HA VE YOU EVER walked into a classroom and immediately sensed that the learning environment was a place charged with interest and energy? Did you notice how students and instructor were equally involved and enthusiastic about the topic? The diction course is in dire need of such an atmosphere. An increasing number of university level instructors report that diction courses are being condensed or even eliminated from vocal performance degree requirements.1 Discovering a dynamic diction classroom is as vitally important now as ever. We need to prioritize language study and create a learning environment where interaction between instructor, students, and resources produces an interest that results in a revitalization of the lyric diction classroom.

Our goal is to make the transition from teaching environment to learning environment through innovative classroom design, placing new emphasis on creative teamwork and collaboration.2 Success depends upon the instructor’s plan of action and how that plan suits the students’ needs. The instructor’s plan is enabled through an informed academic community willing to support a topic of vital importance to the singer, voice teacher, and coach accompanist. This article addresses how to facilitate active learning in the diction classroom and how to preserve the academic integrity of the lyric diction course. Its subject matter focuses on teaching strategies for the primary lyric languages at the undergraduate level and provides guidelines that set standards for the course, instructor, and student. I hope the suggested activities encourage a dynamic learning atmosphere for the classroom and the proposed guidelines bring about much needed change so that voice programs will be equipped to offer the optimal learning environment for undergraduate lyric diction courses.

SETTING THE STAGE

In the dynamic diction classroom, all are equally enthusiastic about the topic—the students are interested in accomplishing the instructor’s goals, the instructor is aware of the students’ needs, and a win/win situation has been planned. Each of us has an agenda. The instructor’s agenda is to impart relevant information and to accurately assign the grade. The students’ agenda is to make the grade, to enjoy the topic, and to be a valued member of the class. Through creative planning, we strive to make the instructor’s and students’ agendas match.3 Achieving a shared goal is the instructor’s responsibility. It is accomplished by communicating high expectations, by planning group engaging
activities, and by instilling a sense of self-worth within each class member. We cannot afford to make students feel inhibited or self-conscious in a course that requires participation. Instructors are creative action planners who promote positive peer interaction, correct errors in a kind and considerate manner, and validate students’ questions and comments. (Compassion goes hand-in-hand with competence; the instructor who is capable of answering questions of language diction with the caring heart of a teacher gains the admiration of students.) Establishing a positive, encouraging atmosphere for the classroom is our most powerful tool.

CREATING INTERESTING CONTEXTS FOR LEARNING

Establishing an active and engaging learning atmosphere is the next valuable attribute of a productive diction classroom. In the active learning environment, students get out of their seats, out of the note taking/lecture mode, and up to the board where all can enjoy the spellings and sounds of lyric words, and the IPA. Instructors are the facilitators of this learning style while students become the active participants, engaging in dialog with each other.

Active learning through the use of rich resources:
1. initiates discussion between the student and instructor;
2. encourages peer interaction;
3. allows students to learn in the process of doing;
4. increases student accountability for learning;
5. motivates students to sharpen skills and explore additional resources;
6. encourages leadership by allowing students to listen and learn from each other; and
7. makes learning more powerful, interesting, and enjoyable.

Lectures provide a framework for the course. They give the instructor a moment to introduce new topics, make a transition from one activity to the next, and guide class discussion following a listening assignment. In the dynamic learning environment, the remaining class time is devoted to an interactive application of the concepts taught. This format stimulates intellectual curiosity, initiates further questions, and prompts more sophisticated discussion.

ACTIVITIES FOR THE CLASSROOM

The following activities will transform the dry diction lecture setting into a lively, interactive diction learning experience.

Board work

One of the most effective and engaging ways to initiate interest in language study is through group assignments at the board. When all students participate, the diction classroom is transformed into an interactive learning lab (Figure 1). Our diction classroom has a special 16’ x 5’ projection dry erase board. Lyric word lists are projected across the board from a laptop. Students then discuss and apply new diction rules by transcribing and enunciating the lyric words (Figure 2). When it is apparent that all have a solid understanding of the spellings and rules, students are challenged to complete the lists in a timed manner. Often they enjoy a competitive transcription race with each other. If a projection board is unavailable, the following two-part activity is equally...
Successful: first students take their foreign language word lists to the board as a transcription exercise, then the transcribed lists become an enunciation exercise for the entire class to read aloud.

