

The Singing Classroom: A Community of Musicians

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Singing as Knowledge, Singing as Community

Singing is a powerful human activity. The intentional use of our body to create musical sounds is an intensely felt physical, spiritual and cognitive pursuit. When people sing songs, even at the most beginning level, they are drawing on an incredible amount of what David Elliott has characterized as "procedural knowledge" or knowing-in-action (Elliott, 1993, 1995). Procedural knowledge is one component of musicianship, a highly complex, multidimensional form of knowledge that develops over the course of an individual's experience with music. Access to her singing voice is not only every student's right, it is also central to the development of musicianship (Rao, 1997). Singing is a key way that individuals develop and demonstrate their musical knowledge, their musicianship. But singing is more than an individual aurally demonstrating her musicianship. Recent research in music education stresses the multi-dimensional nature of music making as both an aural/physical phenomenon and a social one (Bowman, 1993a, p. 55). The sounds touch us and the social nature binds us in community. To think of one feature without the other is to miss an essential characteristic of what makes music "music", and yet so often we concentrate on how to improve our production of the sound qualities of music, without looking at the concomitant social effects of making music together. Music education philosopher Wayne Bowman has eloquently linked the two.

Making or taking music together creates and sustains a sense of unconditional collective presence in the world, a process in which the insularity of selfhood is transformed into a domain of shared concern... Musical experience invokes and nurtures oneness, a shared world unencumbered by contingencies of time and space. This experience is a special kind of experiential common ground which, owing to the special character of sound, brings and binds together as few other experiences do. Singing voices merge into a sonorous unity that is profoundly centering, both individually and collectively. Collaborating in its creation and enactment forges collectivity into community. (1993a p. 55)

The school music classroom is a collection of individuals, at times overwhelming in their diverse needs and desires. Many students do not even come to the music classroom by choice. Yet it is also fertile ground for building the type of community described by Bowman — a place where students and teachers can

experience that merging into a sonorous unity. How do we shape our classrooms so that all of our students can experience that sense of profound centering that comes from making music? How can we encourage our students to think of themselves as musicians in both the sonorous and social sense? In this paper I explore some of the current research on learning as community and describe two programmes premised on reviving and developing a singing culture in our schools within the context of building a community of musicians.

Models of classroom learning

Common educational practice has explored extremes of learning, from teacher-centred pedagogy to child-centred discovery, and every permutation in between. Essentially, however, both ends of this spectrum concentrate on one-sided responsibility for education. In a choral context the teacher-centred classroom corresponds to traditional choral model of the conductor leading the ensemble, relying on her musical ears and musicianship to evoke and shape the sound, correcting errors and taking responsibility for the musicianship of the singers. The role of the teacher-conductor in this model is to "prepare the knowledge for transmission and to motivate the children to make themselves receptive" (Rogoff, Matsunov & White, 1996, p. 393). The teaching follows the pattern of "teacher initiates, student responds, teacher verifies". This is a transmission model of teaching.

The response to this model in education circles was movement toward a child-run model of education, otherwise known as "discovery learning". In this scenario teacher presence is almost a nuisance variable. The children are encouraged to actively explore learning situations, acquiring knowledge as they go. Think of situations in which children are asked to freely explore all of the sounds that they can make with their voices and create sound compositions, or sing-song approaches that link music with other disciplines in an artificial, "hobby" sort of way. The children are completely responsible for the process and product of these activities. In this model the learners are responsible for what they take from the activities in which they engage. This is an acquisition model of education. For many years the emphasis on child-run learning has made the role of the teacher-conductor unclear. Teachers have experienced a certain discomfort between the "conservatory" model of their own music education, the professional model of conductor and the educational rhetoric of child-centred learning.

Transmission and acquisition are both one-sided modes of learning. The responsibility for promoting learning rests squarely on either the teacher in the transmission model, or the student in the acquisition model. One side of the learning relationship is active, the other, while not completely passive, does not share in the process of managing learning. Explorations in the theory of participation have led to a new conceptualization of the role of teacher and learner in a learning context. This is not merely a compromise. Rogoff, Matsunov & White (1996) contrast transmission and acquisition models with the notion of a process of transformation of participation, in which there is a community of learners, "involving both active learners and more skilled partners who provide leadership and guidance...in collaborative endeavour" (p. 388). In the community of learners model of education all participants are active; no one has all the responsibility and no one is passive. "The organization [of instruction] involves a community working together with all serving

