

Critical Discernment of Quality in Singing: An Approach to Encouraging Self-regulated Singers through Peer Assessment

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Abstract

In 2008, as part of the ongoing development of a learning model for singing using sociocultural theories, peer assessment was introduced into the singing component of a tertiary level, undergraduate, creative arts performance course. The purpose of this exercise was to encourage students to become self-regulated learners capable of continuing with their learning after graduation. Falchikov (2007) has argued that peer involvement in assessment has the potential to encourage learning and develop assessment skills that will last a lifetime. The project investigated what effect changing the role of the actor/singer in an assessment has on the group and also the individual development of graduate qualities such as critical thinking and responsibility. It also looked at what process was involved in order to integrate peer assessment into the subject and what kind of support was needed to achieve this. The research found the main benefit that the students perceived from the exercise was that it helped them to reflect on their own practice by having to make the effort to interact with the criteria given in order to properly assess a peer. The added responsibility of having to assess other students encouraged them to interact more carefully with the descriptors of quality so that “discernment of quality becomes a key aspect of learning (Sadler, 2008, p.18).”

Overview

In 2008, peer assessment was introduced into the singing component of an undergraduate bachelor of performance course, as part of an ongoing initiative to position Vygotskian (1978, 1986, 1987) socio-cultural theories within the context of learning singing (Latukefu, 2010). Sociocultural is a term used by Wertsch (1991) in order to understand how mental action is situated in cultural, historical, and institutional settings. This definition suits the present research because singing teaching is firmly situated in cultural, historical, and institutional settings. Vygotsky (1978) wrote that the keystone of his method the “dialectical approach, while admitting the influence of nature on man, asserts that man, in turn, affects nature and creates through his changes in nature new natural conditions for his existence (p. 60).” This ability to create new natural conditions for existence was of interest to me in relation to assessment. I was curious as to how changing the natural assessment conditions of experts judging students, to students judging each other, could affect learning.

There were certain key concepts that were used in development of the peer assessment exercise. Vygotsky’s (1978) theory of Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) promotes the idea of a novice performing a range of tasks that they cannot accomplish on their own, but in collaboration with an expert are able to achieve. The emphasis is on the collaboration and eventual shared understanding that develops between the expert and novice. This concept was built into the design at the implementation stage of the research. Vygotsky discussed the ZPD in terms of assessment and instruction. Vygotsky was interested in assessing the ways in which

learners make progress. He endorsed the notion that formal instruction, which moves ahead of the student's development, is in itself a source of development (Daniels, 2008).

The formal aspect of each school subject is that in which the influence of instruction on development is realized. Instruction would be completely unnecessary if it merely utilized what had already matured in the developmental process, if it were not itself a source of development (Vygotsky, 1987, p. 212).

A sociocultural approach, to learning singing encourages students to become better self-regulated learners (Montalvo & Torres, 2004) capable of continuing with their learning after graduation (Falchikov, 2007). In order to achieve this, students must be capable of thinking critically about their own singing. Learning singing should not be simply transmission of technical and musical skills through teacher-led reflection-in-action (Gaunt, 2007) but, should aim to develop a conceptual understanding of both the theory and performance basis of singing. This would allow students to guide their own learning in refining their singing. Vygotsky's (1986) theory of concept formation is related to the theoretical view of learning as a socially and culturally mediated process, which brings together the individual experience of the learner and the wealth of the theoretical knowledge accumulated in society.

Self-regulated learners are self-motivated and use strategies that help them achieve what they desire in relation to their learning. They will often participate in the control and regulation of academic tasks (Montalvo *et al.*, 2004). The introduction of peer assessment into the university undergraduate singing course was a strategy to try and encourage students to participate in an academic task, which in turn would make them think about what constituted quality in their own as well as others' singing. It also moved ahead of a student's own development in that they had to judge another student on notions of quality in singing, which they themselves might not necessarily be capable of reaching.

Research Context and Participants

The research was conducted in the Faculty of Creative Arts at an Australian non-metropolitan University. The students were second and third year Bachelor of Creative Arts students who all study singing as part of their skill acquisition for the theatre. The students were all aged between 18 to 21 years of age. Some students had previous singing training and some did not. The students all learnt a Vaccai singing exercise in class for the purpose of the assessment. There were 40 students altogether participating in the project.

