

# **The Constructivist Choral Rehearsal**

Getting Your Singers On Your Side!

By Dr. Dominic Gregorio

In traditional classrooms, teachers lecture to students who passively receive and regurgitate information. Constructivist teaching turns this paradigm around, placing the learner in the center, empowered to engage and actively construct knowledge and meaning with the guidance of a teacher-coach. Constructivist teaching strategies enable students to learn, grow, and transform through answering challenges and moving consistently toward individual and collective actualized potential.

## **3 Key Principles**

1. Setting the Culture: Safety, Unconditional Acceptance, Teamwork, Infinite Potential
2. Guided Discovery: Empowering Singers to Realize Solutions
3. Learning Structures: Providing Processes to Enable Singer Success

## **Setting the Culture: Safety, Unconditional Acceptance, Teamwork, Infinite Potential**

1. Safety First! Singing, self-expression and creative thinking requires vulnerability. Declare your rehearsal room a space for safe and respectful communication. Review sympathetic nervous system response “Fight, Flight, Freeze” and parasympathetic nervous system response “Rest and Digest”.
2. Strive to create an environment where all students feel safe to express their opinion. If singers feel safe to express themselves individually in front of the group, they will feel safe to express themselves vocally with each other and you.
3. Declare your rehearsal room a sarcasm-free zone. Sarcasm can be taken the wrong way, or the right way; both are harmful.
4. Understand the learning/memory curve. Humans forget and require gentle reminders. Questions are always welcome and allowed, even the moment before a performance! It is counterproductive to get frustrated/ angry for a momentary lapse of memory. Set high expectations, yes, but steer clear of words or energy that might send your students into sympathetic nervous system response, or hook them into the Parent (Command)- Child (Emotional) dynamic.
5. Solution oriented thinking vs Reactionary thinking. Stick to the facts, resist negative judgment when providing feedback.

6. Eliminate “I” from your rehearsal language. Team effort uses the words “we” and “let’s”. Too much use of “I” hooks students into a parent- child dynamic. Singers are not in the room to fulfill your demands.
7. Believe in their infinite potential. Clarifying your vision to see only their highest and greatest enables students to move into that potential. In psychology, this is called the “self-fulfilling prophecy”, usually used to limit young learners!

### **Guided Discovery: Empowering Singers to Realize Solutions**

1. Compare A/B. Ask the ensemble, or different groups of the ensemble if they liked what they heard, or liked what the other voice group did. Ask them how they would make it better. This works well for vocal technique as well, “which sounds/feels better to you?”
2. Teach principles, not cases. Compare: “Alto’s that’s flat” vs “Alto’s, why is it important that we spin that pitch more? They answer: Because it’s the 3rd of the chord, and the third of chord tells us the quality of the chord!
3. Vary the seating positions of the choir. Try rehearsing in a large circle or in a mirror with two choirs facing one another so that they hear differently, hear more, from rehearsal to rehearsal.
4. Creating Rehearsal Sets gives singers a sense of constant accomplishment
  - a) Sing through a rehearsal section (Set)
  - a) Identify for the singers ways to make it better (Follow-Through)
  - b) Create an exercise to make the specific problem better (model and have them sing the interval, fill in the blank, monochant the text and have them repeat for pronunciation, model the rhythm and have them repeat. Run again and ensure it was improved.
  - c) Acknowledge whether the goal was accomplished or not (Closure).

## **Learning Structures: Providing Processes to Enable Singer Success**

1. Use Dalcroze Eurhythmic/ Kinesthetic principles to enable singers to correct their own rhythm or breathe support through embodiment.
  - Have them tap the shoulder of the person to their left
  - Tap the beat or subdivision on the heart
  - Dance!
  - Literally “stepping into” a high note helps to release tension and improve breathe support
2. Use stimulus variation in rehearsal: different sitting/ standing positions, alternate sitting and standing, alternate slow/fast, difficult/ easy, soft/loud, major/ minor, working hard/ playing.
3. Two techniques for using sight singing on neutral syllables
  - Sing on “pum” where the singers close immediately to the “m”. This enables singers
  - Sing on “nu” softly while piano plays parts. Listen 75%, sing 25%.
4. Fill in the note. When you hear a note error, come back to it play fill in the incorrect note. For example, if it is a four note phrase: do re fa so, and the singers are not getting the “fa”, sing the first two pitches and ask them to fill in the incorrect pitch. Some will get it immediately and then the others will follow. Then, say “go back” or “go forward” so that they can feel and embody the relationships between all pitches.
5. Ask for student volunteers to delve into the composer, the history surrounding the work, the poetry, and allow them to present their findings to the class. This can flow into them writing the program note for that song, or speaking an introductory paragraph for the audience.
6. Experiment with count singing
  - Always count-sing at a piano dynamic
  - Focus on the accurate attack of each new pitch
  - Keep a solidly consistent tempo, usually a slower tempo to start
7. Use prepared scores that include solfège.
  - Solfège enables singers to feel their melodies and harmonies from the inside out. Intonation and confidence is always heightened
8. Processes for restlessness, sleepiness, excess energy, poor alignment
  - To align the singers say, “Sitting tall, two feet flat on the floor, back away from the chair.”

- When singers look tired, either give them a break, or get them up doing something. You might try, deep breathing and exhaling on “Ha!”, some jumping jacks, a 1-minute dance party etc.
- When singers are overexcited, help them to center inhaling and exhaling on “sh”. Try a one-minute guided meditation with eyes closed setting positive intentions, goals, for the following rehearsal segment.

**Stay in flow;** refuse to give in to negative emotions such as frustration.

Encourage your students to do the same. It is counterproductive to waste energy getting upset that a “mis-take” was made. Simply notice the error, do an exercise for your singers to correct it, and move on. Allow your singers to be where they are and allow and expect them to grow each week. TRUST the process!

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Dominic C. Gregorio is Director of Choral Activities and Assistant Professor of Choral Music at the University of Regina, Saskatchewan. In 2012, Dr. Gregorio graduated with the Doctor of Musical Arts Degree from the University of Southern California in Los Angeles and was awarded the USC Order of Areté Medal, the highest honour accorded a graduate student upon graduation. He also holds a triple major Masters Degree in Music from Temple University in Philadelphia (Voice, Choral Conducting and Music History) and a B.A. in Music from the University of Guelph. In 2015, Dominic was awarded the University of Regina New Faculty Teaching Award of Recognition, and under his leadership, the University of Regina Chamber Singers were recent finalists in the Choral Canada CBC Amateur Choir Competition. A frequent baritone soloist, Dominic has performed recently with the Regina Symphony Orchestra, the Saskatoon Symphony Orchestra, the Regina Philharmonic Choir and the Per Sonatori Baroque Ensemble. Dr. Gregorio is a former conductor of the McMaster University Choir, Gay Men’s Chorus of Los Angeles, USC Thornton Opera Chorus, USC Thornton Apollo Men’s Chorus, Toronto Singing Out, and the Taipei Philharmonic Foundation Choruses. Dominic is proud to serve Choral Canada as VP Communications and editor of *Anacrusis*.