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Survey of University Acting Majors regarding the Most Useful Elements of Singing Training

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ABSTRACT
A three-semester singing course devised for university acting majors had a three-fold focus: (1) performing songs, (2) basic music theory/sight reading, and (3) basic vocal pedagogy (anatomy, technique, wellness). After 4 years of the course, 59 students who completed at least one semester completed a survey assessing which elements of the curriculum were most useful as preparation for subsequent auditions and performances. Respondents indicated that, while enrolled in the courses, they perceived performing songs to be the most useful element (44.1%), followed by music theory (39.0%) and vocal pedagogy (17.0%). After completing at least one semester, these results inverted, with vocal pedagogy perceived to be most useful (40.7%), followed by music theory (32.2%) and performing songs (27.1%). This trend increased as students were further removed from the course. Therefore, most students initially felt best served by performing songs and, as time progressed, they saw greater value in vocal pedagogy and music theory as preparation for professional pursuits. However, students most often reported that they would increase the amount of performing songs (57.6%) and decrease the amount of vocal pedagogy (50.8%). The article discusses these results in terms of curriculum and future research.

KEYWORDS
Singing; actor training; voice pedagogy; college/university curriculum; music; pedagogy; voice

Introduction

Voice teachers, researchers, and pedagogues have published myriad articles on the benefit of singing training in a university actor training program. Some authors have discussed specific approaches and techniques and their efficacy (Saunders-Barton 2005, 281–282; Wayth 2011, 307–309). Others have examined how to incorporate singing training into existing coursework (Melton 2001, 312–314). Still others have advocated singing training that incorporates "real world" demands as seen in the professional industry (Bartlett 2014, 27–35).

Few authors, however, have incorporated the input of the students regarding the industry demands they are seeing in their early professional pursuits and how well their university singing training prepared them for those demands. Therefore, the purpose of this survey investigation was to understand which elements of singing training in an

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actor training degree program were the most useful to students and recent graduates in their subsequent auditions and performing.

Background

In the fall of 2014, a three-semester singing course curriculum began for students in a university BFA actor training program. Though the course had previously existed, the curriculum varied from year to year due, in part, to instructor turnover. The appointment of a new instructor afforded the opportunity to revisit the curriculum in the hopes of establishing a standardized, long-term vision for the course that would adequately prepare students for the profession.

In a 2001 article in the *Voice and Speech Review*, author and professor Joan Melton outlined what she felt singing training for actors should require. The curriculum she recommended included instruction on how to prepare audition material, a unit on music reading and sight singing, and vocal technique that goes beyond mere vocal coaching (Melton 2001, 312). Following these recommendations, the three-semester curriculum had three specific goals for the students: (a) build performance skills by learning and performing songs, (b) build basic music theory/sight reading skills, and (c) learn basic vocal pedagogy (e.g. anatomy, physiology, technique, vocal wellness).

There was a three-semester curriculum. (a) In the first semester, a typical 80-min, bi-weekly class was divided into approximately 25 min of physical warm ups, breathing exercises, and vocal exercises; 25 min of music theory lecture, worksheets, and sight-singing practice; and 20 min on songs (learning and memorizing, exploring character choices, incorporating technique, and performing for the class). This schedule also allowed 5 min at the beginning and end of class for announcements, questions, and brief discussion. (b) In the second semester, class was divided into 20 min of physical warm ups and vocalizing, 10–15 min of sight-reading, 20–25 min of vocal pedagogy lecture and discussion, and 15–20 min of learning, exploring, and performing songs. (c) In the final semester, class was divided into 20 min of physical and vocal warm ups, 10–15 min of sight-reading, and 40 min of learning, performing, and staging songs, duets, and ensemble numbers, and participating in mock auditions for the class and for guest clinicians.

Justification of the Curriculum

Although the vocal skills needed for actors who may occasionally be required to sing on stage may not exactly mirror those needed for actors who focus primarily on music theatre, the prominence of "type" in modern casting means that actors with less extensive singing training may still be considered for significant singing roles. When also considering how many plays incorporate singing, either by design or due to a director's discretion, actors who have developed their singing skills are able to audition for a greater number of performance opportunities than those who have not. Since there is less time devoted to singing instruction in university actor training programs than in music theatre or voice performance programs, coursework must be maximized to focus on the most crucial elements needed. Therefore, the curriculum devised for the acting students who participated in this study was essentially a truncated

version of the singing curriculum offered to music theatre majors in the same department, omitting required studio voice instruction.

