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## **Effective and Engaged Followership: Assessing Student Participation in Ensembles**

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by Douglas C. Orzolek

# Effective and Engaged Followership

## Assessing Student Participation in Ensembles



Photo of Douglas C. Orzolek by Liam Doyle

*How do your students participate and interact with their director and with each other in your ensembles? Here are some points to consider.*

**Abstract:** Music educators consider participation to be an important part of learning in their classrooms. And as the era of accountability rages on throughout the field of education, many educators have sought ways to describe the deep engagement that occurs in rehearsals. This article considers the role that the concept of “followership” can play in helping educators explain what engaged participation looks like in ensemble learning. The article also outlines potential implications this concept holds for learning, teaching, assessment, and how we account for participation in our classrooms. Potential academic outcomes for engaged followership include more engaged learners, heightened musical experiences, and strong critical thinking in rehearsals.

**Keywords:** assessment, effective, engagement, followership, leadership, participation

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Educators at all levels and in all types of classroom will likely admit that they emphasize the importance of participation in their classroom. As a parent, I can offer that all my children's teachers include their perception of a student's level of engagement in discussions or other activities as a component of a learner's grade. Likewise, music educators consider participation to be a vital element in their rehearsals and classrooms.<sup>1</sup> Unfortunately, however, a cursory search on the Internet will reveal a few models that attempt to define effective participation. Even in the examples found, it is rare to find substantive definitions of what participation really means in a music classroom, and it is even more unlikely that the criteria provided include any connections to musical knowledge, skills, or understandings that have been learned in class.<sup>2</sup> For example, in addition to observing a student's contribution to the entire group, ensemble directors often consider having a pencil, arriving on time, not chewing gum, showing up to performances or events, and having a good attitude as evidence of a student's strong participation in the ensemble. Are these items really indicative of effective and engaged participation?

In recent years, there has been a significant shift in pedagogical approach that emphasizes the importance of a student's capacity to reflect, collaborate, respond, create, innovate, and make more decisions in their learning experiences, as portrayed in the National Core Arts Standards (for an overview of the 2014 Music Standards, see <https://nafme.org/overview-of-2014-music-standards/>). In other words, teachers are asking students to engage in the processes of learning that require a type of classroom participation that is actively engaged, rigorous, and exciting—changes that can significantly change the nature of the relationship between the teacher and students. While my colleagues are quick to express that this type of collaborative and democratic learning process has been an inherent part of our setting, many have not found a means to define these processes in a

way that allows us to properly consider them in our assessment and evaluation of our students' efforts.<sup>3</sup> Recent thinking and writing outside of the field of education, however, may provide us with a definition of effective and engaged participation that better aligns with the goals and objectives of a music ensemble and a music classroom. This article explores that idea further.

## Leaders and Followers

Many might perceive the relationship between ensemble directors and students to be similar to that of the one that exists between leaders and followers. The nature of the leader/follower relationship has certainly been examined and studied by those from a variety of fields—business, education, music, coaching, politics, and so on—and there is a strong consensus that the rapport between leader and follower holds the key to meeting goals.<sup>4</sup> Recent considerations of this relationship, however, has focused more on the leader's capacity to foster collaboration, facilitate group efforts, and enable followers to solve problems using their creativity.<sup>5</sup> Many refer to this type of leader as the “servant-leader” or “collaborative-leader” since this person elects to take the attention away from his or her role.<sup>6</sup>

While the notion of the collaborative-leader is becoming more ubiquitous in organizations and workplaces all over the United States,<sup>7</sup> the word *follower* still holds the undertone of a person whose responsibility is to be passive, subordinate, and acquiescent. This stereotype is somewhat altered when we refer to this role with the term *followership*.<sup>8</sup> With this change, we begin to see the position in a different light—one that is more reflective of the process of following and one that is more complementary to our concept of leadership. With this subtle change in thinking about followers paired with the contemporary learning approaches used in many schools, perhaps we have entered what might be called an “era of followership,” making this an even important idea to apply in music classrooms.

