

Habitualizing Excellence: Methods for Developing Practice Habits Within Choral Programs at Small Liberal Arts Institutions

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Abstract

Co-written by a professor of music and a philosophy professor, this article explores the connection between habituation and musical practice specifically within the context of choral programs at small liberal arts colleges. Compared to those of music conservatories or larger institutions, choral programs at small liberal arts colleges face unique challenges in terms of the practice habits of students who participate in choral ensembles. The authors argue that conductors serving these institutions must intentionally teach students how to practice and then assess their progress. This article includes a discussion of how habits are formed and stresses the predominance of habits and the relative unimportance of talent. After outlining these psychological and philosophical underpinnings, the authors suggest practical ways to help participants in choral ensembles develop the habit of practicing their music. Specific suggestions include sharing short- and long-term learning goals with students, as well as assessment procedures to hold students accountable for their progress. The article concludes by offering additional ideas regarding student leaders and departmental curriculum that can further

contribute to the development of a culture of musical excellence within small liberal arts colleges' choral programs.

Conductor-teachers who serve large institutions benefit from traditions of high performance standards, generous funding, and strict audition requirements. They work with students who have demonstrated an ability to meet these high standards, often before they even matriculate. But what about those conductors who serve small liberal arts colleges, which often have modestly-sized music departments of three to five tenured/tenure-track faculty? As demonstrated by the National Collegiate Choral Organization's establishment of a Liberal Arts Task Force, these programs and the faculty who serve them have distinct challenges. One such challenge for these institutions is how to provide meaningful,

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collegiate-level choral experiences to students with differing levels of experience, ability, and interest. Even in auditioned choirs, a significant percentage of students are not music majors or minors, and many do not study voice privately. Some members may have limitations in musical literacy or singing in multiple languages. These challenges do not mean, however, that these students are unintelligent or musically unsophisticated. Quite the opposite—although they may lack some musical experience, these students possess an unjaded love of music and a thirst for knowledge that can be developed, alongside musical fundamentals, to produce excellence.

Cultivating Excellence Instead Of Talent

In his seminal article, “The Mundanity of Excellence: An Ethnographic Report on Stratification and Olympic Swimmers,” Daniel F. Chambliss examines the attributes of elite, Olympic-level swimmers. He argues that while there are innate thresholds to athletic achievement, external factors are more predictive of success. In the case of swimming, these include hometown, parental income, and coaching.¹ Thus, beyond a base physical competency, natural-born talent has little to do with certain swimmers achieving greater success than others. Rather, successful swimmers have two qualifications: access to the external advantages mentioned above and a disciplined pursuit of excellence. Chambliss frames excellence as being “accomplished through the doing of actions, ordinary in themselves, performed consistently and carefully, habitualized, compounded together, added up over time.”² In the case of

¹ Daniel F. Chambliss, “The Mundanity of Excellence: An Ethnographic Report on Stratification and Olympic Swimmers,” *Sociological Theory* 7, no. 1 (Spring 1989): 78.

² *Ibid.*, 85.

swimming, a determinative action might include executing the proper technique for a flip turn every single time, regardless of whether it occurs in a routine practice, warm-up for a meet, or competition.³ Excellence, then, is a collection of proper decisions; the differences between those who achieve it and those who do not are “neither unmanageable nor, taken one step at a time, terribly difficult.”⁴

Across the fine arts, the cultural trope of the artist as a brilliant eccentric is idealized. Think of Beethoven with his unkempt hair pouring water over his head while breaking strings on his legless pianos. Many vacuously view such idiosyncrasies as exemplars of genius. If such figures are seen as exemplary of musical success, then the vast majority of students will be left out before they even begin. By definition, there are few geniuses in the world, and, as Chambliss demonstrates, natural talent is finite, common, and not predictive of success. What matters instead is the development of habituated practices.