Learning and Performing Songs

In each of the three semesters of the course, students learned, memorized, and performed four to six songs from the musical theatre canon. Performances occurred in class, in mock auditions, and in a performance final for faculty and department students at the end of each semester. The majority of the repertoire selected represents the "Golden Age" of musical theatre, such as those that were written before the late 1960s. In much of this music, the piano accompaniment supports or even doubles the melody, which facilitates learning for students new to singing. The songs also demonstrate musical form and structure through clearly defined cadences and the logical way in which the songs can be shortened for the 32- and 16-bar cuts frequently required for auditions. In addition, the ranges of the songs generally facilitate the use of head voice/mode 2/cricothyroid-dominant production for female singers. Some pedagogues suggest this vocal register is often neglected by beginning-level singers and feels weak when compared to their chest voice/mode 1/thyroarytenoid-dominant production (Ware 1998, 116). Spivey and Saunders Barton, therefore, encourage building the cricothryroid-dominant register to bring it into balance with the thyroarytenoid-dominant register in order to develop the mixed voice that the authors refer to as the "Holy Grail" of vocal technique (Spivey and Saunders Barton 2018, 37, 40–41).

In the second semester, the level of difficulty in the selected repertoire increased through greater use of chromaticism, piano accompaniments that rarely double the voice, and forms that do not fall into obvious 32- or 16-bar cuts. In the third semester, students learned duets and ensembles, alongside additional solo pieces that ranged from the Golden Age to the present. Thus, the selected repertoire provided students exposure to various composers, styles, and eras. It allowed them to learn music that was progressively more difficult, after first developing performance skills on repertoire that was less musically and vocally challenging. The course also provided students a base of repertoire (12–15 songs after the three semesters) from which they could draw for future auditions.

While considerable class time was spent on developing vocal skills, the curriculum emphasized a text-first approach to performances, incorporating the presentation skills students were developing in the rest of their coursework for delivering individualized, story-driven performances. These performances also gave students opportunities to address and manage issues related to musical performance anxiety (MPA). Anecdotally, many students discovered that symptoms of "stage fright" were more pronounced when singing before a group than when, for instance, performing a monologue. Therefore, frequent performances each semester provided students ongoing opportunities to explore various strategies for performing alongside MPA.

Music Theory/Sight Reading

In order to provide a degree of music literacy and understanding of musical notation, the curriculum included music theory in the first semester. After learning the basics of

how to read music, students began sight reading melodies—a daily practice that continued for all three semesters. By learning solfège with moveable "Do," melodies eventually encompassed major and minor keys with moderate chromaticism in both simple and compound meters.[1]

Students also completed exercises designed to develop relative pitch.[2] The purpose of this training was to give singers a degree of autonomy when learning music. That is, the more singers understand how to read music, the better prepared and more independent they will be when asked to learn and prepare music for auditions and performances.

Vocal Pedagogy/Anatomy

The coursework also incorporated regular units on vocal anatomy and function and how to build vocal technique. Topics included posture and body movement, breathing, phonation, resonance, articulation, and registration. They practiced a variety of vocalises and exercises alongside these units with an emphasis on helping students build reliable tools for self-assessment. Additional units on vocal health and hygiene addressed how diet, lifestyle, medications, and the day-to-day demands of a career in theatre may impact the voice and its ability to function optimally.

Lastly, students learned to differentiate between the technical choices required for making different stylistic sounds in healthy and sustainable ways (i.e. the differences between "legit," mix, and belt). In building fuller capabilities of their voices, students began to find what Saunders-Barton refers to as the "refined co-ordination of the bass (thyroarytenoid muscle) and the treble (cricothyroid muscle) components" that is the "secret ingredient" in allowing the mixed and extended middle voice to maintain consistent quality from speaking to singing (Saunders-Barton 2005, 281–282).

Methodology: Survey

The purpose of the current study was to measure the student- and graduate-perceived effectiveness of this singing training in an actor training program related to current industry demands. That is, we wondered if those who had taken any part of the course sequence believed the curriculum helped them to prepare for auditions and productions that require singing. To that end, we designed the IRB-approved survey to explore the following three primary research questions: (a) Which element of the curriculum did participants perceive would be most useful (songs, pedagogy, music theory) during the coursework and after they had taken it? (b) How useful did participants believe the curriculum was in preparing them for auditions or productions that required singing? (c) What element of the course would participants increase or decrease?