as resources to the others, with varying roles according to their understanding" (p. 389). It would be naive to deny that learning takes place in all three models, but Rogoff et al. maintain that although students may learn the subject matter in each model, "they learn a different relation to the subject matter and to the community in which the information is regarded as important, through their varying participation in the process of learning" (p. 390-91). I propose that the "learning as community" model will promote a more robust form of learning as children are not merely the instrument of the conductor's musicianship, or involved in activities to "re-invent the wheel" through individual "discovery". This model acknowledges the role that children play in actively constructing their own musicianship, as the teacher gives them the tools and acts as a guide. It capitalizes on the wealth of experience and expertise that the teacher brings to the learning situation without setting the teacher up as the dispenser of a private store of mysterious musical knowledge. Most important, however, is that all members of the singing community in the classroom are acting as musicians; they are enabled to assume the identity of musicians.

Situated Cognition and the Singing Classroom

Research in the field of situated cognition points to guidelines for organizing curricula that support a "theory of participation" model of learning. The term "cognitive apprenticeship" has been coined by Brown, Collins and Duguid (1989), who propose a model of education that immerses the learner in situations of practice, providing authentic contexts in which to develop skills and dispositions for practice. This is also the foundation of the "reflective practicum" of Donald Schon (1983, 1987). Traditionally school curricula have been organized around "abstract, decontextualized formal concepts" (Brown and Campione, 1990). This traditional view stresses "what" is learned but negates the importance of "how" and "where" it is learned and used (Brown et al., 1989). Work in situated cognition challenges this view, maintaining that,

the activity in which knowledge is developed and deployed...is not separable from, or ancillary to learning and cognition. Nor is it neutral. Rather, it is an integral part of what is learned. Situations might be said to co-produce knowledge through activity. Learning and cognition...are fundamentally situated. (p. 32)

The singing classroom as reflective practicum means providing students with the opportunity to engage in solving real musical problems (Rao, 1993a). Students and teacher study real repertoire, engaging together in the music-making process that involves learning how to use their voices to produce tone, practising the reading and writing skills that arise from the context of the repertoire being studied, and learning to perform expressively and with stylistic integrity. These are the tools of musicianship. The curriculum is repertoire-centred, not structured around formal concepts "about" music. The content of the repertoire must be, as Doreen Rao describes it, "artistically distinguished and culturally diverse" (1997). The educational outcome of children's learning is the development of their musicianship as demonstrated in their singing and in their reflections about their musical experiences of singing. Elliott (1993) describes the way that musicianship is developed through musical performance.

Moving "inside" and becoming part of musical practices by learning to make music well is the only way that all the component knowings of musicianship develop and cohere. Learning to interpret and perform music is a matter of progressive musical problem-finding and problem-solving. It is through active music-making, in relation to standards and traditions of creative musical practice, that early, middle, and secondary school students develop musicianship. (p. 14)

The personal outcome for the children is increased self-esteem and knowledge of self (Rao, 1993a, 1993b; Elliott, 1995).

The singing classroom is rich with possibilities for developing the musicianship of students and teachers within the culture of choral music. Students who are engaged in authentic musical undertakings are challenged to make musical decisions that are tied to the making of real music. As a result, they will develop not only the musical skills necessary to the performance of choral music, they will develop the disposition of inquiring and intentional music makers. Surely that is the definition of "musician".

Roles in the Singing Community

Inhabitants in a community have varying roles to play in the activity of that community and those roles rotate as we engage in the activity (Rogoff et al., 1996). This premise holds true for the singing classroom. Think of the traditional performance roles in choral music — conductor, singer and audience. In a community model of music education the participants rotate those roles as they solve the musical challenges inherent in the repertoire. The students, who have traditionally sung in response to the gesture of the conductor, need to experience taking the responsibility over their music-making by acting as their own conductor—monitoring their own vocal response to the time, pitch and expressive qualities of the music. This may involve the students keeping pulse, using hand-signs, mapping the contour of the phrase in the air, or using a conducting gesture as they sing. Students also experience the role of coach as they listen to each other sing, and reflect on each other's ability to achieve the challenges of the repertoire.

