

# Plant, Water, and Harvest: How Younger Students and Emerging Student-Teachers Think and Grow

Robby Shellard and Jeremy Little - Spring 2013 IL-ACDA "Podium"

**From Jeremy:** I have been fortunate to be able to mentor some excellent student teachers thus far. After working with each emerging teacher, I often reflect on 1) how much 10 years of classroom teaching experience has taught me, 2) how I interact with and relate to students both in and out of the classroom, and 3) the importance of a positive, yet relentless desire to improve one's teaching/lesson planning with student outcomes in mind.

Robby entered student teaching with the unique ability to "think like a teacher" already under his belt. While he improved greatly in other musical/non-musical aspects of lesson planning, pacing, vocal modeling, etc. his ability to accurately reflect on his lessons, struggles, and strong points served him very well.

The following ideas were taken from conversations that Robby and I had over the course of his student teaching time at Vernon Hills H.S. and can apply to many emerging teachers. It is our hope that reading this will 1) encourage more experienced teachers to consider mentoring an emerging student-teacher, 2) prepare music education students to think about these issues before student teaching, and 3) spark discussion about the collaborative process between mentor-teacher and student-teacher.

**From Robby:** As a new teacher, fresh out of the collegiate culture of academia, it can be difficult to predict where students will struggle when learning a new piece of music. To me, this was one of the largest transitions into teaching in a real classroom.

In college, I was surrounded with music majors and other musicians that can sight read at the drop of a hat. I worked with peers that had excelled in music theory and could learn new pieces quickly and efficiently (sometimes, regardless of the teaching style in front of them). Though I had many chances to work with community members through a church choir and students in observations, I still lacked the daily interaction with beginning students that only exists during student teaching.

Coming to Vernon Hills, I knew that Jeremy had a strong program. On the performance level, many of his students have performed in the All-State choirs, and his alumni continue to be musically involved after high school. However, I did not realize the amount of work that he must put forth in order to bring young singers to this high level that I had come to expect from strong musicians. I had seen only the "end result," not the years of training that students must receive and thousands of hours of dedication they must put forth before attaining such a high level of musicianship.

Over my last nine weeks at Vernon Hills, I have found a variety of reasons that students struggle when learning a new piece of music. By being able to predict these difficulties and counteract them *before they happen*, teachers can spend rehearsal time efficiently. Though all of you "oldies" may have seen and counteracted these mistakes occur in your own classroom for years, it's always helpful to freshen up.

## **Emerging Students - Common Challenges**

As Robby accurately pointed out, when new teachers make the transition from college into student teaching, they often don't realize how long it takes most students (at all age levels) to learn a piece of music. Since the student-teacher can sight read, has been in that culture of music reading/refining, etc., he/she often fails to remember what it was like to be a 7th grader just learning to sing.

From day to day, student-teachers need to learn how much emerging students "forget" or are not able to quickly execute without proper set-up or lead-in.

- **Transitions**

- Going into a new section (end of one musical phrase to the beginning of the next)
  - When phrases end and begin on different notes, emerging students need to be taught how to recognize this, not to scoop, etc., to audiate the new note before their entrance, and to breathe in the shape of that vowel ahead of their entrance - all of this is not intuitive

- Lost learning over the weekend (or from day-to-day)
  - Just because something was taught yesterday, doesn't mean it's "learned" today. Emerging students need plenty of review and scaffolding to review and solidify their parts before moving on to new sections. Especially if they "learned" a section a few days earlier, it always surprises emerging teachers how little they've retained. Intentionally planning to review these sections after a few days off will save frustration when the students' actual performance doesn't meet the teacher's expectation.
- Transitioning from one song to another
  - Currently, we're studying a piece with a 9/16 time signature, another in cut time, and a third in a fast 3/4 time, but not quite in 1. In each of these songs, a quarter note looks the same but sounds/feels quite different. Without proper setup, younger singers can/will be confused by this notation. Often, a simple visual demonstration on the board with a few rhythmic exercises sung by the class will help their eyes/ears make this transition, but it's a step that's often forgotten by the music ed. college student who can instantly adjust between time signatures, non-standard notation, etc.
    - Oftentimes, it can be hard for young teachers to remember this factor. In college, you typically rehearse one song at a time (before having someone else direct), and rarely get the scope of a curricular choral classroom that is needed to think in this manner.
- **Learning and Refining a Vocal Line**
  - When emerging students sing a vocal line incorrectly, emerging teachers often have difficulty diagnosing the problem.
    - Did they learn it wrong? - (ie. Did the teacher play/sing a wrong note or rhythm? Did the students sing a wrong note/rhythm/word and remain "uncorrected"?)
    - Were they thrown off by something? - (ie. Was the conducting wrong, the piano accompaniment off, or the words the teacher used to bring them in unclear?)
    - Did they just forget it? - (ie. Did they learn it at one time correctly, but now are they not executing it correctly?)
      - There is quite a difference between these three reasons, and a teacher's strategies to fix the problem will differ with each reason.
  - Is the piano masking the students' true performance? Is it the students' harmonic and rhythmic crutch? Can they sing in tune on their own? Can they keep a pulse without it?
  - Are most of the students following the few strong leaders in each section, or do they all really know the line and are able to execute it together?
    - How do you (as a teacher) know? Can they sing it a cappella? Have you heard it without the best students singing? Do you use digital voice recorders to individually assess each student?
- **Common problem points for younger singers**
  - Singing the top line octave lower (instead of 6ths, or whatever under harmonies are written)
  - Following contour of upper lines - even when one line descends, many younger singers follow the contour of what they hear, not what they see
  - When lines are similar but not exactly the same (even if it's obvious to teacher)
    - This is a VERY common mistake and one that can eat away valuable rehearsal time fixing later on. Emerging teachers need to sing through each vocal line in advance and be able to plan strategies to make sure students know these differences before they learn them incorrectly and cement the wrong notes in their head.
  - Adding too many layers at the same time (pitch, rhythm, text, expression, multiple parts, up to tempo)
    - Another VERY common mistake. Scaffolding and sequencing these layers in small increments rather than all at once is a recipe for success in the long term.

