

## **CAPTURING BENEFITS OF MENTORSHIP IN VOCAL MUSIC PEDAGOGY WITH A PROJECTIVE STORY-TELLING TASK**

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### **Abstract**

*The teacher-student relationship influences academic and personal outcomes for students from primary school through higher education. Most students, from an early age, learn to avoid conflict with teachers, but vocal music students have unique experience with one-to-one pedagogy and may learn to 'work through' conflict. The present study seeks to identify possible strengths of vocal music students, using a projective story-telling task. Vocal music students were significantly more likely than non-music students to compose stories featuring predominantly positive outcomes, conflict resolution, secure attachment, responsible action, and internal locus of control. The degree of internality, however, did not predict the grades or jury ratings of the vocal music students.*

**Keywords:** *vocal music, mentor, pedagogy, student-teacher relationship, projective measurement*

### **Introduction**

The teacher-student relationship is understood to influence academic and personal outcomes for students at all levels (Hughes, Luo, Kwok & Loyd, 2008; Spilt, Hughes, Wu & Kwok, 2012; Sengul, Zhang & Leroux, 2019). Rogers (2015) found that the alliance college students perceive with their professors contributes to grades and self-perceived learning. As class sizes rise in many disciplines, special strategies may be needed to increase opportunities for the development of the teacher-student bond (Sengul et al., 2019), but that connection is built into vocal music education where one-to-one mentoring is the norm (Burwell, 2019).

Writing about the elementary school music classroom, Steele Royston (2017) makes a strong case for empathy and caring in the teacher-student relationship, arguing that the student is more important than the music. The importance of the music surely increases as students grow toward young adulthood and professional education, but the student-music balance is not a zero sum game; even in higher education, the individual student

remains important and much must be learned beyond technical music skills (Gaunt, Creech, Long & Hallam, 2012).

Ellis (2004) studied the impact of teacher confirmation on college students enrolled in general education classes, contending that students are influenced by receiving messages (implicit or explicit) from teachers that the students are “*valuable, significant individuals*” (p. 2). Ellis found that, when confirmation is in doubt or when disconfirmation occurs, significant apprehension may arise in the student and result in performance deterioration. Still, though college students, in general, may demonstrate sensitivity to negative communication from faculty, vocal music students might manage better.

Vocal music students are constantly navigating the dissonance between self-experience and audience-experience (Helding, 2017). The mentoring professor is both a source of dissonance (providing feedback that may differ from the student’s internal experience of self) and a trusted, empathic guide. Spilt et al. (2012) note that much research points toward pernicious effects of conflict in the teacher-student relationship, and Meyers (2003) prescribes a range of efforts to prevent conflict in traditional college classrooms. In vocal music pedagogy, however, professional development includes emerging skills for “*resolving the dissonance to consonance*” (Helding, 2017, 90). Most students, from an early age, learn to avoid conflict with teachers, but vocal music students learn to *work through* conflict.

The present study seeks to identify possible strengths of vocal music students – advantages that might be traced to their unique learning experiences. We chose to create and use a projective story-telling task. In such tasks, an unfinished story (a stem) is presented and students are asked to complete the story. These tasks are called ‘projective’ because a respondent is thought to project aspects of the self into the story they author. Projective story stems have been reliably and validly used with young children when cognitive limitations prevent the use of objective measures (Robinson, 2007); with developing professionals, the same technique might help avoid the response biases elicited by some objective measures (George & West, 2011). Since it is difficult to know what a ‘good answer’ might be, students are less likely to be influenced by the desire to put a best foot forward, for example.

The story stem, created for this study features an ambiguous, conflictual moment between a professor and student in a music studio. Such moments have the potential to arouse apprehensive emotion and impoverished learning (Ellis, 2004), but vocal music students are expected to distinguish themselves on this task per their extensive experience in the one-to-one learning environment.

