

From your Repertoire Specific Coordinator: Sherlee Glomb

Creating a Safe Space in the Choral Classroom

On August 7, 2021, I was asked to be a part of a talk back panel at the VA, MD/DC, and DE ACDA Voices United Virtual Conference titled, *“Preparing for a New Tomorrow.”* I was approached by VA-ACDA Ethnic and Multicultural R and R chairperson Daniel Jackson to join his talk back, *“What is Equity? The Variety of Challenges Facing Today’s Choral Director”* alongside Dr. Marshaun R. Hymon (Co-Founder of True Change Alliance, LLC), Dr. Kari Adams (FSU Professor), Daniel Jackson (Stone Bridge H.S.), and A.J. Rodriguez (South County H.S.).

Our conversations covered a broad range of topics within equity, including defining equity through our own lens, discussing what it means to be ‘equitable,’ to discussing how we respond to some people’s point of view that choral music’s primary purpose has become social justice and a political breeding ground.

With school starting around the corner, I focused primarily on some more practical ways to create a safe and more equitable classroom environment for all students and what it means to have a “culturally responsive” classroom. The following information is taken from a handout that I created for this talk back.

It’s important that students can have a safe place to release their thoughts and feelings about the negative things they see, hear, feel, and fear each day. Enabling conversations about these issues empowers students to voice their concerns and questions about unjust situations in their lives or in the lives of those around them.

1. Be Transparent

- Teach through who you are (your family, hobbies, food, music, culture, beliefs)
- Explore texts in a choral piece and how it connects with your emotional life
- Fully embracing and accepting who you are helps your kids do the same for themselves

2. Create ways for students to share who they are with you.

- Icebreakers
- Index card and have them write their given name, preferred name and pronouns, favorite song, hobby, and one thing they hope to get out of the class.
- Question or Quote of the Day (write answer on stickies and stick on board)
- Run a weekly poll using a Google form
- Use exit slips
- Use a teacher reflection survey
- Use a one-minute reflective journal with prompts
- Soundtrack of My Life project

- “This I Believe...” Board: Anonymous notes written at end of class of what they believe in (e.g., “I believe all students should be seen and heard”) and read them at the end of the week. Then, put it up on a Positivity Board for all to see.

3. Be fully present and deliberate in communication

- Use transition times between classes, lunch, recess, or bus duty to engage students
- Greet students by name and offer a friendly comment or ask questions about their day. Be sure to say their name correctly and ask about their pronouns.
- Make specific comments to students to show you care and that you see them

4. Celebrate the artistry of people from marginalized segments of society

- Be highly inclusive in the repertoire you choose and the ways you talk about music. Program works written by women, the LGBTQ community, people of color, and from a wide variety of genres and time periods—and not just during Black History Month or Women’s History Month. Explore the many ways that people create music that speaks to their human experience.
- Theme your concerts to express feelings, concerns, resilience, social injustices
- Decorate your classroom with a broad representation of what it means to be a musician and artist
- Celebrate trailblazers who defy stereotypes
- Ask students to share who their musical heroes are with you

5. Make room for student feedback.

- Student reflection after concerts, performances, and class can give us insight into what is working within our program as well as where needs can be addressed
- Ask students to brainstorm concert themes or let them provide some input into choosing a single piece (assuming it’s appropriate both in terms of content and being arranged well for their skill level). It’s possible to give students some of what they want while also delivering the instruction they need. Your ability to balance these considerations can help with student buy-in and engagement within your program.

Creating Safe Spaces: Transgender & Gender Nonbinary Singers

- ◆ **When posting for singer auditions** keep language about voice parts gender-neutral
- ◆ **Include a rainbow sticker** or other symbol as an LGBTQ ally in your chorus rehearsal space
- ◆ **In the audition setting, ask new and returning singers what pronouns they use** and include this question on your audition form for each singer to fill out
- ◆ **Post signs for gender-neutral bathrooms in rehearsal and concert spaces.** Educate your chorus and audience regarding the protocol and importance of gender-neutral restroom space.
- ◆ **Use gender-neutral language in rehearsal** and insist that all section leaders and singers also follow these same guidelines
- ◆ **Invite all singers to audition for any solo that fits their vocal range** regardless of gender
- ◆ **Invite transgender and gender-non-conforming** individuals, students, artists, speakers, and song writers to perform as guest artists in your concerts

- ◆ **Program songs by transgender and gender-non-conforming composers and song-writers.** Share stories in your classroom that educate the student singers regarding gender nonconforming individuals in history or current day experiences.
- ◆ **Examine requirements mandating gender-specific concert attire.** Forcing singers into gender specific (or incongruent) clothing may be seen as a public devaluing of identities and communicates indifference to the spectrum of gender identity and expression.
- ◆ **Assign voice sections for each singer dependent on their voice range and voice color.*** If a singer's voice is still transitioning check their range every 3-4 months and assist them in moving to a new vocal part as needed.
- ◆ **If a singer shares that they are transitioning via testosterone,** ask when they started and how the transition has affected their vocal range, etc. It will typically take 6-12 months for a singer's voice to settle to a consistent range and can take up to 2 years to be reached.

* You may encounter a singer who requests to sing in a voice part that doesn't fit their range. Choral directors should have a plan for what to do with trans singers who want to sing a voice part that matches their gender identity.

Guidelines to Building a Culturally Responsive Curriculum

First, we must figure out what defines culture and what cultures exist in our classroom.

Culture is often thought of in terms of just different ethnic groups but it can also be viewed in terms of race, gender, sexuality, abilities, or class. A student may belong to more than one culture in which case their cultures will naturally intersect. It is also important to examine the "invisible" cultures within the classroom which may include:

- What is the culture of the choirs, historically speaking?
- What cultures make "higher education" or "elite ensembles" what they are today?
- What cultures have been "privileged" in the creation and maintenance of our choir classes and how can we create a more equitable environment?

So, once we understand the cultures and biases that exist in our classes, then we can address guidelines for a culturally responsive curriculum. These include:

1. Respect diversity
2. Engage motivation of a broad range of students and cultures
3. Create a safe, inclusive and respectful learning environment
4. Derive teaching practices from across disciplines and cultures
5. Promote an equitable learning environment