

## **EUROPEAN VOCAL PEDAGOGY – DIGITAL RESOURCES TECHNOLOGY LEARNING STRATEGIES – WWWHF? WHAT, WHEN, WHY, HOW AND FOR WHOM?\***

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In looking for materials and questions pertinent to developing the pedagogy programme of the current EVTA project, the results in my own studio pointed to the question of learning strategies and styles. I asked myself: „Why does this work so well for one student, and not at all for another?“ Having often posed this question in connection with my observations as a voice teacher both within my own class and those of my colleagues, I decided to pursue it. I make no pretense of the fact that the material in this article is not scientifically researched; it is born out of a brief internet search, an hour-long conversation with a neurologist and reflection on my experience in teaching practise.

I venture to observe that **true teaching begins where propogating my own singing experience ends.** Experience as a singer is an important basis for teaching, but it will function well only if student and teacher have a similar frame of physical and cultural reference. As a teacher I need additional resources when my student is of another voice or personality type, or comes from a different cultural background. In order to deal adequately with the individuality of my student's and own mechanisms, a teacher needs to extend his/her repertoire far beyond passing on his/her own experience as singers. The knowledge currently available on the anatomy, physiology and acoustics of the human voice is a fundamental resource, and yet, teaching singing is a matter that deals with a person in a very intimate way. It seems to me that today's students and our rapidly changing professional world call for a methodology that balances the triangle of the objectivity of vocal instrument function with more traditional subjective experiential knowledge and with psychological and developmental questions of personality structure and – in our case – learning strategies.

A video a colleague found on YouTube poses a thought-provoking question, „**I teach and therefore you learn**“. It seems to me to be a common experience that teaching does not automatically result in students' learning! As singing teachers, most of us begin teaching the way we were taught. Motivated either by our own negative or positive experiences, we try to emulate – or be different than our own teachers. Interestingly, in either case, we also teach the way we learned. Our first repertoire of methods comes from our own training and vocal discovery process. In addition, we also tend toward establishing a methodology that is related to our own strategies for perception and learning. One of the first set of reflective questions arises: Do I teach the way I learn? Do I teach the way I myself was taught? Is this not one of the factors determining whether a teacher-student relationship will result in a successful learning curve?

It seems to follow that effective pedagogy should include finding out my student's learning strategies, and developing an individualized approach that takes this and related questions into account. Inasmuch as I know myself and my student and how we fit together, I will have defined one of the factors leading to effective teaching. As our repertoire of knowledge and tools expands from traditional to technological, this becomes an increasingly important, additional factor.

### **The human brain and perception**

When I posed my question to neurologist Dr. Eckehardt Altenmüller, he pointed out a helpful basic factor about how the human brain initially perceives information. Cognitive perception is like putting a jigsaw puzzle together: it looks step by step at a series of details, then fits them together into a bigger picture. Global perception first sees the larger picture, then dissects the information step by step and fills in the details. The brain automatically chooses one of these modes when given information, so the first unconscious decision entails looking either at the whole picture or at the first detail that comes into view.

### **Using our senses - a secondary path**

Much touted as channels of learning, even to the point of typologies, are the perceptions we pick up through our senses. Auditory, visual, tactile, and kinetic tools are common in teaching practise. However, according to Dr. Altenmüller, they address the secondary phenomena of perception. What consequences does this have? Since I am not able to answer that question, I eagerly anticipate the article Dr. Altenmüller has promised to write for us on this subject.

My search continued with the research done by David and Alice Kolb. Their conclusions, published in 1984 showed that learning is a process involving four factors:

- Concrete experience - „I do this, you do that.“
- Reflective observation - „What should I change?“
- Abstract hypothesis - „What changes if...?“
- Active testing - „Can I sing better this way?“

The obvious consequence is: in order to teach so that our students learn, we need to create an atmosphere in which they

- can be involved
- can explore
- have things explained
- can apply their own knowledge
- can evaluate the results independently.

This knowledge is independent of subject matter and so, it has very practical consequences for our teaching. This kind of methodology goes far beyond telling a student about my own system and singing experience.

A further search revealed a categorization of learning styles I found helpful in thinking about the subject matter at hand. David Straker has defined learners as listeners, readers, writers, talkers, observers and doers. Since I found this information helpful, I gladly share my reflections, even though I have not yet tested or researched its scientific basis. My search will continue in any case! The following descriptions refer to his system and include experiential elaborations of my own.

### **Six Learning Styles - David Straker**

**Listeners** like to be told what to do. They are happy with lectures, slides, presentations and are always looking for an end result they can work with. They like clear, consecutive programmes they can work with. This is one of the qualities of a student who will ask for a warm-up programme in appropriate steps. They will do well in a traditional academic classroom environment.