The Centrality Of Habits

While many people understand the importance of habituation when it comes to maintaining good daily practices like tooth-brushing, diet, and exercise, few appreciate the degree to which human living is habituated. A 2011 study found that approximately 40% of waking human conduct is habitual.⁵ Think, for example, of the habits of speech, such as

³ Chambliss draws an important distinction between quantitative and qualitative differences. Excellence has little to do with doing more of something. Rather, doing certain things better leads to greater success. *Ibid.*, 72–74.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 85.

⁵ David T. Neal et al., “The Pull of the Past: When Do Habits Persist Despite Conflict with Motives?,” *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 37, no. 11 (November 1, 2011): 1428–1437.

word choice, intonation, and accent. Gestures, bodily poses, and whether one maintains eye-contact are equally habits. So too are one's dispositions and reactions. If the concept of habit is understood broadly enough, perhaps to the point of metaphor, then biological tendencies are also habitual: consider the regularity of breathing, hunger, and sleep. Humans are bundles of habits.

Theorizing about the centrality of habit is nothing new. Indeed, Aristotle devoted a large portion of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, his best-known work on morality, to understanding habits, specifically as they apply to developing virtuous people. One of his most important conclusions is that "acts of any kind produce habits or characters of the same kind."⁶ This view is intuitive enough: the person who lies is on the path to being a habitual liar, and charitable actions reinforce a habitually generous disposition.

For Aristotle, the focus is less on what kind of person one is by nature and more on what kind of person one is able to become by practice. Stated plainly, if an individual wishes to be a better person, they should find ways to act better. Action is determinative, though not solely determinative, of our character and skills. He makes this point with a musical example: "It is from the same causes and by the same means that every virtue is both produced and destroyed, and similarly every art; for it is from playing the lyre that both good and bad lyre-players are produced."⁷ Habitually playing the lyre is part of what makes a person a good lyre player, but it is not the only necessary element for success. Further elements include the preparation they have received, how they play, and the focus

⁶ Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics*, David Ross, trans. (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2009), II. 1, 7.

⁷ *Ibid.*, II. 1, 6.

they adopt in evaluating their own playing. The role of the conductor-teacher is to model these further elements in rehearsal. By encouraging individual practice, and thereby reducing student dependency on rote-learning, class sessions can be spent refining and polishing the repertoire.

Habituation serves many functions, from ensuring consistent practices to freeing up active attention and brain power, but its core use for Aristotle is found in the achievement of human excellence, becoming the best and most fully developed kind of human possible. Summing up this Aristotelian view, Will Durant writes, "Excellence is an art won by training and habituation: we do not act rightly because we have virtue or excellence, but rather we have these because we have acted rightly...[W]e are what we repeatedly do. Excellence, then, is not an act, but a habit."⁸ This understanding of the relationship between excellence and habit can be applied to choral training. The view that understands musical success as genius sees excellence as an act; the view this article advocates, in which excellence can be developed, instead understands it as a habit.

How Habits Work

Where Aristotle's view of habits was formed by observation of habitual conduct, both his own and others', contemporary thinkers have the fortune of being able to theorize in light of recent psychological, neuro-biological, and sociological studies of habituation. In 2012, reporter Charles Duhigg helpfully condensed and summarized much of this research, putting together a general account of human habituation.⁹ What follows is a brief presentation of his core model and findings.

⁸ Will Durant, *The Story of Philosophy: The Lives and Opinions of the World's Greatest Philosophers from Plato to John Dewey* (New York: Pocket Books, 2006), 98.

⁹ Charles Duhigg, *The Power of Habit: Why We Do What We Do*

Habits, which are patterns of action, operate within a common sequence, what Duhigg calls “the habit loop.” Because habitual actions always occur within an appropriate context—people don’t start brushing their teeth in the morning while still in bed—the first stage of this loop is a “cue.” This is “a trigger that tells your brain to go into automatic mode and which habit to use.”¹⁰ Cues include phenomena such as being in the correct location, hearing a particular phrase, or seeing some signal. Think, for example, of a person approaching and offering an extended hand. This gesture will likely spark a response: extending one’s own hand in anticipation of a handshake. Duhigg calls this response a “routine,” which can be “physical or emotional or behavioral.” As a result of successfully completing the routine, one receives a reward. Even in those cases where there is no obvious further benefit to carrying out the habit, there is still an implicit reward: “the cue and reward become intertwined until a powerful sense of anticipation and craving emerges.” Successfully carrying out a habit loop can be its own reward.

