

Silver Linings: Giving Grace, Growing Closer, and Building Trust

By Hilary Morton



Everyone has had a hard year. I think choral directors might have had it a bit worse. We will be dealing with the fallout from this pandemic for the next few years at least, rebuilding our programs from the ground up. We haven't been teaching "choir" as we have known it to be for our entire professional lives. We have made up our curriculum weekly to keep our students engaged, check on their emotional well-being and maybe learn musical skills along the way if we are lucky. For me personally, technology has never been my friend. I've learned more this year than any other year in my 18 years of teaching. I've made mistakes, I've had to teach myself some skills to share with my students, and I've celebrated each success along the way.

There are positives from this that I will incorporate into my teaching forever. I have given more grace than I ever thought possible. And because of this, I feel I have grown closer to many of my students. There is a different level of trust and respect that I hope to maintain. Without the stress of upcoming performances, there has been more time to check on their individual skill level, mental state, and their understanding of concepts. In a large group, students can hide. Every music director has lost members of their ensembles this year, but kids come to choir for different reasons. Some love to sing. Some are gifted at reading. Some love to be with their friends. Some love to be part of something bigger than themselves. Some were forced by parents.

We all know those students who barely produce sound, or badly need a confident singer behind them or beside them to get through. With students working individually, they are completely on their own. This is the opposite reason many students enroll in choir. It's a very social place, and some students are uncomfortable singing alone. I have gradually made easy assignments where they sing by themselves. They turn in (well, let's be honest, MOST turn in) weekly sight reading factory assignments. I can manipulate the criteria each week (change time signature, key signature, mode, etc.) but I always let them choose their level of difficulty. Each of our students is in a different place among their musical journey, so let's accommodate for them and accept this fact. I give them full points for just turning in the assignment and starting on the correct first note. Accuracy is not important. I am astonished at what I heard. Once they jump over the hurdle of not being scared of the fact that their teacher is listening to them, this is a magnificent tool of gauging where your students are vocally, and musically. I can more quickly diagnose vocal faults, shifts, and how they are doing with their musical literacy. I will continue to use this weekly for the rest of my career. It makes it so much easier to quickly make decisions in a live rehearsal based on what you hear from them individually each week. Sadly, I

never did this before. I wanted kids to not feel the pressure, and frankly, didn't think I had the time. I think this is a valuable tool and I feel it has brought new confidence out in many of my singers.

I also think my professional ideals have shifted in this pandemic journey. What is most important? Teaching music or teaching children? I am currently thankful for every student who has stayed in choir and I will continue to focus on what's important, like why I love music and why they love music. I don't know if I will take choirs to competitions next year. Right now, that's the least important aspect to this art. And maybe we will all re-evaluate what is most important to our programs. Right now, it's the people who come into my room, or onto my laptop each day. I don't know when we will sing the caliber of literature I'm accustomed to teaching, and right now, I just don't care. It's about so much more than that.

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