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Validating a Volatile Confidence with Vicarious Vocals

What is a literacy? It is something you are proficient at, and it takes some sort of developed skill to master or accomplish. An obvious example of a literacy would be the written word: reading and writing. It takes a certain amount of schooling to be able to form words and sentences, add the punctuation, etc. However, a literacy does not have to be centered on the alpha-numeric languages. It could be almost anything: composing music, reading body language, analyzing movies and books, creating art, surfing, caring for animals, or even baking. Literacy does not have to involve the written word at all. Along this same tract of thought, one can have multiple literacies at the same time. For instance, I play the clarinet and can type this sentence. I cannot, of course, perform both of these tasks at the same time. But learning something new does not force the older skill to disappear. My progression in musical literacy has been an important part of my self- development. It has shaped me, and left me with iconic memories that continue to influence me today. It has even led to the growth of additional literacies. My literacy of music is simple in the fact that I am still “reading” something: the notes and dynamic markings on a staff. However, it is also diverse - I sing, and play both the piano and clarinet.

Flashback to my sophomore year of high school, as I’m waiting my turn at the annual talent show. My feelings could be accurately described by the words “very nervous” - sweaty palms and neck, shortness of breath, the feeling of constantly having just a little too much saliva

in the back of my throat. I was staring at the large wooden door that led backstage when my dear friend (who also happened to be one of the hosts for the evening) came up to me and said one of the most inspirational things I've ever heard. He said, "Remember: performance is 95% confidence, and 5% talent. And you've got the talent." I will never forget those sentences. In that moment they were just incredibly kind words from a friend, but over the years they have become a sort of personal mantra.

I remember staring at the draped curtains, knowing I had to walk through them very soon. My fingertips tingled with the anticipated feeling of them gliding across my skin, the velvet so soft and yet so fuzzy at the same time, the scarlet color both intimidating and comforting. I had run my hands over these curtains a thousand times before, helping backstage with the plays and setting up for band and choir concerts, but this time was different. This moment felt worlds away from all that. I felt suddenly vulnerable, exposed. The dark skirt I was wearing felt too thin, too flowy. It was much different than the long blue jeans I was used to wearing. The makeup on my face felt too heavy. *No one wants to hear me sing. Why am I even up here?* This thought - interpreted as a feeling of nervous embarrassment - darted about in my head, adding to my discomfort. I hadn't paid much attention to the words my friend had said earlier, but they came back to me and taunted me as I lost control of my self-confidence. There was just something about being alone on a stage with everyone looking at me that took all my determination away. As the hosts announced my name and the title of the piece I was singing, time slowed down to a crawl. Even with all that seemingly extra time, I could not think of a single word that I needed to sing.

I pushed my way through the thick hanging curtains and toward the microphone. Grasping the cold metal with both hands, I waited for the sound guy to do his thing. The opening

chords for “Someone Like You” by Adele filled the auditorium. I peered into the crowd, trying to distinguish faces behind the piercing stage lights. The series of chords that signaled my entrance reverberated out of the speakers. Everything else fell away. I opened my mouth, and sang. Somewhere in my mind I was aware that there were other people present, but I was not singing for them. I was singing for me. I was singing to show myself that I could do whatever I wanted, and that I wouldn’t let my anxiety get in my way. To me, music is a way to express your emotions. When I sang at that talent show, I could feel everything that Adele felt as she wrote and sang that song. It’s similar to the feelings you get when reading a sentimental novel or watching a horror film. You empathize with the characters and feel certain emotions according to the events taking place, even though you aren’t really participating in any of them. I ended up forgetting to sing the last round of the chorus, and so instead randomly improvised on “ooh.” The music stopped a few seconds after my voice. I could breathe correctly again. It was very quiet for a couple moments and then the second host took the microphone and said very softly “...and wasn’t that beautiful.” Although things didn’t go exactly as planned, the sense of pride I felt as I realized no one else had noticed my mistake was invigorating. Instilled with newfound confidence and adrenaline, I smiled. I felt like a different person.

Developing literacies is an important part of anyone’s... well, development. Some even use their literacy to escape oppressive environments or daily stresses, whether it be writing by yourself in your room, typing code in an online forum, or playing a sport with a team and working together to score points. Music and other literacies are a great way to expand knowledge of yourself and become more comfortable in your own skin. Music to me is a way to bond with others, both by making it with them or creating it for them. The satisfaction of the different vibrations overlapping and seeming to dance together is almost indescribable. It is a way to

convey feelings to one another. For example, playing a succession of notes makes the members of an audience apt to feel a specific way according to those sounds. And this was all planned by the composer. A piece of artwork can instill intense emotions in the beholder based on colors or different focus points. An author of a book can describe a picture in such detail that the reader sees it in their head. This is what Stephen King was conveying when he said, “[Writing is] Telepathy, of course” (103). Although descriptions of what you should think and feel are not being whispered into your ear, they are still being interpreted. Uncommon literacies are unique in their communications, but learning to convey things in this way is an essential life skill.