A consequence of this complex understanding of habit loops is the recognition that habits can be easily short-circuited; they are *delicate*. As Duhigg puts it, “even small shifts can end the pattern.”¹¹ Without the cues that launch the habit loop, it is possible the habit will not continue. If people stopped extending hands, there would be no handshakes, of course, but consider whether anyone would brush their teeth without the taste of morning-breath, the feeling of overnight mouth staleness, or the fear of others smelling bad breath. These are the indicators that the relevant habit has not yet been carried out and that it is time to do so; if they were gone, people

would be in need of a new cue to motivate their teeth-brushing routines, or the habit might fall to the wayside.

On this model, the keys to developing and maintaining habits are securing workable cues and ensuring appropriate rewards. Without the cue, there is no automatic way the routine will begin, and it will have to be begun and then carried out intentionally instead. Without a reward, the routine may feel fruitless and the potential-habit will not solidify; it may have to be carried out voluntarily every time. Thus, to build habits, cues and rewards that are both sufficiently motivational and sufficiently in harmony with the routine must be selected.

This idea can be shown by appealing to negative instances: cues and rewards that do not line up with the routine that is hopefully being habituated. The worst sort of cues are those that are irrelevant to the routine, because the transition from one to the other will have to be carried out intentionally for longer than if a relevant cue were chosen. While someone attempting to break a smoking habit might be able to use a cue of desiring to smoke a cigarette to go for a run, there is not an obvious linkage between the two. And eventually, if the true goal is replacing the smoking habit with a running one, the craving for nicotine will gradually subside, leaving the running routine without its cue.

The best cues are those that are both relevant and consistent. For consistency, few cues are better than time of day, though time often lacks relevance: there’s no particular reason that 6:00 AM is better for waking than 5:59 or 6:01. Maximum relevance can be found in a limitation or agitation nearby to an intended habit: smelly breath is a good cue for toothbrushing, because

in Life and Business (New York: Random House, 2012).

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 19.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 27.

the latter fixes the former. But not all relevant cues are consistent, which can leave a hoped-for habit without its cue. As such, consistency of cue is more important than relevance.

The worst sort of rewards are unimportant to the habitator. If they do not care about the reward, then it will be difficult for the routine activity to become habitual. Nearly as bad are those rewards that work at cross-purposes with the routine. A good example of this bad pairing is comedian Drew Carey, who lost nearly 100 pounds in a year. After great dieting success, he rewarded himself for completing his first 10K race by eating an ice cream “cone with an entire pepperoni pizza and a cupcake.”¹² The issue here, of course, is the disconnect between the practice and reward: the former tends toward health, while the latter is a return to his unhealthy ways. Realizing the disconnect and its dangers, Carey recontextualized this reward structure with a slogan (“Eating crappy food is not a reward—it’s a punishment”) and now rewards himself in healthier ways, such as relaxing massages. This new reward is not destructive of its underlying habit and thus preferable.

Despite the above paragraph’s examples, rewards do not need to be separate from the practices they reinforce. While children may be induced to good behavior through promises of treats or staying up late, adults do not necessarily need external rewards like these. Mature habits often function as their own rewards. Individuals feel the pleasures of reward simply for having accomplished the routine—perhaps with a feeling of “a job well done”—so the habit loop’s motivating craving is not for some external good, but for accomplishing the task itself.

¹² Robert Mortiz, “No More Mr. Fat Guy,” *Parade*, September 26, 2010, accessed January 18, 2019, <https://parade.com/47683/robertmoritz/26-drew-carey/>.

