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## Enhancing Choral Conductor Identity Development Through Online Community-Threaded Discussion

By

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### Abstract

*This action research report addresses the structure and outcomes of a fifteen-week online project designed to enhance choral conductor identity development through community discussion. Aligned with a university choral literature course, the project was intended to encourage professional perspective and communication. Outcomes and insights were ascertained via online responses to posted choral performance recordings, a questionnaire given at the end of the project period, and an in-person final group discussion. A categorical analysis of discussion content revealed a larger frequency of comments focused on expressive aspects of music over comments focused on musical technique. Comments were often stated as personal preferences rather than objective observations aligning with a particular style or genre. Students demonstrated a fluid use of resources to stimulate conversation including class readings, selected video/audio recordings, and peer comments. Questionnaire responses indicated that the online format enhanced students' ability to formulate and articulate ideas, expanded their understanding of professional community perceptions and expanded their overall awareness of their role as a choral conductor. Class members also reported greater awareness of the differences between formal online discourse appropriate for professional communication and informal conversation habits developed through social media interactions.*

**Keywords:** Choral conducting, Identity Development, Online Threaded Discussion

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## Introduction

Dramatic changes within the landscape of choral music in recent years—including rapid expansion of literature resources and contrasting choices in approaches to choral music-making—provide ample opportunity for diverse perspectives. However, these differences in approach generate barriers within the choral performance and educational communities, creating conflicts of taste as well as mutual misunderstandings (Garnett, 2009). The changing paradigms of our collective experience calls choral conductor/educators to proactively engage in expanding an awareness of the "self" in relation to professional ideas and values held by the choral music community as a whole. The framework of identity theory classifies and categorizes the components of individual thought and action within structured systems, such as education and performance, through an understanding of roles and meanings, and the expectations and standards that guide behaviors (Stets & Burke, 2000). Within this framework, the term identity encompasses not only the assertion of individual action (agency), but also an awareness of how individual thought and action relates to professional systems.

In addition to the influences of institutional study and established norms, professional identity development is largely due to socialization within a professional community (McCarthy, 2007). Self-identity development is an ongoing process constructed through practices and discourses, and maintained through actions and interactions within defined social groups (Garnett, 2009). Conductor/educators experience identity development in stages, beginning with early experiences in music. Primary socialization, which occurs before formal pedagogical study, takes place in primary and secondary school band, choir and orchestra ensembles. Through these experiences, musicians learn the standards of professional practice and procedure (Woodford, 2002). Ensemble experiences also include the influence of an instructor, who serves as a model

for professional behaviors (Teachout, 1997). Through formalized study in college-level methodology courses, pre-service conductor/educators develop secondary understandings of professional ideas and behaviors, which then take on meaning and inform role-specific practice (Haston & Russell, 2011). Influences from a wide variety of people places and things shape professional identity. These influences form a collective understanding of a "professional knowledge landscape" (Clandinin & Connelly, 1999).

The positive influence of a peer group during career preparation can be significant in providing opportunities to exercise professional ideas and behaviors (Conkling, 2007; Haston & Russell, 2011; McClellan, 2011). North and Hargreaves (2008) suggested that peer group participation can enhance learning through the application of internal "cultural tools" such as symbolic systems, language, concepts, and scripts. They further posit that individual learning is an outcome of repeated joint activities with shared cultural tools (p. 322). Addressing the comprehensive nature of identity construction, Lave (1991) stated, "Developing identity as a member of a community and becoming knowledgeably skillful are part of the same process, with the former motivating, shaping and giving meaning to the latter, which it subsumes" (p. 65).

According to Abrahams and Abrahams (2017), professional self-identity takes on meaning through collaborations (social interaction) with others who understand the frameworks of a specific discipline, and how each functions within that discipline. They propose that choral musicians construct individual meaning-making through a common understanding of the social, historical and cultural practices of the discipline. Garnett (2009) suggested that long standing communities of practice define the vocal and conceptual elements that choral conductor/educators need to master in order to identify with traditional musical behaviors and associated meanings. A "basic core of common traits" represents the conceptual elements that

envelop different types of groups and varied repertoires (p. 63). Understanding this common core stems from conversations relating the use of the voice, social identity, genre and moral attributes of a singers' character, which form a life-style sector that is specific to activities that surround choral practice (Garnett, 2009; Garnett, 2017). Application of the components of choral practice require conductors to utilize discipline specific knowledge and skill, while at the same time creating artistry through choice in expressive elements of music-making. Learning to balance this dichotomy is an essential skill for every conductor/educator.

