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The case studies: CHAT in use - Case study 13.1 Designing an effective undergraduate vocal pedagogy environment: A case of cultural-historical activity approach in a singing course

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The case studies: CHAT in use - Case study 13.1 Designing an effective undergraduate vocal pedagogy environment: A case of cultural-historical activity approach in a singing course

Abstract

This chapter draws on six case studies of pedagogy with technology in Higher Education. The studies are chosen because they illustrate how the use of technology impacts on pedagogy in these contexts. While the cases are drawn from different levels of higher education (undergraduate to postgraduate) they are woven together by a shared framework: namely, the use of CHAT to explore pedagogical innovation with technology. One of the significant strengths of CHAT, all studies will argue, lies in its ability to situate goal-directed action within the larger context of a motive-directed activity. That is, its explanatory power lies in situating pedagogy (in the instances reported here) socially, taking it out of the realm of the teacher I student dyad to enable a more nuanced understanding of how learning actually happens as a complex activity.

Keywords

vocal, environment, case, cultural, studies, historical, activity, approach, pedagogy, chat, undergraduate, singing, study, course, 13, 1, designing, effective

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Case Study 2.4: Designing an effective undergraduate vocal pedagogy environment: A case of cultural historical activity approach in a singing course

Irina Verenikina and Lotte Latukefu

Context

This case exemplifies the application of cultural-historical approach and activity theory to vocal education at a Australian University. It represents an overview of a five-year study which aimed to develop and critically evaluate an innovative undergraduate classroom environment based in collaborative vocal pedagogy (Latukefu, 2010). The case presented in this chapter is focused on the ways that cultural-historical approach (Vygotsky, 1978) and the activity theory model (Engeström, 1999) were utilised to re-conceptualise tertiary vocal education and develop an innovative model of collaborative teaching of singing.

Background

Vygotskian (1978) cultural-historical theory was applied to underpin the study by using a number of concepts such as socially and culturally mediated teaching, co-construction of knowledge, self-regulated learning (Latukefu & Verenikina, 2013) and concept formation (Latukefu & Verenikina, 2011).

One-to-one tuition in higher vocal education is considered as most powerful mode for instrumental and vocal training (Gaunt, 2011). However, the amalgamation between drama and music teaching at the University made the formerly offered one-to-one lessons unsustainable. This change provided an opportunity to look for an effective alternative to this traditionally predominant way of vocal training. This is particularly important as the one-to one vocal training model (also known as a master-apprentice model) has a number of limitations (Jorgenson, 2000).

Collaborative learning has been extensively employed by educators to promote student learning (e.g. Ioannou & Artino 2010; Johnston, Johnston & Smith 2007; Main, 2010; Verenikina, 2013). It is seen as “an accepted, and often the preferred, instructional procedures at all levels of education” (Johnston, Johnston & Smith, 2007, p. 15). However peer learning in relation to learning singing at a tertiary level has been under researched (Latukefu, 2009; 2010). This study was undertaken in response to the lack of research of vocal pedagogy in an environment that is not the traditional one-to-one learning model.

Sociocultural approaches to teaching can be utilised in relation to vocal education, both in one-to-one tutoring and in a teacher's work with a group of music students where self-directed learning and self-evaluation can be facilitated by peer support. The role of the teacher in peer support is that of "the director of

the social environment in the classroom, the governor and guide of the interactions" (Vygotsky, 1997, p. 49). To be effective, peer support needs to be carefully orchestrated so the students are working together on a joint task which is within their reach (Daniels, 2001).

Approach

The study employed design-based research methodology (DBRC, 2003) to design an innovative undergraduate vocal classroom environment which enhances vocal students' self-regulated learning. Improving educational practice, designing a learning environment and at the same time developing learning theories in the real situation of the singing course was central to the study (Gravemeijer & Cobb, 2006).

Vygotsky's (1978) cultural-historical approach was systematically applied to inform the design. The theory provided the means to alter the traditional vocal education relationship between the teacher and the student offered by master-apprentice relationship where the master is looked at as a role model and a source of identification for the student (Jorgenson, 2000). In this relationship where the predominant focus was on the transferral of skills and knowledge from the teacher to the learner, the students are often not actively involved in their learning and the responsibilities for improvement are shifted to "the teachers, who have to take on the role of omnipotent master" (Zhukov, 2007, p. 124).

The main purpose of the developed design was to encourage students to take more responsibility for their own learning of singing and move toward the goal of self-regulated learning. Student reflection, collaborative peer learning and assessment aimed at students' taking control of their learning and co-construction of knowledge with peers and the teacher as a mentor. This was complemented by introducing the students to the scientific concepts concerning vocal technique and new vocal exercise as well as the musical knowledge. The purpose of this was to integrate musicianship and aural skills into the authentic environment of singing and not separate theory from practice.

