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Investigating Multivocality through Basil Bernstein's Ontology and Epistemology of Pedagogy

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Abstract

This article explores tensions in Western classical vocal pedagogy through the lenses of queer theory and Bernstein's work. Using Basil Bernstein's theories of *Pedagogic Codes* and the *Pedagogic Device*, I examine how strong classification and framing shape power dynamics and limit vocal identity within traditional voice education. I position *multivocality*—the ability to sing across genres and styles—as a pedagogical and theoretical intervention that challenges rigid norms and expands expressive possibilities. Drawing on autoethnographic reflection, queer theory, and critical music education scholarship, I trace how voice classification, particularly my own experience as a "bass," functions as a site of both constraint and resistance. By incorporating multivocality into vocal training, educators can weaken exclusionary codes and foster more inclusive practices. This work invites a reimagining of vocal pedagogy as a space for agency, plurality, and pedagogical transformation.

Keywords

Multivocality, queer pedagogy, Basil Bernstein, voice pedagogy, prolepsis, vocal identity, music education

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I began singing at a young age, serenading my grandmother with "Once Upon a Dream" from Disney's *Sleeping Beauty* at the age of four. Throughout elementary school, I belted "(Everything I Do) I Do It for You" by Bryan Adams alongside my older sister. By middle school, however, I noticed the high notes in Styx's "Open Arms" slowly slipping out of reach. Still, I wailed along, accompanying myself at the piano. By my third year of high school, at age sixteen, I could sing a C2, an ability rare in my school choir. I often added the optional bass tonic to cadential phrases in our choral repertoire. The choir director and my peers valued me for those low notes and for my music-reading skills. I earned a status akin to "first chair" in the bass section. I sang in the top ensembles, earned spots at All-State, and served as section leader.

I joined choir during my second year of high school after I auditioned for the chorus in the schoolwide musical my first year. At my school, the choral program nearly always produced the leads. I had started dance lessons early and regularly rewatched the VHS musicals my mom collected. I knew *The Sound of Music* by heart, along with a range of Sondheim and Disney shows. But each year, I failed to land lead or even named roles. I could not sing above C4 without flipping into falsetto. The director always needed basses in the chorus or a dance captain. My choir director, who also ran the musicals, gave the roles I wanted to tenor and baritone classmates who could hit the high notes.

In year three, when we staged *You're a Good Man, Charlie Brown*, nearly everyone assumed I would play Schroeder. He played piano and sang "Beethoven Day," a number that confirmed his status as the show's musical savant. But the director gave the part to someone else. By senior year, when my beloved *The Sound of Music* finally made the schedule, I chose not to audition. I could not emotionally handle watching the role of Rolf go to someone else.

Puberty had changed how I sang and how I saw myself. I struggled to sing along with my favorite artists on the radio. I wanted to sound like Justin Timberlake or Ricky Martin but begrudgingly found more success mimicking Neil Diamond on my dad's old CDs or Bing Crosby during the holidays.

My Story, Not My Song

Although I didn't recognize it at the time, I encountered a tension between singing ontologies and the epistemology of Western classical vocal pedagogy. In this

article, I use "Western classical" to refer to the vernacular construct of art music, which originated in ancient Greece and spread globally through the Western European tradition (Kajikawa 2019). Western classical singing prioritizes head voice dominance, which singers achieve in part by thinning the vocal fold body cover. In contrast, Contemporary Commercial Music and many vernacular styles of singing often default to a thicker vocal fold body cover, producing chest voice dominance more commonly associated with vernacular and colloquial speech (Robinson-Martin 2010).

As my vocal folds thickened during puberty, I found myself vocally caught between the popular and musical theater styles I had cultivated before puberty and the aesthetic demands of choral singing. I struggled to access higher notes as I tried to push my thicker vocal folds higher in pitch while also integrating classical breathing, laryngeal, and pharyngeal techniques.

I needed, and eventually pursued, what Meizel (2020) calls multivocality: the embodied intersection of techniques and meanings that enables individuals to vocalize across genres and styles. What if my music education experiences had included a vocal pedagogy that recognized multiple modes of vocal production? Could such an approach have created opportunities to celebrate a range of vocal traditions and prepare students to sing across stylistic boundaries? Might I have experienced greater alignment between my vocal development, academic training, and personal goals?

My experience extended beyond technique; power, pedagogy, and identity deeply shaped it. Teachers and directors, operating under conventional assumptions about my voice, assigned me the role of bass—a classification embedded with implicit expectations that may have limited both my academic and artistic future. Teaching multivocality, therefore, becomes an act of what Muñoz (2009) describes as educated hope—a praxis committed to dismantling normative vocal expectations and creating space for individualized, expansive vocal possibilities. To unpack my journey toward multivocality, I draw upon a queer, proleptic, and Bernsteinian framework.

A Queer, Proleptic, and Bernsteinian Framework

Prolepsis, as theorized by Michael Cole (1996), refers to the projection of past cultural norms onto learners, shaping expectations for their future identities. In music

education, this process often reifies established conventions, embedding them into the practices of vocal training. Such projections limit students' vocal possibilities before those possibilities fully emerge (Talbot 2014; Talbot and Taylor 2023). McKiernan and McNickle (2023) challenge this static classification by problematizing gender-essentialist frameworks in choral music education, showing how the reinforcement of binary expectations frequently marginalizes singers. My own experience of being constrained within a rigid "bass" classification illustrates this dynamic. The pedagogy I received did not account for the fluidity of my vocality or its expressive potential beyond a singular range. Queer futurity, as described by Muñoz (2009), resists this finality, embracing emergent identity and vocal possibility. Talbot and Taylor (2023) frame this resistance as emancipatory—an artistic dismantling of the predictive trappings imposed by dominant ideologies. Queer futurity, as a framework, both challenges vocal classification and promotes multivocality. Singers whose perceptions of gender, sexual orientation, vocal possibility, and even aesthetic interest may benefit from challenging conventional voice-part assignments and embracing multivocality as part of the pedagogical process.

