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“Going Viral”: Contagious Agency Through Learned Helpfulness in a Choral Ensemble

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ABSTRACT

Through hermeneutic phenomenological study (van Manen, 2015b), I explored the music learning processes of multiage learners in a choral ensemble (aged 6–16) designed as a social constructivist learning environment (Fosnot, 1996; Wiggins, 2015). The multiage structure of the ensemble fostered peer scaffolding, which flourished and became central to the culture of the ensemble. The prevalence of this phenomenon enabled insight into a collaborative learning process and how it supported learners’ construction of musical understanding and musical agency (Wiggins, 2016) of individuals within the group. Emergent themes reflected the presence of phenomena I describe as contagious, “viral,” musical agency, and care/courage, and the key role that emotion played in learning processes. Findings describe a reified community of learned helpfulness (Hogle, 2018), as learners fluidly and dialogically offered their agentive musical selves as teacher-helpers and learner-helpers (Hogle, 2018), focused on shared performance goals within the choral ensemble. Attuned learners provided socially mediated processes of pedagogical tact (van Manen, 2015a) to scaffold individuals’ learning needs, processes, and musical agency. Through this transformative process, ensemble agency, community, and musical performance flourished.

In 2012, Allsup posed to music educators:

What if children really were the foundation, the basis, our center of gravity? What if their care and cultivation came first? What would it mean to create a music curriculum in which the fundamentals of music were human and not merely musical? (p. 7)

As a choral ensemble teacher, these questions resonate with me deeply, and I have always strived to keep learners and their needs and goals at the core of our work together. I learned to teach music with a constructivist vision and have always taught from that perspective. In this article, I share what I learned from working as a teacher-researcher in a constructivist choral music learning setting.

In a constructivist view of a learning process, learners formulate understanding of new experience in relation to understandings developed through prior experience (Fosnot, 1996). Vygotsky (1978) and Rogoff (1990) describe this process as deeply

embedded in social contexts. Considering music learning in the context of inherently social music ensembles, Shively (2015) suggests we can “remake the ensemble experience so it reflects constructivist principles [through] an environment in which students are more engaged in musical thinking and decision-making processes, rather than relying on the conductor” (p. 133). Because music learning requires initiative on the part of learners, Wiggins (2015, 2016) emphasizes the centrality of learner agency in the process. Cleaver and Ballantyne (2013) propose that we support development of learner agency when we adjust the nature of constructivist strategies used. Hansen and Imse (2016) suggest moving “seamlessly between focused instruction, guided instruction, collaborative learning, and independent learning” (p. 26), transforming the role of the learner.

To encourage individual musical thinking, ensemble educators might include problem-solving activities (Wiggins, 2015) to foster progressive development of learners’ musical understandings, remembering that learners participate in problem-solving most when teachers take less direct responsibility (Roesler, 2017; Wertsch, Minick, & Arns, 1984). For example, self-evaluative repertoire practice in small groups can become experiential contexts for ensemble learners to identify musical goals and problem-solve through challenges (Freer, 2009).

Extant literature describing choral ensemble learning experiences primarily focuses on teen, adult, and adult/teen settings rather than elementary or cross-age ensembles involving children. In a secondary choral ensemble, Kennedy (2002) found “cross-grade mentoring friendships” (p. 33) valuable, highlighting the important role of learner interaction and dialogue through peer mentoring and tutoring. In her study of a cross-age cathedral choir that included younger children, Barrett (2011) observed peer teaching and legitimate peripheral participation (Lave & Wenger, 1991) as choristers strove for “clear goals related to immanent, tangible performance responsibilities” (p. 279). Luce (2001) notes a need for renewed emphasis on collaborative learning processes in music education research. Kirrane, O’Connor, Dunne, and Moriarty (2016) suggest further study of “the relationships that exist between singers . . . to conceptualize the mechanisms through which choral membership affects individuals’ social and psychological well-being” (p. 2). In the context of this earlier work and my own prior experience teaching through social constructivist approaches in choral music education settings, I chose to enter into a qualitative study of a choral ensemble to consider a social constructivist approach to choral teaching and learning through a psychological lens of musical agency, seeking to contribute to the literature on collaborative learning processes in multiage ensemble settings that include younger children.

