

Survey of University Acting Majors Regarding the Effects of Singing Training on Confidence and Skills

Brian Manternach & Jeremy N. Manternach

Abstract

A three-semester course for university acting majors had a three-fold focus: (1) performing songs, (2) music theory, and (3) vocal pedagogy (physiology, technique, wellness). After the course had been taught for four years, 59 students assessed which curricular elements were most useful while taking the course(s) and once they had completed the course(s). As previously published, while taking the course(s), the highest number of participants indicated that learning and performing songs was the most useful, and vocal pedagogy least useful. However, perceptions inverted after taking the courses, with vocal pedagogy rated most useful and learning and performing songs least useful. Of those who participated in auditions or stage productions that required singing, more than 90% reported the courses were extremely or somewhat helpful in building their confidence and more than 95% reported the courses were extremely or somewhat helpful in building their skills.

In this investigation, we examined previously unreported data from the open-response questions: (1) Overall, what do you feel is valuable about the singing training you took as you were training to be an actor? (2) Do you have any other comments or reflections on the course? Forty-seven (79.7%) participants mentioned improvements in confidence and/or skills in their answers. Of those, 57.4% mentioned improvements in confidence or used a synonymous phrase compared to 46.7% who specifically mentioned improvements in skills. Additionally, 31.5% indicated improvements in confidence or used a synonym without mentioning improvements in skills, while only 20.4% mentioned improvements in skills without mentioning confidence.

The increased feelings of competency may have increased motivation. Similarly, the coursework seemed to address multiple components of Bandura's self-efficacy theory. Increased domain-specific self-efficacy (e.g., singing performance) has been linked to general self-efficacy; and high general self-efficacy has been linked to psychological well-being.

Keywords: Performance Skills, Confidence, Self-efficacy, Psychological Well-being, Theatre, Singing

Introduction

Researchers have examined the connection between participation in music and an increase in self-confidence among those in specific populations. In one study, adolescents who have been sexually abused found an increase in self-esteem and self-confidence after music therapy interventions (Clendenon-Wallen, 1991). In a second study, multiple sclerosis patients experienced an increase in self-esteem after multiple sessions of music therapy (Aldridge et al., 2005). In a third, Taiwanese undergraduate students experienced increased confidence after 20 hours of music therapy (Wu, 2002). Finally, Pavlicevic et al. (2014) posited that “therapeutic musicking” provides young adults with ongoing opportunities for experiencing confidence and self-esteem.

In other studies, researchers found that singing, in particular, may also lead to increased self-confidence, among other benefits (Hillman, 2002; Lestari & Handayani, 2017). In one study, adult subjects experiencing bereavement found improvements in their self-esteem, as well as in their sense of self-efficacy, after joining a choir (Fancourt et al., 2022). Similarly, other sources have tied theatre education and theatre practices to increased confidence and self-esteem (Savatgy, 2022; McCammon, 2012). In fact, certain theatrical programs and curricula have even been structured with a central goal of building participants’ self-confidence (Bogwardt, 2010; Horne, 2017; Côté, 2011).

In this study, we combined elements of music, singing, and theatre to examine the impacts on self-confidence. Specifically, the purpose of this study was to determine the effect of singing training on confidence and skills in students in an actor training program housed within a university department of theatre.

Method

Background

In a previous study (Manternach & Manternach, 2019), we investigated a three-semester singing course curriculum that was structured according to three specific student learning outcomes: (a) build performance skills by learning and performing songs, (b) build basic music theory/sight reading skills, and (c) learn basic vocal pedagogy (e.g., anatomy, physiology, vocal technique, vocal wellness).

After the course had been taught for four years, we designed an online survey to measure the perceived effectiveness of the curriculum, collecting input from both currently enrolled

students who had completed at least one semester of the three-course sequence and graduates of the curriculum. Among the questions, participants were asked to rate which of the three elements of the courses (performing songs, music theory, or vocal pedagogy) they believed were most useful while (a) they were taking the course(s) and (b) once they had completed the course(s). In addition, they reported how well the course prepared them for professional pursuits. Specifically, they indicated how well the course helped build their confidence and their skills for subsequent auditions and productions that required singing.

