# Compliance and Adherence in the Voice Studio

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## INTRODUCTION

The start of a new calendar year is a natural time to encourage students and clients to refocus on their singing goals. Given that many of them may have already set New Year's resolutions, it is logical for them to also evaluate whether or not their practice routines have them on track or if they need to be adjusted.

Like resolutions, meaningful goals take thought and effort to establish if they are to be more than just "pie in the sky" platitudes. Author and voice pedagogue Lynn Helding writes that goal-setting works by "concretizing vague notions of achievement" while promoting focus, cultivating self-regulation, and helping to calibrate efficient use of time.[1]

Once goals have been established and tangible steps have been designed to help reach those goals, the real work of following through begins. How can we help our students stick to the plan?

Some of the ideas that have influenced my thinking on this topic were first brought to my attention by Katherine (Kittie) Verdolini Abbott, a professor of communication sciences and disorders at the University of Delaware and co-author with Ingo R. Titze of *Vocology: The Science and Practice of Voice Habilitation*.[2] Each year, Verdolini Abbott gives a series of lectures at the Summer Vocology Institute at the Utah Center for Vocology. One of the issues she explores in these lectures is patient compliance (or adherence, which is fast becoming the preferred term) to medical advice. Numerous studies have explored why patients sometimes do and sometimes do not follow their doctors' directions, whether this relates to taking prescribed medications, maintaining dietary changes, or following through with recommended therapy exercises.

As a speech-language pathologist, Verdolini Abbott is particularly interested in whether the studies on patient adherence could apply to those who are assigned voice therapy exercises in a clinical setting. Could these studies also inform our work in the singing voice studio, giving us insights that may help our students and clients comply with their own vocal practice schedules?

## COMPLIANCE VS. ADHERENCE

First of all, the chosen verb may have some influence. In many settings, instead of asking patients to "comply," they are instead encouraged to "adhere" to given

directions. One image that comes to mind when hearing the word "adherence" is that of a Band-Aid, the "adhesive bandages" that stick to the skin to protect cuts or abrasions while they heal. That image actually applies (pun intended) pretty well. According to Dictionary.com, *to adhere* means "to stay attached; stick fast; cleave; cling." But it also means "to hold closely or firmly" and "to be devoted in support or allegiance," as in "to adhere to a plan."[3] In other words, it is "to be consistent" in a practice. *To comply*, however, is "to act or be in accordance with wishes, requests, demands, requirements, conditions, etc," or "to be . . . conciliatory."[4] Acknowledging the power of language, it is one thing to ask our students to adhere to a practice schedule. It is quite another to demand or require them to be conciliatory, even if they know their practice will lead to an outcome they desire. Asking them instead to be consistent in their devotion may appeal to their better selves and lead to more positive results.

As an example, when I was a high school music teacher, our administration decided at one point to implement a special homeroom period for "free reading." Students would report to the auditorium each day for 25 minutes with a book of their choosing. They were not allowed to do homework or use their phones—they were just asked to read. Knowing how packed high schoolers' schedules can be, the homeroom was merely designed to give them time to read for pleasure in the hopes that it would lead them to becoming lifelong readers. However, the feedback we received from the students regarding this special period was decidedly negative. I remember one student in particular—an avid reader herself—who hated the new homeroom. When I asked her why she would be opposed to being given time in her day for something she already enjoys doing, she responded that because reading was *required,* it took all the fun out of it. She felt she was being commanded to comply, I suppose, rather than being encouraged to adhere.

## LOCUS OF CONTROL

Looking beyond the language of compliance versus adherence, the literature on the subject uncovers a variety of factors that may contribute to patients' lack of adherence. One factor seems to be whether people have an internal or external locus of control. As described by clinical social work psychotherapist Richard B. Joelson, "If a person has an internal locus of control, that person attributes success to his or her own efforts and abilities. A person who expects to succeed will be more motivated and more likely to learn. A person with an external locus of control, who attributes his or her success to luck or fate, will be less likely to make the effort needed to learn."[5] Referring to a 1999 Gordillo et al. study,[6] Titze and Verdolini Abbott state, "External locus of control negatively predicts compliance with medical treatment, even in conditions as significant as HIV."[7]

Can we take this information and apply it to the voice studio? Voice students with an external locus of control could believe they are not as skilled at singing as they should be because fate did not grant them natural talent. Maybe they feel they have not been lucky enough to have had voice teachers who could competently help them build their skills. This may cause them to feel destined to always lag behind their peers, no matter how much time and effort they dedicate to practice. Therefore, any obstacles that may potentially interfere with their practice schedules (being busy, not having easy access to a practice space, etc.) may quickly derail their efforts, further frustrating their progress and demotivating them in the process. This may ultimately cause them to lose dedication to the discipline of singing, proving their fatalistic beliefs to be true.

