

Another Perspective: Crowdsourcing Our Ensemble Rehearsals

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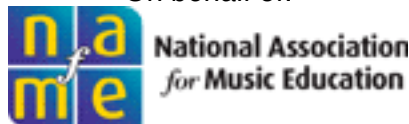
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Another Perspective

Crowdsourcing Our Ensemble Rehearsals

Learning is a dynamic process that consists of making sense and meaning out of new information and connecting it to what is already known. To learn well and deeply, students need to be active participants in that process. This typically involves doing something—for example, thinking, reading, discussing, problem-solving, or reflecting.¹

Is the era of the expert disappearing? Wikipedia has replaced *Encyclopædia Britannica*; the American public votes on the best and favorite singers and dancers on reality entertainment television shows; Hollywood celebrities and our virtual “friends” pronounce opinions on world events using Twitter and Facebook; colleagues can endorse our qualifications on LinkedIn; the mPING app uses crowdsourcing to report on the weather, social music-making is growing, and blogging is rampant, as is blogging on blogging.

While some of us might find this concept unsettling, disturbing, or even dangerous (think “WebMD”), a paradigm shift has definitely occurred. In 1964, when television sets had become popular in the United States but the personal computer was twenty years in the future, Canadian communications theorist Marshall McLuhan famously wrote in *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, “the medium is the message.”² McLuhan surmised that the printing press promoted a hierarchical mode of human interaction and learning in which those in control exert power over others. In contrast, the digital or information age promotes a liberal, more empowering way of learning and interacting.³ Or as Bob Stein, founder of the Voyager Company and the Institute for the Future of the Book, says, “If the printing press empowered the individual, the digital world empowers collaboration.”⁴ McLuhan is also credited with coining the term *global*

village, and his prediction has proven to be accurate. The Internet connects us all, whether we like it or not, and it is not only changing how we think and how we learn but is changing our conventional notions of authority. Knowledge is growing more participatory and collaborative by the digital minute.

At a recent workshop presented by two representatives from Apple, “How the iPad Is Changing Education” (more on that later), the presenter opened with the following parable:

Imagine a man swept away from the early nineteenth century to Times Square present day by a time machine. Everything around him would be mind-blowingly strange . . . buildings, cars, neon, masses of people interacting with smartphones . . . until that man walked into a school. He would know immediately that he was in a classroom. He would recognize that immediately.⁵

I’ve been thinking about that a lot lately. It’s true, not much has really changed in our classrooms for a *long* time. Yes, we may have different desks, we might sit in a circle or in small groups, we might have a projector and a screen, but the configuration is pretty much the same as it has always been. And what about our rehearsal rooms? Would they look the same as they always have? If that same late-nineteenth-century gentleman were a trombone player in the Sousa Band and he walked into a modern



Cynthia Johnston Turner believes that leadership can also mean letting your students' ideas influence musical performance. (Photo by Robert Barker, Cornell Photography)

rehearsal room, would it be “mind-blowingly strange”? No, it wouldn't. He would know exactly where he was and where to sit.⁶ With the exception of a few well-worn rehearsal techniques like “scramble”—or occasional “circle” setups—rehearsals today look a lot like they always have.⁷ An expert (the conductor) is at the front of the room, usually standing on a box and holding a stick (we could talk here about *that* power dynamic, but we'll leave that alone for now!) imparting musical wisdom to the musicians who are sitting in a fairly standard formation, playing music chosen by the conductor, and awaiting direction, maybe even inspiration. And not only that, but the rehearsal of said music for the almost sole aim of a single performance.

For some time now, this whole rehearsal scene has been bothering me, and I've been slowly trying to change it. In a recent article by Randall Everett Allsup and Cathy Benedict, “The Problems of Band,” the authors state that “the problems of the American wind band . . . stem from an inheritance that is overwhelmed by tradition,” the band world is “predominantly teacher-centered, teacher transmitted, and content/repertoire driven,” and “we are deluding

ourselves if we think our students are actually taking on the responsibility of independent musicianship or becoming more musical.”⁸ Yep, that would be telling it like it is—thank you, Randall and Cathy!

I'd like to share some of the more learner-centered techniques that the students in my ensembles and I have been experimenting with. As a result of this paradigm shift in my thinking and teaching techniques, I have a renewed sense of excitement for what happens in the rehearsal room, and I think my students do as well. I'm in relatively new territory. Let's face it: I'm a control freak—I'm a conductor. But control is largely an illusion and usually about fear,⁹ so I am ready to begin to relinquish at least some of that control. And here I'm reminded of what Lao-tzu asked in the *Tao Te Ching*: “Can you lead without seeking to control?”¹⁰ It's a provocative question for conductors and teachers on many levels.

