownership of all aspects of their vocal development as well as the successes that they experience in performing and creating as musicians. Portfolios are also an excellent tool in creating pride in personal music-making for students since they are a concrete item (binder, CD, box) that can be shared proudly with others.

Standing in a chapel full of people either mouthing the words to a hymn or lazily singing along is quite intimidating to someone like me who has to sing as loudly as she can. I'm very proud of myself because not only did I work up the courage to sing as loudly and gracefully as possible, but I think that it is working in encouraging others to sing too (Grade 11 music student, personal communication)!

Portfolios develop self-analysis skills in young musicians (independence from teacher)

Not only do portfolios develop self-analysis and reflective skills in young musicians, but they also, and perhaps most importantly, lead to independence from teachers. Through taking ownership of their own learning, students develop the confidence to make artistic decisions about their performances and better apply guidance and advice from their music teachers.

I am glad that I still have another year with portfolio evaluation, as I like to evaluate my singing skills in an honest, analytical way. This helps me to realize which areas I would like to improve on personally and, through different experiences and by doing different songs, I learn from them rather than putting them aside as insignificant events in my life. Rather than throwing away experiences, I have to recall

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them and decide on what I could have done better, which is a great skill to have so early in my singing career. In learning from my past experiences, I believe I have a solid foundation for the future of my vocal development (Grade 11 music student, personal communication).

The Structure of the Vocal Portfolio

As previously outlined, there are many different *looks* to a portfolio and it is up to educators to decide the most appropriate focus for their students. The format of the portfolio can be altered and adapted to best suit the goals of the students. I will share the model that I have developed and that has worked the most effectively in my senior vocal classes (grades 11 and 12).

The vocal portfolios that my music students create are meant to show progress and musical development through a 10-month period. It is expected that the portfolios be professional in appearance so that they can be taken into auditions or musical job interviews as well as shared with their peers. These vocal portfolios are called "process-folios" or growth portfolios as they include work in progress, best pieces, and significant pieces as determined by the student. This version of the vocal portfolio also includes dates to monitor growth over time and uses criteria set in relation to curriculum expectations. They are intended to show student progress in understanding content and skill development over a longer period of time. Each month, my students are required to collect an artifact, which will represent a vocal activity and then write a description that analyzes the artifact. The vocal portfolio artifact can be anything from a song score, a video of a performance, a tape of a rehearsal session, a photo, or anything else of the student's choosing that represents their vocal development. At the end of the school year, the students have created a wonderful collection of artifacts and reflections that document their development as young vocalists.

What has worked for me?

Through the implementation and use of vocal portfolios in my vocal program, I have found certain elements that work particularly well. The students begin the portfolio process in September with a vocal biography assignment where they are asked to write a formal style biography of themselves as a singer. This assignment sets the professional

tone for the year in the portfolio process as the students immediately think of themselves as singers not just *students in a vocal class*.

It is also important to consider self-assessment tasks before beginning the portfolio process to focus students on their goals as musicians. By using curriculum expectations and proper music terminology in these goals (perhaps by giving students a list of ideas to choose from and add to), the portfolio is connected to the curriculum in a meaningful way.

The use of a set structure for each entry works very well. The students have the element of choice in selecting their monthly portfolio artifact, which gives them ownership of the portfolio as well. They choose what to include (and what not to include) in the portfolio which is very empowering for them.

Artifact Reflection template

1. Descriptive title:
2. Date of activity:
3. Description of activity:
4. Analysis:

Figure A: Sample of the vocal portfolio monthly template

Questions to Consider

As music educators and choral conductors reflect on the idea of implementing portfolios in their programs, here are a few questions to think about in this regard:

1. What should be included in the portfolio?
2. What will the portfolio look like?
3. Who will select the contents of the portfolio?
4. When and how will the portfolio be reviewed?

The vocal portfolio is an effective motivational performance-based assessment tool at any level. Portfolios can serve to encourage singing and vocal development as well as to instill a wonderful sense of pride and confidence in young vocalists.

As my final year of high school slows to an end, so does my high school vocal career. While I'm filled with nostalgic feelings, at the same time I know that this is a step forward in life and that at university I plan to take music electives. Thanks to my

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improvements this year, I've found an even deeper love for music, especially vocally. I am now confident in my skills as well as my vocal and music knowledge (Grade 12 music student, personal communication).

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