### **Emerging Student-Teachers - Common Challenges**

While we all know the learning curve for new teachers can be steep, the process is also exhilarating, constantly providing opportunities for growth and self-discovery. The roller-coaster of emotions (from "*I am the best*

teacher ever” when you taught a kid how to sight-read quarter notes - to “I am an utter failure of a teacher,” when a student points out something you taught the whole class incorrectly) is a part of the teaching journey.

Here are a few ideas for emerging student-teachers to consider as they begin to teach choir.

- **When I play piano, am I focusing too much on my own “performance” (i.e. just playing all the parts correctly) and not able to listen to their “performance”?**
  - Not having competent piano skills is a serious problem for emerging music teachers. All of their focus goes into playing the correct piano part and none of their brain power is left to think about tuning, phrasing, the kid-in-the-back-row-whose-hair-is-on-fire, etc.
- **How well can I “get an accurate read” on the situation?**
  - How do I know when to move on when teaching a concept? Have I been aware of student attitudes or focus during rehearsal? Are we close to a concert and thus need to press on, or can we take some time to refine or discuss? Have I spent too much time on a certain song/concept and need to move forward, or have I just brushed over a topic, not allowing students to really grasp what I’ve just taught.
  - When should I accept a “mediocre” performance and when can I demand more?
  - When leading a discussion - Am I probing deep enough with my questions? Are most/all of the kids tracking the discussion, or just the few that raise their hands? How can I involve all kids in the discussion? Have I thought about strategies beyond just asking questions and getting answers from the best kids who always raise their hands?
    - This was another one that can be particularly hard to learn in a collegiate setting. Because your classmates typically know the exact answer you are looking for or have already asked a similar question, it can be hard to assess your own questioning skills.
- **How do react when things don’t go quite right in the classroom?** In other words, how does a younger teacher bounce back from a setback? How does a teacher plan to make the next teaching experience better when something didn’t go quite right?
  - When a mistake is learned, how do students un-learn it?
    - Emerging teachers are understandably often nervous in their initial student teaching experience. These nerves many times cause them to teach/sing parts with plain wrong notes/rhythms, etc. (Side note: I (Jeremy) fall victim to this often as well!) What newer teachers often don’t realize is how many repetitions it takes to un-learn the mistake; how important the initial teaching sequence is when kids first learn something, and how long it takes to really cement a vocal line in younger students’ heads.
  - What do you do when younger singers don’t match pitch?
    - More experienced teachers often are able to take the long view, to see this student for who he/she is as a unique person wanting to improve their voice. Thus, time and care and many patient hours are spent trying to help students match pitch. Emerging teachers often become frustrated because kids can’t instantly do something that comes so easily to the college music education major.
- **“Classroom Management”** - I (Jeremy) really loathe the this term. Instead, I like to make this analogy: I attempt to treat every student as a relationship I want to keep past the two, three, or four years of high school. In this relationship, I “invest” in them - I put “money in the bank” with them each and every day I see them (ie. creating a relaxed, yet thoughtful classroom environment, asking about and genuinely caring about their personal lives, admitting when I make mistakes and showing humility and persistence when this happens, etc.) and through these strong relationships I know when I can “withdraw” my deposit (ie. demanding more effort/focus in rehearsal, calling extra rehearsals, singing more challenging repertoire, exploring extra-musical ideas and doing non-singing projects, etc.).
  - Here are a few things to think about:
    - How do I motivate my students out of mediocre singing into better performance without getting negative?
    - How do I set up the classroom for risk taking? How can I set up the classroom for student risk-taking? (Doing kinesthetic motions, answering tough questions, thinking aloud, speculating as a class, singing in an extreme tessitura, or a cappella, etc.)

- We have to be the person who has to nurture that growth, to plant the seed in each student, to nurture the soil, and harvest at the right time.
- We have to see the potential - in every ability level, kid type, etc. and have a growth plan for them.
  - This is my (Robby) favorite one. As a student, you live for the “here and now” and rarely think about what will happen after the next concert or school-year. However, as a teacher invested in their own program, it is a crucial task to help students grow regardless of their starting point. This idea of having “a plan” for each student is a much longer term goal, one that we rarely set for ourselves as students.
- **Juggling many balls at the same time.** Question: How do you prepare yourself for the kind of ‘thinking on your feet’ without having actually taught? Answer: You really don’t. You begin to think this way and become comfortable with many simultaneous issues through experience. However, you can prepare yourself by turning the mirror on yourself and reflecting on how proficient you are at the following skills, on how well you can do many of the following simultaneously.
  - Piano / conducting chops
  - Hearing the choir & individual parts (right/wrong)
  - Thinking about what to fix, why is it wrong?
  - Behavior and other student issues
  - Thinking about how to say it, how to bring them in, etc.
  - Reminders/announcements/to-do lists
  - Reading the students - attitudes/reactions/mood

We hope this article has provided a glimpse into the student-teacher and mentor teacher relationship. We both left the experience invigorated and excited to grow as teachers in the weeks and months ahead. We hope you will use these ideas and questions as springboards for your own reflection and growth.