Habitualizing Musical Excellence

Perhaps it goes without saying, but practice is an integral part of all musicians’ lives. At some point in their development, successful musicians establish effective practice habits. The manner in which they do so is as unique as each individual. Through trial and error, the influence of teachers and the maturation process, people develop practice routines that work well for them. Some discover effective patterns early in life, while for others, these emerge later on.

To be accepted into a conservatory setting, students must demonstrate a level of proficiency that can only be achieved through significant practice. Although conservatory students may not have impeccable practice habits, they demonstrate established ones. By contrast, students at small liberal arts colleges typically do not have to audition to study music. Instead, anyone who enrolls in the college and passes the required courses can complete a major in music.

Open access to liberal arts colleges’ music programs certainly has benefits, such as allowing students to discover musical interests during their time in college. However, this open access can permit students who lack effective musical habits to pursue music as a career path. For obvious ethical reasons, institutions of higher education should take career readiness seriously and prepare students to be successful upon graduation. To do so, all institutions that offer credentials in music should be helping students develop the necessary practice habits. For the reasons stated above, this is particularly important for small liberal arts colleges.

Understanding the centrality of habits and how they are formed is integral to helping students develop practice habits. As a faculty member with strong, established practice habits, it is easy to assume that college-aged students know how to practice or to become frustrated when they do not. Remembering that many students involved in musical ensembles at these institutions are not music majors or minors, conductors must not only teach practicing as a skill, but also must provide students with opportunities to demonstrate the fruits of their practice and hold them accountable. The following examples may prove useful in illustrating practical ways in which choir directors can integrate instruction of habituation into the ensemble setting.

Sharing The Plan

An essential part of helping students develop a habit of practicing is giving them objectives to work toward. Consider, for example, that a particular ensemble is preparing seven octavo-length pieces for an upcoming concert. Students with undeveloped practicing habits will likely not have the motivation to practice, and even if they did, they would not know where to start. It is easy to imagine such students taking their folders into practice rooms and playing through their parts of all seven pieces without stopping. The issue is that this kind of practicing exercises piano skills more than singing. Students with better-developed habits will practice specific passages until they can sing them perfectly without accompaniment. To do so, they might employ practice strategies such as singing on a neutral syllable instead of text, speaking the text in rhythm, or practicing under tempo. This kind of practice requires a sort of metacognition: “What elements do I need to work on and

what strategies can I use to best address these elements?” But this kind of thinking is neither innate nor obvious to students.

Providing students with short- and long-term benchmarks is one way that conductors can help students know what specifically to practice. The Ripon College Chamber Singers, for example, go on an annual choir tour over spring break. This experience is, in many ways, the culmination of the entire year. Tour concerts are approximately 75 minutes long, and the repertoire is exclusively unaccompanied, drawn from a breadth of historical periods and styles, and in five or more languages. Learning, let alone memorizing, this much music is understandably intimidating for new members to the ensemble.

One strategy to make preparing for concerts more manageable is a weekly, Friday-morning email with the plans for the following week’s rehearsals. Figure 1 is an example of such an email from November 9, 2018. Not only does this email help students know what will be covered in each rehearsal so they can practice ahead of time, but it also aids in rehearsal planning.

Figure 1 shown on next page.

Figure 1. *Short-Term Learning Goals in Weekly Email*

Good morning,
Here are the plans for next week. Looking forward to continuing to make progress on our Holiday music.