In addition to these major questions, the survey also gathered information related to when the students took the course, how many semesters of the sequence they completed, and how many of their subsequent auditions and productions required singing. The final question was an open-ended item in which they could share their feelings about the survey and the curriculum with the instructor. (For the full survey, see the online supplemental materials.)

We loaded the 16-item survey to Survey Monkey for ease of distribution and completion. The survey data collection took place at the completion of the fourth year that the course had been taught. Eligible participants included any of the 72 students who had

completed at least one semester of the sequence. Fifty-nine students completed the online survey, an 81.9% response rate among possible participants. These students had taken a course in the sequence less than one year (n= 21, 35.6%), between 1 and 2 years (n = 24, 40.7%), between 2 and 3 years (n = 11, 18.6%), or more than 3 years (n = 3, 5.1%) prior to completing the survey.

Results

Which Element of the Curriculum Did Participants Perceive Would Be Most Useful (Songs, Pedagogy, Music Theory) during the Coursework and after They Had Taken It?

We asked participants to report the aspect of the curriculum they believed was most useful while they were taking the course(s) and now that they had completed the course(s). The highest number of participants (n = 26, 44.1%) reported believing that learning and performing songs was the most useful element of the curriculum while they were taking the course(s) (see Figure 1).

This element was followed by music theory (n = 23, 39.0%) and vocal pedagogy (n = 10, 17.0%). Participant perceptions inverted after they had taken the courses; vocal pedagogy was most often rated most useful (n = 24, 40.7%), followed by music theory (n = 32.2%) and learning and performing songs (n = 16, 27.1%).

This trend increased as students were further removed from the course (see Table 1). Participants less than a year removed most often reported that learning and performing

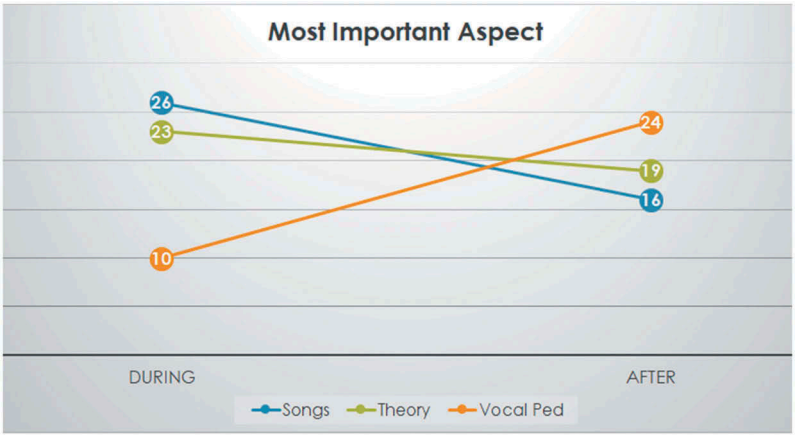

Figure 1. Aspect perceived to be most important during the course(s) and after.

Table 1. Most important aspect of the curriculum and number of years removed from course(s).

		Most Important Aspect		
Time Since Last Course	# of Participants	Songs	Theory	Vocal Ped
< 1 year	21	38.1%	33.3%	28.6%
1–2 years	24	20.8%	39.2%	50.0%
2–3 years	11	18.2%	36.4%	45.5%
3–4 years	3	33.3%	33.3%	33.3%

songs were the most important aspect of the curriculum (38.1%). Those 1–2 years removed (50.0%) and 2–3 years (45.5%) removed, however, reported that vocal pedagogy was the most important aspect of the curriculum. Only three participants were 3–4 years removed from the course. They each selected a different aspect of the curriculum as most important (33.3% each).

How Useful Did Participants Believe the Curriculum Was in Preparing Them for Auditions or Productions that Required Singing?

There were 43 participants (72.9%) who reported having a subsequent audition that required singing. We asked those participants to report how the coursework affected both their skills and confidence in preparing for those auditions. More than 95% of participants reported the courses were *extremely helpful* ($n = 29$, 67.4%) or *somewhat helpful* ($n = 12$, 27.9%) in building their skills. Two participants (4.7%) selected *neither helpful nor unhelpful*. More than 90% of participants reported the courses were *extremely helpful* ($n = 29$, 67.4%) or *somewhat helpful* ($n = 12$, 27.9%) in building their confidence. Three participants (7.0%) selected *neither helpful nor unhelpful* and one (2.3%) selected *extremely unhelpful*.