To structure this ideological critique, I use Bernstein's[1] theories of Pedagogic Codes (1993) and the Pedagogic Device (2000) to explain how classification and framing govern the transmission of knowledge and regulate access. Strong classification, as found in Western classical voice pedagogy, insulates traditions from one another, maintaining rigid boundaries between genres and voice types. Power lies in the construction and perception of those boundaries; control operates within them, dictating which vocal techniques are legitimized. My training excluded pop and musical theater styles to such a degree that I internalized the belief that those genres were out of reach for a "bass like me."

Bernstein's work, however, also provides a roadmap for disrupting pedagogical uniformity by transforming the relationships between knowledge sources (Singh 2002). Adjusting the sequencing, pacing, and assessment of learning—while reframing the social space of instruction—weakens classification. These shifts create the conditions for multivocality to be not only recognized but systematically integrated into vocal pedagogy. Teaching multivocality within this model goes beyond adding repertoire or acknowledging stylistic diversity; it involves restructuring the power relationships embedded in pedagogy. It demands a critical interrogation of classification and framing practices that have historically constrained access and shaped artistic identity. Meizel's (2020) definition of

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multivocality deepens this approach, offering a way to understand vocal expression that transcends prescriptive pedagogical norms. She writes, "I interpret vocality as both an embodied act and a constructive process—as a way of singing inscribed and reinscribed with the lived experience of vocal sounds … practices, techniques, and meanings that factor into the making of culture and identity, and in the negotiation of power. *Multivocality* (emphasis in the original), then, denotes the performance of many such ways of singing, and highlights the breadth and depth of vocal intersubjectivity" (11).

Though simple in etymology, *multivocality* (many voices) resists easy definition. In this article, it refers to the vocal intersection of sounds, practices, techniques, and meanings embodied and constructed within the individual. It enables singers to cross genre and stylistic boundaries in ways that reflect their personal vocal development. However, Meizel (2020) warns that when co-opted into a superficial multiculturalist discourse, multivocality can unintentionally reinforce essentialisms rather than challenge them. This tension between resistance and commodification echoes Bernstein's (2000) analysis of pedagogic discourse: without intentional reframing, dominant structures tend to reproduce themselves.

Meizel (2020) suggests that singers often employ multivocality to articulate their self-narratives within spaces that might otherwise exclude them. This aligns with Muñoz's (2009) concept of queer futurity, which includes an insistence on possibility beyond normative constraints. My story is not one of rejecting Western classical singing, but of expanding it. I learned to perform and value it on my own terms, integrating it into a broader multivocal framework.

My Story, Not My Song: A Growing Awareness

Enthralled by the prospect of studying music in college and confident in my choral abilities—at least for notes on and below the bass clef staff—I left dance behind and pursued a degree in choral music education. As a bass, I studied arias and art songs centered on virile hunters, drunkards, conniving kings, and old men. With some coaching, I learned to sing a D4, but only at the peak of an ascending phrase and at my loudest dynamic. Vocal dysphoria soon resurfaced as I struggled to connect with the repertoire assigned to my voice type, what McKiernan and McNickle (2023) identify as a subconscious resistance to gendered expectations imposed through vocal classification.

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To reconnect with the music I loved in childhood, I joined a student-led contemporary pop a cappella group, where I felt a stronger affinity with the genre. However, I failed to secure solos and duets due to my limited vocal range. For four years, I anchored the group with "doom-bada" bass ostinatos while others sang like Justin, Usher, and Ricky. More clearly than before, I recognized a growing desire for multivocality (Meizel 2020) and a deeper longing for vocal emancipation (Talbot and Taylor 2023).

Multivocality Investigated Through Basil Bernstein's Theory of Pedagogic Codes

Power and Control

Power creates, legitimizes, and reproduces boundaries between categories (Bernstein 1993). Power exists in the space between boundaries that punctuates their separation. Western discourse often defines a singer's voice as "operatic," "pop," or some other bounded descriptor (Meizel 2020). Although all vocal genres fall under the umbrella of singing, each maintains power through boundaries that insulate one genre from another.

Control, on the other hand, exists within boundaries and legitimizes forms of communication within a defined space of socialization (Bernstein 1993). According to Bernstein, knowledge reproduction and change depend upon control. Power creates the defined space between these disciplines, the "what" and control legitimizes the communication within the space, the "how." In musical spaces, including academia, power persists in the categorization of voices, and control reproduces cultural norms through the bodies that sing and the music they are allowed to perform (Koza 2008).

This dynamic aligns with Foucault's (1979) concept of disciplinary power, where institutions construct and regulate bodies to function within a highly controlled system. In choral pedagogy, singers are sorted into voice parts through a variety of formal and informal audition processes that align with the hierarchical structures of Western classical training (O'Toole 2005). These structures mold individuals to fit institutionalized expectations (Foucault 1979) of vocal production and artistic legitimacy. O'Toole (2005) critiques the traditional choral structure as one that prioritizes discipline and control. In this context, singers are not only sorted into voice parts but are also expected to self-regulate within the confines of

the ensemble's power structure. This form of control extends beyond physical positioning in rehearsal rooms to the ways in which voices are valued, categorized, and assessed. The discourse surrounding what constitutes "proper" vocal technique further reinforces institutionalized power dynamics, creating a system where certain voices—and by extension, certain identities—are rendered more legitimate than others. These processes highlight the hierarchical power punctuating the boundary between "high" and "low" art (Carroll 2021).

A further issue arises in the lack of gender, language, and historical diversity of music performed within the traditional academic musical canon (McKiernan and McNickle 2023; Patinka 2021; Stark 2023). These exclusions reinforce control and preserve boundaries that separate vocal traditions. Meizel (2020) echoes this value-based boundary construction in her discussion of vocal commodification, writing, "The only voices allowed to matter are those embedded in the bodies allowed to matter" (4). Knapp and Mayo (2023) similarly conclude that the hegemony of Western classical music education rejects students before they decide to pursue it. For Bernstein (1993), these conclusions underscore a high level of control that legitimizes communication within these musical spaces.