## Engaged Followership

Throughout the business-related literature, there is not a clear definition of engaged followership. However, several authors have outlined the dispositions of strong followers as a means for us to consider what this might mean for our setting. Author and researcher Robert Kelley was one of the first writers to explore the concept of followership in his landmark article “In Praise of Followers” that was published in the *Harvard Business Review*.<sup>9</sup> Kelley is very much of the mindset that we focus too much on developing leaders and leadership skills, and as a result, this “preoccupation with leadership keeps us from considering the nature and the importance of the follower.”<sup>10</sup> Kelley felt so strongly about the role of followers that he is responsible for the phrase “the art of followership.”

In describing effective followership, Kelley offers the following: “What distinguishes an effective from an ineffective follower is enthusiastic, intelligent, and self-reliant participation—without star billing—in the pursuit of an organizational goal.”<sup>11</sup> Kelley states that while there are several types of followers, “star followers think for themselves, are very active, and have very positive energy. They do not accept the leader's decision without their own independent evaluation of its soundness. If they agree with the leader, they give full support. If they disagree, they challenge the leader, offering constructive alternatives that will help the leader and organization get where they want to go.”<sup>12</sup> To enact this type of followership, Kelley posits that effective followers must hold these qualities: “They need to manage themselves well; They must be committed to the organization and to a purpose, principle, or person outside themselves; They must build their competence and focus their efforts for maximum impact; and, they should be courageous, honest, and credible.”<sup>13</sup>

Kelley's ideas spawned other researchers and thinkers to consider the characteristics found in strong followers. Educator and writer David Gill, in

summarizing the ideas of Harvard University professor of public leadership Barbara Kellerman, suggested that good followers understand and commit to a team's mission, take personal responsibility, are well prepared for their tasks, and support their teammates.<sup>14</sup> Deanna Raffo, a professor of business management, suggested many of those same dispositions but also added the importance of followers maintaining a positive attitude, being a contributor, and modeling ethical behavior.<sup>15</sup> Researchers Jon Howell and Maria Mendez agreed with many of those ideas but also stressed the importance of followership behaviors that include "the ability to maintain collaborative and supportive relationships; and providing courageous support to the leader."<sup>16</sup>

An informal frequency analysis of the words and phrases used in the related literature to describe effective and engaged followership revealed the following terms: *responsible, organized, confident, passionate, creative, intelligent, understanding, open-minded, and respectful*. I believe that these descriptors are highly symbolic of the descriptions found in the existing literature on effective followership. Those same terms seem to parallel Kelley's initial thoughts about good followers shared in the earlier paragraph. In the end, however, all these behaviors and dispositions seem to describe followers who are engaged with their leaders to actively cooperate in achieving organizational goals.

Some of the most forward-thinking writing about the art of effective and engaged followership is drawn from the fields of education and music performance. Specifically, the authors consider and discuss the significance of collaborative learning experiences in classrooms, the value and importance of practicing and performing as an ensemble, and the evolving roles that leaders and followers play in schools, classrooms, and music groups.

The concept of collaborative learning is one of the most prominent themes found in the followership literature, particularly as it relates to classroom work. Author and speaker Ira Chaleff

considered group learning in the general classroom to be so important that he advocated for engaged participation to be a major component of students' grades.<sup>17</sup> Writer Krista Kleiner agreed and called for schools to establish a goal of requiring students to work together rather than competing with one another.<sup>18</sup> Chaleff took that concept one step further and called on college admission officers to base acceptance on a student's contribution to the whole of their school community rather than solely considering leadership roles.<sup>19</sup> Kelley even suggested that the "need-to-develop-leadership" approach taken by many schools to resolve peer pressure-driven social issues is erroneous. He advocates for developing more followership skills in students, which will help them "learn how to protect themselves from leaders who encourage them to engage in either self-destructive or socially destructive behavior."<sup>20</sup> Based on his familiarity with music groups as well as their capacity to work together toward a common goal, writer and former music educator Paul Newton referred to school- and business-based working teams as "learning ensembles" and discussed the need for members to have "practice sessions" that focus on developing the skills of communication, consensus building, and shared leadership.<sup>21</sup>