Have a great weekend,
JCH

Monday, 11/12

- Johnson: learn m. 31–54
- Victoria: review m. 19–39
- McKelvy: work bottom of p. 5–end

Tuesday, 11/13

- Johnson: review m. 31–54; polish m. 1–30
- Victoria: learn m. 40–52; polish m. 1–39
- McKelvy: work C–end

Wednesday, 11/14

- S/A/T/B SECTIONALS
 - Johnson: solidify m. 1–54
 - Victoria: solidify m. 1–52
 - McKelvy: solidify all

Thursday, 11/15

- Johnson: polish m. 1–54; learn m. 55–end; sing all
- Victoria: polish m. 1–52
- McKelvy: run without accompaniment

Notice that students are not expected to know entire pieces for rehearsals; rather, they are asked to focus on preparing short sections. This strategy makes use of what Karl E. Weick calls “small wins.” In “Small Wins: Redefining the Scale of Social Problems,” he explains that a “small win” is a “concrete, complete, implemented outcome of moderate importance.”¹³ To illustrate his point, Weick discusses how Alcoholics Anonymous encourages sobriety “one day at a time” rather

¹³ Karl E. Weick, “Small Wins: Redefining the Scale of Social Problems,” *American Psychologist* 39, no. 1 (January 1984): 43.

than for a lifetime, which can feel unattainable, especially for people who are newly sober.¹⁴ Similarly, the manageable chunks described in these weekly emails provide students with clear, workable goals that, when accomplished, feel like “small wins.”

Further theoretical support for encouraging practice of smaller passages can be found in the work of John Dewey, especially his

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 42.

understanding of “ends-in-view.”¹⁵ This sort of end is distinguished from the fixed and final aims at which human conduct is directed. While the ultimate goal of an ensemble member’s practice is a successful concert performance, it is not the only aim motivating their practicing. “Ends-in-view” are the deliberative and practical stepping stones that link together where individuals are and where they ultimately want to be. People drive to the store only by getting in the car, turning it on, making a series of turns, and the like. Keeping focus on each partial achievement can help to motivate and to make the sometimes-arduous work

¹⁵ John Dewey, *Human Nature and Conduct, Human Nature and Conduct*, vol. 14, *The Collected Works of John Dewey, 1882-1953. Middle Works 1899-1924*, Jo Ann Boydston, ed. (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 2008), 223.

of practice more significant. Consider Dewey’s example: “Men do not shoot because targets exist, but they set up targets in order that throwing and shooting may be more effective and significant.”¹⁶

As small wins and ends-in-view are not the final goals of practice, it is also important to share long-term goals with students to allow them to see how everything fits together. A learning schedule can be helpful in communicating long-term goals. Figure 2 is a learning schedule for the Chamber Singers. Although producing this schedule takes significant time and effort, it signals to students the seriousness of the work ahead.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 226.

Figure 2. *Long-term Learning Goals.*

<p>Program (draft—order will likely change)</p> <p><i>Lobt Gott mit Schall</i> –Heinrich Schütz <i>Cantate Domino</i> –Heinrich Schütz <i>Reincarnations</i> –Samuel Barber <i>Mary Hynes</i> <i>Anthony O’Daly</i> <i>The Coolin</i> <i>Flower of Beauty</i> –John Clements ? –Hagenberg (commission) <i>Panda Chant II</i> –Meredith Monk</p> <p>INTERMISSION</p> <p><i>Nochevála túchka</i> –Pitory Ilyich Chaikovsky <i>Be Like the Bird</i> –Abbie Betinis <i>Let My Love Be Heard</i> –Jake Runestad <i>Shenandoah</i> –arr. James Erb <i>A Winter Landscape</i> –Lane Johnson <i>Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star</i> –arr. Daniel Elder <i>Jabula Jesu</i> –arr. Stephen Hatfield</p> <p>ENCORE: <i>The Road Home</i> –Stephen Paulus</p> <p>Assessment groups</p> <p>A. Samara, Grace, Bailey, Jessica, Wil, Tommy, Austin B. Rachel, Savannah, Savanah, Lydia, Tom, Ryan, Luke, Caleb C. Maria, Callista, Abbe, Erin, Ethan, Yacob, Josh, Jimmy</p>

Figure 2. Long-term Learning Goals (continued).

Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday
	January 22	January 23 <i>Flower of Beauty</i> - memorized assessment	January 24 <i>The Road Home</i> - memorized assessment
January 28 <i>Lobt Gott...</i> - memorized assessment <i>Twinkle, Twinkle</i> - learned assessment	January 29 <i>Anthony O'Daly</i> - learned assessment	January 30 <i>Shenandoah</i> - memorized assessment	January 31 <i>Cantate Domino</i> - learned assessment <i>Twinkle, Twinkle</i> - memorized assessment
February 4 <i>The Coolin</i> - memorized assessment	February 5 <i>Cantate Domino</i> - m. 1-80 memorized	February 6 <i>Mary Hynes</i> - learned assessment	February 7 <i>Cantate Domino</i> - m. 80-end memorized
February 11 <i>Nochevála...</i> -memorized assessment	February 12 <i>Let My Love...</i> - learned assessment	February 13 <i>Cantate Domino</i> - memorized (all) <i>Let My Love...</i> - memorized assessment	February 14 <i>Panda Chant II</i> - learned assessment
February 18 <i>Anthony O'Daly</i> - memorized assessment	February 19 <i>Winter Landscape</i> - memorized assessment	February 20 <i>Mary Hynes</i> - memorized assessment	February 21 <i>Panda Chant II</i> - memorized assessment
February 25 Hagenberg commission - learned <i>Jabula Jesu</i> - memorized assessment	February 26 SATB sectionals- Hughes gone at ACDA	February 27 sectionals in assessment groups- Hughes gone at ACDA	February 28 no rehearsal
March 4 10-day rule begins Hagenberg commission- memorized	March 5	March 6 run program from memory	March 7 run program from memory; Tour Preview concert on Sunday, March 10 at 7:30 pm
March 11 polish program from Sunday's concert	March 12 run program from memory	March 13 polish program	March 14 run program from memory

Much like how an English professor might divide a novel into manageable nightly reading assignments, this calendar lays out a complete plan for the weeks leading up to the concert tour. Although this might seem overwhelming at first, students can learn to trust the process and rely on hard work to achieve the goal of excellent tour performances.

Holding Students Accountable

Reliability and accountability are integral in the development of habits; these modes of external confirmation especially contribute to supporting people's nascent habits. A succinct example of this is again found in the habit of using a toothbrush. Because most people do this several times a day, it is easy to forget that someone taught each person to do so. Every morning, most parents want to ensure that their children brush their teeth and might ask them if they brushed their teeth or even go so far as to check to see if their toothbrushes are wet. The habit of using a toothbrush is in part developed by parents monitoring their children on a daily basis until it is firmly automatized. (In fact, satisfying a parent may be one kind of appealing reward for children; this desire to please can help make concrete habit loops.)

Conductors must similarly hold students accountable for their progress. Although many collegiate conductors wish that students would arrive on campus with an intrinsic motivation to practice, this is often not the case, especially at small liberal arts colleges. Therefore, extrinsic motivators, such as part tests or other such assessments, are necessary, especially in settings where students are still developing practice habits.¹⁷

¹⁷ The use of such assessments is hardly unique to the authors, and what is presented here has been culled and modified from former teachers and colleagues. Hughes wishes to recognize in particular Augustana College's Jon Hurty.

Additionally, for ensembles like the Ripon College Chamber Singers, which rehearses four hours per week, it is not unreasonable to hold students accountable for the class material.

In Figure 2 above, one can see that members of the Chamber Singers are divided into three assessment groups, each of which is as close as possible to an SSAATTBB octet. As a group, students undergo two types of assessments: "learned" and "memorized." In a learned assessment, assessment groups sing the entirety or a portion of a piece using sheet music; in a memorized assessment, groups sing from memory. Before an assessment, the choir as a whole reviews the assigned passage. Then, an assessment group is called, at which point the students in that group walk off the rehearsal risers and stand directly in front of the conductor. During an assessment, the conductor beats time but does not conduct entrances, cut offs, or expressive ideas; the students are expected to know each of these. The routine nature of assessments makes the experience predictable for students and therefore aids in the establishment of habit loops.