Multivocality disrupts this system of power and control, not by eschewing Western classical singing, but by adding to it (Meizel 2020). Singing plurally—having the ability to sing multiple, seemingly incompatible vocal traditions—implies the crossing of previously fixed boundaries. This approach encourages people to see elements shared and different between styles and to celebrate those differences (McKiernan and McNickle 2023). Good-Perkins (2019) advocates for this kind of recognition in her study of Arab students learning Western music at an international university. Despite significant differences between traditions, students found value in both learning Western classical singing and preserving their own Arabic traditions. Crossing boundaries forces negotiations between laryngeal structures, resonance structures, power structures, and their intersection with identities and musical interpretation. To avoid essentializing either Western classical or other vocal styles, it is important to acknowledge variation in technique, interpretation, and identity within all traditions.

A choral example of transforming boundaries through a reshaping of control appears in a case study by Shaw (2016), where a choir director instilled an open-mindedness about crossing musical boundaries. Mr. James (a pseudonym) created multiple opportunities for singers to express rather than compromise their cultural

musical identities. Drawing on his own background as a child of German-Jewish immigrants to Colombia, as well as his self-identification as a "citizen of the world" fluent in four languages, Mr. James guided students to discover which of their own range of sounds most appropriately met each new vocal situation. He did not mandate one vocal style, timbre, or performance practice, but rather helped students recognize when certain sounds lent themselves to various musical contexts.

I add that this case study occurred within the bounded genre of choral singing, and although control weakened regarding the types of vocal styles, timbres, and performance practices the singers experienced, the arguably Western boundary of choral singing persisted unchanged. While not a full renegotiation of the choral genre, Mr. James's recognition of his own multivocality inspired a change in the vocal discourse within the youth choir (Shaw 2016). As a result, James's students developed the ability to fluidly navigate cultural and musical borders appropriately in terms of both culture and style within the choral setting. In my own high school story, the kind of ontological shift that Mr. James encouraged might have alleviated the confusion I felt as a participant vocally capable in choral settings but floundering in others.

In these examples, the weakening of control from within predefined boundaries occurred through altering the communicative rules of singing. By changing the discourse, individuals either altered the boundaries of their disciplines or invited multivocality within a bounded setting. Bernstein (1993) describes this as the weakening of classification through a change in the discursive framing within the power-bounded, controlled situation. As Foucault (1979) argues, power is not merely repressive but also productive. Power shapes, normalizes, and enforces boundaries while simultaneously creating the conditions for resistance. In this light, multivocality actively reconfigures power and control within a pedagogic framework by altering the classification of the discursive practice.

Classification

According to Bernstein (1993), the act of classification further defines power and creates relationships between boundaries by establishing power relations, identities, and the degree of insulation between boundaries. Strong classification operates as a mechanism of power, maintaining rigid discursive boundaries and limiting permeability between traditions. For example, the classification of "bass" gains meaning only in contrast with "tenor" or other voice parts. Western classical

vocal pedagogy operates under strong classification, wherein teachers and students strive for the consistent production and reproduction of highly specific vocal sounds for a given composition.

By contrast, popular or vernacular singing reflects weaker classification. In these spaces, when teachers are involved at all, they and their students often employ greater flexibility in the reproduction of vocal sounds. For example, a popular artist might release the acoustic version of a track wherein they produce a lighter, breathier tone by employing a thinner vocal fold body cover and a wider aryepiglottic sphincter, in place of a previously "chesty," fuller tone with thicker vocal fold body cover and a narrower aryepiglottic sphincter. These adjustments occur alongside changes in laryngeal height, manipulation of cartilages within the larynx, changes in pharyngeal structures, and in breath pressure. Within that same song, the popular artist might alter their entire mode of vocal production due to any number of interpretive decisions. In contrast, classically trained singers typically try to consistently reproduce the same vocal aesthetic throughout a composition, even as vocal technique subtly shifts.

Most of the time, the classification of the Western classical aesthetic includes the dominance of the "head voice" (thinner vocal fold body cover), a lowered laryngeal position, increased subglottic air pressure, a tilted thyroid cartilage, a narrowed aryepiglottic sphincter, retracted false vocal folds, medialized tongue position, and regulated engagement of thoracic and neck muscles to support the singer's vocal production. I list this recipe to illustrate the strong classification and corresponding insulation that define this vocal practice. I could not similarly list a vocal recipe for popular singing due to the myriad types of vocal production found within this weakly classified space. Notably, the vocal recipes for Golden Age musicals like *The Sound of Music* and *Once Upon a Dream* from Disney's adaptation of Tchaikovsky's *Sleeping Beauty* align closely with the recipe for Western classical singing, despite being classified otherwise. This exemplifies the productive function of power (Foucault 1979), where norms of vocal production reinforce what is perceived as legitimate or "correct" technique. Nevertheless, neither I nor any voice student I knew during undergraduate or graduate study sang this kind of music as part of our training.

Classical singing instructors work alongside students to build consistency of vocal execution, often extending the vocal practice to encapsulate entire compositional epochs and bodies of composition as "standard" performance practice.

Teachers in the dominant United States academic tradition implement stylized rules rooted in Western classical technique, often excluding nonconforming sounds (Bennett 2022). During my undergraduate study, I superimposed these rigid rules onto my body, which was predisposed to produce low pitches. Perhaps I lacked the necessary drive to try my best because I felt my aesthetic identity lacked connection to classical bass repertoire, a reaction to a proleptic predetermination (Talbot 2014; Talbot and Taylor 2023). Regardless, my training failed to support the development of a flexible or multistylistic voice. I graduated with numerous vocal faults and felt unable to sing in any genre to my aesthetic satisfaction.

Multivocality, as Meizel (2020) explains, challenges strong classification by enabling individuals to traverse genre and style through embodied intersections of technique, practice, and meaning. As individuals come to understand themselves through complex personal and cultural lenses, their ability to cross boundaries undermines the insulation of previously rigid vocal spaces. When that insulation erodes, classification shifts, and the associated power weakens (Bernstein 1993). Bernstein (1993) poses a critical question: "Where we have strong classification, the rule is: things must be kept apart. Where we have weak classification, the rule is: things must be brought together. But we have to ask, in whose interest is the apartness of things, and in whose interest is the new togetherness and the new integration?" (122).

