

student buy-in that is incredible.

Here are a few suggestions to keep in mind.

- This system works best in beginning classes which tend to include a wide range of talent and ability. Challenges do help move less talented and/or reluctant singers to a higher level. In advanced classes, challenges and the resultant placements are not employed nearly as often because the ability of these more advanced singers is typically narrower from best to not-as-good. Also, more experienced singers function at a higher level and have more developed talent than beginning classes
- Singing by himself or herself before peers is the most stressful thing a guy or girl can do in a choir class. Once singers have been through this process, confidence levels rise immeasurably. I've found that almost no singer is truly nervous prior to concerts or competitions. Why? Every singer has already been through the toughest test imaginable—singing in front of peers and surviving!
- Keep track of student row positions. When the time comes to audition students for next year's advanced choirs, data on row placement and highest row achieved is available and used to place students in the next choir class.
- "Moving up" is an incredible high for most of the singers. It builds a confidence that usually withstands losing a later challenge.

This system or method is not perfect. On some occasions, a student who has challenged several times without success can get discouraged or turned off about singing.

Important: Make it a point to offer at least one positive comment about each singer who is challenging for a new spot. Give immediate feedback. This helps lessen discouragement. Through the years, the benefits of this practice have far outweighed any negatives.

Little did I realize twenty years ago that this challenge system would become such a large part of the choir experience at our school. Seeing singers, with little or no previous choir experience, discover their voices and find their niche in a choir has been deeply rewarding.

During my tenure at Napa High School, challenges and resultant row placement have been an integral part of bringing hundreds of singers to a high level of excellence in their

choral experience. The process literally gives young people a place on the risers that is theirs. They can offer help or receive encouragement. They share the lasting joy of singing choral music with friends and peers, an experience they won't forget.



Music gives soul to the Universe.

—Plato

Literacy Achievement and the Impact of Choral Music Participation

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During my years as a middle and high school choral director, I realized that American education was going through dramatic changes in the beginning of the 21st century. The way children were educated was constantly evolving. Public, private, parochial, charter schools and post-secondary educational institutions were and still are being affected by various federal and state regulations.

Students, teachers, and educational leaders in these institutions are directly affected by regulations, increased academic demands, and an ever-changing educational landscape. Administrators and choral directors at every level should, in my view, examine reasons and the rationale for success in our institutions of learning while maintaining a commitment to musical excellence.

The concept of a connection between music and literacy goes back to the time of Plato. Learning and retaining literacy skills and the transfer of musical knowledge share a common heritage.

Researchers Michael Mark and Charles Gary [*A History of American Music Education*, 2007] have drawn a clear picture of the evolutionary path traversed by American music education. The results of their research should be studied and reviewed by all choral directors because we can then get a clearer picture of where we are and we should be moving as a profession.

Mark and Gary offer insights which are invaluable. For example, they show that we music educators are training amateur musicians, not professional musicians in-the-making. The term, amateur musicians, must be understood in order for us to help equip our students with the skills necessary for developing musical excellence. As we teach these skills to our students, have we wondered how these same skills could be used in other areas of academia?

When I was teaching in a high school in its seventh year of the Arkansas Department of Education's literacy improvement plan, I was intrigued by the possibility of helping shape my choral students' academic achievement, especially in literacy. Our school's choral program was experiencing great growth and truly was a beacon of light for higher levels of achievement in other academic areas in our school.

The 2009–10 school year was tension-filled because of the demands for achieving higher literacy goals within the school learning community. During our beginning-of-the-year professional development day, a literacy coach presented the end-of-course (EOC) format for our school's eleventh-grade literacy exam. I was fascinated and decided to explore a number of suggested instructional strategies and then implement them in my choral rehearsals.

EOC (end of course) testing occurred at the end of that year, and when the results came back, not only did eleventh-grade choir students do well, 98% of them scored at the proficient or advanced levels. I was amazed! The connection between choral music and literacy achievement was undeniable. I decided to write my doctoral dissertation on this correlation which I had observed first hand.

In this short article, I will talk about the relationship between participation in choral music and academic achievement, especially literacy, in five different high schools. The results of my research show that students with a prolonged involvement in choral music, grades 8–11, have a statistical advantage in literacy achievement when compared with those students who do not participate in choral music.

The methodology behind my study included an ANCOVA, a statistical term that entails comparing two groups while exam-

ining an outside constant. The eighth-grade benchmark exam scores and the 11th grade EOC literacy scores were used as the variable.