**Introductory warm-up exercises**

English word lists in graded order provide a rich resource for introductory exercises in transcription and enunciation. Students are asked to write IPA for their individually assigned English word list on the dry erase board. This fills the classroom with IPA lists for group reading and enjoyment. Mistakes are interestingly revealed as students pay close attention to a precise pronunciation of the symbols their classmates have provided. There are many variations within this activity. Students may be asked to use the International Phonetic Alphabet to write a favorite quote, discuss current events, or they may be given a specific English literature assignment to transcribe. I require my students to transcribe according to the rules for art song literature as outlined in *The Singer’s Manual of English Diction* by Madeline Marshall (Figure 3). Regardless of the method of transcription, this exercise provides an engaging activity that allows all students to participate (Figure 4).

**Electronic flash cards**

Challenging the class as a group and in a timed manner increases interest in the topic, promotes comradery among class members, and adds variety to daily classroom activities. Electronic flash cards are the quickest way to provide a group challenge and to quiz students’ knowledge. There is a distinct advantage when presenting material with the option of rapidly changing frames. In contrast, the hand-held flash cards are often too sluggish for the replies of a group. Electronic flash cards are easily made by typesetting a list of words or phrases in a large font using a Word document in “Landscape” formatting. Every “PageDown” is a new word or phrase to be projected onto the screen. Electronic flash cards are especially helpful when learning exception words. The instructor may create an excellent review by mixing exception words with words of like spelling (Figure 5). Some instructors have the ability to create...
IPA flash cards. Even the “diction divas” in the class will be challenged when lyric transcriptions are displayed for all to read (Figure 6).

**Individually assigned word lists**

A dual purpose is served when students are given individually assigned word lists for transcription homework. These assignments are turned into enunciation exercises in the following class meeting. There is no need to grade IPA when accuracy of the student’s transcription is based upon correct pronunciation. The remaining class members are challenged to transcribe their classmates’ word lists during the individual assessment period.

**Daily repetition**

Daily repetition is used to memorize exception words. Place the words in a specific order to make them sound familiar, rhythmic, or rhyming.

**Sing-song memory aids**

Quality memory aids are a valuable way to communicate and retain important information. Creating effective ways to memorize specified German words is important due to the number of words that are exceptions to the rule. Interestingly, words that are exceptions to the closed vowel rules occur far more frequently than words that are exceptions to the open vowel rules. I assign a sing-song memory aid to these words. They are to be enunciated in the following order: *bin, in, bis, hin, im, mit, es, des, weg, ob, von, vom, um, zum, drum, das, hat, was, an, man, am, ab*. Note how often they appear in a list of frequently occurring lyric words (Figure 7).

**Word and phrase memory aids**

Another valuable memory aid tactic involves applying consonants that require memorization to the spelling of a word or phrase. You may wish to create your own memory aids or enlist the help of students who enjoy making suggestions for this activity. For example, in French class I credit a former student for recognizing that the consonants in the word *human* nullify the rules for nasal vowels when those consonants are preceded by *n* or *m*. With my workbooks, I needed to create a few original memory aids. Here are some examples: the dental consonants are contained within the word *dental*, voiced plosive consonants are contained within a G chord, and syllabic division of consonant clusters in Italian occurs after the consonants contained within the word *harmoniously*. In German, *g, b, and d* retain voicing when followed by consonants in the word *learn*. For English, *Ella Standeth* is dry humor to instructors who follow Madeline Marshall. (It is an alternative to *Daniel Sitteth* and reminds students that certain consonants, when followed by *u* and *ew* spellings, create the [ju] sound.) The phrase, *After class Blanch danced rather fast*, is a memorable way to learn the sequence of sounds pronounced with dark *a* in British English. The word *andante* reminds students that there are a few specified words like *command, demand, can’t*, and *shan’t* that must also be pronounced with a dark *a* in British English.
DEFINING OUR TASKS

The work of an undergraduate lyric diction instructor is multifaceted. We are to familiarize students with the languages they sing, teach them to accurately enunciate lyrics, and provide them with terms that describe articulation. When students are exposed to numerous words and phrases, teaching opportunities increase and interest is sparked. The best way to expose them to numerous words is to provide individually assigned word and phrase lists as homework. This was my purpose when organizing the Lyric Diction Workbook Series. Each language follows a similar daily class plan. At the beginning of the semester, each student is given a homework number 1–12. Each homework number has a corresponding list of approximately twenty words per unit. The student is expected to transcribe the list after each class meeting as a homework assignment. Accuracy of the student’s transcription is assessed in class while he or she reads aloud. The remaining class members are required to transcribe the words as they are being read. Note: all twelve lists should be distributed regardless of the number of students in the class since the number of words in each unit is specifically designed to fill a fifty minute period. For smaller classes, more than one list may be assigned; for larger classes, two or more students may share the same list. By following this procedure, students will be exposed to approximately 240 lyric words per class meeting and over 4,800 words in a full semester. Class begins with this activity, then a brief lecture introduces the next unit with its new consonant and vowel sounds. The students practice the new sounds by