Locus of control refers to an individual’s beliefs about the one’s control over, responsibility for, and contribution to outcomes. Persons who exhibit external locus of control perceive that powerful others or the environment control outcomes, and they tend to be more passive. Persons who exhibit internal locus of control, on the other hand, tend to be responsible and proactive. Unsurprisingly, researchers have tended to find strong correlations between internality and success in college (e.g., Drago, Rheinheimer & Detweiler, 2018). Ryan and Grolnick (1986) demonstrated that a projective story task could be reliably and validly scored by raters for degree of internality.

As an indication of the validity of the task, itself, we predicted that a relevant measure of participant empathy (pertaining to fantasy) would be correlated with story length and the number of emotions cited for the student character. We hypothesized that vocal music students would be uniquely prepared, by their mentorship-intensive program, to compose stories about responsible, effective conflict resolution with a mentor with whom the protagonist enjoys a stable attachment. We also hypothesized that the degree of internality in the stories of vocal music students would predict end-of-semester, jury performance ratings.

## **Method**

The study was approved by the campus Institutional Review Board, and the sample included 220 consenting students – 62 vocal music students and 158 non-music students. The sample predominantly identified as female (71.8%) and non-Hispanic White (75.4%), with an average age 20.01 years ( $SD = 2.70$ ).

All participants completed a projective story-stem task. The non-music students and approximately half of the vocal music students completed the Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI) (Davis, 1980, 1983). Performance data were collected three months later for the vocal music students, including cumulative GPA and end-of-semester jury performance results.

The story-stem task prompted participants to use their creativity: *“Use your creativity to finish the following story. Describe what happened before and what happens next, what the characters are thinking and feeling, and then give the outcome of your story.”* All participants were exposed to the following stem, in which the genders of the two characters are left ambiguous.

*Sandy, a sophomore vocal music major, has started to shake in the middle of a lesson. Sandy can hear Dr. Smith’s voice but stopped listening to the words a few seconds ago - maybe it’s been longer. Confused, Sandy keeps thinking: “Why it is that everyone respects my talent and loves my singing, except Dr. Smith?!” Dr. Smith has stopped talking and seems to be waiting for an answer of some sort, but Sandy has no idea what the question was. Then it happened...*

Participant’s stories were coded by trained raters, working independently. The raters worked naive to whether the author was a vocal music or non-music student, and they coded the stories for outcome type, conflict resolution, secure attachment, locus of control, and emotional content. In the first phase, sixty percent of the stories were coded by multiple raters, resulting in Kappa’s for the dimensions analyzed in this study ranging from .452 to .752 (see Viera & Garrett, 2005). In a second phase, coders met to review disagreements, identify errors, and enhance training.

A measure of dispositional empathy, the IRI is a 28-item self-report test. One of its four scales, Fantasy, is expected to be related to participants’ broad engagement with the story-telling task. The Fantasy scale reflects the ability to imagine oneself in fictional situations. The internal consistency for the seven-item Fantasy scale was reportedly .78 for male respondents and .79 for female respondents, and test-retest reliabilities at

sixty to seventy-five days were reportedly .79 for male respondents and .81 for female respondents (Davis, 1980).

## Results

The ability to imagine the ‘feelings and actions of fictitious characters’ (IRI Fantasy subscale) was significantly correlated with story length ( $r(186)=.17, p=.011$ ) and the number of emotions cited for the student character ( $r(186)=.23, p=.001$ ) – results that provide some support for the validity of the story-stem task, itself.

Vocal music students were significantly more likely than non-music students to compose stories with predominantly positive outcomes ( $\chi^2(1)=19.75, p<.001$ ), conflict resolved ( $\chi^2(1)=7.74, p=.005$ ), and secure attachment ( $\chi^2(1)=47.31, p<.001$ ) (see Table 1).

