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Maintaining Healthy Vocal Use for Teachers During COVID-19 and Beyond

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Covid-19 has changed our lives in many aspects, such as in-person gatherings that have abruptly transitioned to virtual meetings in the face of this pandemic. It has been theorized that Covid-19 has accelerated the digital future regarding workplace environment and convenience. For some professionals, this did not have a huge impact. For others, who use their voice and body language to communicate daily, this digital conversion has made a significant difference. For example, some teachers have found a drastic change in their everyday work environment. Their once decorated classroom has now turned into a room and computer in their house. Teachers have various styles regarding how they instruct, engage, and educate their students. However, a sudden, unforeseen change to virtual teaching with little to no knowledge has left some teachers and students feeling lost.¹

It seems that teachers and students have a symbiotic relationship in the sense that there is a mutual benefit to support each other. Educators may start to realize how important receiving immediate and visual feedback is for teaching a lesson. They may ask, “What made the experience better in person versus a virtual lesson?” “Are the students getting bored?” “Are my students even learning anything?” Furthermore, it may be questioned what fundamentals are involved for successful classes and overall well-being.

Teachers’ voices are an essential part of their day. Level of engagement from the teacher and student is important to facilitate attention, learning, and participation. Breath support, posture, and prosody are key components that teachers’ voices rely on heavily, and when any of these components are altered, healthy vocal production could be negatively impacted. Breath support is characterized by how to most efficiently use air from the lungs for adequate subglottic pressure and healthy consistent vocal fold vibration. Typically, in the classroom setting, teachers are standing when lecturing. Additionally, given the nature of virtually working from home, posture is often compromised due to sitting for long periods of time. Poor posture often results in decreased breath support causing external and internal muscle tension and subsequent strain on the voice. Lastly, prosody of the voice is what gives animation and meaning

behind the words spoken. Seeing your students in-person aids in engaging your students with musical language. On the contrary, staring at a screen in the house, where one may or may not see your students’ faces depending on the camera setting, may not be as rewarding. This may translate to monotone, one-sided instruction which has the potential to lose the attention of the students and cause unnecessary vocal abuse over time.²

The situation for teachers in a live classroom is not easier. Wearing a mask is akin to putting a baffle over one’s voice, requiring more vocal projection to achieve the same net volume. The mask similarly limits the rate of air ingress to support the lungs, and it hides the facial expressions of the teacher and students that are important to real-time feedback. Managing a hybrid classroom with some live and some virtual students is often a combination of the most challenging factors of each setting.

Some ideas at engaging an audience of students while combatting limitations of virtual education are:

- Maintaining good posture during voice use. Since this is difficult with virtual learning while sitting for prolonged periods, standing for a portion of the lesson aids posture, and increases body movement that further supports a strong breath. A standing desk is another option with the camera at eye level to promote proper neck position while speaking. Further, using diaphragmatic muscles for breathing improves efficiency and healthy projection of the voice.³
- Take brief lesson breaks to stand and stretch. This is a great technique to reinvigorate a tired or restless classroom. In addition to revisiting healthy respiration, this can be used to address muscle tension in the neck, shoulders, and upper back. Muscle tension dysphonia can also result as a maladaptive compensation strategy in response to these environmental factors.⁴ Doing vocal warm-ups,⁵ and combining stretching, breathing and vocalizations also engages the group.
- Introduce more prosody. The beauty of expression motivates learners, shows compassion, and connects the teacher with the student.⁶ By having the students/audiences’ cameras on for visual feedback, it also provides a level of self-awareness to the speaker.⁷
- Revisit the basics of voice conservation. We all recognize the effects of seclusion on physical conditioning, and how this plays out with decreased breath support and subsequent vocal strain. Prepare your talking points more carefully, fewer words, more breaths, and slow it down. And recognize hoarseness and strain as warning signs to rest and talk less.⁸

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Although Covid-19 may be on the wane, the pandemic has accelerated us into the future where teleconferencing is here to stay. The impact on teachers and other professionals' voice use is not fully clear, but change will certainly be part of the equation. Reinvesting in the basics of vocal efficiency, respecting voice limitations, and an openness to new ideas, healthy vocal quality can be maintained during a time of virtual conferencing.

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