

The Nadine George Voicework Pedagogy:
Morag Stark, 3rd August 2022

The Nadine George Voicework Pedagogy

A short reflection of my teaching experiences through the work

by Morag Stark

***"What is it that you want from yourself
as an artist and human being?"***

(Voice Studio International)

*With special thanks to:
Nadine George, Ros Steen, Mel Drake and the Voice Studio International;
Tara McAllister-Viel, my colleagues and students at East 15 Acting School
and my mum, Ann Stark.*

Since first being introduced to Nadine George Voicework (NGVW) in 1996, it has transformed and enlightened my voice-teaching practice on many levels. The most consistent influence being: ¹The Pedagogy itself.

What draws me to the NGVW Pedagogy?

- the two-way dialogue between teacher/student
- motivating an embodied, routine practice for students
- guiding the “opening” without the need to “get it right”
- what we are listening for
- the NGVW community

Two-way Dialogue

Ros Steen, my voice teacher since 1986 and voice-teaching mentor, reminds me in our conversations about NGVW that learning is a two-way dialogue between student and teacher sharing what is intergenerationally relevant in their practice(s).

My students are inspired by the fact that I am still actively investigating my own voice – that it is an ever-evolving practice for me, even though I am a middle-aged person and I no longer “perform” professionally. The dialogue continues between us as fellow artists: What were your transitional moments? How were you affected by another individual’s voice/vibratory energy, and how does that influence your own risk-taking?

I can offer my students examples of experiences I have had during my practice of the work which may open up possibilities for their own experimentation. For example, during the “²High Female” day of Nadine George’s 2018 Teacher’s workshops in Glasgow – I had an intensely-emotional, transitional moment in my upper range which has impacted on my “Deep Male” voice since. I related this recently to a student identifying as non-binary who valued the opportunity of re-visiting their “female” voice. The work made the student realise that through neglecting this part of their voice after coming out as non-binary, they had also been limiting their dramatic range as a performer.

¹ Pedagogy: The principles, practice or profession of teaching (Collins)

² For further details on new terminology and the Four Voice Qualities, please refer to Nadine’s *Breath Work and Four Voice Qualities* worksheet in the Voice Studio International website.

The Nadine George Voicework Pedagogy:

Morag Stark, 3rd August 2022

Topics such as transgenderism and intimacy, which have been prevalent in current UK actor-training, have also benefited from this two-way dialogue. The millennial generation have access to language describing their choices in how they uniquely identify, in a way that previous (Western) artistic generations have not. Nevertheless, my students appreciate the intentions of NGVW and that the terminology is about the person as a whole, not about their birth-gender.

Getting it Right

The NGVW Pedagogy offers a clearly-detailed physical warm-up structure to learn and “get right”, contrasting with sounding and voice-into-text where ³“not getting it right” is encouraged. Success is validated by self, teacher and group, and revolves around the present, creative-needs of each student. In my first one-to-one session with Nadine when she said “very good, that’s right” as I dropped into the ⁴“Aw” breath, I was surprised. I had never previously understood how I met “correct” breathing approval in voice classes, despite the fact that I had spoken and sung in a range of acoustic spaces for four decades. It felt very reassuring to simply be told that by Nadine. I then felt no need to prove anything, which allowed me to open freely into the next stage of the work. I subsequently began to gauge when I was getting my own “right”.

In my current Voice-teaching post at East 15 Acting School I work with five different performance training programmes, each presenting contrasting needs and learning preferences: BA Acting and Community Theatre, BA Acting and Stage Combat, BA Physical Theatre and BA World Performance (all three-year programmes) plus a one-year Certification in Higher Education in Theatre Arts.

My Stage-Combat and Physical-Theatre students, a majority of kinaesthetic learners, connect immediately with the hands-on approach and self-led autonomy of the NGVW pair-work. The Combats, who present a keen attention to precision and detail (considering weapon-handling needs), enjoy the specificity and repetition of the warm-up structure. They respond with kind attention to each other which has been magnified during the Covid19 pandemic, as has the wider discussion on intimacy work in performance training. My students have contributed helpfully on the need for consent during the contact work and how we might approach it in a fully non-coercive way. By demonstrating with each new group/student: “this is what to expect” and offering an “it’s ok/not ok” agreement

³ “not getting it right” here is describing an open exploration of sounding/text work without pre-empting expectations of what “should” sound right or wrong. The teacher continues to provide encouragement and feedback (physical expression or verbal language) throughout the exploration. The student can then take forward the embodied experience into their later work. NB the warm-up also offers freedom of development and detail within its set structure.