Multivocal expression centers on the intersection of sounds, practices, techniques, and meanings embodied and constructed within the individual. Meizel (2020) illustrates this destabilization through an interview with a White celebrity impersonator of Tina Turner: "Despite her belief that a racialized voice lies in the structure of the bones…, she arrives at her target sound simply by manipulating *soft* (emphasis in the original) tissues and spaces in the vocal tract" (76). This instance also reveals the potential intersection of multivocality and cultural appropriation. Meizel argues that listeners often associate specific vocal sounds with particular bodies, extending this notion to disabled artists and figures like Susan Boyle, whose rise to fame relied on public misconceptions about the relationship between bodies and voices. In popular music, audiences frequently interpret the voice as the sonic manifestation of "corporeal truth" (McKay 2013). Multivocality manifests on a case-by-case basis, offering potentially liberating and, at times, problematic possibilities. It may not only be an act of vocal versatility, but also, I submit, an assertion of futurity, and a rejection of fixed vocal norms in favor of an

expansive, yet-to-be-realized vocal potential (Muñoz 2009). In disrupting classification and reframing vocal discourse, multivocal artists erode the boundaries that govern power in musical pedagogy. As Bernstein (1993) asserts, such erosion occurs through shifts in the framing of pedagogical discourse, creating the space for something new.

Framing

Framing refers to the nature of communication within a classified space (Bernstein 1993). According to Bernstein (1993), framing begins with the selection of what is communicated and continues through sequencing, pacing, criteria for assessment, and control over the social base for transmission. In addition to regulating discursive order, framing governs social order. It establishes pedagogical hierarchies, expectations of conduct, and defines how legitimized knowledge is constructed and acquired. These communicative structures regularly unfold in teacher–student interactions.

Meizel (2020) likens Western classical vocal training to that of ballet, noting that both have historically been framed as foundational disciplines for all other forms of artistic expression. This tacit discourse positioned these art forms as models for safety and social legitimacy. This hierarchy in choral pedagogy potentially disciplines bodies and reinforces institutional power (Foucault 1979; O'Toole 2005). Koza (2008) similarly observes that typical audition panels at schools of music adhered to specific, implicit ideas of correct tone quality, diction, body comportment, and even attire. The combined effect of these discourses reinforces what Stauffer (2016) called the "core narrative" of music education in the United States. Core narratives, Stauffer writes, "are powerful and durable. They cannot be untold, and they are tremendously difficult to reframe" (72). This narrative constrains futurity by limiting the possibilities of what voices can be and do (Muñoz 2009).

Although recent curricular reforms suggest broader inclusion, many scholars argue these changes are more symbolic than structural (Hess 2022). Hardy and Kallio (2023) caution that simply adding diverse repertoire—without altering the underlying discursive rules—produces the illusion of change. The persistent selection and teaching of repertoire in vocal and choral pedagogy that rarifies and utilizes a strongly classified approach to vocal production persists in elevating Western Classical ideals over pedagogical choices that would invite multivocality. Dominant pedagogical frameworks may still constrain how students engage with

their vocal and musical identities (Talbot and Taylor 2023). McKiernan and McNickle (2023) similarly underscore the limitations imposed by rigid vocal classifications and the resulting power imbalances. This may include how educators audition for ensembles (requiring certain numbers and types of individuals in each voice part) and vocal studios (who learns which repertoire). The power imbalance created by this type of framing discourse places students within rigid vocal classifications for those ensembles and vocal studios. Jenkins (2022) warns that attempts at diversification may omit root causes that lead to cultural and individual assimilation rather than transformation, as dominant discourses in Western classical music remain unchallenged.

Reframing Classroom Repertoire

Scholars suggest that while educators in the United States increasingly acknowledge the diversity of musical styles, this recognition often fails to meaningfully inform repertoire selection (Bennett 2022; Jenkins 2022; Kratus 2007; Williams 2011). Culturally diverse music is often sung with a Eurocentric choral timbre rather than shifting toward brighter, fuller, or unblended tones, which may be more appropriate for certain genres (Goetze 2017). This strict observation of tacit framing rules may alienate singers outside of the Western classical tradition. However, shifting these rules carries its own risks: shifts in framing may also lead to new forms of marginalization (Shaw 2016). Shaw warns that repertoire selected solely based on students' cultural backgrounds, without equitable implementation, may reinforce exclusion. Additionally, mismatches between repertoire and individual student expectations can intensify feelings of disconnection.

As a possible pathway, Helding and Ragan (2022) advocate for a collaborative model in which teacher and student co-construct learning goals based on individual needs and preferences. Together, the student and teacher review the goals regularly, set realistic and achievable objectives, and apply technique to answer the question, "How?" The answer to this question, in many cases, might involve another type of singing or multivocality. Recognizing the implicit vocal discourse enables teachers to reframe the explicit one, resulting in a new pedagogical discourse. This reframing weakens classification and subsequently disrupts power and control within the pedagogic space (Bernstein 1993). Though perhaps more complex in an ensemble setting, this process begins when conductors acknowledge the

implicit vocal discourses operating within their choirs. As demonstrated in Shaw's (2016) case study, when Mr. James recognized his own multivocality, he created space for his students to explore theirs, thereby enabling a more inclusive and responsive musical environment.

Reframing Language, Genre, and Technique

In her work with university-aged students, vocal instructor Accetta (2022) found that Estill Voice Theory™ offered a productive framework for students to explore and achieve their vocal goals. By emphasizing the technical mechanics of voice production, students demonstrated increased ability to access a range of vocal qualities. One student remarked, "Instead of deeper-voiced students being told to use 'falsetto' or students with a higher-pitched voice being told to use 'head voice' or 'chest voice,' this can all be addressed by using more technical, neutral language" (203).