Conversely, all choir members know when an assessment will occur but do not know which assessment group will be called. The unknown component encourages them to prepare for all of them. On any given day, one group or multiple groups might perform. Sometimes, if the initial review of the piece is particularly strong, the assessment does not happen. The varied aspect of the process ensures that students continue to practice.

Some conductors may choose to randomly call on an SATB quartet for part tests. This encourages practicing but may also cause an unreasonable amount of anxiety. For example, students may know their part but struggle

because they are singing with people they are not accustomed to hearing. By contrast, predetermined assessment groups, as discussed above, allow students to practice outside of rehearsal with those with whom they will be assessed. Additionally, groups of eight people remove some of the individual pressure.

Conductors must find an assessment method that fits well into their program. Regardless, it is helpful to strike a balance between a serious demeanor during the assessments, while also letting students know that this is a learning experience. When members are visibly nervous, it is helpful to remind them that they would not have been placed in the ensemble if they could not be successful. When giving feedback at the end of an assessment, conductors should stress what went well and gently point out areas for improvement. It is easy to focus on the negatives; however, by underscoring the positives, students may view their performances as small wins. These tangible bits of success help students see the value of practice and encourage them to continue.

One important reward found in these accountability assessments is exactly the kind necessary to build habits. If students know that assessments are coming, then being able to perform them well—or at least avoiding doing poorly—is a reward that can potentially motivate students' habit loops. Additionally, a high frequency of assessments further establishes habit loops; Figure 2 shows assessments on an almost daily basis. To be successful, students need to practice regularly. Successfully achieving accountability—or avoiding the feared accountability failure—is a reward that may send students to the practice rooms.

Learning From Exemplars

It can be challenging for conductors to spend precious *tutti* rehearsal time teaching students methods for practicing. It is important, however, to provide students with specific ways to practice. Obviously, one can share goals and assess learning, but if students do not have the tools to practice independently, these strategies will be for naught.

Many conductors appoint section leaders, who are charged with leading sectional rehearsals and otherwise positively influencing other singers in their section. Sectional rehearsals not only offer effective skill-building experiences for section leaders, many of whom are pre-service music educators, but also are opportunities for the other students to learn practice strategies from peer exemplars. Though habitual practice is often seen as a private affair, conductors should encourage section leaders to share methods of practicing, such as speaking the text in rhythm, isolating problematic intervals, etc. Section leaders should also be encouraged to share the cue and reward structures that have kept them actively practicing. Explicitly talking about developing habits on terms such as those offered above can aid in providing a framework for students to understand their own processes of habit formation. Therefore, when choosing leaders, conductors should take care to select students with traits they wish for the rest of the ensemble to exemplify. A section's success is not to be found only in its outcomes, but also in the process it takes to work toward musical excellence. And, of course, better practice habits will likely lead to better outcomes, too.

The applied studio is another setting in which students can receive personalized instruction on how to practice from an aspirational figure. Choral faculty members can collaborate with

their voice colleagues to develop shared language and expectations regarding individual practice. It should be noted, however, that many students in choral ensembles at small liberal arts colleges may not study privately.

Returning to the earlier Aristotelian understanding of habituation as the path to self-improvement, it is clear that part of determining to become a better person is learning to act like better people. Individuals who are more developed in respect to a given characteristic or skill function as exemplars, showing less developed people some possibilities for human growth. The process of learning is, in part, a matter of the less developed person imitating the more developed one. Gradually, through establishing habit loops, the learner will stop solely acting like the other person, instead finding that acting well has become simply acting like themselves. This understanding of learning through imitation and habituation is as true for developing courage, or learning a manual trade, as it is for learning to practice and ultimately becoming an excellent musician.