METHOD AND METHODOLOGICAL CONTEXT

I was the founder and teacher of a nonprofit community children’s choir that rehearsed weekly in a suburb of a major Midwestern American city. In creating the

program, I had sought to intentionally combine multiage learners with varied socio-cultural backgrounds. Some students had worked with me as a music teacher previously; other students were new to me. Small groups of learners were friends and two were siblings. After I taught 14 rehearsals and two performances, I decided to work as a teacher-researcher (Kincheloe, 2003) to study the lived experiences of learners in this nonauditioned choir of 14 participants, aged 6–16. These learners brought widely varied prior music learning experiences to the setting, as 10 of them came from inner-city neighborhoods and four from affluent suburbs. (All names herein are pseudonyms.)

As part of my typical teaching practice, I had video-recorded each of the rehearsals and performances with two cameras located on opposite sides of the room (a) to inform my own conducting practice and future rehearsal planning and (b) to use the videos for self-evaluative learner activities. These extant recordings became the data for this study. I transcribed the verbal and musical content of each video, creating timestamps and sequential charts. I systematically analyzed and charted nonverbal behaviors and social interactions occurring in each video. Using teacher-researcher observation methods outlined by Robinson (1994), I primarily attended to musical sound coupled with nonverbal behaviors and attributes of eye contact, proximity, facial expression, appearance, gesture, touch, and posture, along with social interaction questions that classified recurrent types of behaviors, events, roles, dialogic interactive patterns, and potential meanings. Lesson plans, teacher reflective journals, and my own lived experience of the rehearsals further triangulated the data analysis. Artifacts included notes and emails from parents or learners, comments from parents present during rehearsals, student artwork, and classwork.

Through hermeneutic phenomenological analysis (van Manen, 2015b) of verbal, nonverbal, and musical interactions evident in the data, I sought to understand participants' lived experience and the meanings they made of these experiences, inductively seeking emergent themes, essences, or phenomena (van Manen, 2015b). I systematically journaled important ideas, images, connections to possible theory, events, and emotions, creating summaries and visual representations of possible emerging themes and metaphorical linkages (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). I strove for thick description with an *emic* perspective (Geertz, 1973), hand-tracing screen shots of specific video data and selectively choosing to create narrative accounts of educational experiences or narrative emplotment through analysis (Clandinin, 1992; Polkinghorne, 1995). I was keenly aware of my own contextual (Peshkin, 1994), subjectively constructed (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) meaning-making process as I comparatively analyzed emergent phenomena.

To establish credibility, I engaged in peer debriefing (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) with colleague researchers who have similar expertise in constructivist learning and teaching and choral music education. I engaged in negative case analysis through multiple recursive looks at the data to seek possible opposing instances of phenomena (Lincoln

& Guba, 1985). Recording all interactions that occurred during 14 weeks established prolonged engagement and persistent observation (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I aimed for dependability through careful record-keeping (Patton, 2002), grounding all my work in the data, and kept transferability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) in mind as I aimed to invite *verstehen* (Bresler, 2006), resonance, engagement, connectedness, and relational dialogues with music teachers.

Teacher-researchers utilize their unique empathies and contextual understandings of educational phenomena through subjective lenses that are aimed toward a common good (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). In both teacher and researcher roles, I sought to ask, “What is the nature or essence of the experience of learning (so that I can now better understand what this particular learning experience is like for these children)?” (van Manen, 2015b, p. 10).

