

Allowing Success: Is It Time To Take the Training Wheels Off of Your Chorus?

by Drew Collins

Most effective educators agree that one's content area (for us, music) is a means of getting our students to think and learn for themselves. The more I teach, the more I realize that students have creative minds and accurate ears. If we impart to our students the skills and concepts they need, we can get out of their way and allow them to achieve success on their own. The more we do this, the stronger they will become, the deeper they will think, the more expressively and thoughtfully they will sing.

However, when this goal is neglected, we can easily get caught in the exhausting cycle of trying to lead our students to the point of achievement instead of providing them the tools and freedom needed to discover success on their own. In MMCP lingo, this is called following a "prescribed pattern of teacher-dominated instruction" (MMCP Synthesis, Thomas, 1979). It is the difference between teaching our singers *pieces of music* instead of teaching them *music*. (How many of us have said or thought, "I'm so busy getting ready for the next performance, I don't have time to teach sight-singing"?) But, if our goals constantly revolve around getting our students ready for a performance, are we still educating them? Or have we relegated our students and ourselves to being mere entertainers?

Think back on the people who have had the most positive influence over your life. Did they give you everything you wanted, or did they teach you how to get it yourself? In his book, *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, Steven Covey asserts that there are three stages of maturity: dependence, followed by independence, and finally interdependence. When older students are still dependent on you to teach them pitches, they are prevented from progressing in their musical maturity. Similarly, when we dictate to students the artistic and interpretive elements of a piece of music instead of asking their thoughts and opinions, we enable our students' dependency on us. We treat them like an adult chorus in need of a unified artistic vision instead of a school choir which still needs to be taught fundamental skills and concepts. When taught thoughtfully, choir can provide your students their first exposure to interdependency; there is no greater gift an educator can give.

Spoon-feeding pitches and rhythms to our singers and neglecting to involve them in the artistic process through effective questioning techniques is like keeping the training wheels on a bicycle even after the rider is capable of balancing on his/her own. Removing the training wheels helps the new rider to move from dependency to independency. Is it time to take the training wheels off of your choir?

Choral Training Wheel #1: FEAR OF FAILURE

As teachers, we want so badly for our singers to succeed, we develop a fear of what might happen if they ever failed. Remember, it's okay for students to fail occasionally; indeed, this can be a powerful tool when working to meet goals.

Of the nine "training wheels" discussed in this article, this is the most important concept to adopt. The rest are all dependent on your understanding of this idea. As you continue to read, remember that oftentimes, the first step to success is allowing failure.

Choral Training Wheel #2: THE PIANO

Imagine for a minute what your rehearsals would be like without the presence of a rehearsal keyboard. For a while, probably, neither director nor singer would know what to do. But eventually, don't you think that your singers would rise to the occasion? And maybe even be stronger in the long run? Thankfully, most of us don't have to deal with a keyboard-less rehearsal room. But perhaps there's something to be learned from such a notion.

If you don't do this already, here is something you might try: Once a phrase is learned, rehearse it a few times completely unaccompanied (whether or not the piece is a *cappella*). If your choir doesn't do very well, have them do it again.

Once your singers get used to singing without this “training wheel,” they will sing more confidently and accurately, and will retain their part better. In other words, use the piano as a rehearsal tool, not a crutch!

Choral Training Wheel #3: RUNNING NOTES

Some educators, it seems, teach essential musical skills like sight-singing and theory only enough for their students to make it into the latest honor choir. Believe it or not, there are some music educators who don't do any sight-singing at all. (Isn't that like an English teacher condoning illiteracy?!)

Having a program of daily sight-singing can save oodles of time during the rehearsal portion of your lesson. There are many good method books to choose from, or you can just write a new, short melody each day. Doing so puts more of the onus on the singer to learn notes and rhythms for themselves instead of having every pitch and rhythm dictated to them.

If you are still overwhelmed at the idea of leaping into teaching sight-singing to your choir, try starting with rhythmic exercises.

Choral Training Wheel #4: MAKING SUCCESS TOO EASY

Is it more gratifying to achieve something easy, or to achieve a goal that once seemed unreachable? Most of us seem to place the bar just high enough so that the students are challenged but can easily achieve the necessary goal. But, is that what students really need?

Many teachers seem to believe that if they set the bar too high, students will get frustrated, give up, and quit choir! On the contrary, having high standards tends to result in high student achievement. Consider setting the bar high right away and help your students work toward it by setting daily goals. In other words, set a long term goal, and design a sequence of short term goals to meet it. Taking “baby steps” is fine, as long as the overall expectation for achievement is kept high, and the end is kept in sight.

Choral Training Wheel #5: SEATING CHARTS

Human beings are creatures of habit. Not only that, we are extremely territorial. Singers get used to being in a particular seat and between specific singers. If you try to move them, they may actually growl! But what really is happening is that the singers come to rely on those around them instead of growing to rely on themselves. Yes, it is important to have a seating chart, just take care not to get so mired in it that it weakens your choir! (For example, some conductors have a seating chart for Monday-Thursday and have an alternate “Friday formation.”)