Through the use of video and audio tape students can also be their own audience, listening to their rehearsals and performances with an ear to what they are accomplishing in their performance — how they are succeeding, what they would like to improve. Arts Propel, a curriculum and assessment project developed by Harvard researchers provides an excellent foundation of tools for students' self-assessment (Davidson and Scripp, 1990). Student responsibility for self-assessment is also developed in the music text *We Will Sing!* (Rao, 1993b).

Students are not the only participants whose role is flexible. The teacher must be prepared to leave the conductor's role to be a performer, demonstrating her musicianship by singing ideas for the students, making her musical decision-making process available to the students through her active performance in the classroom. This can be a powerful teaching tool, as students reflect on the teacher's performance, identifying positive elements of performance and offering suggestions for improvement. This often gives the students an opportunity to verbalize, or make external those kinaesthetic and vocal principles that they have been learning in practice.

Models of Singing Communities

The features of the singing community that I have described above are vividly evident in two programmes that I am studying as models for choral music education. The first, the "North York Choral Development Project", began as a partnership between the North York Board of Education, the most populous, diverse school board in Ontario, and Dr. Doreen Rao from the University of Toronto. It was conceived in response to the need for the revitalization of choral singing in schools. The project is a choral performance-based approach to music education. Teachers and students come from across the board to work with a master conductor-teacher. Project Sing! has its roots in the Choral Music Classroom project, a partnership between Tennessee Technological University and school districts in the rural Upper Cumberland Region of Central Tennessee. The two populations of students are vastly different, yet the results of strategic efforts to engage in singing as the foundation for music education show that all children are capable of developing musicianship in partnership with skilled music teachers.

The North York Choral Development Project

Recognizing that revitalizing the children's skills depends on a revitalization of teachers, the project began with a vision of professional development for a core of North York music teachers. Each teacher attended a series of teacher seminars designed to develop the participating teachers' palette of teaching skills and dispositions, directly connected to their own performance of choral repertoire, to rehearsal/demonstrations, to their own teaching contexts and a culminating concert. The children's choral component centred around a board-wide choir of children from grades four through eight. Each teacher involved in the Choral project brought 10-20 children to form this choir. Children had the opportunity to build their musicianship in a reflective practicum, singing with children from across the board, while teachers had the opportunity to watch the growth of their own children. This facet of the organization also developed a core of committed young singers to infuse the programmes of their schools.

Initially conceived in 1992 as a three-year professional development programme, the North York Choral Development Project has now completed its sixth year. Almost 50 teachers have benefitted from the intensive, long-term commitment to professional development¹ context of a singing community as teachers and students solve the musical challenges inherent in the repertoire. Singers (both adult and child) are empowered by Rao to make their own musical decisions by her coaching, and modelling the decision-making process as together they learn a piece.

Teachers found a remarkable growth in the quality of their classes' singing, the level of the children's musical interactions and knowledge. Children use sophisticated musical vocabulary to describe their musical experiences and have become quite comfortable making suggestions for changes in their vocal production, or performance of a piece.

The final concerts are an opportunity for all learners, teachers, students and conductor to perform together. Initially the concerts took place in North York schools. Now, however, the final concerts have moved to the Ford Centre for the Performing Arts, an international-class performance venue. As teachers and

students take to the stage they are united in the singing community. The students have the opportunity to know their teachers as performing artists as they share in the creation of music. The teachers see the concerts as authentic performance opportunities, as evidenced by one teacher's remarks: "When I was singing with the children I didn't feel like I was singing with children (I was expecting I would). I felt every bit as much a musician as when I was singing the Brahms' *Requiem*" Dolloff, 1994, p. 151). The concerts also provide an opportunity to open the project to the larger community of parents, friends, board officials and other community members. Through the support expressed by the members of this larger community, the teachers and children experienced an additional layer of musical value and recognition. One teacher eloquently expressed her growth as a result of participation in this project,

I feel that the challenges given by the project have broadened my horizons. I have achieved some things that I would not have attempted on my own. Because of all of the positive comments and feedback from the Music Dept., parents and children, I feel a growing confidence in my abilities for choir directing. (Dolloff 1994, p. 155)

The following was a journal entry made by a young chorister.

It keeps getting better and better. It always gets more fun when I know the music.....I FEEL GOOD achieving all these things. (Bradley, 1996, p. 15)

The Choral Development Project also reached out to a number of other communities. Choral and elementary methods undergraduate students from the University of Toronto were able to come to the school to participate with in-service teachers and their students as they learned more about teaching and learning choral music. This was a unparalleled opportunity for the pre-service teachers to observe models of teaching and learning and to begin to join the larger community of music educators. Graduate students from the University of Toronto also took advantage of this living lab to research issues in choral music education.