Teacher/Researcher

It is important to acknowledge the fact that as the teacher/researcher in this project, I needed to negotiate multiple roles in the research setting. First, I was the course designer who framed the sociocultural context for the study; secondly, I was the teacher who carried out the pedagogical intervention of implementing peer assessment into the subject; and thirdly, I was the researcher who interacted with participants and generated field notes.

Methods and Project Phases

There were two phases in the project. In the first phase, six students were chosen using purposive sampling to ensure that gender and indigenous and international students of the student population were represented in the sample. The focus group met twice and in the meetings developed descriptors of quality in singing and discussed the best way to implement peer assessment into the subject. The importance of student participation in the process of developing of assessment criteria was a consistent theme in the literature on peer assessment in music courses (Hunter, 1996; Blom, 2004; Searby, 1997; Daniel, 2004). In the second phase, peer assessment was implemented in the singing subject and the rest of the students were included in this phase of the project. At the end of the university term a questionnaire was sent out to the students in order to evaluate the peer assessment exercise and 30 out of 40 students responded to the questionnaire. Complementary data about the student experience of the exercise was collected through reflective journals that students are required to write, and the in-class notes from the lecturer.

Data	Purpose	How it was collected
Two focus groups	To gather information from the students about criteria they thought important for high quality singing.	Six students attended two focus groups in which they discussed the best process for implementing peer assessment into singing classes and how to solve possible problems that might arise during the exercise. Discussions in focus groups were recorded and analysed.
Questionnaire	To find out what students found useful about peer assessment.	Administered at the end of the project.

Table 1. Data collection.

Implementation

The students were all given a copy of the descriptors of quality, constructed by the focus group, but they were also given instruction to add their own descriptions if they thought there was something missing.

Technical achievement

Anchoring- ability to anchor in shoulders, back, and throat constantly while singing
Good Posture
Silent intake of breath and good airflow
Energized - Performance is well energized
Intelligibility - vowels are well formed and resonant
Sob - attempt at sob
Twang - able to incorporate twang in all registers
Release of constriction - ability to release constriction on long phrases and in all registers
Vocal colour - imaginative phrasing and thought processes
Accuracy - ability to accurately sing tunes and rhythms with words

Interpretative skills

Communicate with audience - ability to communicate through body language and vocal colour

Ability to affect audience through imagination and thought process

Appropriate stylistic choices

Deep involvement with music and commitment to communication with audience

Professional skills

Memorization is complete and reliable

Establishes a relationship with audience and accompanist

Performer is physically and musically prepared for the performance

Qualitative judgements to think about

Performance is compelling and forceful

Performance is sophisticated and commanding in presentation

Performance is thoughtful and engaging

Performance is technically well executed, but bland and unimaginative

Performance is under-prepared and lacks skill

Performance is unsatisfying and musically unconvincing

Figure 1. Descriptors of quality composed by students (Latukefu, 2010).

In the first week of class students used the descriptors of quality as a guide to giving criticism in class. The teacher modeled and led the critiquing in order to give examples of how to use the descriptors of quality to suggest improvements in a performance. The teacher then withdrew herself from the discussions as the university term progressed so that by week 5, she was facilitating rather than leading discussions. At the start of the term, the teacher made sure she stood in the centre of the group between the performer and the rest of the class and gave her critiques in the style of a Master Class with an expert. At the end of the 5 weeks, the teacher sat at the side of the group allowing students to take over the space physically.

In week 6, the students were placed in panels of three students per panel and the panels took turns to judge a peer as they sang. The ethics of being part of a panel were discussed at this time including protecting the confidentiality of the panel and coming to consensus rather than allowing a particular person on the panel to override the others. Responsibility for the marking of a peer was stressed by the lecturer and students were asked not to take this lightly. Fading of support (Falchikov, 2007) or scaffolding was used in phases of implementation (see figure 2).