Here are some ways you can shake things up occasionally. Even if you only change the formation once or twice per term, it will help your singers to become stronger and more confident musicians:

- *Choral formation*: There are many formations choirs can use. For example, instead of seating each section in columns, try seating them in rows. For more ideas, check out the book “Up Front!” (ed. Guy B. Webb, ECS Publishing, Boston, 1993).
- *Row-tate*: Have everyone move forward one or two rows (those that usually sit in the front may move to the back).
- *Quartets/Octets*: Create a seating chart that puts singers in quartets or octets. Some choirs perform this way, other directors prefer to use it only as a rehearsal tool.
- *Scramble (whole ensemble)*: If you don't have time to create a whole new seating chart for quartets/octets, just tell the choir to stand with singers from sections other than their own.
- *Scramble (within sections)*: For ensembles who have never sung in quartets/octets or scrambled, have them mix up just within their own section. Singing between different singers may be enough of a challenge for one day, even if those singers are singing the same voice part.
- *Circle up!*: Robert Shaw preferred rehearsing choirs which were in a circle around the room.

Many directors use this technique for one song every now and again. But what if you did it for a whole rehearsal? Not every room makes this possible, but if yours does, why not give it a shot?

- *Fill the room:* Have the choir expand “like a sponge filled with water” to occupy the entire room instead of just where the choir is normally seated.

So, the question remains: how is this practical? Creates an index card for each singer and put it on their seat every day (consider using different colors for each section). Once singers are used to hunting for their card, it becomes a relatively simple matter to change the formation: just put the cards on the new seats, and leave it to the singers to search for their card.

Choral Training Wheel #6: PACK MENTALITY

Most choral singers pride themselves on their ability to blend. This certainly can result in a pleasing ensemble sound. After a while, though, if everybody is blending, nobody is singing out! What used to be a pleasing choral tone has turned out to decrease the expressive capacity of the ensemble.

My singers are used to hearing me ask them to “sing with confidence” or to “sing your personal [forte/mezzo forte/piano/etc.]” At times, I’ve even asked them to “Sing that phrase like a soloist,” or asked them, “How would an opera singer sing that?” This individualizes them as musicians and reduces the pack mentality that can get in the way of higher levels of musical expression.

Choral Training Wheel #7: CHOOSING LOW-QUALITY MUSIC YOUR SINGERS WILL LIKE

Have you ever heard a choral conductor say, “ This piece isn’t all that great, but the kids will *love* it.” Surely there is a balance to be found between quality of repertoire and appeal to the singer. Isn’t there high quality repertoire that your singers will respond to? Giving in to the undeveloped tastes of your singers not only decreases your role as their musical leader, but also traps you into feeding their desire for instant gratification. Stick with the good stuff – your singers will thank you for it later.

Choral Training Wheel #8: ALL TUTTI, ALL THE TIME

Another way to encourage your students to explore their own personal musicianship is to have them sing their choir music in small groups (or, by row for those choirs who are new to this). A few rehearsals before your next concert, assign singers in groups of 4-12 and have them perform for each other.

The gripes you will hear from your singers may be along the same lines as the gripes you hear for Choral Training Wheel #5. But the benefits can be remarkable.

NOTE: Design a rubric, and this can also serve as a tool for singer assessment!

Choral Training Wheel #9: SNAPPING ON THE BEAT

When our singers don’t watch us, we tend to respond by either increasing the size of the gesture (more on that when we get to CTW #10), or make some kind of sound on each beat. Some conductors snap, some clap, some stomp, some tap a baton, some bang on the lid of the piano... Whatever the source of the sound, the result is the same: the singers, who now have even *less* motivation to watch, bury themselves further in their score.

Instead of compensating for their lack of eye contact, try one of these ideas. First, reduce the size of your gesture so that if your singers need to see the beat, they have to look up. Next, start arbitrarily changing the tempo; they’ll start watching in a hurry!

But how many of us have said to our choir, “Watch me!,” only to have them bury their heads in their scores again in later rehearsals? If they do start watching you, reward them by showing something worth watching. Be clear, be expressive, be inviting, and smile!

Choral Training Wheel #10: OVER-CONDUCTING

Removing Choral Training Wheels #2-9 will help move your students from dependency to independency. But this last one is designed to achieve the final level of maturity, interdependency.

Band and orchestra conductors accuse us choral folk of having a gesture which is “too flowery.” We may hate to admit it, but we must concede that as a group we may have earned that stereotype! Beyond the enormous, curly gestures our field is known for, though, lies a more ominous problem. Singers often rely on their conductor too much of the time: every cue, every release, every dynamic. But these things are printed in the score; if a singer is well-trained, can’t we leave these things up to them?

Once your singers know a piece, have them sing it without a conductor (it may be best to choose a piece without tempo changes or an excessive number of fermati for this experiment). They may miss an entrance or two, but that’s okay (remember Choral Training Wheel #1!). Have them go through the piece without your help until they get it.

This is one of those training wheels we all resist removing, because we’re afraid our ego may get bruised. It seems like a double-edged sword: our students will either fail, or they’ll succeed and think us unnecessary. But that’s always the danger of letting go. Remember that the end result is not for you as the teacher to feel better about yourself; the goal is getting your students to become self-sufficient musicians.

When you do start conducting again, avoid the “big three:” (1) mouthing words, (2) cuing every entrance, and (3) making your gesture so big it looks like you’re trying to guide a plane into the gate!

There are educational benefits as well as musical benefits to removing these Choral Training Wheels. Educationally, your singers will be learning about music, and will move from dependency toward higher levels of artistic maturity. Musically, your choir will be more expressive, learn music faster and retain it better, and they will sing with increased confidence.

Each of these is designed to force students out of their comfort zones. They probably won’t like it very much at first! But, remember the end results that you hope your students will achieve. Music is a means of getting our students to think and learn for themselves.

Next time you realize that you are getting caught in the cycle of providing your students with success instead of giving them the means to discover success on their own, try removing one of these Choral Training Wheels, and see how much difference trust can make in your rehearsal.

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