On the other hand, students who have an internal locus of control, who believe they are in charge of their own lives, may have a different experience. They may recognize, for instance, that they do not possess the same natural abilities as some of their peers, but they instead use that as motivation to work harder rather than to withdraw. Instead of viewing an obstacle like a busy schedule as an excuse or justification to skip practice sessions, they may see it as a challenge to overcome and insist on finding time to practice, knowing that it is the surest path to improved skills.

If an internal locus of control makes it more likely that we will follow through with our practice, can we simply choose to adopt that mindset? Joelson finds that difficult to say for certain. He explains that, although locus of control is often seen as an inborn personality component, there is also evidence that it is shaped by our experiences. Specifically, he writes, "Children who were raised by parents who encouraged their independence and helped them to learn the connection between

actions and their consequences tended to have a more well-developed internal locus of control."[8]

Regardless, sometimes acknowledging our natural tendencies can help us consciously overcome them when they are not serving us. Students may be encouraged to embrace some of the mantras that Joelson has heard from people who have an internal locus of control, such as, "I know it's up to me," "I can learn how to become more successful," and "I am responsible for what happens in my practice."[9]

## SELF-EFFICACY AND SOCIAL SUPPORT

Another factor that may impact how well students adhere to their practice schedules is self-efficacy. According to the American Psychological Association, "self-efficacy refers to an individual's belief in his or her capacity to execute behaviors necessary to produce specific performance attainments (Bandura, 1977, 1986, 1997).[10] Self-efficacy reflects confidence in the ability to exert control over one's own motivation, behavior, and social environment. These cognitive self-evaluations influence all manner of human experience, including the goals for which people strive, the amount of energy expended toward goal achievement, and likelihood of attaining particular levels of behavioral performance."[11]

Put simply, self-efficacy has to do with individuals' beliefs in their own ability to carry out a behavior. It's similar to an internal locus of control, where they believe that their efforts and choices are responsible for their successes as opposed to outside factors like luck or fate, but it applies more directly to choosing the behaviors that will lead to success.

Unsurprisingly, studies with medical patients have shown a positive correlation between self-efficacy and compliance/adherence.[12] This means that patients who had a strong belief in their ability to carry out a behavior were more likely to follow through with doctor-directed therapy and treatment.

Once again, can we apply this to following a singing practice schedule? Perhaps students with strong self-efficacy will be more likely to follow through with their practice schedules because they believe in their own abilities and that they have the power to take steps that will lead to the vocal progress they are seeking. Students should be encouraged to analyze their tendencies in this area, perhaps with targeted questions: Do you believe that practicing will lead to positive results or do you think it will not make a noticable difference? Do you believe that you can be self-motivated enough to maintain a regular practice schedule? Do you believe that, for the sake of the vocal progress you desire, you can overcome the many temptations in your environment that lure you into spending your time in other ways? These can be tough—but necessary—questions to answer, especially if students have had difficulty sticking to practice schedules in the past.

For students who acknowledge that their self-efficacy is not as strong as it could be, social support has also been shown to have positive connections to adherence. In clinical settings, patients who had a social support system were more likely to follow through with rehabilitation and health maintenance.[13]

Therefore, students may be asked to make themselves accountable to someone (besides their teacher) who is invested in their progress. Perhaps it could be a friend or family member who has always encouraged their musical pursuits. Maybe other musicians with whom they collaborate could be recruited, given their mutual goal of making their shared performances as successful as possible. Maybe studiomates could pair off to be "practice accountability buddies," in order to check in with each other to make sure their partners are staying disciplined in their practice.

## DOCTOR DEMEANOR

There is one additional factor that appears in the compliance/adherence literature that is worth mentioning: the demeanor of the doctor. In certain studies, patients who perceived their physicians to be business-like were less satisfied with their clinician-patient interactions and were, therefore, less likely to follow directions from those physicians. Conversely, patients who perceived their doctors to be warm and caring were more likely to stick to the programs and procedures prescribed by those doctors.[14] In short, the doctors who were perceived to be warm and caring were also viewed as competent, while those perceived as being cold and aloof were considered to be incompetent.[15] As Titze and Verdolini Abbott bluntly state, "As a clinician, if your patients *like* you, they are more likely to follow your advice than if they *don't like* you."[16]

Could this mean that singing students who perceive their voice teachers to be business-like or cold and aloof are less likely to follow their teacher's directions or recommendations? Or, if teachers are perceived to be warm and caring, are students more likely to do what their teachers ask when it comes to practice?