The success of the initial phase of the Choral Development Project encouraged programme leaders to organize a number of other choral initiatives families of schools within the North York Board, creating a rich network of teachers and bringing the choral experience to even larger populations of students. Some projects have been running for five years now, and demands for more projects are coming from school board superintendents as each wants one of these dynamic projects for his or her area. "Families of Schools" choral projects involve teachers and students of the elementary, middle and secondary schools of one geographical area in a choral music experience. The tri-level aspect of the "Families of Schools" projects lead to an even larger conception of community; the students of all levels sing with and for each other and the teachers from all panels have an opportunity to meet together in seminars, demonstration/rehearsals and concerts. The multiple levels of apprenticeship are an important component of the success of these projects. There is evidence that the programmes at the high school level are growing as the children who have been involved in the project arrive at high school and expect to be part of a school choral programme — and know what will be expected of them (B. McCrae, personal communication, May 15, 1997).

Project Sing!

Project Sing! is a dynamic programme building the profile and practice of choral music education in rural Tennessee. A rich tapestry of intersecting communities, this project began as "Choral Music Classroom", a programme developed to address the need for authentic teaching opportunities for pre-service teachers enrolled in music at Tennessee Technological University. The model developed as a teaching community as Professors Linda Ferreira and Mitzi Groom organized their students to teach weekly in rural schools of the surrounding district. Professors Ferreira and Groom participated in the project as teachers in the schools as well.

The programme resulted in an awareness of choral music in the school districts and led to the hiring of music specialists in the schools (Ferreira, Groom, Phelps & Adams 1997). As the university students graduated they moved on to fill these new positions. Project Sing! was born to fulfil the need to expand the reach of Choral Music Classroom, and to continue to include the growing number of in-service music specialists in this community.

Project Sing! is a pedagogical and research programme designed to examine and explore models for implementing excellence in choral singing in intact public school classrooms. Children are taught how to use their voices through singing of choral repertoire. Every child, even those still locating their singing voice, is considered a musician (Groom & Ferreira, 1996, p. 39). I had the opportunity to spend a week this past February in the schools involved in Project Sing! and observed children who were actively involved in learning to use their voices, exploring music and reflecting on the quality of their performance. The fundamental premise that singing is a learned behaviour to which every child deserves access is born out by the insistence on participation by intact classrooms, not auditioned or extra-curricular choirs. Teachers spoke of the focus that the project gave their teaching and the commitment and excitement demonstrated by their students at being able to sing with others. Research beginning this fall will look more closely at the development of reflective musicianship in the children involved in Project Sing!

Both the North York Choral Project and Project Sing! are examples of intersecting communities of teachers, students and universities making music and developing musicianship in partnership, in a collaborative effort. Having interviewed teachers and students in both of these programmes, I have been faced with a recurring theme. Participants, teachers, students and conductors feel that they are part of something bigger, that they are learning from being together, from working in community (Dolloff, 1997b, 1994).

Conclusions

John Dewey (cited in Greene, 1995, p. 66) has described community as collective activity. I want to make a distinction between acting in a collective manner and participating in a community. Singing together does not necessarily forge community. There needs to be an intentionality toward working in community, a way of engaging each other in singing together and in a mutual respect. Maxine Greene characterizes this as working within a community of regard (1995, p.39). Through situating the development of musicianship in singing in authentic ensemble experiences, students learn in a robust way about being a musician.

Psychologists Carl Bereiter and Marlene Scardamalia issue the educational collective a challenge. "Can a classroom function as a knowledge-building community similar to the knowledge-building communities that makeup the learned disciplines (1993, p.201)?" This morning I issue the same challenge to my fellow choral music educators. Can our classrooms function as musical communities similar to the musical communities that people form all around the world when they make music. Having seen the active musical communities in the classrooms of North York and rural Tennessee, I am convinced that the answer is not only that they can, but for the musical sake of our students they must.

Author's Note: I am indebted to all of the teachers and children who have welcomed me into their singing communities, and particularly to Dr. Doreen Rao whose teaching continues to remind us to empower all of the voices in our artistic communities.

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Endnotes

1. For a comprehensive description and analysis of the project see Dolloff, 1994.