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Figure 7. Frequently occurring German lyric words. (This word list originates from research gathered while writing the German Lyric Diction Workbook. The number indicates how often a word appeared in the 1200 lyrics studied.)
enunciating frequently occurring words. The instructor discusses the rules governing transcription and all complete one list of words containing the new rules. Additional time may be spent listening to the new sounds through sung or spoken example or by transcribing at the board. If the class size is adequate (twelve or less), it is possible to project ten to twelve word lists on the board for all to transcribe. This is a very effective tool for reinforcing the rules while giving students a group activity.

ESTABLISHING BOUNDARIES

The subject of lyric diction encompasses multiple disciplines. In order to avoid stepping on toes (or fingers, as the case may be) and since the topic is so vast, it is wise for the instructor to set boundaries on the material covered. Narrowing down the subject matter is a unique choice for every instructor. My selection of topics is based upon my desire to support our voice faculty and to fill a specific need. In our program, each student is assigned a voice teacher and a vocal coach. In order to avoid covering material that has already been provided in the voice lesson or coaching session, I do not expound upon sung application. My goals are to familiarize students with the lyric languages and to address matters of transcription, resonant enunciation, and expression. We may briefly discuss the adjustments needed for singing, but I clearly tell students that they are to work with their voice teacher or vocal coach when making the final decisions necessary for sung application.

DAILY LESSON PLAN

With topics defined and classroom activities chosen, an order of operation is needed. Group engaging activities are beneficial only when placed within a reliable daily routine. As diction instructors, we love order, rules and guidelines. Our lesson plans should reflect this type of organization. The previously mentioned activities are easily incorporated into the following lesson plan.

Introductory exercise: testing

Begin each class by testing students’ skills. There are three things we need to know: Have they done their homework? Are they forming the new sounds correctly? Are they able to apply the new rules for transcription? The following three activities help evaluate students’ level of understanding: daily written quizzes, homework graded on the board, and transcription assignments assessed by listening to students’ enunciation.

Lecture and group application: enunciation

Next, introduce the new IPA symbol and discuss the rules governing enunciation. This is a brief lecture followed by class enunciation of frequently occurring lyric words. It is interesting to note that frequently occurring words are also typically short in length. They make excellent enunciation exercises for the introduction of a new IPA symbol.

Lecture and group application: rules for transcription

It is important to cover transcription in a separate discussion. Transcription requires the use of a different set of skills. Discuss then apply the rules by transcribing one word list together.

SETTING GUIDELINES

Measures designed to accommodate the lesson plans and activities listed above are provided in the following section. Setting a high standard for the course, instructor and student enhances the quality of education in vocal performance programs and provides the framework necessary for creating an engaging diction classroom experience.

Guidelines for the course and classroom

There are seven measures that would protect students’ academic needs, ensure optimal classroom conditions, and allow diction instructors time needed to introduce and reinforce subject matter:

1. Refine the topics covered in undergraduate lyric diction by highlighting the four primary lyric languages: English, Italian, German, and French.
2. Maintain a four semester diction course requirement for vocal performance majors.
3. Limit the class size to twelve students per section.
4. Establish diction course requirements for students with voice related majors, such as vocal accompanying and choral conducting.
5. Require three years of foreign language grammar study for undergraduate vocal performance majors (one year each of Italian, German, and French).
6. Provide an adequate learning environment by offering the following supplies: computer with overhead projector, large dry erase board without ledger lines, sound equipment, Internet, and daily word list assignments for each student.

7. Provide an open, clean classroom with desks arranged in a semicircle. I prefer to have the desks face a projection screen for the brief lecture and discussion period. We have a large open space available in the back of the room with a projection dry erase board for students’ group assignments.

