Using online platforms to create community in the voice studio: Lessons from the pandemic

By Lynn Eustis, DM

Remote teaching has come a long way since the first panicked days back in March 2020. At the beginning of the pandemic many of us were scrambling to figure out how to move voice lessons to a fully remote format. We found ourselves in Zoom classrooms staring at frightened, displaced students. Eventually we learned how to share files and links in the chat, how to draw using the Whiteboard function, and how to say "You're on mute" approximately 35 times a day without going insane. By the summer we were all settling into the dreaded new normal: our FaceBook feeds were full of posts about SoundJack, Cleanfeed, open-back headphones, and external microphones. The effectiveness of remote voice lessons and the range of available technologies for studio teaching have been discussed elsewhere. This article will not endeavor to offer technical instruction but rather to suggest ways we might use technology to create community for our students, with a particular focus on the voice studio class.

It seems clear now that some elements of remote teaching will be with us even when we are back in our beloved studio spaces. We are now able to offer lessons to singers in other parts of the country or the world, which greatly expands the possibilities for recruiting prospective students, growing our private studios, and checking in with students who are traveling to sing (when that work eventually resumes). We are also able to invite guest speakers from an unlimited number of locations to work with our students, since there is no need for travel or its associated costs. These practicalities will make our lives easier going forward. Even with the advantages of these technologies, studio class presents its own challenges. It is especially difficult to create a sense of community within our studios when we cannot meet as a class in person.

Online classroom teaching is not new or specific to the pandemic. Many institutions, including music schools, have offered online courses and online degrees for years now. In the wake of the pandemic, there are many articles available about how to move teaching into a remote format without losing the all-important personal connection between teacher and students. But voice studio class is a very different kind of group environment. As I have said in my own books, the singer's ego is a minefield of potential triggers and sensitivities. When we are speaking with students about their voice, their most personal possession, in front of a group of their peers, we must

tread with immense care and emotional intuition. This becomes even more tricky when the class takes place online.

What are the goals for a studio voice class? Most students mention performance experience as a primary benefit of meeting as a group. They receive feedback on their performances from the group and from the teacher. The class is a chance for them to hear their fellow singers and to be encouraged by following each other's progress. They can see the technical and musical concepts in motion while not under pressure to perform themselves. The studio class takes an isolated activity and places it in a group setting with singers who are all pursuing a shared approach and/or aesthetic.

How are these goals compromised by the remote environment? The practical concerns are obvious. The absence of an in-person collaborative pianist creates major issues for the singers and for the teacher. When using accompaniment tracks, more time is taken by trying to stop and start. The sound difficulties are legion: the impossibility of speaking simultaneously, the variance in equipment (headphones, microphones), the unreliability of WiFi networks, the tendency for sopranos to exceed the frequency, and many other realities hamper the natural flow of the class.

The pedagogical concerns run even deeper. Instead of breathing properly between phrases, many students find themselves waiting to align with the track. The teacher must try to address this and other problems, often without being able to confirm what is actually happening. It is more difficult for the teacher to read the room in the online classroom: to determine whether the student is receiving the feedback appropriately or to know whether the class as a whole is following the broader concepts. It feels a bit like giving a master class in which you don't know your audience. Many of us are accustomed to that dynamic but it is unsettling to face it week after week with your own students.

All of these conditions leave the group without the normal sense of community, which is greatly compromised by the inability of the singers to share the same physical space. Online there are no sidebar conversations, no body language to follow, and no conversations that occur organically on the way into or out of the classroom. Why is this a problem? It is a problem for the teacher because it takes longer to develop the trust that is

so critical to the success of the applied voice lessons. That trust is not limited to the teacher-student relationship; it also affects the mutual trust students need in order to feel safe performing for each other. Online, the students are left to wonder what the other students were truly thinking about their work. For new students, it is more difficult to establish friendships within the group. In normal circumstances, the group functions as a safe haven and source of enormous support for singers within the larger program.