There were 29 participants (49.2%) who reported having been in a subsequent production that required singing. More than 96% of those participants reported the courses were *extremely helpful* ($n = 14$, 48.3%) or *somewhat helpful* ($n = 14$, 48.3%) in building their skills. There was 1 participant (3.4%) who selected *neither helpful nor unhelpful*. Nearly 90% of participants reported the courses were *extremely helpful* ($n = 17$, 58.6%) or *somewhat helpful* ($n = 9$, 31.0%) in building their skills. There were 2 participants (6.9%) who selected *neither helpful nor unhelpful*, and 1 participant (3.4%) selected *extremely unhelpful*.

What Element of the Course Would Participants Increase or Decrease?

Finally, we asked students which aspect of the curriculum they would increase or decrease for themselves and for the majority of those who take the class. Despite the trend of highly rating the vocal pedagogy curriculum, participants most often suggested that vocal pedagogy be decreased to better serve themselves ($n = 24$, 40.7%) and the majority of students ($n = 30$, 50.8%). Conversely, they most often suggested increasing the amount of learning and performing songs for themselves ($n = 27$, 45.8%) and the majority of students ($n = 34$, 57.6%). Similar numbers of participants recommended increasing and decreasing the amount of music theory contained in the curriculum (see Figure 2).

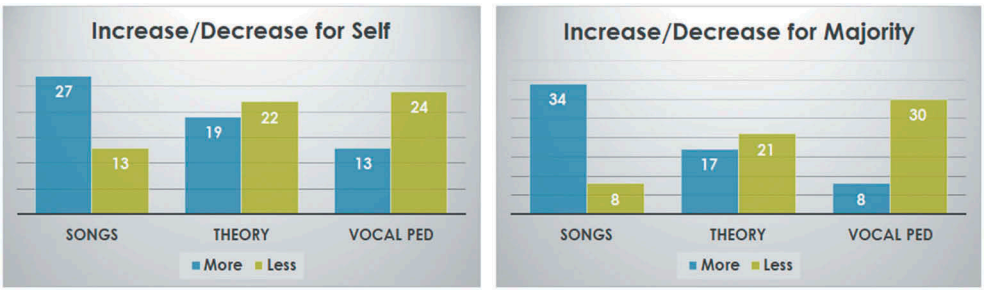

Figure 2. Which part of the curriculum would participants increase/decrease for themselves and for the majority of the students.

Discussion

This investigation represents one particular survey of acting majors who took part in a singing training curriculum during their degree program. Results are specific to this sample and training program. However, these are perhaps the first data collected from students who took part in such a program. As such, data may inform future researchers and university instructors as they design, implement, and revise singing training curriculum.

Perhaps the most compelling trend revealed by the survey is the change in what was deemed the most useful element of the curriculum. Although the majority of students surveyed initially felt best served by learning and performing songs, as time progressed, they saw greater value in vocal pedagogy and music theory as preparation for their professional pursuits. One possible reason for this response may be the realization that, when students have basic music literacy and understand how to negotiate their vocal technique, they will be able to learn additional songs independently outside of class.

It could also be due in part to the "fixed mindset" versus the "growth mindset," as explored by Carol Dweck (Gross-Loh 2016). Anecdotally, many students appear to have a fixed mindset about singing, meaning it is a talent one is either born with or without. Demorest (2017) has similarly referred to this belief as a "talent mindset." A growth mindset toward singing acknowledges it as a skill that can be developed through direction and practice. The vocal pedagogy element helps students explore the function and technique behind singing. Even though this technique is put into practice while singing songs, it may be that the understanding of how to develop the skills needed for singing is what was missing in many students' background and, therefore, deemed most valuable as the courses progressed. Some students seemed to embrace a new perspective, with one participant stating, "Anyone can sing is a lesson well learned." Later surveys may consider taking the students' musical background into consideration when determining which elements of the course they find most useful.

