

CSTP Standard #5: Assessing Students for Learning

Element 5.5: Involving all students in self-assessment, goal setting and monitoring progress

With the broad diversity of musical and academic skills among students in a choir class, it is often difficult for teachers to design appropriately flexible assessments that can measure the progress of these diverse students while still supporting and encouraging all levels of students to greater heights of achievement. The task is even more difficult in choir because, unlike any other class, students typically demonstrate their level of skill and understanding through a sung demonstration. Not only does this not leave any physical work to pass back to students and parents, but often times the criteria for a good performance is little more than “sing it like this” or “no, with more feeling!” Some music teachers (and their administrators) have tried to solve this dilemma by taking away all standards of achievement in choir classes, making it an “easy A” class that only requires students to show up. But to take away all standards of achievement is to rob music of one of its greatest benefits: the life-long pursuit of excellence that it fosters. Indeed, for any class to be worth its time, it must have standards of excellence to which students can measure themselves and improve their skills.

In my own choir classes, I have found that the answer to effective assessment is to provide students with a set of performance standards that are clear enough to facilitate goal-oriented growth, while being flexible enough to allow for varying levels of ability. From the very beginning, I instruct my students that singing in choir is about three main goals: Skill, Beauty and Expression.

Skill is the ability to sing the right notes, rhythms and words in a piece.

Beauty is the ability to sing with a rich tone, beautiful vowels and expert poise.

Expression is the ability to communicate ideas, emotions and stories through the use of facial expressions, word emphasis and other musical devices.

“Skill, Beauty, Expression” becomes our choir class’s motto, hung front and center in the classroom and prominently displayed on choir t-shirts. Each of these areas is repeatedly honed in regular warm-ups and addressed in each of the pieces we rehearse. Against these three standards the students are directed to assess their own performance (both individually and collectively) formatively during class rehearsals, as well as summatively after a concert. The particular effectiveness of these standards lies in the fact that they apply to any kind of music at any level, and they are easily understood and appreciated by all students. Through these areas of focus, students not only reflect on and improve their own singing skills, but also learn how to value and evaluate in the often abstract area of musical performance. And of course, the ability to evaluate products and performances based on skill, beauty and communicative ability will be helpful in any area a student chooses to pursue in life.

Artifact: “Choir Performance Standards Rubric”

Assessment Level	“Skill”	“Beauty”	“Expression”
4 “Exceptional”	Student consistently sings correct pitches, rhythms and words.	Student consistently uses beautiful tone and rich vowels.	Student proficiently uses at least 3 expressive techniques (including facial expressions) to add a clear dimension of expression to song.
3 “Average”	Student makes some minor mistakes in pitch, rhythm and/or words.	Student makes a good effort at using beautiful tone and rich vowels, but is somewhat lacking in results.	Student uses at least 3 expressive techniques but fails to use facial expressions, to use techniques proficiently, and/or to add a cohesive level of expression to song.
2 “Below Average”	Student makes significant mistakes in pitch, rhythm and/or words.	Student does not make a reasonable effort at using beautiful tone and rich vowels and/or achieves a low level of tone/vowel quality.	Student uses less than 3 expressive techniques and/or makes no effort to apply techniques to create a cohesive level of expression to song.
1 “Poor”	Student is unable to sing song due to unfamiliarity with pitches, rhythms and/or words.	Student consistently uses strikingly incorrect vowels and/or extremely problematic tone (very breathy/very strident).	Student uses no expressive techniques.

Artifact: “Concert Self-Evaluation”

<p>Name _____ Date _____ Period _____</p> <p style="margin-top: 10px;">Concert Performance Evaluation</p> <p>How well do you think we did in the concert? How well did you do yourself? Please evaluate your own performance and the performance of the choir as a whole using the performance rubric on the board. Explain your rating.</p> <p>Skill (Singing correct pitches, rhythms, words, harmonies, starts and stops in music)</p> <p>Whole Choir: 1 2 3 4 You: 1 2 3 4 (circle one)</p> <p>Comments: _____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>Beauty (Use of beautiful tone, focus, legato, vowels; overall professional appearance)</p> <p>Whole Choir: 1 2 3 4 You: 1 2 3 4 (circle one)</p> <p>Comments: _____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>Expression (Communicating ideas and feelings of song to audience with facial expressions, word emphasis, dynamics, etc.)</p> <p>Whole Choir: 1 2 3 4 You: 1 2 3 4 (circle one)</p> <p>Comments: _____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p>
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