When I first started experimenting with my teaching in the rehearsal room a few years ago, it was met with little success. I would stop the ensemble and ask questions like “Where do you think the height of this phrase is?” or “Where is the first major event in this piece?” or

“Is the written dynamic correct here?” All these are decent questions to provoke thinking about the music, but sadly -ill prepared. Students would stare blankly at me (or not make eye contact at all). Occasionally, one of the more courageous students (usually a section leader or principal player who may have already felt empowered) would participate, but I didn't feel as if most of my students were truly engaged. In my frustration, I spoke to some of students privately about this. A few students told me that they simply weren't used to being asked their opinion about the music; they were used to being told. A few students told me that they thought all day in their other classes and that they just wanted “to play.”¹¹ One student told me that answering those types of questions was my job, not his. Talk about tradition! But I refused to give up, and I marshaled on. I read articles and books on new ways of teaching and I attended quite a few workshops offered by the Center of Teaching Excellence here at Cornell. Eventually, I started asking better questions, and more students started participating.

Two changes happened that created a minor breakthrough. First, I decided to be honest with my students. Stephen R. Covey taught us in *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People* that “the more authentic you become, the more genuine in your expression, particularly regarding personal experiences and even self-doubts, the more people can relate to your expression and the safer it makes them feel to express themselves.”¹² At the first rehearsal, I took ten minutes to tell my students a story. I told them about my experiences growing up in the music room. I told them how my high school band director used fear and intimidation to get results (albeit, excellent results). I told them that if I was honest, I viewed myself as a benevolent dictator, but a dictator nonetheless, and I wanted to change that. I told them how I wanted to change the paradigm from teacher-centered to learner-centered, how I wanted to make the rehearsal process as important and engaging as the performance product. I told them that I had chosen repertoire for the first

concert cycle that I had never performed before, and even though I had studied the scores thoroughly, we were going to learn how to interpret them together. I talked about some of my fears and hopes in doing all of this. It was an interesting experience for me to share this with my students. I felt slightly vulnerable. Vulnerability on the podium is a daily act, at least for me, but it was different to not have the music as a catalyst for that vulnerability. But I also felt authentic (to use a popular educational buzzword), and I felt their support.

Then, I had the students complete a short questionnaire.¹³ It was designed to open the lines of communication and develop some reciprocity in the room. The questions were

1. Tell me three things about yourself that you think I should know.
2. What are you interested in learning in rehearsals and performances?
3. How do you think that learning should be assessed?
4. What are your expectations of me?
5. What should I expect from you?

It was a simple but powerful exercise. The climate in the room changed. It is difficult to explain, but it was palpable. Things felt more . . . open.¹⁴

The second change was a result of a small epiphany. It finally occurred to me that my students spend a good portion of their daily lives in the digital world. Facebook, G-chat, Twitter, email, texting, Google searches, gaming—they haven't known life without the Internet. Of course, I had known this for some time, but I hadn't really thought about the ramifications of that in the rehearsal room. They are completely at ease and at home on the Web.¹⁵ Perhaps the students would be more comfortable sharing information and discussing questions in a digital format. Our platform, and the students' suggestion, was (and continues to be) Piazza.com. We started with responses to the initial reading of the first concert's repertoire. Responses ranged from comments about compositional devices such as orchestration, instrumental colors, dynamics, motivic use, and repetition, to comparisons with other

composers (two students began a discussion with me about Susan Botti's possible influences—Schoenberg and Berg), or works by the same composer, to overarching emotional or visceral responses. Many also anointed their "favorite" but acknowledged that that often changed by the time of the performance. I was impressed, not just by their participation, but also by their intellect and, in some cases, profundity. And I told them so at the next rehearsal. During that rehearsal, when I stopped and mentioned that several students had commented on the potential balance issues in one piece and asked how those balance issues might be resolved, several students had suggestions. It was exhilarating, and it continues to be. It doesn't happen all of the time, and I still "lead" the rehearsal, but the students are invited to contribute more than just their playing. The level of engagement has been elevated.

Students are now posting their own questions and comments on the site. There have been useful and important discussions ranging from the practical (where to buy the best valve oil, how to practice certain passages, which recordings are the most useful) to the profound (What do "quality" and "accessibility" mean, and to whom? What is the role of the audience during a performance? Is the use of visual stimuli at a concert a distraction from the music or an enhancement? Where do "chills" come from?). Having been provided with the opportunity to think critically, to reflect, and to share our experiences, knowledge, and opinions, I believe we build a stronger community of learners.