Some of the above issues cannot be resolved and must simply be negotiated. In the online environment, the teacher must exhibit patience and skill, and lead the class by positive example. Our students have been traumatized by the loss of their performances, their in-person lessons and auditions, and so many other joys of the singing life. They look to us for positive inspiration, even when that feels impossible to muster. After all, voice teachers have been living through the pandemic as well, and we have suffered many of the same losses. We have missed hearing our students sing in person, we have missed knowing them more fully, and most of all, we have missed celebrating their milestones. Our profession has often been described as a lonely one because we do most of our work apart from our colleagues. The online environment has exacerbated this. For example, we are now completing all of our adjudications alone in our homes instead of sitting at a common table with our colleagues. Going forward, we all hope to be back in the studio and in the studio classroom as soon as possible. In the meantime, there are ways to use online platforms to enhance our teaching and build community within our studios, both now and in the future.

Online platforms can provide a critical supplement to compensate for some of what is lost in person, particularly with regard to community. Most higher education institutions use Blackboard or similar systems for coursework across all disciplines. Prior to the pandemic, many voice teachers did not use these platforms, especially since we do not typically collect assignments or manage large numbers of grades for our applied voice courses. In the shift to remote teaching in March 2020, I attempted to set up a Blackboard course for my students but ultimately felt overwhelmed, and the need to become comfortable with Zoom was more pressing at the time. Blackboard just didn't feel essential to my work with my studio. After going through my institution's Faculty Coach training, however, I saw that I could mold Blackboard to my own purposes fairly easily.

What is Blackboard? From their company website: "a course management system that allows you to provide content to students in a central location, communicate with students quickly, and provide grades in an electronic format." The original version of Blackboard is mostly applicable to large-format academic courses. The company has developed a simpler, user-friendly version called Blackboard Learn, an interactive learning management system used by higher education, K-12 school, government and military programs, as well as a number of large corporations worldwide. If you are not associated with an institution that holds an account, you can explore free alternatives, including "Experience Blackboard" which offers free access to "Coursesites." This program offers many of the same structural features as Blackboard Learn. The point here is not to recommend a particular platform but rather to suggest that these platforms can be a useful tool in general, no matter which one you choose.

There are many benefits to using an interactive learning management system (LMS). Starting from a practical standpoint, it can serve as a central place for information and announcements of all kinds. You can post your syllabus, your grading rubric, sample repertoire lists and resumes, and anything else you want the students to be able to access easily. It can provide an easy method for scheduling studio classes and other appointments with students using Google docs or other online sign-up sheets. We have posted these on our studio doors in the past but it is certainly more efficient to give students a remote method, and for us to be able to consult the lists at any time, from anywhere. If you want to collect their resumes and repertoire lists, you can set up and track an assignment using the platform, or simply ask the students to upload their documents to a specified location. Working with an online platform gives students essential practice with technology. Since most of these systems are password protected, they can be used as a safe repository for sharing students' performance recordings.

Another advantage of these platforms is that they are designed to be easily customized by the instructor. While Blackboard is just one of the available platforms, it provides a good example of what these platforms offer. Blackboard is essentially a blank slate, which is why it seems unclear what to do when you first attempt to use it. In order to show one way to begin, I will present a tour of the Blackboard Learn site I set up for my studio. The home page can be customized with a photo (mine shows a cat standing open-mouthed in front of a microphone). The first step in creating content after the home page is to create different modules, or headings, based on your specific

needs. These modules can be created and moved around as though they are an online filing cabinet. A module is just a term for a heading, or a building block for the outline of your course material. Within each module (under each heading), you can upload content, including documents, web links, videos, links to apps, or discussion boards.