⁴ Aw – Deep Male Voice Quality

The Nadine George Voicework Pedagogy:

Morag Stark, 3rd August 2022

between participants, consent is maintained within everyone's comfort zone, without limiting experiential opportunities.

The Physical Theatre (PT) students have been drawn to their training through a desire to express with their bodies and are often vocally inhibited. In the solo-voice NGVW with the final-year PTs, however, they have demonstrated openness and bold risk-taking, which one student described as the voice equivalent to their⁵ aerial work. They feed-back that the work has enabled them to identify a physical/emotional connection to their voices not previously experienced in voicework. A considerable percentage of the PT/Stage Combat students present dyslexic learning preferences and often learn best by "doing". The NGVW Pedagogy appears to remove a fear of sounds or language by appealing to the⁶ somatic experience for the learner. Likewise, this is also demonstrated with my⁷ ESOL students.

The Do-and-Drop

I frequently find in my teaching that students are keen to "collect" different accents and dialects, to mimic words and phrases without allowing sufficient processing time to delve deeper into where the sounds, tunes and rhythms come from culturally, and sit in the body. Similarly, students present a desire to gather a series of warm-up exercises which they temporarily practise, but then their motivation and commitment dwindles - as often does sustaining their commitment during the exercise itself. This is what Ros Steen calls the "do and drop".

It seems that many voicework methods do not realistically facilitate sustained practice – they present idealised practice theories. NGVW, by contrast, does not call itself a method, but does stimulate continuation of work. Within a structured framework, the individual, pair and group can "stay in vibration and carry forward" from one stage to the next.

During the breathwork, when students are physicalising with outstretched arms, guiding their breath to the extreme⁸ kinesphere around them, it develops an embodied sense of where their breath can begin extending out to. Some traditional voicework methodologies suggest "driving the thought". If the speaker has not yet connected somatically with breath into sounding though, then the thought will often remain cerebral and "un-owned" by the speaker. My Cert HE students benefit greatly from this stage of the work which, often after some initial hilarity, enables them to progress, opening their breath further and wider, connecting with empowered focus and confidence.

⁵ BA Physical Theatre students study Aerial practice using silks and hoops

⁶ Somatic: Relating to the body, especially as distinct from the mind (Cambridge)

⁷ ESOL – English as a Second or Other Language

⁸ Kinesphere: the personal space around us within reaching possibilities of the limbs without changing one's place

What are we listening for?

What the teacher and student are listening for in NGVW is already rooted in a highly complex, ongoing conversation amongst experienced practitioners of the work. I will not attempt, therefore, to undermine in a mere paragraph, the magnitude of this ⁹phenomenological experience and the pedagogical questions it raises. In simplified terms, both teacher and student are finding their own different ways of how they experience energy moving through the body and voice – often described as “openings”. In introduction to an area where I would like to develop my research further, I will describe a personal visceral-response “opening” I sometimes experience during my teaching of NGVW:

This is when a vibration travels up the back of my neck and radiates around the lower part of my skull. It is a pleasurable and reassuring sensation. It resembles the response I may have when recognising an evocative piece of music, hearing a particular chord (voices or instruments) or a spoken voice that touches me emotionally. This sensation periodically happens during the solo voicework, the groupwork sounding of the four-qualities, and also sometimes during the group-breath circle. While I cannot yet precisely pinpoint its trigger - it reinforces that my auditory response is a full-body reaction, a personal phenomenon, and cannot be described through language alone. What the teacher and student are fundamentally listening for therefore, whether it be through sounding or in ¹⁰“vibrated silence”, seems to be the ability to connect to inner and outer vibratory energy.

The Community

In conclusion to this reflection, I would like to thank the ¹¹VSI Community, who have been a main inspiration for me to become an accredited teacher of NGVW. Their pedagogies have continued to enlighten me throughout my voice-teaching journey to date, as has their on-going kind support. During the Covid pandemic, the Community’s shared dialogues about how they have adapted their pedagogies have been an invaluable resource. These have ranged from online teaching strategies, taking the work outdoors, dealing with facemasks, and the impact of the pandemic on the voices/wellbeing of our students and ourselves. I embrace the opportunity to take the work forward together and continue to learn from and share with this creative body of kindred-spirits.

⁹ Ref: *Listening and Voice, Phenomenologies of Sound* (by Don Ihde)

¹⁰ Nadine uses the term “vibrated silence” for “the sonic in-between” – i.e. the space between sound and silence where energy is still connecting between speaker and listener.

¹¹ Voice Studio International