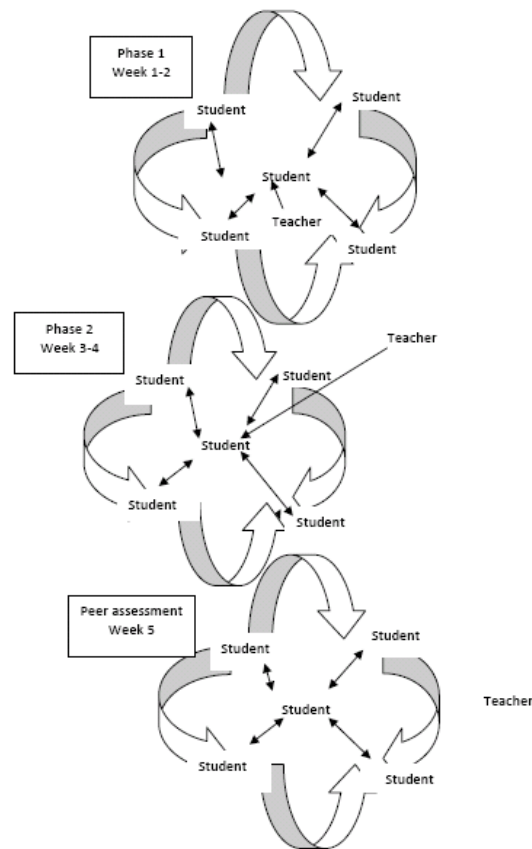


Figure 2. Implementation of peer assessment exercise over 4 weeks. The teacher is central to the discussions in the first couple of weeks and then slowly withdraws herself.

Results

A survey sent out at the end of the peer assessment exercise was concerned with students' reactions to peer assessment in relation to their learning and self-regulation. Results from the survey showed that the main benefit that the students perceived from the exercise was that it helped them to reflect on their own practice by having to make the effort to interact with the criteria that described good quality singing in order to properly assess a peer:

I feel like I have a better grasp and am more competent in terms of assessing someone's ability to perform well and now have a set of criteria I can apply . . . to my own practice as I can be careful not to do things that impair performance that I have noticed in others (personal communication).

"It will assist me to critically assess performances, which I may be required to do when in the industry (personal communication)."

I believe it helped my learning. I really enjoyed taking on the teacher role and being able to assess someone extensively and be able to express my own reflections on the student. I feel it is beneficial for the future where I

will need to not only accept criticism but give it as well (Latukefu, 2010, p.9).

The majority of students, 83.3% ($n = 25$) strongly agreed and 16.7% ($n = 5$) agreed that peer assessment made them think more critically. When asked whether the peer assessment exercise gave them a sense of responsibility to their classmates, 62.1% ($n = 18$) strongly agreed, 37.9% ($n = 11$) agreed that it did.

“By assessing my classmates I found that during my assessment I was thinking critically and could therefore work to apply the things I had noticed lacking in previous assessments (personal communication).”

I liked the ability to be able to discuss as a panel why and how the performance of the singer worked. Playing the assessor gave me an understanding what are the standards and criteria I need to full fill (*sic*) to be able to perform well in my own performance (personal communication).

Talking with the rest of the panel was really good for solidifying ideas of what to observe for technique. Also because of the detailed criteria everyone put a lot more effort into preparing for the assessment because we knew what we would be judged on (personal communication).

I got a chance to put myself on the other side of the table. The judging side and see what it is that judges view as important in a performance which helps me reflect on what I need to work on (personal communication).

“The exercise enabled me to critically evaluate my peers, which is something which is not done very often (Latukefu, 2010, p.7).”

Conclusion

Students co-constructed the assessment related knowledge, which they were able to appropriate as their own and apply to self-assessment and the finding of this study in relation to peer assessment was that the more ownership the students had of the assessment task the more seriously they took it. Vygotsky (1978) spoke of development occurring in cycles of maturation processes that have already been completed and those that are just beginning to develop and mature. The modeling by the teacher in the first few weeks of implementation helped provide a critical language and framework for those students who did not have the experience to describe what they could see or hear. Peer assessment was an effective strategy in the local context of a higher education degree to develop in students an ability to discern quality in themselves and others by participating in the control and regulation of academic tasks (Montalvo *et al.*, 2004). This kind of agency helps students to become self-regulated because by judging and making meaning of what others are doing when they sing they are reflecting on their own quality of singing.

Author's Note

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