Here are the modules I created originally, with the content format listed underneath each heading:
- Start Here
  — Dr. E's introductory video [a short welcome video]
  — Dr. E.'s new website [web link]
- Recordings and Poems
  — Dr. E.'s Favorite YouTube recordings [web links]
  — Recordings of Dr. E. [web links, audio files]
  — Spotify Listening Lists [web links]
  — Poems [documents]
- Discussion Board [here you can set up different forums on separate topics]
  — "Ask Dr. E."
  — Introductory videos [student videos]
- Sign-up Sheets [Google docs: Studio, Talk Sessions]
- Course Documents [documents]
- Assignments

The Start Here module began with a three-minute video I recorded to welcome students to my studio. I attempted to be as direct, open, and friendly as I could be in a remote setting. I asked the students to create and upload similar short videos as a way to introduce themselves to their colleagues. Many sources suggest doing this within large scale lecture courses because that is the only introduction the students may have to one another, and it gives the professor a way to see the students as more than a number. For music students, it provides an opportunity to exercise creativity and to share themselves in a safe way before they take the next, more vulnerable step of sharing their vocal work. When my new website went live during the fall semester, I placed a link to it on the Start Here page so that it would be easy to find.

Online auditions are here to stay, and our students need to become comfortable with recording themselves as well as with the functional details of how to create and post videos that highlight their best work. We spend so much time in the studio working on vocal technique and artistry but far less time working on visual presence, particularly in a recorded video. The students need to learn how to use effective lighting, camera angles, professionally appropriate clothing, and high quality sound to maximize the impression they make in their online auditions. Creating a representative videorecording takes

practice along with constructive criticism. Our students have largely come of age during the explosion of social media. They are painfully aware of the YouTube analytics that tell them how much of their work was actually seen by the company's review panel, and they are eager to strategize to achieve better results.

The section headed Recordings and Poems began as a place to post recordings I wanted my students to hear and to view alongside my notes highlighting noteworthy aspects of the performances. Our students have a wealth of recordings available to them now on YouTube, Spotify, and other streaming sites, far beyond the listening resources many of us had in our student days. This wealth of material is both a blessing and a curse because students are not always informed about the listening choices they make. Targeting specific recordings for them, and explaining what they should listen for, is one way to help students improve their discernment. This section included YouTube videos, audio recordings, a selection of my own performances, and links to Spotify Listening Lists. During the spring and summer, I built a Spotify list on a theme each week, such as Scandinavian song, Great American Songbook, and Mozart Style. Some of the lists were created by special guest artists, and we did several lists of recordings chosen by the students themselves.

This section also included Poems. We start each studio class with the reading of a poem, delivered by a volunteer from the class. I started this practice as a way to focus student attention on the currency of words as worthy apart from the musical settings, and to help students to determine what sort of poetry spoke to them most directly. I typically choose short poems that pack an immediate punch. Starting the class with a poem, following any announcements, also has the effect of tuning out the noise of the school day and bringing the group into the discipline that we are about to study. When we have been able to hold end-of-year studio parties, I ask the students to bring a poem that they will read to the group. In the Zoom setting, I share the poem using the screen-sharing function instead of handing out hard copies and then post the PDFs to the Blackboard site.

Discussion Boards are an effective way to field questions and to start conversations about a particular topic. "Ask Dr. E." was intended to solicit their questions about general topics, but you can start a discussion thread on any topic. We used a discussion thread for uploading their introductory videos (and posting their compliments to one another). Another discussion thread focused on audition videos. Students did not use the discussion boards as often as expected but this may be due to separate FaceBook groups in which they already communicate

with one another. Their questions for the instructor may be too specific and personal to ask online, even in the closed Blackboard setting.

One of the other losses we have sustained during the pandemic is the casual interactions that happen organically in the building. Students don't run into us in the elevator, nor can they drop by the office to ask questions. For this reason, I set up online Talk Sessions for my students during the pandemic. I offered each student thirty minutes every other week to talk with me via Zoom about whatever they wanted. Some of them used the time to talk about auditions and repertoire, and some screen-shared their audition videos so we could go over them together. Sometimes we used the session just to check in on how they were doing in general. This was particularly important for the new students, three of whom I have never taught in person (even their trial lessons happened remotely). The sessions were not mandatory but most students opted to sign up quite frequently.