The purpose of this article is to describe the structure and sequent insights of an action research project intended to promote identity development in undergraduate choral music education majors. The discussion project was designed to provide opportunities to advance specialized knowledge within a framework of social influence. Two questions guided the project:

1. In what ways does online threaded discussion enhance professional identity development?
2. What are the conditions that promote breadth in online discussions about choral music?

### **The Setting**

The context of the study was an undergraduate choral literature course, required for choral music education students. Because the purpose of the choral literature course was designed to focus on factual information and pedagogical exploration, students did not have much opportunity to engage in a formal process of group and personal identity formation. In an effort to shift this imbalance, I (course instructor) decided to see if I could foster personal identity growth by adding a new component to the course: namely an online discussion thread. The notion that online community discussion with like-minded individuals could prove transformative to identity development and pedagogical practice intrigued me (Justice, et al.,

2013; Kastner, 2015; Luehmann & Tinelli, 2008). I defined the term community here as a group of individuals with the same interests and goals.

Eleven junior and senior level students, including one instrumental music education major, enrolled in the course, formed a cohort of third and fourth year music education majors. Pre-requisite requirements for course enrollment included four semesters of music theory and aural skills, four semesters of piano skills, applied voice study, and choral ensemble participation. All students had completed a one-semester musical styles course and one semester of foundational work in music education (lesson planning, philosophy, beginning field work). Six students had completed choral conducting and secondary choral methods, while the five remaining class members were concurrently enrolled in choral conducting with the methods course planned for the following semester. All students had completed between 10-30 hours of practicum experiences in secondary music classrooms. Based on this experience, class members' ability to engage in threaded discussions about applied choral conducting practice rested on basic understandings of professional knowledge and applied conducting practice.

The publication titled *Choral conducting: A leadership teaching approach* (Simons, 1983) served as inspiration for the framework used in this project. In this book, Simons identified professional socialization and the ability to control professional resources (knowledge) as key elements in conductor development. Simons provided a six-phase model intended to facilitate communication skills, musical skills and professional perceptions. The first stages of the model include developing group identity, contextualizing and asserting the "self" within a group, and developing the art of verbal communication. From this base, musical activities such as leading songs, developing rehearsal techniques, and focusing on gesture complete the profile of a choral conductor. The model highlights the influence of social connections in establishing

individual identity within a professional collective, with specific attention to promoting individuality through discourse.

### **Project Sequence**

Enrollment in the choral literature course provided class members access to an online learning platform (Desire to Learn: D2L) equipped with discussion capability. The project occurred over a 15-week semester. I assigned the students eight separate listening examples and corresponding online discussions on a weekly or bi-weekly basis as listed in the course syllabus (see Table 1). The sequence of the recordings was in chronological order by musical style period, following the sequence of literature studied in class. I also posted reading materials online to enrich understanding of style periods and genres, and to promote the use of common musical language. Recordings alternated between professional, high school, community and collegiate choirs. Three of the recorded performances (discussion 4, 5, and 7) involved comparisons between two like-choirs, and five recordings were focused on a single choir. I selected exemplar recordings to reflect a variety of secondary, collegiate and community ensemble types and musical genres. The exemplars included performances that I considered to be of good quality. The recordings came from public domain audio and video sources. To ensure access to the technology platform, class members completed an initial threaded-discussion practice session prior to the first project discussion.

Table 1

*Sequence of Exemplar Recording Examples*

Discussion #	Style Period	Type of Choir
1: Single Exemplar	Renaissance	Professional
2: Single Exemplar	Classical	Collegiate
3: Single Exemplar	Romantic	Community
4: Comparison of Exemplars	Contemporary	Collegiate
5: Comparison of Exemplars	Jazz	High School
6: Single Exemplar	Ethnic/Multicultural	High School
7: Comparison of Exemplars	Master work	Professional

Class meetings, which ran concurrently with the online project, focused on score analysis and exploring the pedagogical considerations of choral literature appropriate for middle and high school level choirs. Class members completed analyses for seven pieces, which they presented in class, using a template based on the Comprehensive Musicianship Through Performance framework (O'Toole, 2003). I provided specific feedback for each assignment in the form of written comments. Listening examples posted on the online discussion board came directly from the list of literature assigned for the course, and the posting date of each online recording coincided with the a scheduled in-class presentation on that piece of literature.