DATA ANALYSIS

Initially, as I entered into an analysis process, I was curious about what might contribute to the development of learners’ musical agency, informed by Wiggins’s (2016) description of musical agency as “belief in one’s capacity to engage musically, initiate musical ideas, and intentionally influence one’s musical life circumstances” (pp. 103–104). Looking further into studies of agency in the field of psychology, I found Snyder’s (1994) hope theory particularly informative in interpreting what was emerging from the data. In his seminal work, Snyder (1994) defines hope as “the *sum* of the mental willpower and waypower that you have for your goals” (p. 5). In subsequent writing (e.g., Snyder, 2002), he replaces willpower with *agency* and waypower with *pathways*. Snyder poses that, when considering a goal, a high-hope individual regularly thinks agentively with accompanying pathways thoughts. Personal value or ownership of one’s goals is key to hope theory and acknowledgement of pervasive emotions is its unique characteristic. Snyder (1994) explains that emotion is a continually influencing “*byproduct* [emphasis added] of how effective we are in the pursuit of goals” (p. 21). Informed by these perspectives, I considered the individual constructs of hope theory (goal and pathways thoughts, emotion, and agency) within the dialogic, relational experiences that comprised the data.

In the data, I could see individual musical agency contagiously “going viral,” permeating each musical experience, socially mediating musical agency for others. Often, musical agency seemed to heighten through nonverbal communication of gesture, steady eye contact, a short gaze with another, or a positive emotional response to learning experiences.

Contagious Musical Agency

In the opening warm-up of the first rehearsal, as learners formed a circle with me as teacher, 6-year-old Wesley began the “viral” process through sharing his musical agency.

I modeled desired musical sound, visually scaffolding vowel shapes with gesture. Wesley imitated me with his hands as he sang. Others then began to do the same and, after an encouraging word from me, all agentively displayed vowel shapes with their hands as well as their mouths. As a result, their vowels had a more unified sound (Session 1).

Wesley's musical agency to show his sound through gesture—embodied visual representation of his embodied musical sound—became an impetus for shared understanding, shared meaning-making, shared experience, and unified community. It felt as though a circular connection was being made, removing a wall between teacher and learner-filled ensemble.

During each transition to a new song, Wesley sang his own versions of the songs aloud. He filled transition times (during passing out of scores, movement of groups) with his own musical ideas, freely sharing his self with others (Session 2).

Wesley cried, "Did you hear the harmony?" and burst into applause—"YAYYY!" Others joined him in contagious applause (Session 1).

Wesley's actions seemed to initiate numerous instances of "contagious" musical agency within rehearsals. For example, different learners initiated sight-reading of their own parts, offered harmonization as others rehearsed, or solo-sang during transitions (Sessions 2, 4, 6, 10); initiated leadership for varied activities (Sessions 1, 3–8, 10–12); shared improvisatory musical ideas (Sessions 1, 3–5, 9); and initiated problem-solving or performance practice ideas (Sessions 2–13). Musical agency also "virally" spread through audience members during both performances; audience members chose to sing with the choristers and clap on off-beats during various pieces, creating a literal crescendo within a musically agentive extended community.

Role of Emotion in Musical Agency

The data also revealed roles of both positive and negative emotion as a critical influence on musically agentive behavior in this choral ensemble. In Session 2, we improvisationally solo sang "My name is . . ." It was 6-year-old Jane's turn.

JANE (PUTTING HER HEAD DOWN AND COVERING HER FACE WITH HER ARMS): I don't want to.

ME: That's OK. Want to do it with me, like a duet?

One arm came down, away from her face. She sang barely audibly, with me. I left out one word and she sang it, maintaining continual eye contact with me, smiling as she sang.

Six-year-old Wesley was next in the circle. Musical improvisatory dialogue filled the room, as all smiled:

WESLEY (SINGS): My name is Wesley Tate or you could call me Wesley.

ME (SINGS): Would you like us to call you Wesley?

WESLEY (SINGS): Yes, I would.

ME (SINGS): I'm going to call you Wesley.

WESLEY (SINGS): OK.

Sixth-grader Malaika was next in the circle. She gripped her hands tightly in front, smiled, and looked down at the floor, leaning away. I asked, "Want to do it with me?" She nodded and then sang her name with me audibly, as a duet (Session 2).