Moving forward post-COVID, I plan to continue these talk sessions in some format. They provided a valuable chance to focus on conversations outside of the voice lesson. Students came to these sessions with an agenda, and they quickly learned that they would need to target their thinking ahead of time. Having a designated time to discuss career questions both focused students on planning ahead for their own career goals and using their lesson time more efficiently as well. We may not need to set aside quite as much time, since the students will be able to drop by the office occasionally. It was surprisingly effective, though, to ask students to target their questions with specific goals in mind.

The last two categories are self-explanatory. The "other course documents" module housed the course syllabus, the grading rubric, style sheets for Mozart and Baroque, the Manual of Dr. E. (my evolving summary of technical concepts they need to know), sample performance resumes, and academic CVs (including my own). We used the Assignments function to collect their performance resumes (and CVs for doctoral students). Within the function, I could easily see who had completed the assignment and offer my comments. It was considerably more efficient than asking the students to email these documents separately.

The modules can easily be organized to fit your studio's structural needs, and you may find yourself shifting them often to make things easier to locate. I adjusted my module titles and content repeatedly during the semester as I saw how my students were using them (or not using them, either because they couldn't find the material within two or three clicks or because they weren't interested in a particular item). They all used the sign-up sheets and they all posted videos and assignments. The introductory videos were especially popular, as they provided a chance to get to know one another in a different, playful way. I chose to make viewing of the other content optional, so I did not set it up to show who or how many had accessed it. Occasionally I used the anonymous poll function during Zoom class to ask them about how they were using the site.

Polling is a clever way to use the technology to gauge where students are in terms of community. In Zoom it is fairly easy to create a poll for a particular class meeting or for your Personal Meeting Room, if that is what you are using. Blackboard also has a survey function which is a bit more complicated to run. I use anonymous polls in Zoom to help me read the room. Questions include things like how often you practiced this week (with options including something humorous such as "I'm supposed to practice?"), how hopeful you are feeling about the future of our profession, how often you felt anxious or stressed this week, or true/false inquiries about using the Blackboard site. I typically end the poll with a question that has no relation to singing, such as which lobster roll is correct, cold with mayonnaise or hot with brown butter. (The answer is cold with mayonnaise, for those who are wondering.) Most of these questions centered on life in Boston in order to help acclimate new students.

We are all looking forward to the time when we can resume our normal activities as singers and teachers. Until that time, we can adapt our thinking about online platforms, and approach them as valuable tools for actually increasing personal connection. For the immediate future, we can practice using these platforms in order to choose aspects that may improve our studio communities even after we are able to teach and sing in person again.

Additional Resources

Articles:

Darby, Flower, "How to be a better online teacher" (Chronicle of Higher Education, April 17, 2019).

Hulett, Kari Henry. "Community from a Distance: Building a Sense of Belonging in an Online Classroom" (The Scholarly Teacher, May 21, 2019).

Krause, Caitlin. "How to Forge a Strong Community in an Online Classroom" (Edutopia, April 15, 2020).

The Learning Network, "80 Tips for Remote Learning from Seasoned Educators" (New York Times, August 26, 2020).

Websites:

http://www.bu.edu/ctl/teaching-remotley-in-the-arts/
https://www.smartmusic.com/music-educator-resources/

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She appears frequently as a soloist with professional organizations in works such as Mozart's Mass in C-minor, Gloria *(Poulenc),* Carmina burana, *and Knoxville:* Summer of 1915. *Dr. Eustis has sung over thirty operatic roles, most notably Lucia, Zerbinetta, Olympia, Pamina, Susanna, Rosina, and Gilda. In 2007 she appeared as the title soloist in the U.S. premiere of James Whitbourn's* Annelies: The Anne Frank Oratorio, *a work for which she continues to be in demand. She has been heard with the Americke Jaro Festival (Czech Republic, eleven seasons) and taught at the Up North Vocal Institute in Michigan (seven seasons).*

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