

TEACHING STATEMENT JENNIFER M. RODGERS

I want students emerging from my classrooms to be better masters, not better mimics. If they have mastered the concepts we engage with, rather than memorized or parroted, their learning will be actionable – malleable and unfinished, ready to deconstruct and recreate in light of whatever they learn next. This is crucial in any field of study, but particularly so in vocal music and conducting where our body is our instrument. Our intensely personal and subjective instruments require us each to craft a language of understanding that synthesizes knowledge and technique given to us by our mentors with our own sensations, expression, and passion.

As a teacher of both future artists and of music as a fundamental, “human-building” skillset for all undergraduates, I strive to be as egoless as possible and to *relate* rather than *relay* information. In other words, I want to build bridges and pathways for students to form relationships with what I am teaching rather than simply convey information. The learning environments that I create are designed to pair motor-learning and laboratory-style trial and error with foundational academic and physiological concepts. For example, in a vocal pedagogy lesson, I present anatomical and acoustical foundations of a given area (breath, registration, vowels, resonance) followed by guided exercises and partner work. Over the course of a semester, this applied work is complemented by robust discourse, opportunities for peer teaching, one-on-one mentorship, and space for students to discover their gifts and confront their areas of challenge.

My teaching style draws from my own widely varied experiences and eclectic curiosity. My ability to communicate effectively and provide multiple pathways to a concept is a strength I rely on. I use metaphors, parallels from multiple disciplines, theater, and humor to convey my meaning, and encourage students to voice their own interpretations as they find them. For example, we might approach a passage of music through harmonic and melodic structure, but also through cultural context, storytelling, Laban movement, text analysis, or a game of frisbee, depending on what will yield the connection.

Awareness and a Philosophy of Layers

A good teacher encourages students to develop awareness of where they begin any task and grow from there. In order to do this, the teacher herself needs to be fully present, listening and watching to learn where the student is drawing their initial understanding from and what new layer of understanding is accessible to them. This philosophy of layers helps me meet students where they are and keeps me rooted in another central tenet of my teaching – “what is now possible?” Asking this question incrementally keeps me attuned to the direction and pace of learning, to levels of absorption and relevancy, and to effective, flexible rehearsal and classroom management.

Examples of prioritizing awareness as a teaching and learning tool range from the smallest moment of individual discovery to moments that can make or break an entire rehearsal or performance. Often, I have become aware that a singer’s first barrier to free up a sound is linked to layers of fear or doubt about their voice or a previous musical experience. Given a little space

to acknowledge this discovery, we have then made breakthroughs in progress with just a repetition of the work at hand. Other times, realizing that students have come to class needing to process a national event has led to layers of expression and connection with their music that they would not have been ready for otherwise.

A philosophy of teaching and learning in layers allows for tremendous individual growth within a group setting. Each student enters each class or rehearsal with understanding, experience, and readiness that is unique to them. This is true at the very first rehearsal of an inexperienced non-auditioned choir and equally true in a late-semester rehearsal of a top ensemble. I ask my choral singers and conductors to pay attention to where they are starting. Where are they holding tension? What is their energy level? What concept are they focusing on as we begin? Their response to these questions, occasionally communicated verbally but more often by a change of stance or approach to the task, alerts me to how my coaching will meet their frame of mind.

More importantly, each student becomes an agent of their own success. In mixed-level ensembles, I use layering and resources to devise a “challenge line” of programming that accommodates a wide variety of skillsets. Early rehearsals are spent assessing and teaching the vocal concepts that we will be working towards. Those who are more musically fluent may be working to master elements of more nuanced expression and vocal production at the same time that those who learn more by ear are concentrating on notes and rhythms. The more experienced singers are providing a soundscape that is supporting those less sure and guiding them towards an ensemble sound, while themselves working at a level that is satisfying and productive. I then provide resources for singers to work independently between rehearsals with the goal of consolidating the knowledge gained and being ready to continue moving forward the next time we meet. This methodology has allowed these ensembles to take on a variety of repertoire and reach performance levels that would not otherwise be possible.

While the content of each layer of learning is important, equally so are the preparations for new layers and continued growth. It is crucial for me to embrace that my students leave their time with me unfinished, in fact to encourage them to never be finished. Their musical experiences, whether used professionally or avocationally, can endow them with powerful gifts of creative processing, emotional and physical intelligence, and collaboration that are valuable in any field or craft they pursue. I want them to be active synthesizers who seek out more mentors, more experiences, more layers to hook and weave into their lifelong collection.

Ultimately, what is most important to me in teaching is what is most important to me in life – to truly see people and their potential, as I hope to be truly seen. Encouraging students to know and use their gifts and both accept and grapple with their shortcomings. Believing in them, sometimes before they believe in themselves, and never dismissing a struggle even when it is not shared or readily understood. Then – standing on my own sense of self, trusting my compassion and kindness, and extending that trust to my students – have the courage to engage in plain-speaking. Holding up mirrors for my students, revealing my own imperfections and responding to the mirrors held up for me, and inviting us all to keep discovering truths. To keep becoming ever-more-accomplished and ever-unfinished masters.