Other Factors

This article has focused exclusively on strategies to help students develop practice habits. However, it should be noted that habituation should be only one part of a larger effort to build musical excellence within choral programs at small liberal arts colleges. Through their repertoire selections, for example, conductors can communicate to their students a high level of expectation. Compared to music students at other types of institutions, what students at small liberal arts colleges need the most is experience. At Ripon College, it is fairly common to work with first-year students, even those interested in the Music Education major,

who have never sung in a language other than English. Over their four years, it is imperative to expose them to many styles, genres, and languages. Students might feel intimidated at first; however, this can be framed as empowering: “Look at what we were able to accomplish this year!” When teachers believe their students can achieve at a high level, plan accordingly, and hold them accountable, student growth can be remarkable.¹⁸

Choral faculty at small liberal arts colleges might also have to focus on building students’ skills more so than those serving different institutions. While conservatory choirs might be able to skip vocalizations (assuming that students come to rehearsal warmed up), this is likely not prudent for programs at small liberal arts colleges. In these settings, conductors, remembering that most students are not studying voice privately, should view warm-up exercises as miniature group voice lessons. To improve music reading skills, faculty members might incorporate sightsinging into rehearsals. For example, between the warm-up and repertoire portions of rehearsal, the Chamber Singers read one hymn per day in four parts on solfège. This kind of guided practice regimen has both improved the singers’ reading abilities and familiarity with functional harmony and has made it possible to learn concert repertoire through reading rather than by rote.

Faculty might also consider making curricular changes to better support their choral programs. Protocol for such changes varies by institution, and is never as quick as one might hope. However,

¹⁸ John Hattie’s research bears significant weight on this topic. He has developed a meta-analysis called “Visible Learning,” which quantifies the effects of various factors on student learning. His research shows that “Teacher estimates of achievement” have the largest effect size on student achievement (1.62). John Hattie, “Applicability of Visible Learning to Higher Education,” *Scholarship of Teaching and Learning in Psychology* 1, no. 1 (2015): 80-82.

faculty at small liberal arts colleges often have an advantage over those at larger institutions in that these schools typically have less administrative red-tape and greater nimbleness. Recognizing its needs, the Ripon College Music Department has created a Group Voice Class and a pre-music theory class called Foundations in Music. Both courses are open to music majors and non-music majors. For music majors, the classes set expectations for college-level music and fill in holes in their knowledge so that when they enter private voice lessons or the theory sequence, they are prepared to move more quickly. These classes also help non-music majors who wish to improve their skills. Everyone in Chamber Singers is encouraged to take these two classes because they will enjoy the ensemble experience more if they have stronger skills.

Conclusion

Almost universally, conductors wish that the musicians they work with practiced more outside of rehearsal. Hopefully, this article has provided some useful insights into how practice habits are formed and given practical suggestions for conductors wishing to be more intentional in the teaching of practice.

Although the article has centered on choral programs at small liberal arts colleges, these ideas may be useful to faculty at other types of institutions, as well as in the settings of

instrumental ensembles or applied lessons. Regardless of circumstance, if teachers are unsatisfied with students' practice habits, they must systematically set clear, attainable learning goals, share them with students, and then assess students' progress. Faculty members who choose not to do so will likely continue to see the same poor results in student achievement. On the other hand, the intentional instruction of practice methods, coupled with enhancing the departmental curriculum and cultivating a culture focused on excellence, can help musicians of all kinds to flourish.

Author's Note

Teaching is more than the transference of knowledge; it is a reciprocal exchange of ideas. I am indebted to my student Tom Poulette, who sparked this entire project by sharing with me Daniel F. Chambliss's article "The Mundanity of Excellence: An Ethnographic Report on Stratification and Olympic Swimmers" and later Karl E. Weick's "Small Wins: Redefining the Scale of Social Problems." Tom is pursuing a major in Chemistry-Biology and plans to attend medical school. He also sings in the Ripon College Chamber Singers, the flagship choir at Ripon College. His intellect, curiosity in diverse topics, and ability to make connections across disciplines exemplifies the very best of the liberal arts.

—*John C. Hughes*

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