**Readers** are the students who constantly complain that others either too fast or too slow. They want to go at their own pace. They are the ones who are happiest with a book or printed handout to study at their own pace. They are ideal candidates for developing body imaging through a good book or DVD on anatomy and physiology and rest assured: they will come back with questions! They tend to listen with one ear and get distracted by auditory input.

**Writers** need to transfer information into their own words, so they will ignore any prepared summaries or handouts in favour of their own notes. They feel safe with a pen in hand and paper nearby. They are the ones who need the tactile contact pen to paper, even if it is doodling to keep focussed during a lecture.

**Talkers** learn through challenge and discussion. They will listen attentively, but regularly need time to have their questions answered. They also need permission to interrupt and pose their question without being cut off. Their provocative questions can be very helpful in a group situation.

**Observers** love examples. They want to watch a demonstration or look for a video to give them a practical example, both positive and negative. They want to know how to do it, but also how not to do it. They are good at imitating, so the old-fashioned parrot method can be an effective method with them.

**Doers** learn by trial-and-error. Their impatience to get going prohibits taking the time to read instructions or take a course, which they do only as a last recourse. They are ideal explorers and gather knowledge by trying again and again until they find out what works. As singing students, these learners will not wait for the end of an instruction, no matter how short and concise. They need an assortment of materials to work out on their own rather than a set programme.

Readers will quickly recognize, that these strategies can only offer an orientation helpful in defining my own way of teaching, getting to know my student and finding a method that will help him/her learn effectively. Each of us will identify with more than one strategy that we have used intuitively both in our learning and in our teaching methods. A poor teacher-student fit can mean two things: the student needs a different teacher, or the teacher broadens his method with additional approaches that make it easier for the student to learn. I believe that we as voice teachers tend to equate a non-functional teacher-student relationship too quickly with a poor or untalented student. Students in turn, consider an unsuitable or inflexible teacher a poor teacher. Although there are many untalented but motivated students, and many inflexible teachers, this is not the consequence of my thinking!

### **Applying the strategies to approaches to teaching singing:**

**Traditional teaching** with its use of imaging appeals to a lively imagination, and offers auditory and visual images – good examples for the observer. It communicates experience well and as such, is well-suited to a teacher-student combination where both are similar voice and personality types. It has functioned as oral tradition for centuries. It is also the language we all use for developing artistic expression. This approach depends however, on a common cultural and linguistic frame of reference. What does smelling a rose or listening to a nightingale mean to someone who has never seen let alone smelled a rose or heard a nightingale! Although the teacher using this system has the feeling of imparting concrete information, it is not factual or objective. It imparts no knowledge of vocal function and may not even be physiologically correct – and yet it often works well.

**Knowledge of anatomy and physiology** have become essential, basic tools in today's teaching. Today we understand the knowledge of the body to be essential to achieving healthy vocal function. It is the talkers, observers and readers who will quickly demand and effectively absorb concrete knowledge of how the singing voice functions and use vocal function as their guiding star in pedagogy and performance. The teaching community no longer disputes this question, but in my observation, it is easy for „functional“, physiology-based thinkers and singers to get lost in pursuit of optimizing tonal quality. Approaching singing from this vantage point will provide essential tools, but does not develop musicality or artistry effectively.

**The use of objects and technology** in teaching is as old as first mirror used to give what we today call „real time feedback“ to a student of singing. In addition, creative teachers have included balls and gymnastic bands used in physiotherapy, other aids to assist in releasing balance and organic movement, visual aids such as anatomical illustrations or even paintings to communicate related aspects of historical style, costume, and architecture. Many technological assistants including voice visualization in the studio fall in this category. Easily available computer programmes offer programmes for sound analysis, which offer us a new kind of objectivity.

As my brief case studies show, it also has the potential to engage a student in very practical and helpful ways. Doers and observers are particularly good at making use of the direct results achieved with these tools. Tactile exercises give orientation, physical movement or an on-screen image helps them concentrate. This approach often effectively opens the door to functional information for students not prone to ask for an anatomical illustration. It also trains multitasking, one of the basic skills used in singing. The principles of establishing long-term learning from a short-term success must be attended to with an effective with-without practise strategy. It does not deal with subjective aspects of singing so of course, this too is not complete as a method.

Good teaching remains the sum of many parts!

### **Conclusion**

Even if these observations should not be based on scientific evaluation, which I will leave to others, they have been helpful to me in understanding some of the mechanisms at work in my teaching studio and I hope my readers will find my observations thought-provoking and useful! It will be worth our time and effort to pursue the knowledge available in these related areas.

Confucius is said to have given us the following word of wisdom on teaching, which I believe we should take to heart:

Tell me and I will forget.  
Show me and I will remember.  
Involve me and I will learn.

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