Estill Voice Theory™ trains students in four vocal fold body cover adjustments—thin, thick, slack, and stiff—and encourages exploration of how these adjustments can occur throughout the range. In this model, qualities such as "head voice" (thin) and "chest voice" (thick) exist along a continuum, rather than being fixed by pitch or gendered expectations. Students also learn to manipulate laryngeal height to produce specific sounds, replacing traditional voice part assumptions with individualized control. Accetta (2022) noted that by using technical, descriptive language, students gained agency to combine techniques and define their own "vocal recipes."

These vocal recipes, which may include Western classical aesthetics, could reflect reclassified genres. For instance, Popera artists blend operatic, musical theater, and popular styles, actively reframing the boundaries of language, genre, and technique (Meizel 2020). Performers may sing "Unchained Melody" in Italian as "Senza Catene" alongside "Nessun Dorma" or "You'll Never Walk Alone," transitioning between popular and operatic tone qualities within a single performance. Microphones often aid this shift, allowing singers to modulate required amplification as they move between styles. Artists also navigate vocal fold thickness and laryngeal height as it applies to desired timbre, and pharyngeal shaping as it applies to resonance and projection. For instance, the original key for "You'll Never Walk Alone" positions the highest note on G, which may be either belted, sung

operatically, accessed via falsetto, or approached through other desired recipes, by many larger laryngeal singers (those typically assigned male at birth). In the show *Carousel*, a female (small laryngeal singer) character sings this song, and this note on G5. Arguably, access to G5 predicates relatively limited options for vocal recipes, mostly those akin to what composer Oscar Hammerstein may have intended. Conceiving a performance of this song in other keys, or by other types of voices, and then layering a multivocal approach broadens both access and opportunity for singers. These explicit alterations challenge the tacit framing rules mentioned earlier.

A singer's ability to achieve their desired vocality or multivocality depends on their ability to recognize and understand the framing rules, whether implicit or explicit, within a classified space. The stronger the framing, the stronger the classification. The stronger the classification, the greater the power and control that define the boundaries of a musical space. The stronger the boundaries, the fewer individuals who can fully recognize and realize the rules of discourse within those boundaries. A multivocal pedagogy disrupts this pattern by altering the rules of discourse. To continue the "You'll Never Walk Alone" example, teaching a large laryngeal singer to access G4 via belting, operatic, falsetto, registral mixing, and other vocal recipes reframes the rules, potentially changes the classification of vocal space, and provides opportunities for boundary crossing mulitvocality.

My Story, Not My Song: I Was Just Trying to Follow the Rules

About a decade after joining choir in high school, I had developed into a capable choral singer and truly loved the experience. Near the end of my master's degree, in my mid-twenties, my university conductor programmed Haydn's *Creation* and asked me to sing the role of Adam. The part required an E4, a note I did not comfortably possess. Despite my tenuous relationship with vocal technique, I felt honored to finally receive a featured solo. At the same time, I became acutely aware of the contrast between my personal identity and the representation of humanity's progenitor. Power, operating through classification (Bernstein 1993), structured access to this musical role and reinforced assumptions about who belongs where.

Lovingly, my choir friend, who portrayed Eve, coached me into technical confidence to help mask my vocal discomfort. At the performance, the limited staging required Adam and Eve to walk from the choir to the front of the stage. After much

preparation, I could reliably sing the E4. Still, I recall feeling confused by the audience's chuckles as we walked onstage. That moment, and the performance that followed, exposed my insecurities, underscoring how power regulates and produces bodies in performance spaces (Foucault 1979), shaping audience perception through institutionalized norms of vocality and sexuality.

A video recording later revealed the stark contrast: Eve appeared poised and radiant in her gown, confidently leading the way, while I, dressed in a rented tuxedo, looked visibly uneasy. My vocal and sexual insecurities were on full display. We performed duets titled "By Thee with Bliss," "Our Duty we have Now Performed," and "Graceful Consort," with the angel Uriel concluding the scene in a recitative titled "O Happy Pair." This moment crystallized my proleptic positioning within a pedagogical and classificatory system deeply rooted in heteronormative expectations (Talbot 2014; Talbot and Taylor 2023), placing me in a role that publicly conflicted with the realities of my vocal and sexual identity.

Recognition and Realization Rules

Bernstein (1993) recognizes these systems of power as exuding Pedagogic Codes, the message a classified space exudes, such as the contrasting connotations of "rap" versus "bluegrass." These codes carry an external orientation, shaping how outsiders perceive and interpret the power dynamics of a space. Within broader society, the messages embedded in these codes interact with cultural expectations and dominant ideologies. Individuals may or may not recognize these codes, and even if they do, they may lack the ability to realize them, i.e., to act upon or operationalize those codes. This recognition–realization dynamic forms the core of Bernstein's (1993) theoretical framework: individuals do or do not, by degree, comprehend the nature of classification, framing, power, and control, and likewise, do or do not, by degree, possess the capacity to navigate them successfully. According to Bernstein, strongly classified spaces make distinctions between social groups more pronounced and may either invite or alienate based on an individual's ability to recognize and realize the rules of that space. Crucially, these rules function at the level of the acquirer, not the transmitter. Without recognition rules, would-be participants are denied a legitimate voice, and the capacity to evaluate or be evaluated within the space.

The story of Ghaleb provides a strong example of recognition and realization rules within a choral setting (Perkins 2018). Ghaleb took a choral audition at a university in the United Arab Emirates. Due to the disparity between Ghaleb's local upbringing and the strong Western classical classification of the choir, Ghaleb did not pass the entrance audition. Despite Ghaleb's very strong musical skills, the university's choral culture exuded realization codes that Ghaleb did not initially possess. While Ghaleb likely recognized the choral milieu, they could not realize their abilities within that classified space.

While my own story differs, I also encountered a vocal education system that did not serve me. Despite my upbringing, cultural background, vocal training, and musical education, I did not possess the ability to realize my desired sounds, Western classical or otherwise. I recognize that my homosexuality contributed to feelings of alienation. However, I was not seeking to realize "gayness" within choral/vocal spaces; rather, I was seeking emancipation from the label "bass" and the associated values, social order, and discursive rules that did not align with my vocal goals or interests. When individuals lack realization codes, they often experience only the structural boundaries of power and classification, not the tools for navigating them (Bernstein 1993).