And now for the experiment that may provoke you to say, "Oh-oh, she's gone too far!" It relates back to the idea that the expert (in this case, me) chooses the repertoire. I don't know about you, but designing artistic programs that fulfill my needs, those of my students, and those of our audiences consumes a tremendous amount of time. And perhaps, like me, you feel great pride when a well-designed program "works." Likewise, like me, you might look back on older programs and think, "That wasn't such a good idea." I'm not prepared

to completely relinquish my control (whether it is an illusion or not) on designing programs and choosing repertoire. I happen to believe that as leaders in an artistic field, we *should* be the arbiters of taste, and I love designing programs, but I am prepared to provide my students with options and choices. For one concert per semester, students are given the option of choosing one or two works on the program. They are given works from which they can choose, although we are also open to suggestions of repertoire that we have not thought of if the student can provide a valid artistic reason for which it should be on the program. Each of the recordings are posted on Piazza.com along with scores, if available, along with reasons why the work or works would be a good fit with the existing repertoire planned for the concert. After the students listen and study the possible choices, they vote on the works, and we choose the one with the most votes. I have found that the students' sense of ownership for the entire program is heightened. It's more work for me—I have to choose a number of pieces (not just one or two) that will work, but that small gesture of sharing the decision making has reaped fabulous rewards in terms of students' self-agency.

Time to come back to the iPad, as promised. Nothing extraordinary here except that I have used the iPad in rehearsals to great effect. Although we haven't found the perfect application yet,¹⁶ with the help of Cornell's Information Technology Department, we have been able to transfer scores onto the iPad and project it on a large screen behind me. I then conduct and rehearse from the iPad. Practically speaking, it needs to be a score I know very well (if not one I've memorized) because the iPad screen is so small, but the benefits during rehearsals have been great. Students in the ensemble are immediately drawn into the "big picture." They can instantly see how their individual parts relate to the whole, which, the students tell me, helps them *hear* how their parts fit into the whole. And given that the majority of learners are visual, that makes sense. The

visual experience also allows the students to see what I see, constantly alters their perspective, and reminds them to respect the ensemble commitment to a larger goal—another community builder.¹⁷

I wonder whether that nineteenth-century trombonist would like or even accept some of these learner-centered activities. Perhaps he (and it would have been a “he”) would just want to sit down and play a great march and get on with it, but times have changed, and the students in our ensembles have grown up in a completely different world. Perhaps it’s time we conductors started to change with it.

NOTES

1. Elizabeth F. Barkley, *Student Engagement Techniques: A Handbook for College Faculty* (San Francisco: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2010).
2. Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (Boston: MIT Press, 1964).
3. Paul R. Taylor, “What Would Marshall McLuhan Make of Twitter?” May 6, 2011, <http://designerlythinking.wordpress.com/2011/05/06/what-would-marshall-mcluhan-make-of-twitter/>.
4. Bob Stein, quoted in “Wikipedia and the Death of the Expert,” <http://www.theawl.com/2011/05/wikipedia-and-the-death-of-the-expert>.
5. Jon Landis, “The Mobility Revolution: How the iPad Is Changing Education” (presentation at the Cornell Store, April 12, 2011).
6. Although he might not recognize the repertoire, and he would probably wonder what all those percussionists were doing there!
7. I’m not diminishing the effectiveness or the validity of these techniques; I use them on a regular basis with great success.
8. Randall Everett Allsup and Cathy Benedict, “The Problems of Band: An Inquiry into the Future of Instrumental Music Education,” *Philosophy of Music Education Review* 16, no. 2 (Fall 2008): 156–73. And the problems are not just with band: I know a number of choral and orchestral directors who suffer from the same delusions!
9. Fear that by sharing my vulnerability I will be perceived as less of an authority

or less “good”; fear that my musicianship and teaching and competence will be judged by the performance of my students (it will); fear that I will not be as “respected”; fear that by not perpetuating the traditional dictatorial rehearsal techniques that exist in most college and university band rooms, I’ll be ostracized by my colleagues; fear that this is perceived as a typical “feminine” approach to teaching, to name just a few.

10. As quoted in Diane Dreher, *The Tao of Personal Leadership* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1996), 229.
11. I do satisfy this need occasionally: One of our rehearsals during a rotation (not the dress) is simply a run-through of the repertoire and a sight-reading of a new piece. I don’t do any talking or rehearsing. The run-through is instructive because I record it and send it to the students.
12. Stephen R. Covey, *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1990), 267.
13. The questionnaires took about ten minutes to complete, and I collected them when they were finished. It was not anonymous. Some students wanted to take it home to finish, which surprised me.
14. As a result of that questionnaire, I learned a number of interesting things about my students, many of whom had been in the ensemble two to three years.
15. There are some fascinating articles on how the Web is changing our brains. See Naveet Alang, “For Better and Worse, the Web is Changing How We Think,” <http://www.techi.com/2010/06/for-better-and-worse-the-web-is-changing-how-we-think>; and Nicolas Carr, “Is Google Making Us Stupid?,” <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2008/07/is-google-making-us-stupid/306868/>.
16. Currently, we’re using Score Reader.
17. On April 2013, the author learned that she is one of the 8,000 participants selected by Google to try “Google Glasses.” Imagine the possibilities!



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