Teaching Rehearsal Etiquette

BY LAURA WEIDEL

There is a reason that the terms band class, choir class, and orchestra class sound a little odd—it's simply because they are odd classes when compared to the others in a student's day. The format for performing arts classes is based on a rehearsal—a different paradigm than the instructional format of other classes. It's a format in which our goals are group goals and our products are ephemeral and difficult to quantify. This rehearsal format can also yield inherent behavioral challenges. To meet those challenges, I believe it is important to establish clearly understood expectations or rules of rehearsal etiquette.

While some students behave very well in rehearsal, we can't confuse ritual compliance—either through fear of their director or through being inherently well-behaved—with knowledge of the rehearsal learning process and rehearsal etiquette.

Rehearsal etiquette is the standard of behavior during the rehearsal that allows the rehearsal to be successful and productive. We must establish rules, teach the rules, and reinforce those rules. For our middle schoolers, I present the following:

In performing groups like choir, band, orchestra, drama, and dance, many people come together to prepare a performance. Usually, a rehearsal session has a leader who guides the group in the learning process. When groups of people work together, it is necessary for the rehearsal to work smoothly and efficiently, and it is necessary for the performers to use every minute wisely. Wasted time results in sloppy performances.

There are basic steps to good rehearsal etiquette:

1. Anything that disrupts the flow of a rehearsal is considered to be poor rehearsal etiquette.
2. Have all of the materials that you need. Stopping a rehearsal to get things wastes time.
3. Be ready to go when the rehearsal starts.
4. Every rehearsal has natural breaks or pauses in the routine. If you have a question, wait until there is a natural pause. Always raise your hand.
5. Every rehearsal goes through the process of breaking down the performance piece into small sections. Naturally, there is a lot of stopping and restarting. It is during these in-between times that the director or members will want to evaluate and describe the things that went well or need to be fixed. It makes sense that there is no talking during this time.
6. Often during a rehearsal, one section will rehearse while another section is left idle. When other sections are rehearsing, listen and watch what they are doing. You will probably have to do the same thing yourself. Whatever you do, do not talk or disrupt. The group leader will take this as a sign of disrespect to both the leader and the other performers.
7. Mark or make note of important things that the director or other members point out so that you will remember it next time. It is a waste of time to go back and relearn what you have already learned. Wasted time results in a sloppy performance.

8. Make transitions smooth, quiet, and seamless.

It's helpful to have simple rules that are concrete, yet flexible enough to apply to everyday rehearsal situations. Rehearsal etiquette applies to beginner and experienced students, and the approach is adaptable to all ages. These rules provide a common language for communicating expectations clearly with my students:

• A student is late for rehearsal? Rule #3.
• Students talk after a cutoff? Rule #5.
• Someone makes a dramatic entrance when returning from the restroom? Rule #1.
• A student doesn’t have their music? Rules #2 and #3.

**REINFORCE RULES WITH BEGINNERS**

I often remind beginners when rules apply. For example, I might say, “Let's transition to our next song. Which rehearsal etiquette rule applies? Show me you understand the rule.” Or, “Part One, I am going to work with Part Two for about three minutes to help them learn their harmony part. Which rehearsal rule is your responsibility?” While critical for beginners, I also ask similar questions of eighth graders—it’s a continuing mission.

I also differentiate when I am teaching a lesson and when the group is rehearsing. For example, “Today we are going to review the terms for slowing down in music, and after we review the terms, we are going to rehearse the ending of song X.” And when we change from lesson mode to rehearsal mode, I remind them that we are in rehearsal mode with “Rehearsal etiquette rules apply.”

Another benefit to maintaining these rules is that they provide a language for communicating with parents and administrators about behavior problems in class (i.e., rehearsal etiquette rules violations). The rules allow me to be very specific when explaining what the student is doing (or not doing) and what needs to be done to fix it.

**ASSESSMENT**

My students receive a rehearsal grade based on compliance with their rehearsal rules. I believe that grading rehearsal is justified in our setting because it is through the rehearsal that we achieve our high performance standards. I usually grade students weekly, but I actually prefer for students to grade themselves using a rubric I provide—this allows them to take responsibility for their own learning and assessment.

Band, choir, and orchestra classes present such interesting paradoxes. We use a standardized process to create a nonstandard product; the more the process is standardized, the more creative we can be with the product. Establishing and consistently applying clear rehearsal etiquette rules is key to supporting this paradox. When this consistency is achieved, our students can achieve a higher level of learning, greater ownership in the rehearsal, and a more satisfying music-making experience.

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