Fifty-nine of the 72 eligible students who had taken at least one course in the three-course sequence completed the survey (81.9% response rate). These students had taken one of the courses less than one year ($n = 21$, 35.6%), between one and two years ($n = 24$, 40.7%), between two and three years ($n = 11$, 18.6%), or more than three years ($n = 3$, 5.1%) prior to completing the survey.

The results indicated that while taking the course(s), the highest number of participants ($n = 26$, 44.1%) reported believing that learning and performing songs was the most useful element of the course, followed by music theory ($n = 23$, 39.0%) and vocal pedagogy ($n = 10$, 17.0%). However, perceptions inverted when subjects reported their impressions after taking the courses, with vocal pedagogy rated most useful ($n = 24$, 40.7%), followed by music theory ($n = 32.2\%$) and learning and performing songs ($n = 16$, 27.1%). This trend increased as students were further removed from the course.

Of those who participated in auditions ($n = 43$, 72.9%) or stage productions ($n = 29$, 49.2%) that required singing, more than 90% reported the courses were extremely or somewhat helpful in building their confidence and more than 95% reported the courses were extremely or somewhat helpful in building their skills.

Open-Response Questions

In the current investigation, we examined previously unreported data from the two open-response questions at the end of the survey that further explore relationships between the singing course and the development of confidence and skills. The open-response questions were (1) Overall, what do you feel is valuable about the singing training you took as you were training to be an actor? (2) Do you have any other comments or reflections on the course that you would like to share? First, we looked at the number of times participants used the words “skills” or “confidence” in their responses. We then coded particular words that we deemed to be

synonyms of “skills” or “confidence.” Finally, we noted the number of times the comments indicated that the comment was positively or negatively worded.

Results

Fifty-four of the 59 participants (91.5%) completed the open-response questions. Forty-seven of those 54 participants (87.0%; 79.7% of all survey participants) mentioned improvements in confidence and/or skills in their open-response answers. Twenty-four (44.4%; 40.7% of survey participants) specifically mentioned a boost in confidence, using phrases such as “It helped me gain confidence performing in an area I don't normally perform in” and “I now feel more confident in my singing.” By comparison, nine participants (16.7%; 15.3% of survey participants) specifically mentioned a boost in skills, using phrases such as “I picked up skills and vocal techniques that I still use to this day” and “The class also helped out with keeping my singing skills fresh.”

We then examined words or phrases that are synonymous with “confidence.” With this approach, an additional seven participants fell into the confidence category, making such comments as “[It] helped [make] singing in front of people less scary” and “[T]he most valuable thing I learned is to trust my own voice.” When including synonymous words and phrases for “skills,” an additional 16 participants were added to the “skills” category. These comments included direct synonyms (e.g., “abilities”) or specific skills (e.g., “Helped me sing in a way that's healthier for my voice” and “It helped me...understand where I'm breathing from.”).

Therefore, 57.4% of those who responded to the open-ended questions (52.5% of all survey participants) specifically mentioned improvements in confidence or used a phrase that is synonymous with confidence. By comparison, 46.7% of respondents (42.4% of survey participants) specifically mentioned improvements in skills or used a phrase synonymous with skills.

When considering those who indicated either confidence or skills, but not both, 17 respondents (31.5%; 28.8% of survey participants) mentioned confidence or a synonym for confidence without mentioning skills or a synonym for skills. By comparison, 11 respondents (20.4%; 18.6% of survey participants) mentioned skills or a synonym for skills without mentioning confidence or a synonym for confidence.

It is worth noting that five of the 59 survey participants (8.5%) gave an open-response answer that was unrelated to skills and/or confidence. There were also two responses that we

could not determine to be related to skills or confidence or both and were, thus, not included in the percentages above: “It taught me that I can be in musicals,” and “The training I received really helped me find my voice.” Three of the responses were related to confidence and/or skill, but were negative: “It applied in situations where I had to sing for a show but I don't personally feel confident enough to audition for a musical,” “...as a student in the actor training program who cannot sing, it was frustrating to be forced to take three semesters,” and “I was always feeling bad about my voice, and by the end the structure of the class made me lose confidence in myself as a singer.”

