

# FELIX GRAHAM

## TEACHING STATEMENT

My philosophy and practice of pedagogy is a direct product of my own experiences as a learner. Prior to my graduate studies, I had experienced intense frustration with my educational experiences, as the traditional lecture-readings-tests class format did not mesh well with my own learning style. My introduction to constructivist, student-centered learning environments – particularly with a focus on collaboration, rather than the traditional authoritarian, top-down method of teaching – was revelatory to me. It challenged me, forced me to rethink many of my stances on education, and sparked an intense curiosity in the idea that there might genuinely be better, more efficient ways for students to learn.

As a result, I have – and continue – to seek out and apply the ever-expanding body of scientific knowledge around learning/cognition and vocology, as well as evolving musical practice, to my teaching methods, courses and applied lessons. My pedagogical practice, whether it's individual or group-based, is student-centered and constructivist in its approach, ideally resulting in intrinsically-motivated, curious and thoughtful learners. Practically, this plays out in different ways in my applied teaching, vs. group course work or research.

### APPLIED INSTRUCTION

The primary goal of applied instruction is, in my personal practice, to create confident, self-aware, self-directed singers (be they performers or music educators), with a working understanding of their instrument, good vocal hygiene and effective, efficient practice habits. To accomplish this, I use an individualized, constructivist approach to singer training, wherein performers are taught how to neutrally observe their own singing, making non-judgmental assessments and use their accumulated technical knowledge adjust their practice or performance habits accordingly.

Depending on the students' knowledge level or capacity, this may involve approaches such as:

- 1) **Critical listening exercises** – students may be asked to listen, compare and contrast different singers performing the same material, with the goal of learning to hear differences in technique, articulate how performers achieve artistry and develop or refine their musical and artistic palette.
- 2) **Reflective journaling** – students may be asked to provide weekly written reflections (in addition to normal practice logging or journaling) in which they examine different aspects of singing or artistry, with the goal of helping performers examine internalized beliefs around their voice or performer that might hinder

them, understand areas where they may need to adjust their expectations or priorities, and generally focus on problem solving and mindful practice, rather than mechanistic repetition.

- 3) **Collaborative practice planning** – collaboration with the student to create a plan of practice that addresses both immediate and long-term technical issues, with clear goals, assessment rubrics for their practice sessions, and roadmaps for preparing repertoire.

There are many other methods and exercises used, certainly, but the same general principles apply: with each new student, I assess their technical ability, artistry and musicality *and* their awareness of knowledge of their own instrument, and from that assessment, create a learning plan that will allow them to maximize their progress outside the studio.

## CLASSROOM & ENSEMBLE INSTRUCTION

While the individualized approach described above is not practicable in a larger-scale class, the same philosophy of learning is applicable: I expect students to finish a course with a clear understanding of the topic, as well as how the material may be practically applied. Depending on the topic and class-size, I may use various combinations of dialectical methods, experiential learning assignments, student-led projects and reflection to achieve this result.

Because each group of learners is different, I work to balance clarity of assignments, assessment and expectations on the syllabus with the flexibility to adjust to each class' needs. To this end, learning goals for each week or module are clearly stated, and readings and materials are given to facilitate that learning, but the ways in which those goals are achieved may shift. Accordingly, any rubrics provided are created to allow learners to evaluate their learning and progress, rather than specific accomplishments.

Examples of this type of approach might require that a student write an assessment of their knowledge, understanding or ability of the course subject at the beginning of a semester, with a rubric provided at the end of the semester to allow the students to reflect on their work and assess how their understanding has changed. For more advanced courses or work with graduate students, learners might be asked to set goals for themselves at the beginning of the semester, asked to self-assess at the end to determine whether they achieved those goals, and, if they have not met the stated goals, articulate why not and consider how they might adjust their approach in future classes.

## CONCLUSION: ART AND SCIENCE

While scientific knowledge is a necessary component of any pedagogy, I am also cognizant that I am teaching an *art*. Lessons and courses must provide practical knowledge and skill acquisition, but that knowledge and skill-set

is learned in the greater service of artistry. As such, my applied lessons and courses are purposefully structured to encourage students' artistic growth, in addition to their academic progress. If the ultimate goal of music and artistic performance in general is to be expressive and communicate with others, then fledgling artists must be able to articulate how their knowledge and skill is transmuted into artistry. In my experience, a student-centered, constructivist approach to musical learning has been a useful and reliable method of stimulating and encouraging musicality and expression.