The transformation of the classroom environment was constructed collaboratively over five years in consultation with the staff members and used the reflective journals that students and the teacher wrote during that time as a way of refining and changing the design. This was achieved by analysing the reflective journals for recurring themes, which were then taken into account and incorporated into the design of the next iteration. Revisiting the theoretical framework, the student feedback from formal teacher evaluations and focus groups with students also influenced the design.

Findings and discussion

The sociocultural approach, used in this study, combined with design-based research methodology resulted in a number of design principles emerged from the constant reflection back to theory during iterations of the design. These

principles are transferable to other contexts even if the local context is different from the one where the principles were developed.

Design principle 1 - Students self-regulate their own singing when they understand how their voice works scientifically in relation to their bodies. Students may not always grasp the scientific concepts of singing immediately, but they gain a deeper understanding of meaning in relation to their singing as they progress with their study. Unlike models of learning singing, which are often prescriptive of content, this model allows practitioners flexibility to choose scientific concepts of singing that they will teach their students. The essential point is that scientific concepts themselves become a mediating tool for learning if combined with the everyday concepts students hold about singing. The analysis of data collected from student journals clearly demonstrated that students incorporated the scientific concepts as means for further development of their singing skills

Design principle 2 - Interaction with peers motivates reflection and further learning. The dominance of the one-to-one lesson in the conservatoire means that students do not get as much chance to learn from each other as they do using a sociocultural approach. It was found that the students in the study placed a high value on watching the development of others and learning with them. While advocating for the continued need for one-to-one lessons in the conservatoire, this study questioned whether at an undergraduate level, a balance between group teaching of concepts that are basic for vocal development and one-to-one lessons, was more beneficial because of the peer learning culture that develops.

Design principle 3 - Transformation of practical activity through reflection benefits learning. This study demonstrated that formal reflection by students about their vocal development assisted students in their learning. It achieved this by providing the students with an opportunity to diagnose a problem, think of a solution, carry out the solution through their practice and then refine the solution if necessary. Some students used the reflections to bring together all the perspectives about the voice that they learnt and to work out the ones which worked best for them.

Design principle 4 - Singing students must be able to critically discern quality in singing. To become self-regulated learners capable of continuing with their learning after graduation, students must be capable of thinking critically about their own singing. It was demonstrated that the introduction of peer assessment into the course helped the students to reflect on their own practice by having to make the effort to interact with the criteria given in order to properly assess a peer. Students co-constructed the assessment-related knowledge, which they were able to appropriate as their own and apply to self-assessment.

Design principle 5 - Multiple perspectives are important for learning singing. There is a culture of protection of students from multiple perspectives that exists in many conservatoires as it might be confusing for students to have different teachers tell them different things (Jorgenson, 2000). The present study supported the case for multiple perspectives being highly beneficial to singing

students as they transferred the vocal work that they were doing from one class to the other.

The activity theory model (Engeström, 1999) served as an analytic framework to exemplify the teacher-learner relationship from the perspective of a teacher as a subject of teaching activity. The model allowed for conceptualisation of teaching activity within the social context which included the rules and responsibilities of people involved.

In relation to one-on-one master-apprentice model the teacher was the focus of attention as a desirable model. The object and the desirable outcome of the teacher's activity was that the student be able to render a passable imitation of the phrasing and interpretation of the song by the teacher. The tools in such activity were limited to the teacher's knowledge and division of labour was mainly one-way communication from the teacher to the student. The rule of this classroom was that the student should follow the teacher's instruction without questioning and accept the vocal techniques that were usually based on somatic feelings that the teacher had when singing, which were translated into words for student to imitate (Latukefu & Verenikina, 2013).

In contrast, the modelling of the teacher's activity within the designed learning environment required the use of multiple models following the richness of the object and desirable outcomes of teaching activity - the development of the students' self-directed learning and the complex involvement of the students in collaborative learning (Latukefu & Verenikina, 2013).

Recommendations for future/advice for practitioners

The present research study begins addressing the lack of empirical and systematic research on how students develop singing skills in an environment that is not the traditional one-to-one learning model. Documentation of the processes involved in the development of the model, the experience of the students and their perceptions of how their singing develops help to explain the evolution of the model.

The principles emerged from the study provide insights into strategies that students can develop for self-directed learning and this in turn can act as a framework for teachers which they can organise the content of their singing teaching. For more experienced teachers who find themselves having to adjust the way they teach because of economic pressures or as part of curriculum renewal and review, the theoretical concepts of how students can learn using a different model of teaching will be useful as they develop their own models of teaching suitable to their local context.

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