First of all, while conceding that "aloof" would be an undesirable trait in a voice teacher, "business-like" may not necessarily be an antonym of "warm and caring." It is certainly possible for teachers to have a professional demeanor and high expectations for their students while also being warm and caring. I have long believed that one of the biggest pedagogic mistakes teachers can make is to burden their students with low expectations, allowing them to underachieve and avoid exploring their true potential. This may have the additional effect of conditioning them to expect rewards for even mediocre accomplishments. 2013 Rhode Island Teacher of the Year Jessica Waters beautifully discusses this idea in a blog titled, "We Can't Let Our Love for Our Students Morph into Low Academic Expectations."[17]

Of course, even if we have a textbook-ideal demeanor, students' day to day demands will also have a strong impact on how much they are able to dedicate themselves to a robust practice schedule. Sometimes their seemingly small accomplishments are actually quite significant when factoring in all the responsibilities in their lives. Case in point: One semester I taught a music major who was a single mom working a full-time job and dealing with a temporary physical disability. The C she earned in voice lessons, although the minimum grade needed for the credit to count toward her major, represented a momentous achievement, given all she was dealing with that semester. In this case, regardless of how business-like or warm and caring I was, she was going to practice only as much as her circumstances allowed. Still, it stands to reason that a warm and caring approach that encourages students to practice as much as they can is likely to be more effective than the colder tactic of scolding or chastising them for not practicing more.

## CONCLUSION

Logging hours of practice time is not the only component necessary for vocal progress. Obviously, *how* students practice is crucial, and likely more important, than just accumulating a multitude of practice minutes. But when students do set aside time for regular, focused practice, progress is more likely to be consistent and goals are more likely to be achieved. It may be easy to assume that students who struggle to follow through with a practice schedule are lazy or lack motivation. It could be that these students would benefit from an understanding of concepts like locus of control and self-efficacy in order to identify mindsets that may be interfering with their motivation to practice. They may also consider building a social support system of people who can encourage them and hold them accountable in their efforts. As teachers, we may take time to examine our demeanor in lessons to see if we are communicating a seeming lack of interest ("It's up to you, I can't practice for you.") or an equal investment in their progress ("I believe you can be successful. Let's work together to identify and remove the obstacles that may be keeping you from reaching your goals.").

Just as a good Band-Aid adheres to the skin, providing protection that allows scrapes and scratches to heal, dedicated vocal students must adhere to a regular practice schedule in order for their skills to develop. By addressing the issues above, we may serve as an additional "aid" to our students, helping their practice regimens—and thus, their progress—to stick.

## NOTES

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He earned the 2021 Faculty Excellence in Research Award from the University of Utah College of Fine Arts and the 2016 NATS Voice Pedagogy Award. He has given presentations for the Voice Foundation, Pan American Vocology Association, Voice and Speech Trainers Association, International Physiology and Acoustics of Singing Conference, Fall Voice Conference, TEDxSaltLakeCity, and for NATS at chapter, region, and national conferences.

An associate editor for the *Journal of Singing*, he is also a regular contributor to *Classical Singer* magazine, which has published more than 100 of his reviews, interviews, and essays. Additionally, he has written articles for the *Journal of Voice*, *Voice and Speech Review*, *VOICEPrints*, *College Music Symposium*, *NATS Inter Nos*, and the *Musical Theatre Educators' Alliance Journal*. He also contributed a chapter to *The Voice Teacher's Cookbook* (Meredith Music, 2018).

Manternach has made solo appearances with the Milwaukee Symphony Orchestra, Cleveland Chamber Symphony, and Sinfonia Salt Lake, among others, and his stage credits range from Belmonte in *Die Entführung aus dem Serail* to Eisenstein in *Die Fledermaus* to Miles Gloriosus in *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*.

Originally from Iowa, his degrees in voice performance include a BA from Saint John's University/College of Saint Benedict of Minnesota, an MM from the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, and a DM from the Indiana University Jacobs School of Music.

To go in the dark with a light is
    to know the light.
To know the dark, go dark. Go without sight,
and find that the dark, too,
    blooms and sings,
and is traveled by dark feet and dark wings.

Wendell Berry, "To Know the Dark"