Gaining Pedagogic Codes

To foster multivocal education, instructors must engage in reframing the curricular, social, and value-laden dialogues within their spaces so that students may recognize the various discourses and realize their vocal goals within that space. What I required, at the time, was vocal training that provided me with the technical tools to make sounds in addition those that served the choir, ones that served me as a multi-faceted singer. Helding and Ragan's (2022) approach asks teachers to consider the students' interests, values, needs, and goals. This model requires sustained collaboration between vocal instructors and vocalists throughout the learning process and may necessitate engaging with multiple vocalisms. For example, vocal instructor Lubana Al-Quntar taught both opera and Arabic music, specifically *tarab* (Meizel 2020). She recognized the differences between the two genres but emphasized where teaching methods intersected, as well as vocabularies that worked for both. Al-Quntar felt that Western classical breathing techniques, vowel articulation, and body engagement functioned well in *tarab*. Both

traditions value singing complete sentences in one breath and keeping multi-syllabic words intact. She noted that major differences included the use of "head voice" in Operatic singing versus the reliance upon "chest voice" for *tarab*. In both traditions, she teaches students through triadic arpeggios, albeit with distinct modes of resonance. Multivocalists, like Al-Quntar, discovered how to transition from one vocality to another, shifting between the boundaries of different musical styles and navigating sounds in relation to broader artistic identities.

Changes in classification elicit changes in recognition rules and the ability to distinguish features of those classifications (Bernstein 1993). *Popera* vocalists, for instance, incorporate high and low laryngeal positions, vibrato and non-vibrato production, breathy and resonant tones, and the use of microphones, thus engaging with a wide range of vocal codes (Meizel 2020). As the name suggests, these singers traverse the boundaries between Pop, Opera, and Broadway genres, broadening their vocal appeal to listeners who may enter this reclassified space from one genre or another. Mentioned earlier, vocal recipes for these three genres, especially those songs used by *Popera* artists, can often intersect in more ways than they differ. Educators with an understanding of these intersections may provide a broader palate of sounds and songs for their students to explore. Multivocality offers a pluralistic framework with more accessible recognition and realization codes than those found in Western art music alone. Educational practices that support students in realizing their own multivocality offer opportunities for vocal reconciliation and help bridge the divide between music education and broader societal relevance.

Basil Bernstein's Theory of the Pedagogic Device: Multivocality and Music Education

Bernstein sought to explain how pedagogic communication converts knowledge into something transmissible, acquired, and meaningful (Bernstein 1993, 2000; Singh 2002). Four decades of work culminated in his theory of the *Pedagogic Device*, which accounts for the rules that maintain the stability of knowledge acquisition via dominant ideologies embedded within national education systems (Bernstein 1990; Singh 2002). The *Pedagogic Device* presents a central claim: education reproduces society rather than changes it (Wright and Froelich 2012).

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Academic knowledge and curriculum contain embedded norms and values established and reinforced by dominant educational traditions.

Bernstein (2000) describes the *Pedagogic Device* as "a symbolic regulator of consciousness," asking "whose regulator, what consciousness, and for whom? … whoever appropriates the [pedagogic] device has the power to regulate consciousness… [It] creates an arena of struggle for those who are to appropriate it" (37–38). I submit that teaching multivocality democratizes this arena by recognizing the student singer as an individual with a diverse range of vocal possibilities (Muñoz 2009; Talbot and Taylor 2023).

Three hierarchical and interrelated rules generate principles that form the privileged texts of school knowledge (Singh 2002). *Distributive rules* maintain power boundaries between musical traditions by disseminating different forms of knowledge (Bernstein 2000). These different traditions offer distinct orientations to meaning. For example, societal institutions regulate who produces knowledge and delineate disciplines such as Fine Arts, Natural Sciences, and Humanities (Wright and Froelich 2012). *Recontextualizing rules* govern how knowledge is translated from sites of production into pedagogical spaces, where it is reshaped in relation to other discourses (Bernstein 2000). Architecture, for instance, is a recontextualization of science, mathematics, art, and other disciplines. *Evaluative rules* determine what is deemed the legitimate acquisition of content, curriculum, or conduct.

In vocal education, distributive rules manifest through bounded descriptors such as "operatic," "pop" (Meizel 2020), or, in my case, "bass." For singers, the distribution and/or acquisition of vocal technique frames and controls the pedagogic discourse, legitimizing knowledge to fit institutionalized norms (Bernstein 1993; Foucault 1979). In vocal and choral pedagogy, this classification may manifest through assignment of voice types, prioritizing preordained trajectories over individual exploration (O'Toole 2005; Talbot and Taylor 2023).

Recontextualization rules disseminate by way of publishers, researchers, and educators when the institutionalization of singing interacts with the norms and values established by dominant musical traditions within education: ensembles, voice studios, etc. While other academic disciplines (e.g., medicine, architecture, engineering) often emerge from interdisciplinary recontextualization, music education in the United States has largely prioritized Western classical vocal production as its dominant model (Bernstein 1993; Ellefsen 2022; McPhail 2016; Singh

2002). Without intentional effort to cultivate distinct pedagogical frameworks for other genres, such as jazz or pop, choral ensembles may default to superimposing Western classical technique over alternative traditions. Rigid classification thus reinforces institutional power (Bernstein 2000). Even terminology such as "jazz choir" or "show choir" reflects recontextualization into a Western choral framework. Teaching multivocality has the potential to disrupt these structures by creating individualized, interdisciplinary entry points into vocal study.

Imagine an academic singing ensemble where students learn the techniques and skills that make possible the equitable performance of music reflecting the goals of both teachers and students. One community might engage with Broadway numbers, choral-pop mashups, Western classical masterworks, and opportunities for singer-songwriter duets and solos. A *Popera*-like class might emerge. Another community might focus on skills and techniques that lead to the performance of Gospel music, Hula, and American folk-dance music. Each of these traditions utilize movement in addition to singing. What would this community call their multivocal endeavor?