In Session 4, I asked, "Who wants to try the solo part next week?" Malaika and Jane both raised their hands. These were the very two girls who had been uncomfortable sharing their names in a sung solo. Later in rehearsal, I began to vocally improvise a melody, singing a comment as a recitative. Jane then sang the melody and smiled at me. I thought, "She just spontaneously sang a solo! This was the child who had curled into a standing ball at an earlier rehearsal. What a delightful display of agency, risk-taking, vulnerability, and hope" (Session 4).

Music performance anxiety affects up to 75% of music students, as young as age 3 and peaking at age 15, mostly in females (Kenny, 2006; Osborne, 2016). As teachers, we must be aware of this anxiety; it is "the most significant psychological issue for performing musicians [as it] can be a significant blow to the psychological well-being and optimal performance of a young performer" (Osborne, 2016, p. 422).

Perezhivanie. Conceptually related, Mahn (2003) explains Vygotsky's use of a Russian term, *perezhivanie*, as "the way children perceive, emotionally experience, appropriate, internalize and understand interactions in their environment" (p. 129). Paralleling Snyder's hope theory, *perezhivanie* links emotion with cognition. In this study, high-hope learners modeled a positive *perezhivanie*, or positive emotional reaction to performing experiences. Low-hope ensemble members seemed to contagiously absorb others' high-hope perspective, enabling mutual continuation toward their shared goal. Mistakes became normalized, with subsequent "virally" shared positive *perezhivanie* and learner-constructed pathways for improvement.

During Session 8, we talked about the prior week's performance. Each of these learners emotionally perceived the experience of performance with differing *perezhivaniya*.

MALAIKA: Before, I was terrified. In the middle of it, I felt a little more relaxed and at the end, I was happy.

MELISSA: Singing our song last week was fun.

JANE (SHOUTING): I was so happy that we didn't have a microphone!

ME: You didn't want people to hear you?

JANE: Not me.

KENDI: Sometimes I feel that way when I don't really know it myself, like if I'm actually . . . (her voice trailed into silence)

ME: Is it different when you're in a choir though?

MALAIKA: It's 'cause we're right there.

MELISSA: It's like if you mess up, they won't really hear you.

KENDI: It has a lot to do with who's in the audience . . . (many begin to nod their heads)

ME: I don't know why, but for me, it's easier to perform for a bunch of people I don't know.

MELISSA: Me too. If I perform in front of my friends, I'm like . . . oh God, no.

DAYSHAUN: If they don't know me, they can't criticize me.

Several choristers smiled and laughed. Six-year-old Asha raised her hand, then created a heart with her fingers, placed it to her chest and swept her heart-shaped gesture out toward the room. I imitated her, and then choristers smiled and laughed, imitating her.

MALAIKA: If I don't know a bunch of people, it's like . . . OK, judge-y people.

NANJI: I can perform for friends or anybody, but it's how I SOUND . . . that's what I think about.

JANE: I want to make sure I'm not scared.

NANJI: Work on your part, like you're confident enough when you're doing it and it's just like . . . normal and you're just doing everyday things. You keep doing it and working on it and it's just like . . . it becomes normal. (Session 8)

Care/Courage in Collaborative Scaffolding Experiences

In this unique ensemble, learners shared their musical agency courageously, infused with care for other persons and for music-making. I describe this phenomenon as *care/courage*, reflecting that learners' courage to sing and learn seemed directly connected to a caring, supportive learning environment. In working toward goals of shared understanding or intersubjectivity (Matusov, 2001; Rogoff, 1990; Vygotsky, 1978; Wertsch, 1984), learners reified openness, risk-taking, and vulnerability for individuals within the group. As they cared for shared goals of successful learning and singing, each seemed to experience a sense of power and belonging through "viral" agency, with their focus on collaborative processes rather than perceived shortcomings of self (Bartolome, 2013). Perhaps this environment of care/courage fostered individual musical agency, easing music performance anxiety.