**Table 1. Prevalence of story characteristics from vocal music and non-music students (N=220)**

	POSTIVE/NEGATIVE OUTCOME	CONFLICT RESOLVED/REMAINS	SECURE/INSECURE ATTACHMENTS
Vocal Music Students (N=62)	73%/27%	61%/39%	77%/23%
Non-Music Students (N=150)	36%/64%	40%/60%	23%/77%

When the story featured resolution of the conflict, vocal music students were significantly more likely than non-music students to portray responsible action as the means of resolution rather than misunderstanding or magic ( $\chi^2(1) = 36.53, p < .001$ ). Stories from vocal music students featured significantly more internally-rated locus of control than non-music students ( $t(221)=10.09, p<.001$ ). Contrary to expectation, internal locus of control was not significantly predictive of cumulative GPA ( $r(62)=.08, p=.276$ ) or end-of-semester jury ratings ( $r(62)=.03, p=.417$ ) for the vocal music students.

## Discussion and conclusion

As expected, vocal music students tended to complete a teacher-student story differently than non-music students. The vocal music students were significantly more likely than non-music students to compose stories featuring predominantly positive outcomes, conflict resolution, and secure attachment. Vocal music students’ stories were more likely to portray responsible action as the means of conflict resolution (rather than misunderstanding or magic), and stories from vocal music students showed more evidence of internal locus of control than the stories from non-music students. The degree of internality, however, did not predict the grades or jury ratings of the vocal music students.

The story stem used in this study pulls for the apprehensive emotion that is innervated by teacher disconfirmation, as cited by Ellis (2004). Vocal music students appear better equipped – perhaps arising from their extensive experience in the one-to-one learning environment – to cope constructively with the challenge. Indeed, when skilled options have been learned, even negative emotion may fuel constructive work (Berkman, Lieberman & Gable, 2009). Martin and Collie (2019) found, in a sample of high school students, that the salutary effect of a positive teacher-student relationship appears to far outweigh the negative impact of most problems in teacher-student relationships. Just as juries provide practice for future professional auditions (Amonson, 2016), mentor-based pedagogy might prepare vocal music students for success in future professional relationships.

Of course, non-musicians might also encounter mentors. In a meta-analysis, Sneyers and De Witte (2018) found that when mentoring occurs, it has a positive effect on retention and graduation of college students in general. However, musicians are far more likely to experience mentorship starting earlier in youth and to have mentorship integrated into their education (Hays, Minichiello & Wright, 2000).

While vocal music pedagogy might account for the results of this study, limitations of the methodology leave open other possibilities. For example, vocal music students might have differed partly because their major formed the context for the story stem (which featured the terms ‘vocal music major’, ‘lesson’, and ‘singing’). This potential confound – where an extraneous variable may influence the results of a study – could accentuate group differences in one or both of two ways in a study like ours. The familiarity of the terms might have helped vocal music students, and/or the unfamiliarity of the terms might have hindered the non-music students. Future research can employ our same model, but systematically alter the content of the stem. In a subsequent study, for example, participants could be randomly assigned to the stem used in the current study or to the generic stem shown below. If stem content is indeed confound, a significant interaction will be evident in the resulting 2 (student type) x 2 (stem type) analysis, with *pos hoc* tests revealing the specific nature and size of any such effect.

*Sandy, a sophomore, has started to shake in the middle of a meeting with her professor. Sandy can hear Dr. Smith's voice, but stopped listening to the words a few seconds ago - maybe it's been longer. Confused, Sandy keeps thinking: "Why is it that everyone respects my talent and loves my work, except Dr. Smith?!" Dr. Smith has stopped talking and seems to be waiting for an answer of some sort, but Sandy has no idea what the question was. Then it happened...*

For now, it is neither clear that confound operates nor that its actual effects obscure our substantive hypotheses, but the related methodological questions can be explored in parallel with questions about the benefits of mentorship as the research continues.

The current findings support the potential utility of a projective story-stem task with college students and are, at least, consistent with benefits accruing to vocal music students from mentor-based pedagogy. That story internality did not predict subsequent performance by vocal music students may be related to the small sample size and limited variance in subsequent performance. Additional research is needed with larger, more diverse (multi-site) samples.

The professional development of a vocal music student includes vocal skills and flexible collaborative professionalism (Gaunt et al., 2012). The present study provides evidence consistent with the positive impact of mentoring pedagogy on the developing professional's social cognition and skill – impacts that may ultimately help the professional remain engaged, constructively focused, and flexibly collaborating.

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