A Bernsteinian reframing of pedagogic discourse suggests that by weakening strongly classified systems, multivocality can actively transform pedagogical structures. In this manner, evaluation rules—which legitimize content, curriculum, conduct—may broaden to reflect a multitude of multivocal opportunities based upon the negotiations of local stakeholders. This grassroots approach may upcycle and inspire knowledge distributors to investigate new, interdisciplinary pedagogies. New music-based recontextualizations may reinform academic spaces that look like or differ from our current educational landscape. In my interpretation, Bernstein provides further theory that helps transition from the ontological rules that govern the Pedagogic Device to epistemological fields of action.

Field of the Pedagogic Device

Bernstein (2000) identifies three interrelated fields through which agents either preserve or alter the principles of the Pedagogic Device: production, recontextualization (different from recontextualization rules), and reproduction. Singh (2002) emphasizes the hierarchical nature of these fields, wherein knowledge must first be produced before it can be recontextualized, and only then reproduced. According to Bernstein (2000), knowledge production typically takes place in institutions

of higher education or private research sectors. Recontextualization occurs within entities such as state departments, curriculum authorities, academic journals, domain-specific publishers, and teacher education institutions. Reproduction, defined as the enactment of pedagogic discourse, takes place in primary, secondary, and tertiary educational settings.

Production

The fundamental construction of meaning, or knowledge production, according to Bernstein (2000), occurs through either horizontal or vertical discourses. Horizontal discourse involves contextual knowledge gained through everyday bodily experience, practical wisdom, prudence, and lore. Vertical discourse, by contrast, encompasses disciplinary knowledge formed through conceptual relationships, symbolic systems, community engagement, or research. McPhail (2016, 2023) advocates for horizontal and vertical knowledge to "speak" to each other, making their connections visible so that student understanding can extend across disciplinary boundaries—an interdisciplinarity. Teaching multivocality as vocal interdisciplinarity facilitates this boundary crossing, allowing vocal discourses to interact within a recontextualized pedagogy. Such multivocal approaches to knowledge production emerge in pedagogies like Complete Vocal Technique, Estill Voice Technique™, and the LoVetri Method (Complete Voice Institute 2024; Estill Voice 2024; Somatic Voicework Teacher Association 2024). Others continue to investigate authentic production of horizontally derived, non-Western classical sounds (Park 2023; Stefanova and Speed 2023).

Educators implementing Estill Voice Technique™ might guide students through vocal "recipes," refine figure execution, or support the pursuit of self-identified vocal goals. A choral retreat might include Estill Level 1 training (focused on thirteen vocal tract figures) or Level 2 (which combines figures into vocal recipes). Afterward, students might complete a listening assignment identifying recipes across four genres and then rehearse and perform a themed program, such as unrequited love songs, perhaps spanning a Renaissance motet, a Broadway ensemble number, a pop anthem, and an American folksong. Other schools might center different traditions that reflect their community's goals and values.

Recontextualization

Bernstein (2000) identifies two subfields within the recontextualizing process: the Official Recontextualizing Field (Official-RF) and the Pedagogic Recontextualizing Field (Pedagogic-RF). The Official-RF comprises state and local educational agencies, while the Pedagogic-RF includes university departments of education, researchers, and educational publishing entities. In some countries, a national music curriculum informs the contextualization of knowledge within pedagogic spaces. In the United States, however, the music education Pedagogic-RF remains largely insulated from the Official-RF, due to the absence of a national music curriculum. As a result, actors within the Pedagogic-RF retain substantial autonomy over pedagogic discourse (Singh 2002).

This autonomy enables possibilities for grassroots, multivocal pedagogical innovation. However, it also generates conflicts, as agents within the Pedagogic-RF negotiate control over the Pedagogic Device. Wright and Froelich (2012) argue that curriculum debates constitute "struggles for cultural dominance," noting that "those who own the curriculum own society" (215). They further assert that curricular choices reflect "recontextualized knowledge and skills in and about music," shaped by "class and code-specific educational practices" (217).

Those announcing the merger of Boston Conservatory and Berklee College of Music, for example, declared via press release the intent to "break down boundaries that isolate genres" (Berklee College of Music 2024), signaling a renegotiation within the Pedagogic-RF. Some universities now incorporate vocal pedagogies that teach multivocality (Wigley, Redman-Gonzales, and Brooks 2023). Theoretically, students at a four-year university might spend the first two years developing vocal technique by learning Estill Voice Theory, Complete Vocal Technique, or the LoVetri Method alongside certified faculty. During that time, they would learn a variety of student-teacher negotiated repertoire, exploring multiple vocal timbres and interests. Because many universities now advertise for non-Western classical vocal instructors, students might spend their second two years specializing in a particular vocal style or two. Graduate programs, then, might offer curated, or specialized vocal programs. A long-term renegotiation within the Pedagogic-RF might spark diversification of educational offerings nationwide. What would the group singing ensembles look like at these various institutions? This recontextualization of previously horizontal knowledge discourses (the inclusion of vocal study heretofore excluded from higher academia), now situated within vertically conceived

academic institutions, may eventually shift how singing knowledge is reproduced and reshape the principles that regulate the Pedagogic Device.

Reproduction

If multivocal knowledge production successfully recontextualizes the Pedagogic Recontextualizing Field (Pedagogic-RF), that is, if the dominant pedagogical framework begins to privilege multivocality, teachers must still work to translate and decode this knowledge for students. Wright and Froelich (2012) observe, "Whether by choice or not, school and higher education teachers play a role in the recontextualization of music knowledge and skills whenever they make musical or pedagogic choices" (219). Singh (2002) emphasizes the role of Pedagogic Codes in the field of reproduction: classified spaces govern recognition rules, while framing principles regulate realization rules for learners. Students interpret the strength of disciplinary boundaries, as well as the power and control embedded within and between discourses.