It is also noteworthy that, although the survey was measuring self-perception, three participants noted improvements in classmates. One participant noted “I was already confident and comfortable singing in front of people...But for others in my class that had less experience, I think it was important for them to gain confidence and become comfortable singing in front of people.” Another participant noted that they “...really enjoyed seeing my classmates’ skills and confidence grow.” A third indicated that “...a lot of what I learned was supplemental. However, I really enjoyed learning how other people learn to sing in a class.” Although these comments indicate a boost in confidence and skills, since they are not related to individuals’ self-perceptions, they are not included in the percentages above.

Discussion

As stated previously (Manternach & Manternach, 2019), the element of the curriculum that was perceived to be the most useful changed over time. Initially, respondents felt best served by learning and performing songs. After taking at least one semester of the curriculum, however, more respondents saw greater value in vocal pedagogy and music theory. One possible explanation for such a shift is a realization that basic music literacy and vocal technique skills would allow them to learn songs and negotiate technique independently outside of class, making the in-class activities of learning and performing songs less necessary.

Another possible explanation could relate to a “fixed” (Dweck, 2017) or “talent” (Demorest, 2018) mindset versus a “growth mindset.” Anecdotally, many students in the class identified as actors, not singers, and seemed to initially have adopted a fixed/talent mindset about singing, believing that individuals are either born with or born without singing talent. Perhaps an understanding of vocal pedagogy and the function and technique behind singing revealed it to be a learnable skill. Some students appeared to change their mindset, as evidenced

by open-response answers such as “I think that a lot of people are scared of singing but [this] class has helped curb that fear for a lot of people” and “[I]t gave me so much confidence. Anyone can sing is a lesson well learned.”

Relating to the confidence versus skills portion of the open-response questions, since participants were asked directly about perceived improvements in confidence and skills earlier in the survey (essentially priming them to consider these factors), it is unsurprising that they are mentioned prominently in the open-response answers. However, the fact that improved confidence, or phrases synonymous with confidence, received greater—though not overwhelming—mention than improved skills, or phrases synonymous with skills (or any other area of improvement, for that matter), may be an indication that the greatest overall benefit of the class was related to an increase in confidence.

An increase in confidence may also be linked to motivation and basic psychological needs. Ryan and Deci (2000) have discussed the three basic components of motivation: competence, relatedness, and autonomy. Given the number of participants who reported on increased confidence and skills, it is clear that this coursework helped to develop feelings of competence. Such an increase in motivation would tend to increase participants’ desire to develop skills in the future.

In addition, this course may also have led to increased singing self-efficacy and, possibly, general psychological well-being. Bandura (1977) described four major components to self-efficacy: mastery experiences, social modeling, social persuasion, and psychological responses. This coursework provided ample opportunity for mastery experiences, as participants practiced their skills repeatedly over time. They also were encouraged by their classmates and instructor (social persuasion), and they observed their classmates, which provided opportunities for social modeling. Self-efficacy is often considered to be domain-specific—that is, it is an indication of confidence in a particular area, i.e., singing. There is some research, however, that seems to support a Cross-Domain Influence Model (Jungert et al., 2014). Therefore, self-efficacy in one domain may lead to increased self-efficacy in another domain. In addition, other researchers have found indications of a bottom-up effect in which domain-specific self-efficacy might lead to overall self-efficacy (Grether et al., 2018). Increased overall self-efficacy has been linked to increased psychological well-being (Siddiqui, 2015). Although we did not measure any of the components of self-efficacy theory or self-determination theory, there is a possibility that the

increases in confidence could be an indicator of increased psychological well-being. Future researchers might directly measure these components to determine whether there is a connection to overall psychological well-being.