Three of the seven points need further explanation. Point 1: the subject matter introduced in an undergraduate lyric diction course should not be too broadly defined. Primary choices regarding the languages covered must be established so that information does not become too sparsely disseminated. If undergraduate studies were limited to English, Italian, German, and French, then graduate students would be free to focus upon additional lyric languages such as Russian and Spanish. Organization in this area would reinforce undergraduate repertoire needs while broadening students’ linguistic experiences at the graduate level. Students would be introduced to new languages at a time when it is appropriate for them to explore the rich world of a linguistically expanded vocal repertoire. Point 2: we must avoid the alarming trend toward limiting the number of hours required for undergraduate lyric diction. In many voice programs, diction courses have been completely removed from the undergraduate curriculum. If the singer’s art is to survive, then words, our most precious and intimately related topic, must be preserved. It is not acceptable nor is it responsible for panel members entrusted with the job of assigning accreditation to drop or limit diction from the singer’s or vocal accompanist’s curriculum. If too little time is devoted to the topic of diction, the hurried and labor attempts of the instructor become ineffectual. They have no recourse to give, as they feel responsible, adequate time to each language and are unable to reinforce the concepts introduced. Point 3: the instructor should not be overburdened with a large classroom size. Diction is not a lecture course; rather, it is similar to the lab setting of a piano class where students require one-on-one time with the professor in a group setting. Overloading sections is an exercise in futility inflicted upon the instructor by schools who wish to claim they have a diction program but are not willing to provide the necessary number of sections. Additional learning environments are equally important but may be adequately addressed in the list above.

Guidelines for the instructor

A fascinating dichotomy of intention exists among diction instructors. We run toward our topic with intellectual curiosity and with grand aspirations of attaining a higher level of proficiency, yet we fear responsibility to students who hold us accountable for all words in a number of lyric foreign tongues. It would be liberating for student and instructor alike if certification could be awarded. But there is no degree available for diction and this broad topic rests in the hands of instructors with diverse areas of expertise. Lyric diction is a multidisciplinary form that may be taught by the singer, coach accompanist, choral director, or foreign language professor. While no single discipline prepares the instructor for all aspects of teaching lyric diction, each offers an excellent perspective. Therefore, it cannot be said that the primary area of expertise alone determines qualification; rather, it should be the emphasis upon language study that qualifies an instructor to handle this multifaceted course. If we were to draw a picture of the optimal instructor for this assignment, then each language would have its own specialist on the music faculty: a native Italian coach or singer would teach Italian; a native French coach or singer would teach French; a native British coach or singer would teach English; and a native German coach or singer would teach German. No preference should be given to the coach, singer, or choral director; each has a very special contribution. Rather, give preference to native birth or to the priority a prospective instructor has placed upon language study. If the instructor is not of native birth, additional study should be mandatory. Maintain a high academic standard by requiring at least two years of grammar study and one semester of diction study per language for each course a prospective diction instructor would be assigned. The professor will be much more at ease with students and contented with the course work when these minimum academic prerequisites are met.

Guidelines for the student

The following academic standards are easily attainable by undergraduate students upon completion of a four
semester diction series which highlights the primary lyric languages. Note: adequate proficiency in Italian requires at least one year of grammar study in addition to the diction course. Students would be able to:

1. Transcribe most English, Italian, German, and French texts without the use of a dictionary. (A dictionary that includes pronunciation for verbs in conjugation is necessary for Italian words with e and o spellings. Transcription of Italian words with z spellings, French words with initial h spellings, and German words with multiple elements would also require the use of a dictionary.)

2. Define basic diction terms related to transcription and enunciation.

3. Accurately enunciate English, Italian, German, and French lyrics. Note: grammar study would enable the student to excel in areas of expression since the word for word translations could be adequately prepared and understood.

Academic requirements at the undergraduate level would be raised if graduate programs offered a written, standardized diction test. Advisors would then have an accurate assessment of a candidate's knowledge and could make appropriate course assignments for those with deficiencies. The test should contain basic terms and lyric words with all spellings which are likely to occur in English, Italian, German, and French art song repertoire. The most commonly occurring exception words should also be included.

SUMMARY

The importance of undergraduate lyric diction and the value of the instructor's work cannot be underestimated. How often would precious lesson time be wasted if students were not adequately prepared to transcribe, enunciate, or express their lyrics? The diction instructor's primary purpose is to support the voice faculty. Setting high standards for the course, instructor, and student, will complement the vocal performance program, enhance the quality of education in schools of music, and serve to promote the singer's art.

NOTES

1. The author is in contact with numerous diction instructors through S.T.M. Publishers and the Lyric Diction Workbook Series. These conversations reveal current trends regarding the lyric diction course and the curriculum requirements of voice programs in major universities across the U.S. and in Canada.

2. Development of innovative methods of teaching is attributed to the advice and leadership of Dr. Jonathan Retzlaff, Chair of the Voice Department at the Blair School of Music at Vanderbilt University.


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