Bernstein (2000) and Meizel (2020) both regard these boundaries not only as constraints but also as sites of possibility. McPhail (2016) argues that teachers "provide knowledge of the conceptual destination" and can "enable different sorts of knowledge to 'speak' to each other within an enabling pedagogy" (1163). Specific knowledge and acquired skills always carry tacit and explicit values and artistic preferences (Wright and Froelich 2012). These researchers ask, "What adjustments would be required in the preparation of music teachers to make them (a) aware of their [values and artistic preferences], and (b) willing to override [them] by pedagogic decisions that are in the best interest of those students who, by their upbringing, do not share in the dominant ideology?" (219). For example, McPhail (2018) shares a vignette where a struggling singer-song writer learns the harmonic implications embedded in a melodic line. The student possessed no formal knowledge of music. The teacher, rather than beginning with the rudiments of theory or fundamental vocal exercises, worked with the student to enter her tune into a computer program via an electronic musical keyboard. The student could play the guitar and sing along with the application. She used the program's features to aid in the creation of a harmonic progression, and then came up with alternative bass line progressions, which in turn, helped to extend her initial melodic material. Having harnessed the student's horizontal knowledge via technology, the teacher could—if they prioritized this kind of knowledge—scaffold vertical concepts

associated with music theory, or vocal technique assistance as the student uncovered new melodic lines or desired timbres to which they required healthier vocal access. This type of enabling pedagogy supports a multivocal environment where the educator functions as a trusted guide or even co-learner rather than as replicator of the dominant ideology.

My Story, My Song: A Mostly Happy Ending

After feeling as though I had made a vocal mockery of *Creation* in my portrayal of Adam—and a personal mockery through the exposure of my insecurities—I recognized how my training and vocal classification operated as mechanisms of control, shaping how I perceived my vocal possibilities (Bernstein 1993). For the next decade, I immersed myself in voice science and contemporary commercial methods, determined to achieve my vocal goals and resist disciplinary power (Foucault 1979). I gained knowledge about my large larynx. I learned how different structures within the vocal tract interacted to affect sound. I unraveled what I had previously believed were aesthetic mandates governing vocal quality. I discovered that producing different vocal fold body covers was not tied to specific parts of my range but instead represented avenues of tonal possibility across my entire range.

Through this pursuit, I developed multivocality, disrupting strong disciplinary classification by acquiring pedagogical codes that allowed me to cross previously rigid boundaries (Bernstein 1993; Meizel 2020). When I perform classically, I employ a thin vocal fold body cover and tilted thyroid cartilage (among other adjustments) on the note F4 in arias and art songs. In musical theater or pop, I relish the ability to thicken my vocal fold body cover and tilt my cricoid cartilage to achieve a youthful, powerful A5. In climactic moments, when I pivot from straight tone to vibrato, I consciously regulate air pressure and thyroid tilt. “Open Arms,” as performed by Styx, may remain just out of reach, but I can still wail the ballad if I choose the right karaoke key. I equally embrace the resonance of my rumbly, thick B2 in a choral setting and get excited when conductors program Rachmaninoff. Discovering how to produce the sounds I wanted helped me reconnect with parts of my voice I had previously rejected.

I either taught myself to sing or pursued methods outside of Western classical vocal education. I do not propose my journey as a universal path to multivocality. However, I recognize that if I (white, male, and formally trained) struggled for

decades to find my voice within the traditional paradigm of vocal education in the United States, then others who do not align with conventional vocal classifications likely face similar challenges. This realization prompted me to extend the conversation of musical relevance to include my own story. I want learners, regardless of identity, background, or experience, to know that vocal exploration is valid, and that perceived vocal mis-classifications can be understood through the lens of power operating within pedagogical frameworks. It is time for mainstream, generalized vocal music education in the United States to evolve.

Bernstein's theories of Pedagogic Codes (1993) and the Pedagogic Device (2000) offer mechanisms for change. Alteration in the reproduction of the Pedagogic Device occurs through a change in Pedagogic Codes, initiated by a weakening of the discursive framing within a classified space. By modifying communication (i.e., vocal pedagogy), the sequencing, pacing, and assessment of learning, and the social structure within the pedagogical context, classification weakens. Meizel (2020) asserts that multivocality challenges traditional boundaries and expands possibilities for vocal expression. Instead of treating vocal technique as a fixed, inherited tradition, we might reconceive it as a dynamic, evolving practice shaped in dialogue with the learners who engage in it.

Rather than upholding the stability of a singular pedagogic device, we can disrupt it by weakening classification, loosening boundaries, and creating space for voices that have historically been excluded. This queer and proleptic interpretation of the Bernsteinian framework does not simply critique the past; it actively constructs the future. Teaching multivocality within this model releases singers from the constraints of prescriptive classification and invites them into a process of vocal becoming, where the voice is not preordained, but emergent.

About the Author

Andrew Phillip Schmidt is an Assistant Professor of Music, and Music Program Coordinator at Oglethorpe University. His emerging research investigates issues concerning the why and how of teaching multivocality, efforts and effects of teaching voice science-based pedagogy, and pedagogical methods to encourage cognitive growth in singers. Recent publications appear in *Choral Journal*, *The International Journal of Research in Choral Singing*, and now *Action, Criticism, and Theory in Music Education*. Dr. Schmidt is also a professional chorister, choral conductor, and vocal instructor based in Atlanta, GA.

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Note

[1] Bernstein examined pedagogic practices as fundamental social units through which cultural production and reproduction occur. Music education scholars have consistently engaged with his theories (McPhail 2013; McPhail 2016; McPhail 2023; Philpott and Wright 2012; Wright 2008; Wright 2010; Wright and Froelich 2012), despite several challenges. Some critics mischaracterized Bernstein's early work as a "deficit theory," prompting caution among researchers (McPhail 2016; Singh 2002). Others found his writing overly complex and abstract, which limited its perceived applicability in practice (Singh 2002). In response, Bernstein's advocates frequently dedicate portions of their work—as this article does—to clarifying his terminology and demonstrating its relevance to specific research questions (McPhail 2016; Singh 2002; Wright 2012).