Certainly, the small number of participants is a limitation in this study, which is exacerbated by the fact that not all 59 participants answered the open-response questions. Since this study included those who had taken the courses between fall 2014 and spring 2018, a follow-up study that includes students who have taken the courses between fall 2018 to the present would increase the number of subjects considered.

An additional limitation is that the students who answered the survey all took the same singing courses from the same instructor. Although there were small changes to the content that was delivered in the classes as they were taught over the years, they all followed what was essentially the same curriculum. Therefore, it should not necessarily be assumed that students who took this singing class would have the same experience as students who take a different singing class, or even the same class taught by a different instructor. Future investigators may seek participation from those in other college or university programs with a similar course that follows a similar format.

In the same vein, students were asked in the survey how the course impacted their confidence in auditions and in productions. They were not asked if improved confidence in singing made them feel more confident in their everyday life. Future studies may specifically investigate links between confidence in singing and confidence in other activities.

Conclusion

In this study, we focused specifically on singing within the context of a university theatre degree program, the results of which point to the positive impacts such training has on confidence. Given what was discussed above regarding self-efficacy, it is reasonable to believe that boosting confidence in the ability to sing in front of others may have an additional positive impact on overall confidence, as well.

Links between participation in the performing arts—whether music, singing, or theatre—and increased health and well-being are abundant in the research literature. The fact that this study aligns with this body of work is perhaps unsurprising. It is likely even less surprising among performing arts educators who are flooded with day-to-day examples and anecdotal evidence of

just how much individuals benefit in a variety of ways from engaging in the arts. Hopefully, this study provides even further justification for the vital work these practitioners are doing.

References

- Aldridge, D., Schmid, W., Kaeder, M., Schmidt, C., & Ostermann, T. (2005). Functionality or aesthetics? A pilot study of music therapy in the treatment of multiple sclerosis patients. *Complementary therapies in medicine*, 13(1), 25-33.
- Bandura, A. (1977). Self-efficacy: Toward a unifying theory of behavioral change. *Psychological Review*, 84(2), 191-215.
- Borgwardt, L. (2010). Inspiring Creativity and Self-Confidence: The Power of Theatre in a Child's Life.
- Clendenon-Wallen, J. (1991). The use of music therapy to influence the self-confidence and self-esteem of adolescents who are sexually abused. *Music therapy perspectives*, 9(1), 73-81.
- Côté, I., Getty, L., & Gaulin, R. (2011). Aphasic theatre or theatre boosting self-esteem. *International Journal on Disability and Human Development*, 10(1), 11-15.
doi: org/10.1515/ijdhhd.2011.007
- Demorest, S. (2018, March 1). *Stop obsessing over talent – everyone can sing*. The Conversation. <https://theconversation.com/stop-obsessing-over-talent-everyone-can-sing-74047>
- Dweck, C. (2017). *Mindset: Changing the way you think to fulfil your potential* (updated edition). Little, Brown Book Group.
- Fancourt, D., Finn, S., Warran, K., & Wiseman, T. (2022). Group singing in bereavement: effects on mental health, self-efficacy, self-esteem and well-being. *BMJ Supportive & Palliative Care*, 12(e4), e607-e615.
- Grether, T., Sowislo, J. F., & Wiese, B. S. (2018). Top-down or bottom up? Prospective relations between general and domain-specific self-efficacy beliefs during a work-family transition. *Personality and Individual Differences*, 121, 131.139.
doi: org/10.1016/j.paid.2017.09.021
- Hillman, S. (2002). Participatory singing for older people: A perception of benefit. *Health education*, 102(4), 163-171.
- Horne, C. A. (2017). *Developing Confidence in Late Adolescents: A New Theatre Curriculum* (Doctoral dissertation, University of Akron).
- Jungert, T., Hesser, H., & Träff, U. (2014). Contrasting two models of academic self-efficacy – domain-specific versus cross-domain – in children receiving and not receiving special instruction in mathematics. *Scandinavian Journal of Psychology*, 55(5), 440-7.
doi: 10.1111/sjop.12139