Flashback again, this time to my first college football game. The band was at the top of the steps into Nippert Stadium (Figure 1), waiting for the cue to storm the field. The student section seemed like a beast, roaring with spirit. Everyone’s arms lifted up into the sky, waving around like branches in a gale. Food and empty wrappers littered the aisles and walkways. Throngs of people who had not yet found a seat pushed and pulsed past each other. It had just finished raining, and I could occasionally make out the soft squeaks of someone’s marching shoes shifting around. The smells of concession stand food, rain and sweat all blended together and filled my nostrils. I clutched my clarinet to my body with shaky hands and stared with round eyes out onto a field where several people had just glided to a halt. The bright hues of their sky-diving uniforms were enough to distract me from the upcoming performance, if only for a moment. My gloved hands continued to shake, from nerves coupled with eagerness. The anticipated performance was a huge one, except this time I was not alone. Fireworks erupted suddenly from the middle of the stadium and exploded into shards of color in the sky. The crowds went into a shouting frenzy of excitement. The echoes clashed against each other,

causing a clamor of noise that no one could hear over. In the moments before the game as I stood at the top of those stairs, I was euphoric.



Figure 1: Stairway into Nippert Stadium

Performances no longer put me into a cold sweat. I still got the jitters now and then, but what surfaced was always minor in comparison to how it used to be. I enjoyed participating in activities that amazed the audience. The brass began playing Army Fanfare, the deep tones blending together into something truly marvelous. I was ready. The song ceased and everyone took off. Just like with the talent show, everything else was put on the backburner. What a sight we must've been - several hundred uniformed students toppling over each other and their own feet while sprinting down the cement stairs. A sea of red and black wreathing and writhing together. Marching with the band creates a sense of connectedness. All playing the same song.

All marching the same field. All hearing the same beat. Everyone's notes align to create one huge sound that fills the audience's ears, and leads them toward an emotion of our choosing.

Literacies are important in helping us excel both in that specific field and others. Becoming a better person and accepting myself through band and choir both in high school and college is why I think that everyone should find something they are passionate about and never let go. Music has influenced my life by inspiring me with confidence; it gave me a positive filter to look at the world through. Just like glasses, I don't wear them all the time, but when I do everything seems a lot clearer and more focused. In the band I have chances to play for sports events, parades, and concerts. I sing songs with my friends. Music impacts a lot of things, including some of my other literacies. When I listen to music, I listen to a song the whole way through to get the main concept of the lyrics and hear all the parts at once. Then, I listen again and take all the sections apart from each other and listen to them separately. It is very satisfying to figure out that one song has four different voices singing when before you had heard only one. I also analyze the lyrics for hidden meanings and rhymes.

This, coincidentally, is the same way that I analyze poetry. Reading the poem outright, and then going back and sorting through all the possible perspectives and undertones is how I have learned to understand the material best. Sight-reading music (wholly playing a song I have never seen before) has helped me be able to compute directions and act on them swiftly. I can complete things in a timely fashion if they are given to me in an ordered and organized manner like notes on a page. I take the things I have learned from the different fields of my life and use them together to accomplish simple tasks. "...production, then, is informed by practice and processes associated offered up by the immediate setting as well as practices and processes repurposed from memorials texts, texts involved with previous encounters, and projected texts,

texts involved in anticipated events” (Roozen). This was said by Kevin Roozen - an English professor in Florida. He is basically saying that the skills you use to do something in a specific moment are taken from other times in your life and aggregated together. So, to complete a current assignment, a technique I used in fifth grade could be used in conjunction with a skill I learned in class one week ago. In this manner you can also take skills that you know you will need for the future and blend those into what you already know and implement. So if I need to be able to complete a lab procedure on the first try, I can utilize skills I developed from sight-reading to ease the process.

My literacy of music is multi-faceted, in that I have some sub-literacies within it. I know how to read the music and sing the notes, but I also know how to breathe and make my fingers move so that the same note resonates from an instrument. I know how to move my body and anticipate when the beat hits so that I am in time (both when marching and dancing). I know how to listen to music, and pick out the different phrases, keys or counter rhythms in a song. All these skills are literacies in of themselves, but come together to create a much more profound literacy of music. This literacy has shaped the way I think and see the world. It has contributed to other portions of my life through shared skills. The techniques that I learned to use with music are like tiny chameleons - they can adapt and be used for other literacies as well. Everyone has their own interconnected web of literacies that they use to learn and create; these all come together to mold someone into who they are and how they function.

Works Cited

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Picture of Nippert:

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