At the outset of the study, I offered parameters for the online discussions based on the first three phases of Simons' (1983) model for conductor development. The class was (a) defined as a discussion group of members with similar professional goals; (b) asked to contribute individual thoughts and ideas; (c) encouraged to use resources and existing musical knowledge to assert thoughts verbally. To spark discussion statements and to encourage a breadth of ideas, I asked class members to offer a minimum of six specific comments that related to any aspect of each recorded performance. I also suggested options to enhance the discussion threads such as



offering alternative recordings, referring to course readings, and responding to peer posts. Class members participated in each discussion within three days of specific pre-determined dates as listed in the course syllabus.

Once I explained expectations ensured that all class members were able to access and use the online discussion tool, I stepped out of the discussion network and functioned in a non-active capacity. Since the discussion board was part of our class's learning platform, students were aware that I could access their discussions. To contextualize my silent presence in the project, I talked with the class about the purpose of the exercise and clarified my desire to offer an outlet for exploring and asserting individual thoughts. My intent was to encourage class members to exert positions, articulate ideas, and discuss informed opinions without the threat of critical feedback, and without looking to me for guidance. Wiggins (2015) asserts that teachers influence student agency in the learning process, "For learners to be able to construct their own understanding, we, as teachers, need to learn how to 'get out of their way'" (p. 22). Other than scheduling listening prompts to mirror literature studied in class, I did not make any effort to align the online discussions with class meetings. Any transfers between class content and threaded discussions occurred as a result of interconnections generated by students. I also made clear my intention to use this project to inform my teaching practice, and that I would analyze the discussion threads for content following the end of the project period.

Following the completion of the project, class members completed a questionnaire that included six specific prompts and an open-ended response item. The students rated specific questions on a 5-point scale from *Not Effective* to *Very Effective*. The class also engaged with me in a follow-up in-class group discussion.

### Outcomes and Insights

I based outcomes and insights on a content analysis of threaded discussion comments, results of the instructor-developed questionnaire, and themes generated through the focus group discussion. Next, I evaluated the collected item pool on the three salient aspects of the Simons framework, (a) group identity development; (b) encouraging individual perspectives; (c) developing verbal communication. Based on the *Concert Choir Music Assessment Form*, published by the National Music Adjudication Coalition, I developed the descriptive categories used to analyze discussion statements. Category types included (a) experience statements; (b) sound quality statements; (c) technical accuracy statements; (d) statements about musicality. Total data comprised of 643 statements related to these four categories. Table 2 lists these frequencies.

Table 2

#### *Student Comment Totals and Percentages by Statement Type*

	Total per Discussion	Experience		Sound		Technical		Musicality	
		<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Renaissance	78	4	5.12	27	34.6	13	16.6	34	43.5
Baroque	75	18	24.0	22	29.3	12	16.0	23	30.6
Classical	85	9	10.5	32	37.6	19	22.3	25	29.4
Romantic	105	32	30.4	24	22.8	16	15.2	33	31.4
Contemporary	104	19	18.2	27	25.9	23	22.1	35	33.6
Jazz	77	3	3.8	23	29.8	13	16.8	38	49.3
Ethnic	68	13	19.1	31	45.5	15	22.0	9	13.2
Major Work	53	0	0.0	8	15.0	12	22.6	33	62.2

*Note.* Total (n=643).

## Group Identity and Contextualizing the Self

While in-class activities focused on score study, pedagogical strategies and the purposeful selection of choral literature, online discussions focused much more on individual musical preference and sharing personal experiences. The analysis of statement types (see Table 2) revealed a high number of comments related to *musicality* (interpretation). Specific items included in the *musicality* category were style, expressivity, sense of ensemble, dynamics and overall artistry. The category of *sound quality*, which also received a large number of comments, included issues of vocal tone, pitch and intonation. Comments in both of these categories were often stated as personal preferences rather than objective observations aligning with a particular style or genre. The category of *Technical accuracy* contained the lowest number of comments. Class members seemed less interested in issues of attacks, releases, rhythmic accuracy, diction and the challenge of the music overall. Of the issues included in the technical category, most of the comments focused on issues of enunciation and pronunciation. In the following section of this report, I assigned pseudonyms for students who shared specific comments.

The break-down of the discussion comments also revealed that preference statements regularly set the tone for the discussion and prompted peer responses. For example, in response to a posted performance of *Verleigh' Uns Frieden* by composer Felix Mendelssohn-Bartholdy, Bill's first post included the phrase "gorgeous phrasing." Jill then stated "and it is such a lovely melody," followed by Kathy, who began with "The choir had a beautiful, unified, legato bass sound. Next, Steve wrote "Lovely tone and phrasing from all voice parts." I had intentionally avoided setting up a pre-determined order for student postings and found that members chose to join the discussions in varied order.