Factors considered included socio-economic status, race, and gender. All student participants had to be enrolled in a minimum of two consecutive semesters of choral music in grades 8 through 11.

I undertook a review of how choral conductors and music educators could affect academic achievement, particularly in literacy, in a way that would be quantitative and helpful for administrators. Without sounding too prideful, I hoped to impact literacy achievement at my school in a way that would allow me to remain fully committed to this wonderful art, choral music. I believe administrators and choral directors at every level should examine the reasons for success in institutions of learning while maintaining a commitment to musical excellence.

The purpose of the study was to compare eighth- and eleventh-grade literacy benchmark scores and eleventh-grade literacy end-of-course (EOC) literacy scores of those who participated in choral ensembles with students who did not participate in choral music.

The goal was to determine if there was a statistically significant difference in the scores. Research suggested a positive correlation did exist between participation in music programs in the secondary educational experience and cognitive abilities (spatial, temporal, language abilities), but it had not yet been determined if participation in a choral music program had any relevance to literacy achievement.

Analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) was employed in order to address the question which compared the literacy end-of-course (EOC) exam scores of 110 eleventh graders who did and 108 eleventh graders who did not participate in an academic year of choral music.

The independent variable was the student's participation or non-participation in choral music. The dependent variable was the eleventh-grade literacy end-of-course exam scores of both groups. The eighth-grade literacy benchmark scores were the covariate.

Linear trend lines for the two groups (see Table 1), those who enrolled in choir and those who did not, were examined. Students who were enrolled in choir for one consecutive academic year scored higher than those not involved in choral music.

The scores increased in both groups. These findings indicate that there is a positive relationship between prolonged choral

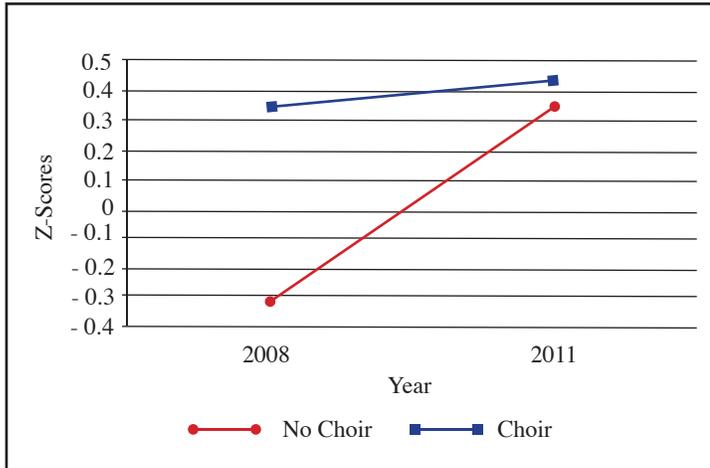


Table 1
Plot of 2008 and 2011 Literacy Scores by Choir Participation.

My high school and community college singers read the texts of octavos and examine them for meaning as well as utilize them in a conversation with each other at certain points during our warm-ups.

I also ask students to help design rehearsals that bring out/explain text meaning, both historically and culturally. Rehearsal practices which include textual understanding and elaboration underpin our mission to achieve greater choral artistry while facilitating a well-rounded education for students and learners at all levels.



music involvement and literacy achievement.

I presented my study at the Mid-South Research Symposium on the campus of the University of Mississippi a few years ago to a wide variety of music educators, all of whom were either retired, actively teaching, or aspiring to teach at various levels in music. At the end of the presentation, I was asked how these findings were relevant to my teaching and how the 98% proficient/advanced results among my choir students had been accomplished. What follows is a brief overview of the process at our school.

Each day, choir students completed a “four-square” sheet relating to literacy (reading) comprehension on either a composer or a text from the music we were rehearsing and preparing for concerts. Students would draw a box and divide it into four equal blocks. Each student was required to place the main concept of the text in block one (upper left portion of the square) and then list supporting ideas in blocks two and three.

Lastly, the singers summarized the meaning of the text in the fourth box (bottom right). This exercise was preparation for a more open response as well as for addressing text meaning. Students would then focus on the musical dimensions of the works through count singing, understanding the underlying pulse and its relationship to the music, tone quality, diction, etc.

Utilizing this approach every day kept literacy as a focal point for rehearsals; however, musical goals were never lost sight of.

This approach, now buttressed by the quantitative study (my dissertation), has inspired me. I now analyze every piece of music my students rehearse using the “four-square” technique.