Despite coming to believe that vocal pedagogy and music theory were the most important elements of the curriculum, students, somewhat surprisingly, did not feel more class time should be devoted to either of these components. More students expressed an interest in additional time devoted to learning and performing songs. It may be that, while students felt vocal pedagogy and music theory were the most useful parts of the course, they also felt they were sufficiently covered in the allotted class time. It may also be that they viewed singing songs as a more enjoyable way to spend class time, while completing music theory worksheets and taking notes during vocal pedagogy lectures might have been seen as more tedious. Therefore, while students valued the material, they might have preferred to spend more class time on the more enjoyable task. In fact, one student articulated that point in the free-response section at the end of the survey, stating, "I think more sight singing is never a bad thing, but it's not a fun thing to do in class. Figure out how to make sight singing fun and cool and I think you've got it all figured out."

Other sections of the survey revealed a desire for learning additional songs, especially those of contrasting styles and from contemporary eras. Therefore, pedagogues might consider devoting more class time to learning more of this specific repertoire. Given the above results, however, care must be taken so that the vocal pedagogy and music theory units remain robust, even if less class time is dedicated to these areas.

As previously mentioned, many actors may experience intense music performance anxiety (MPA) when asked to sing, a skill that may be out of their "comfort zone." Although we did not directly measure MPA during and after performances, more than 90% of students who had been in auditions or theatre productions that required singing felt the courses helped build both skills and confidence for these endeavors—a fact that bodes well for the curriculum. At least some participants in this study mentioned this confidence boost in their free-response comments. One noted the curriculum "gave me so much confidence." Another specifically addressed this fear of singing: "I think that a lot of people are scared of singing but [this] class has helped curb that fear for a lot of people." This finding may also be another reason for the desire for more class time spent on the application of learning repertoire. This high satisfaction rate may also imply that a singing curriculum for an actor training program that is a truncated version of the singing portion of a music theatre training program can be effective for meeting the demands of their profession.

Considering that some of the survey responses were somewhat surprising, instructors may consider seeking student input as course content is adjusted. Although student feedback is generally collected from traditional course evaluations, reaching out to graduates to see which skills are serving them in their post-university career pursuits may provide unique information to consider when adjusting curriculum.

Finally, this study was limited to perceptions of how singing training impacted students in their acting endeavors. Although the curriculum addressed skills useful outside of theatre, many of which may ultimately be more important than career-training elements (especially considering how many acting majors there are when compared to how many full-time jobs are available in acting), and while these skills may be given equal consideration when developing curriculum, those skills were not the focus of this study. Future studies may consider surveying acting majors to see if and how their singing training impacted their non-acting pursuits.

Conclusion

Unlike students studying singing in classical voice programs, who often are expected to pursue graduate studies and apprenticeships before their true performance careers can begin, theatre students can be cast in age-appropriate roles either immediately out of school or alongside their degree work. Furthermore, as casting becomes increasingly based on "type," those who consider themselves "actors who sing" may be in equal consideration for singing roles as actors who more readily identify as singers. Therefore, including singing training in a university actor program would seem to have demonstrable value. Identifying which elements of that training are the most useful should be an ongoing exploration. As industry demands change, so should our curriculum change in order to best help students meet those demands. When making these changes, the students and graduates who are using that training to build their acting careers can provide valuable input.

This study helps to highlight a gap between what students believe is most important about their training from the time they are students to the time when their coursework has been completed. While additional and ongoing studies are necessary to see if these trends extend beyond this particular group of students, continually reaching out to

graduates who are pursuing careers may be useful when determining if a singing curriculum is up-to-date and best serving students.

Notes

1. Solfège is a system in which each note of a major or minor scale is assigned a unique syllable (e.g. do, re, mi, fa, sol, la, or ti). These syllables change position depending on the number of sharps and flats in the key signature (i.e. "movable do"). This system is commonly used to teach singers to perform melodies, as referenced in the well-known "Do-Re-Mi" scene from *The Sound of Music*.
2. We define relative pitch as the ability of a singer to predict approximately where a sung tone lies relative to its notation on a musical staff.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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Jeremy N. Manternach, PhD, is an Assistant Professor of Vocal/Choral Music Education at the University of Iowa, where he teaches undergraduate and graduate choral pedagogy, music education, and research courses. Dr. Manternach is a frequent guest clinician and has conducted state, conference, and local honor choirs in Arizona, Colorado, Idaho, Iowa, and Kansas. His research on vocal/choral pedagogy and acoustics has appeared in such venues as the *Journal of Research in Music Education* (JRME), the *Journal of Voice*, and the *International Journal for Research in Choral Singing* (IJRCS). He currently serves on the editorial board of the JRME and IJRCS.

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