Pedagogical Structure, Strategies, and Techniques for the Choral Music Classroom
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STRUCTURE

The Teacher . . .

A___ plans multiple learning objectives and a variety of teaching strategies. Activities include the following classroom pillars: vocal development, pitch development, rhythm development, sight-singing development, and repertoire. Classroom materials are made available and accessible prior to the start of class.

B___ maintains a well-ordered room.

C___ greets students with a welcoming smile as they enter the classroom. This is a time when many individualized concerns are addressed between student to teacher and teacher to student.

D___ demonstrates an effective and efficient use of class time. Teaches from the time students' enter the classroom until the students' exit the classroom.

E___ plays quality music recordings as students enter class. Recordings of middle school choirs, high school choirs, college and professional choirs, as well as a variety of orchestral and world music recordings are included.

F___ spreads out students' 3/5 role cards on table by entrance. Students are expected to move their role card from the table into the "HERE BOX."   Remaining cards are collected before the end of class.

G___ designates an area for student book bags.

H___ posts the day's rehearsal plan and general reminders for all to see, using a whiteboard, overhead, or computer program. Up to 80% of the information we process is accessed visually.

I___ places music folders strategically to facilitate traffic flow.

J___ limits bathroom releases to "medical" emergencies. The teacher recognizes that teacher responses to students with alpha personalities can differ from teacher responses to beta personalities.

K___ allows students to have bottled water at seats, unless bottles become a nuisance.

L___ offers a "late-to-class" sign-in notebook in which students are expected to give reasons for a late arrival.

STRATEGIES and TECHNIQUES

The Teacher . . .

1___begins class musically and nonverbally in a non-threatening atmosphere using a sense of urgency and playful, positive enthusiasm. This begins as the final 20% are retrieving folders and moving into seats. The following examples are possible formats: (1) sing-what-I-show using Curwen hand signs; (2) be-my-mirror stretches; (3) dance-with-me (without or with chanted rhythm numbers); (4) echo claps (with or without chanted rhythm numbers); (5) non-pause echo claps.

2___ commits to excellence through positive enthusiasm and an exigent (demanding) manner, both of which can become infectious characteristics.

3___ monitors the classroom with a continuous roving eye. The teacher maintains an awareness of every student's participation level and that all behaviors, desirable and undesirable, are learned.

4___ creates seamless transitions between learning events. Each event is practical, applicable to the setting, and structured in a logical order. Within the flow of each event, challenges reflect a pedagogical awareness for the beginning student(s) as well as the need-to-stretch the skills of the advanced student(s).

5___ provides a safe, non-judgmental environment. When a specific skill is taught, students are allowed and encouraged "to fix" their mistakes. Expecting students to demonstrate academic responsibility is important for the student and the teacher. Example: When rehearsing a work, give the students their DO/1 and have the students find their starting pitch. If students are repeatedly unsuccessful performing a desirable skill, the need to re-teach that skill becomes evident.

6___ eliminates idle class time (organizational gaps that last longer than 2-3 seconds). Such gaps invite students to direct personal energies away from the teacher's agenda. In many cases the student alphas will assume the forfeited leadership position.

7___ assesses continuously. Before ending any musical event (activity, exercise, or phrase), the teacher decides why, where, and what to do next.

8___ refocuses students with a nonverbal technique, when chatter erupts. Examples: echo clap, echo consonant pulses, pitched SMS, MSD on neutral DOO. It is important to the teacher's mental, physical, and musical wellbeing to eliminate talking/yelling over student noise.

9___ redirects individual student attention when undesirable behaviors are observed by using a firm demeanor, a knowing smile, and a clear correction --verbal if necessary, although nonverbal is more desirable, efficient, and less disruptive. Examples of nonverbal sign language cues for an individual include: (1) two pointing fingers, "eyes on me;" (2) right hand air chop, "knock-it-off;" and (3) left hand/arm moves from flat parallel position to upright ceiling position, "sit tall." Teacher chooses to move on and not belabor or give undo attention to the incident.

10___ provides students with teacher assessed commentary as they work on each learning event. The teacher praises the specific behaviors that are desirable and redirects (or in some cases ignores) those behaviors that need to be eliminated.

11___ finds a balanced flow between learning events that are easily accessible with learning events that are more challenging.