The discussions themselves were very conversational in nature with embedded responses to peer statements. The number of peer response statements ranged from 10 to 25 responses per discussion thread, and the nature of these responses indicated that class members read and considered each other's comments. Examples of this language include Sarah's comment "...I'm so glad that other people picked up on this also." Tim responded "To answer Mike's question....," and Steve stated a frequently found sentiment "Like others, I also agree with...."

### **Use of Resources**

At the outset of the study, I encouraged class members to respond to peer comments, offer alternative recordings and cite course readings. Peer responses were, by far, the most popular of the options, with the highest number of peer responses offered for the Romantic period and Contemporary period recordings. Class readings were, by far, the least popular of these options. It is interesting to note, however, that the students referenced readings as resources in weeks that yielded the fewest number of overall discussion statements (Renaissance and Ethnic/Multi-cultural). Members consistently offered between 3-6 alternate recordings per discussion, with a record number of 10 alternate recordings posted in response to the Ethnic/Multi-cultural listening prompt.

Students identified a unique and beneficial feature of the discussion format in both the open-ended questionnaire response and the class follow-up discussion. Class members identified the ability to read, and re-read discussion posts as providing an opportunity to reflect on past discussions and re-view examples of past communications. Class members shared that reading peer comments stimulated their thinking, especially when they were not sure what to say during discussion threads. One participant shared "Sometimes I couldn't figure out what to say- so I went back and read things that other people said about other pieces and that gave me ideas."

### Asserting the "Self"

The variety of exemplars used throughout the project offered opportunities for students to offer perspectives that were unique to their diverse experiences. For instance, Cara, a string student who enrolled in the course to become more familiar with choral music, found an opportunity to share her expertise after listening to a recording of *Gloria*, by composer Antonio Vivaldi.

I'm not sure how familiar most choral people are with the orchestra world..... this performance uses Baroque tuning (A=415, aka Ab to our A=440 accustomed ears). The use of vibrato is minimal, as it was generally only used as an ornamentation during the Baroque time period.

In response to a recording of *Kua Rongo Mai Koe*, written by Ngapo Wehi and arranged by Eddie Quaid, Kathy shared this unique perspective.

This song reminds me of the haka that I would see in my high school growing up. Besides the Latino population, Tongans and Maoris were the main non-white groups in my school. As such, certain cultural traditions would be incorporated into school events. For example, my football team would always perform *Ka Mate* at the beginning of each game.

Bill acknowledged his lack of experience with conducting and German diction, but also provided his perspective on conductor effectiveness.

I appreciated the comments about the German diction and the conductor. I actually didn't notice this until others points it out. I haven't had German diction, so I didn't notice the problems, and I might not even have noticed the conductor was doing

anything strange. But, the choir's singing was so beautiful and expressive that something about the conductors' gesture must have been meaningful.

### **Perceived Growth**

Results of the Threaded Discussion Questionnaire are listed in Table 3. As a result of participating in the project, students reported that they had gained a better understanding of their role as a choral conductor (M=3.61), and a greater awareness of issues related to choral performance (M=3.83). Data reflected moderately positive responses with regard to gaining greater ability to articulate ideas (M=3.23), and learning from peer comments (3.09). Participants were fairly neutral about having gained greater understanding of choral music styles (M= 3.41) and an increased listening capacity (M=3.41).

Table 3

*Threaded Discussion Student Questionnaire Responses (n=11)*

	<i>M</i>	Mode	<i>SD</i>
<i>Discussions helped me to better understand choral music styles.</i>	3.41	3	1.44
<i>Discussions helped me to listen more deeply.</i>	3.41	3	1.44
<i>I learned from what my peers had to say.</i>	3.09	3	1.04
<i>I gained greater awareness of the issues in choral music performance.</i>	3.83	5	1.58
<i>I gained greater ability to articulate my ideas about choral performance.</i>	3.23	4	1.58
<i>As a result of the study, I have a better understanding of my role as a choral conductor.</i>	3.61	5	1.75

*Not Effective=1, Minimally Effective=2, Somewhat Effective=3, Fairly Effective=4, Very effective=5*

While overall group questionnaire responses did not indicate a change in listening capacity, four group members commented, through open-ended response feedback, that they had learned to listen in more detail as a result of the discussions. Through focused and intentional listening, they felt that they had gained greater awareness of what to listen for in choral performances, and gained insight into varied musical interpretations and conducting choices.