In this environment, communications became "multidirectional (participant to participant) rather than unidirectional (expert to novice)" (Barrett, 2005, p. 272), embodying dialogic rather than monologic interaction (Matusov, 2001). The ensemble functioned in ways that Rogoff, Matusov, and White (1996) describe as a "community of learners" (p. 397): All participants shifted and varied their roles as resources to others, depending on their understanding of activities through knowledge constructed in prior experiences. I often functioned as a *most-knowledgeable other*, through lesson planning and my own scaffolding.

In choral ensemble settings, learning and teaching often includes use of semiotic, nonverbal communicative gestures such as Curwen hand signs displaying simultaneously kinesthetic and visual representations of pitch. Gestures or facial expressions can also display text as choristers share embodied musical agency. In this study, choristers frequently offered one another scaffolding tools such as vocal and kinesthetic modeling, direct instruction, questioning, answering questions, score-reading assistance, Curwen hand signs, instruction of rehearsal behavioral procedures, conducting of beat patterns, or kinesthetically cuing vowel shapes.

Learners also took the initiative to *seek* scaffolding when they felt they required assistance. In working toward a shared performance goal, this seeking behavior served as a musically agentic problem-solving pathway.

Wesley remarked, "I think I might need a teacher to help me," looking at his peers. Had Wesley been considering his older peers as teachers? (Session 4)

In many instances, individual learners sought scaffolding through nonverbal behavior, such as initiating eye contact with a perceived more knowledgeable other (Wertsch, 1984), initially observing as legitimate peripheral participants (Lave & Wenger, 1991), facing another or locating one's body in closer proximity to another, imitating another's body movements, or displaying challenged pitch through hand signs while seeking intersubjective congruence with others. Frequent asking of questions also seemed to be a highly agentic behavior.

Jane was the first to dance and move to the beat. Her agentic, musically strong sound and active participation seemed to create a contagious energy. Dayshaun began to clap and smile. Malaika began to smile and move. Others joined. Physically active movements emphasized their continually strengthening musical sound. Wesley struggled to clap on off-beats, stopped, looked to Nanji and Abby for scaffolding assistance, then clapped correctly. Jane turned her body and eyes to Malaika, standing next to her. Because this piece included three polyphonic lines, forming a partner song, the younger choristers sought scaffolding from older peers on their own line, looking toward their section rather than me as conductor. (Session 11)

Snyder (2002) describes high-hope people as those who can respond to challenges through creating "alternate pathways and rechanneling of agency to a new pathway" (p. 255). Learners seemed to evaluate individual and ensemble performance as they offered and sought different scaffolding pathways toward musical improvement and competence. Scaffolding takes place within the *zone of proximal development* (ZPD), which Vygotsky (1978) defined as "the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers" (p. 86). A learner's *perezhivanie* is interdependently linked with successful scaffolding of learning in their ZPD (e.g., Mahn & John-Steiner, 2002). Although literature describes vast benefits to peer teachers (e.g., Smidt, 2009), as the teacher, I was continually concerned that older learners might experience boredom if their own ZPD was not entered. Yet, as older learners increasingly took on roles as peer scaffolders, they seemed to facilitate and self-regulate their own engagement through outwardly focused responses to learning experiences of other choristers.

In Session 6, as Part 2s rehearsed, Dayshaun began to sing his differing part along with them, quietly. In Session 7, Dayshaun asked Asha, "Do you want to practice your verse with Jane just one more time?" Asha nodded to Dayshaun and the 6-year-olds faced one another to practice a cappella. Dayshaun mouthed the

words, attuned to them. In Session 11, Nanji held back on giving an answer, allowing for younger beginning learners to share their thoughts.

In this narrative, Dayshaun and Nanji seemed to actively offer space for another's construction of understanding, an empathetic and honoring stance. Although taking a role of teacher can bring its own special learning challenge, it can also create a need for patience, as one's own ZPD as a music learner is not always being entered.

In the following narrative, learners seemed to share an intimate, collective desire for each to successfully share their individual voice. Contagiously fluid nonverbal, semiotic, and musically dialogic scaffolding resulted, as multiple peers became teachers, oriented to one another in reaching their common goal.

