When do you think about your vocal health?

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Article begins on next page
Several years ago I was working on a research project investigating vocal health coupled with behavioral change. A middle school choral teacher was especially interested in participating because she'd had vocal problems in the past and had even sought voice therapy. Upon visiting her classroom, a cause of her voice problems was quickly apparent. None of her students was talking very loudly, but 30-40 students all talking at the same time creates a low roar. The teacher passed out progress reports by loudly yelling the individual names over the noise.

Could this teacher have handed out progress reports without compromising vocal health? Absolutely. One approach would be to demand quiet in the classroom, and some teachers do this very effectively. Other teachers might value giving middle school students a few minutes to blow off steam at the end of a rehearsal. Even then, vocal health can be preserved. This teacher could have allowed quiet talking from the students while she silently handed a slip of paper to each student. Or she could have devised a more elaborate, non-verbal communicative device. Yelling was not the only option.

Vocal health seems to mean a lot to music teachers, especially once it is compromised. The more I talk to music teachers about vocal health, the more I realize how thought to include prevention of vocal damage can make a profound difference in the state of your overall vocal health. Here are a few suggestions for better vocal health:

1. Hydrate regularly
   - If you aren't drinking a lot of water, gradually increase intake (most doctors I've talked to recommend six to eight 8-oz. glasses per day).
   - A sudden increase of water intake can be problematic for teachers who have one class after another with no time for a restroom break. I recommend working your way into drinking more fluids over a school break. By the time you start teaching again your body will be more adjusted.

2. Warm up before teaching/rehearsing
   - Many vocalists would never dream of singing without warming up. So, why do we dive into a full day of teaching without doing the same? At the very least, hum or sing while you drive to school.

3. Pay attention when your voice gets tired, and STOP
   - Take vocal rest breaks.
   - Use non-verbal commands — they can extend the life of your voice, plus they are a more effective means of communication in many situations. Make a habit of using them before your voice gets tired.
   - Use a student to model the singing while you rest your voice

4. Check your posture.
   - Do you sing while hunched over the piano? This puts tremendous strain on your vocal mechanism. Turn the piano and sit down while you play.
   - The posture you use at your desk can positively or negatively affect your overall muscle tension, which in turn affects your vocal mechanism.

If you're already experiencing vocal problems, seek the expertise of a medical professional such as a laryngologist or speech-language pathologist as soon as possible to prevent further damage. It's easy to think about these things when not caught in the moment of teaching. Common sense may guide you to many other realizations about maintaining good vocal health. The key is to have the subject on your radar, preferably before you develop a problem.