- Lestari, R. K., & Handayani, S. S. D. (2017). Children Confidence Development by Theme Based Movement and Singing Method at RA Islamic Tunas Bangsa 4 Ngaliyan Semarang. *BELIA: Early Childhood Education Papers*, 6(1), 14-17.
- Manternach, B., & Manternach, J. N. (2019). Survey of University Acting Majors regarding the Most Useful Elements of Singing Training. *Voice and Speech Review*, 13(3), 312-321.
- McCammon, L. A., Saldaña, J., Hines, A., & Omasta, M. (2012). Lifelong impact: Adult perceptions of their high school speech and/or theatre participation. *Youth Theatre Journal*, 26(1), 2-25.
- Pavlicevic, M., O'Neil, N., Powell, H., Jones, O., & Sampathianaki, E. (2014). Making music, making friends: Long-term music therapy with young adults with severe learning disabilities. *Journal of intellectual disabilities*, 18(1), 5-19.
- Ryan, R. M., & Deci, E. L. (2000). Self-determination theory and the facilitation of intrinsic motivation, social development, and well-being. *American Psychologist*, 55(1), 68–78. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.55.1.68>
- Savatgy, M. (2022). Lights, Camera, Confidence: The Effects of Theatre on Self-Esteem.
- Siddiqui, S. (2015). Impact of self-efficacy on psychological well-being among undergraduate students. *International Journal of Indian Psychology*, 2(3), 5-16.
- Wu, S. M. (2002). Effects of music therapy on anxiety, depression and self-esteem of undergraduates. *Psychologia*, 45(2), 104-114.

Appendix One

List of phrases from the open-ended questions determined to be synonymous with “confidence”

1. To be relaxed and have fun!
2. Performing in front of my peers is invaluable, particularly for students like me who still are figuring their own voice out.
3. I think learning the fundamentals of anatomy and how singing is supposed to work helped me change my view on my own voice and be less ashamed of my own sound, encouraging me not to push and to let it just be what it is.
4. It helped singing in front of people less scary.
5. I think the most valuable thing I learned is to trust my own voice.
6. I think that as an actor it was important to realize that I can do some stuff with music without feeling completely out of my element. I think the practice of being up in front of my classmates and making acting choices while doing something I'm less comfortable with was useful to help me to realize that it's something I can do.
7. Learning how to sing in front of others and not be afraid.

Appendix Two

List of phrases from the open-ended questions determined to be synonymous with “skills”

1. The time I got to perform and practice the songs was helpful to develop my abilities.
2. I learned some of my tendencies while singing and I was given exercises to do to encourage relaxation while singing. I think learning the fundamentals of anatomy and how singing is supposed to work helped me change my view on my own voice...encouraging me not to push and to let it just be what it is.
3. The vocal pedagogy was incredibly important in actually making me sound better.
4. I also think having a good base for healthy singing technique and learning a few good vocal warmups to have in your back pocket are very important.
5. Provided a solid foundation for vocal improvement...vocal technique work has been a godsend in terms of helping me pinpoint areas to work on.
6. Helped me sing in a way that's healthier for my voice.
7. I loved when we got personal time with Brian to practice and work on individual improvements.
8. It helped me to build a stage presence as well as understand where I'm breathing from.
9. Learning vocal pedagogy, and general vocal health/good vocal use has helped me maintain my voice better than I've been able to before.
10. The rounding out and diversifying of oneself and one's capabilities as an actor is so valuable.
11. Vocal exercises helped in speech in acting.
12. I feel much stronger in my voice after having taken the class.
13. I think that being at least able to sing OK in an audition and performance setting is important, so I appreciated that this was part of the curriculum.
14. It really helped with my audition songs and technique.
15. I think oftentimes I think of acting and singing technique as two different things, but being able to integrate my singing technique into my acting technique while learning them both helped me find the connections between the two.
16. If my voice hadn't been ruined by cancer (now you know who I am) I would've had the confidence and ability to audition for musicals.