Kendi and Nanji volunteered to sing an improvised solo line. They decided Kendi would go first, but she didn't enter on time. I began to vamp on the piano, during her repeated attempts. "Oh gosh!" she exclaimed and hit her thighs with her music score. Nanji started to sing the line softly, conducting Kendi's entrance as I continued to vamp. Then Dayshaun conducted her entrance. Kendi laughed, "Let someone else sing it. I don't think I know it well enough." Melissa then sang a rhythm that didn't quite fit. Malaika raised her hands as if to conduct and sang it softly with her on the next soloist entrance. Across from her, Nanji began to mouth the words as solo entrances came. Melissa was still struggling to create a musically pleasing improvisation. After four solo attempts, the ensemble began to sing with her and Asha began to conduct.

Learners began to sway in unison movements, solo lines disappeared and the choir began to sing three-part harmony. Nanji began to clap; others joined her. Soon, all were smiling, clapping, moving, and singing. Malaika leaned to Melissa, checking their pitches. Melissa raised her hand into a Curwen hand sign and Malaika nodded, all continually singing (Session 8).

In Session 12, the choristers freely self-evaluated as each piece ended, verbalizing their individual practice plans. Wesley remarked, "I think I'm good. It's because I'm with my whole choir." Jane affirmed his thought, "Yeah, it's not so much stress with everyone else." As children left, hugs and continued singing walked out the door into the world.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

As agentive learners sought to achieve collective performance goals and collaboratively cocreated pathways for musical problem-solving through dialogic, semiotic, verbal, and nonverbal communication, ensemble as well as individual musical agency seemed to heighten. Snyder's hope theory (1994), involving *individual* constructs of goal and pathways thinking, emotional mediation, and personal agency then functioned as a *social* construct. Each high-hope learner's (Snyder, 2002) positive *perezhivanie*, musical agency, and focus on problem-solving seemed virally displayed and available to the entire community of "co-musicians" (Freer, 2016), a socially mediated extension of hope theory. Mediated musical agency seemed most apparent as peers scaffolded to

enable shared responsibility for learning, utilizing each singer's sociocultural learning experiences and developmental uniqueness.

Learned Helpfulness: Fluid Roles of Teacher-Helper and Learner-Helper

The word "help" emerged as each participant's continuously appropriated synonym for "scaffold." Zimmerman (1990) refers to *learned helplessness*, a term coined in 1975 by Seligman as a "theory [that] suggests that as individuals experience uncontrollable events they show performance deficits on subsequent tasks" (p. 71). In contrast, Zimmerman developed *learned helpfulness*, describing the idea as "the process of learning and utilizing problem-solving skills and the achievement of perceived or actual control" (p. 72). Related to constructs in Snyder's (1994) hope theory, both ideas describe agency as perceived control or empowerment, important in pathways and goal thinking. In this particular constructivist choral environment, learners chose to initiate and label *helping* behaviors in problem-solving experiences, perhaps seeking agentic empowerment for their own learning and for the learning of their peers. Musical, nonverbal dialogues became instances for continual scaffolding of one another's learning and a mutually released space that encouraged *helping* developed, as learners sought musical intersubjectivity. Drawing on Zimmerman, I honor the learners' pervasive use of "help" by creating the term *learned helpfulness* (Hogle, 2018), a central phenomenon that seemed to intensify and reify this particular choral ensemble as a "family" of supportive scaffolders.

Six-year-old Wesley's contagious, high-hope musical agency initiated learned helpfulness in Session 1. In so doing, he became *teacher-helper* (Hogle, 2018), initially sharing his own cognitive-emotional experience as a musician, his own *perezhivanie*. The learners seemed to *virally* create a relational, intersubjective place of safety and belonging in which each felt agentic and could share their personal and musical voices, a prized characteristic of a choral experience (Bartolome, 2013; Sweet, 2014).

