

## **Creating a Culture of Excellence**

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## **Excellence in Teaching**

There unfortunately is not a magic wand, a potent potion, or a step-by-step guide to creating a culture of excellence in your classroom. However, there are some tricks of the trade (so to speak) that I have found useful in establishing, maintaining, and executing high expectations from my singers in all my ensembles. Above all there must be consistency in the delivery of content, rehearsal techniques and strategies, as well as student expectations. If you think about the music educator you think encompasses all it takes to be a successful leader what will you find that they have? Most likely these characteristics will be:

- They are respected
- They are nurturing
- They are somewhat predictable
- They are knowledgeable – also ties in with content delivery
- They can connect with all types of students
- They are consistent

These are the teachers that you walked in to their room knowing to the most finite detail what is expected, how you need to be prepared, and how class was going to run. Routines are always and will always be your friend.

## **My Classroom Won't Be Perfect From the Get-Go?**

I personally think the hardest lesson for new teachers to learn is that their classrooms are not going to be like pedagogical texts outline. They are not going to have the students that practice every single day, come to class prepared, signed up for the class, behave perfectly, get along with everyone, have the willingness to participate, and so on. Most texts are going to outline classes in the most perfect light they can; however, knowing that you cannot expect everything to be perfect from the beginning is a huge win when trying to reach students. It is also a much bigger win when you get those unruly students get involved.

- Focus on all students equally
- Remember that you ensemble is only as strong as its weakest individual
- Give all students an equal and equitable chance to show you they are striving to be involved. This will of course look different from student to student.

So, what are some ways to ensure all students feel welcomed and involved?

### **Building Relationships**

I was previously employed in a district that had implemented Capturing Kids Hearts. Which is a program used in the effective building of relationships between teachers and students. This is key in building a classroom culture that is both respectful and holds high expectations, because when students respect you they will work harder. This program used simple strategies that many often overlook:

- Greeting students at the door – shaking hands, fist bumping, high fives ... letting each student know that you're happy to see them as they make their way in to the classroom.
- Good things – share out
  - This empowers the students to be happy and respectful toward one another
    - This can be as easy as students volunteering information, using sticks, or random number generators ... whatever! However, make sure all students are respectful and respond appropriately to each students share out.
- Affirmations
  - My favorite point on CKH ... students get the opportunity to write affirming words to other students or teachers in the school
    - This gives the students opportunity to use affirming and positive words toward others, helping to build a culture where students can get along.
- Sharing a passion or a launch

All of these skills were pertinent in creating an atmosphere where students feel safe, welcomed, validated, and part of something. When students feel these

things, they are far more apt to rising to a high standard, trying something new, and stepping out of their comfort zone – especially since music is something very personal for each and every person. It is often easy to overlook these aspects when teaching our content because we are programmed to be very business oriented – there is a concert coming up, I have to get students ready for competition, we have to raise money, how are we going to afford t-shirts, I have three altos that sit down the whole time, I have seven “baritones” whose voices are changing – holy cow what do I do?? And we overlook the single most important aspect of any classroom and that is the student. They are a student/human first and a musician second. Which also eludes to the fact that our class is not the only class they have that day, we are but a mere fraction of what they must go through day in and day out. They are stressed, they are weary, and it is important for them to have a place they can come and feel as though it is an escape. There are many other amazing aspects in Capturing Kids Hearts, look in to it, advocate for your district to be trained. It is an intense program, but the pay-out is AWESOME!

### **Give Your Students the Power**

Empowering students as musicians is another important aspect of the choral classroom. Singing is something that is very personal and many feel terrified to do this in front of anyone let alone their peers ... I always strive to ensure my students that each and every voice is a necessary part of the ensemble. When a student feels comfortable in an environment that is free of persecution, they will be far more willing to rise to the standards you have set. Every voice is beautiful, every personality (no matter how challenging) is necessary, and every student is welcome. When I empower my students to sing with no abandon the possibilities are limitless! In line with that I have found it necessary to create a space where students are allowed to fail, reassess, try again, and is free of negativity.

It can be frustrating when a student does not grasp content quickly, or they don't sing exactly as you've modeled, or it takes them a few tries. It is frustrating because you know how to do it and you want them to do it as well; however, in these instances really strive not to cut them down. I know that each of us have had directors who were quick to squish the spirit of a student in a rehearsal and

more often than not those students leave music all together. Be honest about mistakes, remodel, find another approach, change modalities, or something to help make it make sense to each and every student. Differentiation in instruction is so vital!

I just asked one of my recent graduates what she thought made our class excellent and she stated that, "You pushed us to the best of our abilities. You not only told us what we were doing wrong but you gave us examples of how to fix it. You also allowed the students who were further advanced in musical knowledge to sort of lead each section. You didn't let anyone fall behind. Our group was only as powerful as our weakest link."

Students want to be part of something bigger and when they are given the opportunity to thrive, they can achieve wonderful feats! When in rehearsal never settle for second best, always push them to be the best, but give them a variety of ways to get there. Set your expectations high, be consistent in delivery, discipline, and classroom routines. Watch them rise to the occasion! Once they have the momentum, the pride, and the dedication, the excellence will come easily.

### **Resources**

- CALL A FELLOW TEACHER!
  - Never feel like a failure because you need a little assistance or someone to bounce ideas off of! New teachers learn just as much from veteran teachers and vice versa.
- <https://www.smartmusic.com/music-educator-resources/>
- <https://sites.google.com/site/k12musicresources/#choir>
- <https://www.sightreadingfactory.com/>