12___ limits learning events to a maximum of 10 minutes. If the teacher perceives disengaged students, it is very probably that the students were disconnected from the lesson some time before the teacher realized it. Responds to such oversights with a short, fun "re-focus" activity or tell a horrible knock-knock joke.

13___ allows students to move their bodies to their music, or simply takes the time to shake-it-out, or dance to a fun recording (Example #2: Ain't No Mountain High Enough). The teacher considers the creative possibilities of howling to the moon or aerobic exercises ((Example #1: "From a seated position, chant and clap measures A-D in the rhythm chart. Every time you clap/play a quarter note, stand).

14___offer students a variety of kinesthetic (movement) motions to accentuate, accommodate, and reinforce various musical concepts. Example: "On beat four when you sound the "t", snap your fingers."

15___ attends to time. How long are the students standing or sitting or singing?

16___ alternates sitting with standing.

17___ replaces teacher-talk/student-listening with teacher-modeling/student-doing.

18___ engages quiescent (idle) sections with an active musical activity (music markings, rhythm numbers, hand signs, memorize, listen/critique), when working with a singing section. It is the teacher's job to provide articulate expectations to all students.

19___ allows students to change the standing arrangement by singing in a circle or taking 10 seconds to find a new standing position partner.

20___ includes students in the learning process. Allows successful students to teach the students who struggle. Eight graders (2nd year members) are assigned to teach the seventh graders (1st year members). Retests are offered. An [A] on the learning objective, such as writing out rhythm numbers or identifying solfege syllables in various key signatures, produces a highly desirable outcome for the student and the teacher.

21___uses piano effectively to support pitch learning events; however, students are discouraged from piano support dependency. An appropriate order to consider is when learning repertoire: (1) solfege/movable pitch numbers   (a cappella if possible or if necessary, supported on piano; (2) neutral syllable (a cappella if possible or if possible with parts minimally supported on piano); and (3) words (a cappella if possible or with parts supported on piano or with full piano accompaniment).

22___clarifies the starting place; keeping everyone together. Students are asked place a finger on the starting page, system, measure, beat.   Check for accuracy.

23___ maintains quick paced rehearsal/class with more doing and less talking. The teacher keeps the challenge accessible with humor and a sense of urgency. Reminds students to check posture, bring the music to your head not head to your music, use an expansive belt-line breath, remember to maintain relaxed larynx, produce tall vowels, articulate clean consonants, produce quality articulations, strive for a healthy tone, and create a moving musical line.

24___ uses countdown (10-1) as students' transition from one musical event to the next. Example: "Excellent work on that section of the Foster. Without talking, put it away, take out the Mozart, and put your finger on measure 12. (10-1). Are we all on measure 12? Well done!"

25 ___ chooses a musical text that fits the emotional and creative imagination of the students.

26 ___ chooses music that fits the vocal range of the students.

27 ___ chooses a wide range of musical genres and styles, including works by the masters.

28 ___ assesses continuously for correct pitch, correct rhythm, singers' posture, healthy breath support, appropriate free tone that lacks tension and incorporates a related larynx, tall vowels, clear consonants, a musical line that incorporates a variety of dynamic levels and incorporates appropriate syllable inflection/diction, in-tune unison pitches and in-tune chords.

29___ uses appropriate girl language (invitation voice): "Ladies, Stand please!" "Ladies, sit; Thank you!"

30___ uses appropriate boy language (command voice): "Gentlemen, Quietly Stand!" "Gentlemen, Quietly Sit! Excellent!"

31___ uses appropriate language in a mixed choir setting (command voice) "Ladies and Gentlemen, please stand quietly! Thank you!"

32___ creates a safe environment where honest mistakes are tolerated and all abilities valued.

33___ uses friendly competition(s) to challenge and to reward excellence. Example: "If you can sing measures 1-12 on solfege, please stand. Let's work that section again as a full group and see if others are ready to stand."

34___responds to the class bell responsibly, remembering that class bell sounds for the teacher not for the student. Students wait appropriately to be dismissed. The expectations for an orderly exit are as clearly observed as the classroom entrance.

This checklist was motivated by ideas presented by Jennifer Carter (Parkhill JH, Richardson ISD); Gershom Garcia (Arnold MS, Cypress-Fairbanks ISD); and Tammy Benton (Midway MS, Midway ISD) at a 2014 TCDA workshop.