A community of teacher-helpers emerged, as learners increasingly displayed sophisticated elements of what van Manen (2015a) calls *pedagogical tact*. Pedagogical tact refers to more than enabling of skill, competence, conceptual understanding, or technique. Rather, "pedagogical tact preserves a child's space, protects what is vulnerable, prevents hurt, makes whole what is broken, strengthens what is good, enhances what is unique, and sponsors personal growth" (van Manen, 2015a, p. 79). Pedagogical tact implies an emotionally aware and empathetic giving, as the giver seeks to heighten another's agency. Van Manen (2015a) further describes pedagogical tact as "the ability to actively distinguish what is good or appropriate from what is less suited or inappropriate for children . . . in a particular moment (p. 35). A pedagogically tactful educator will respond to each unique child and situation with "respect and attentiveness" (van Manen, 2015a, p. 35).

Teacher-helpers seemed to warmly accept each chorister's existing vocal skill, musical understanding, *perezhivanie*, and musical agency, intuitively noting struggles through

attuned formative assessment. Teacher-helpers then gently offered pedagogically tactful selves, entering unique *teacher* ZPDs, perhaps also mitigating possible *learner* boredom. As learners coconstructed largely nonverbal pathways toward shared performance goals, through agentive teacher-helping with peers, they offered themselves as regulators of the musical learning process, enabling musical sound to continue throughout the entire ensemble successfully.

Learner-helpers (Hogle, 2018) acknowledged misunderstandings, confusion, and mistakes, seeking understanding as they agentively offered learned helpfulness toward shared goals. They initiated coconstruction of learning, sense-making, competence, and skill. Learner-helpers seemed to agentively know when their musical learning had successfully enabled vocal independence; in those moments, they subsequently served as available teacher-helpers for others.

Fluid roles of learner-helper or teacher-helper seemed to depend on particular musical situations as they drew on prior musical experiences in sharing their socioculturally situated musical selves with one another. In this study, choristers increasingly and transiently assigned or accepted a role of more knowledgeable other with varied peers. Because learners added themselves to my role as adult teacher, becoming teacher-helpers and learner-helpers, a more symmetrical community emerged. Learned helpfulness appeared to include outwardly attuned shifting from self. It appeared that caring about mutual musical experience produced a caring, even tending, to the musical agency of others. *Helping*, or “designing sensitive guidance,” seemed to originate from “deep emotional, motivational, cognitive, and volitional concern about well-being and agency in others” (Matusov, 2001, p. 397). As each learner became teacher-helper or learner-helper, challenges of varied ZPDs and emotional shackles of fear seemed to fall away, as data reflected multiple instances similar to the progressive release of music performance anxiety in the two described learners.

Through the fluid, dialogic process of coconstructing musical skill, competencies, and conceptual learning, each learner discovered a place of self-offering within problem-solving experiences shared in this social constructivist learning and teaching environment. As each chorister became teacher-helper or learner-helper, they rose above their individual capacities and the ensemble’s musical offerings flourished. Simultaneously, participants seemed to contagiously experience positive *perezhivaniya*. Multiple perspectives comingled to produce coconstructed musical experiences as the ensemble problem-solved through learned helpfulness.

IMPLICATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Although constructivist approaches to education are often labeled “student-centered” or “learner-centered,” the findings of this study might suggest a “person-centered” approach to ensemble learning through mutual participation and responsibility. As musical experience was coconstructed, a symmetrical and reciprocal trust formed with

each other-focused instance of giving, receiving, and asking for help, in the interest of fostering musical agency and meeting shared musical goals for the entire ensemble community.

Perhaps ensemble conductors might explore socially mediated ways in which learners can be enabled to actively share their own understandings through helping as a foundation for development of musical agency. Because development of musical agency is necessary for music learning (Elliott & Silverman, 2015; Karlsen, 2011; Wiggins, 2016), music education researchers might further study ensemble learning through a lens of musical agency in varied school or multiage community settings. Particularly within same-age and other multiage choral and instrumental ensembles, researchers might seek to understand varied ways in which learned helpfulness might foster musical agency, providing key understandings for 21st-century music educators.

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