Responses to the open-ended questionnaire item provided additional insights. When asked to comment on the overall effectiveness of the project, members shared that they had gained greater insight into how their thoughts, interpretations, and opinions aligned with or differed from their peers. They felt that the interactive nature of the discussions allowed for

flexibility in threading initial comments and responses to peer comments. One student wrote, "I didn't always respond to other comments, but I liked having the option to respond if something really interested me, or I felt strongly about it." While not all members felt that they had necessarily learned from peer discussions, they did find that reading peer comments informed their own thinking, which contributed to an expanded awareness of the issues related to choral performance and pedagogy. As one participant noted, "Other people brought up ideas that I never really thought about."

A follow-up in-class discussion provided a final opportunity for members to share thoughts about the project experience. Similar to findings from a study that investigated the omnipresence of technologies in contemporary communication (Mesch, 2012), class members noted that their communication habits outside of class were increasingly focused in social media formats, making online communication feel natural. They also noted, however, a surprising new awareness of the differences in professional and casual online contexts, and aspects of professional and casual roles in online communication. Members found themselves considering the communication "habits" that they had formed as a result of social media interactions, and how many of these habits were not appropriate for formal/professional online discussions. Mary shared "I kept wanting to use smiley faces, but realized that it probably wasn't appropriate, so I had to think about how to actually say it."

### **Discussion**

The purpose of this project was to enhance the development of choral conductor/educator identity by facilitating engagement in a professional online group/community. Group discussions based on specified choral performance listening prompts facilitated critical feeling and action (comments) through experiential participation (Abrahams & Abrahams, 2017).



To determine how various listening prompts impacted the nature of student comments, I analyzed the threaded discussion statements. Discussions based on music that aligned with individual musical preferences and listening to choirs of similar age enhanced the length and detail of student comments. Class members tended to use the online discussions to offer comments that reflected personal preferences rather than factual information, even when commenting on musical elements, choral tone, and conducting technique. These outcomes are similar to the results of a study conducted by Conkling (2003) in which pre-service teachers' reflections indicated resistance to the purely technical in favor of the more flexible and artistic. Participants in Conkling's study believed that acts of music performance as well as acts of music teaching are context-driven, thus validating varied perspectives in the evaluation of either musical or teaching performances. One could argue that developing a strong sense of musical choice as it relates to context is an essential part of the choral conductor identity development process.

As course instructor, I was most intrigued by students' varied use of resources in response to different recording prompts. Class members cited class readings more frequently in weeks of low statement counts and offered the highest number of alternate recordings in response to the Ethnic/Multicultural recording prompt. These outcomes indicate that students viewed resources in a context specific manner, using different types of source materials to find answers to different types of questions. The surprising finding was the extent to which class members used peer comments as a resource for either sparking ideas or extending their own thinking on a subject, especially in considering aspects of choral music that they had not been aware of previously.

Questionnaire responses indicated that class members felt they had benefited from participation in the project through a greater awareness of issues related to choral performance

and an increased understanding of their role as conductor/educator. They also indicated some perceived increase in their ability to articulate ideas. The ability to revisit past discussions to spark ideas extended students' ability to increase their scope of awareness by reviewing past conversations in their original form. This is a feature unique to online discussion. In class, students can only recall what they thought they heard, or what they recorded in their notes.

I found the outcomes of this project valuable in considering the continued use of threaded discussions as an extension of in-class activities and assignments. The differences between student communications in class, which focused on knowledge of factual information, was balanced with the online communications that focused on preferences, sharing of experiences, and validating "others" and "self" through the use of peers as professional resources. Because the online discussions took place in an environment which was not limited by starting and ending times or the oversight of a faculty "expert," class members also engaged in supportive dialogue with one another by clarifying questions, offering agreement, and expanding on each other's ideas. While I selected exemplar recordings on the basis of traditional constructs of "good" performances, students were able to engage in discourse that re-framed "hierarchical exclusionary practices" by fluidly balancing comments based on knowledge of choral music with comments that focused on flexibility, empathy and "aligning themselves with each other and with the music's identity commitments to create a convincing imaginative world" (Garnet, 2017, p. 138).

Professional identity development incorporates the ability to contextualize individual thoughts and actions within standardized and structured systems by understanding roles and meanings of those systems and social systems within a professional community (McCarthy, 2007; Stets & Burke, 2000). Common core traits, which serve as a unifying elements in the

landscape of choral music (Garnett, 2009), require foundational knowledge, awareness of diverse perspectives, and the ability to contextualize the self in relation to the larger community of choral music. Outcomes of this project indicate that members of my choral literature course used the online community discussions as a platform to state ideas, share unique experiences related to choral music, clarify understandings and validate the self and others through professional discourse.

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