My first encounter with the idea of engaged followership in the performance of music stemmed from a comment shared by amateur musician and writer Joan Oliver Goldsmith in her book *How Can We Keep from Singing*. The book is intended to describe the joy she feels from her experiences as a member of an amateur choir, but it was her description of why she participates in making music that really caught my attention: "Most of us who sing in a chorus do it because we like following."<sup>22</sup> At first, the educator in me felt appalled by this statement, as my personal view aligns with a more collaborative view of my work with ensembles, but further analysis of Goldsmith's comments revealed that she meant something more akin to what has been addressed earlier in this article: "Choral singers are

followers. Not mindless automatons, but people who listen, digest, and process a wealth of information, then execute the directions as understood. . . . The flexibility to respond to ever-changing situations requires brains.<sup>[23]</sup> . . . We may follow the conductor, but we serve the music."<sup>24</sup> While not speaking directly to the concepts of followership that have been described earlier, this example certainly speaks to a spirit of music-making that engages the musician in a manner well beyond the terms that we typically use to describe and evaluate participation. Most important, she stressed that the work of ensemble is dedicated to meeting the needs of something greater than the call of a leader. Rather, their focus is on an outcome dictated by the musical score.

There are no specific applications or definitions of followership found in the music education literature. An idea related to a more collaborative rehearsal setting in school ensembles—one that reconsiders the roles of the conductor/leader and that of the musicians/followers—has been addressed, and it provides an interesting parallel to what is proposed in this article. Music educator Ramona Wis considered this thinking in her book *The Conductor as Leader*. While her book is aimed at helping school-based conductors reconsider their role as a leader in their classrooms, her approach stems from trusting student musicians to take "more ownership of the creative decision-making process [so that] they feel more invested in the ensemble"<sup>25</sup>—in other words, students who are more engaged in what has been earlier described as the concepts of followership. In essence, Wis advocates for a much more collaborative rehearsal and process-oriented rehearsal rather than one geared toward achieving a final product.<sup>26</sup> In other words, a rehearsal setting that allows "the individual musicians to become more than good at following directions."<sup>27</sup> In her efforts to define a collaborative conductor, Wis also begins to provide us with a vision of what effective and engaged followership might look like among the members of our school ensembles. Her

ideas will be considered further in the next section of this article.

There are several other useful but indirect references to followership found in music-related literature. Researcher Louis Hanzlik considered the traditional chamber music rehearsal setting—one in which the coach served a more “authoritarian role”—and a setting that was more collaborative—where the coach served as a “facilitator” of a more “performer engaged” music-making process. Hanzlik reported that the students in the ensembles favored the latter approach and felt the musical outcome was stronger as a result of the approach. The players also admitted to be a bit “shocked” by the approach since “nobody had ever treated them that way.”<sup>28</sup> Taking that concept further, Barbara Kellerman—in her explanation of effective followership in the chamber music rehearsals her colleagues in business settings—referred to the Orpheus Chamber Orchestra and its process for developing their musical performances without an appointed leader or conductor; in other words, the musicians are entirely responsible for the rehearsal process as well as the musical outcomes.<sup>29</sup> Scott Jones, a music educator at Ohio State University in Columbus, has applied this model to his work with younger musicians and has written about the application of this process in his ensembles with great success for both learning and performance.<sup>30</sup> Jones shared the following: “It is one thing for musicians to be *part* of [the] process, and entirely another to be *responsible* for it. I have found that the insights that come from non-conducted rehearsal and performance to be transformational for our students.”<sup>31</sup>

Some of the writings provide us with warnings about what happens if conductors choose not to take a more collaborative style in their rehearsals. Kellerman outlined the removal of Riccardo Muti as music director at La Scala when the entire company asked him to resign due to his “imperial” approach to leadership and lack of engagement of the musicians and staff in decision making.<sup>32</sup> Writer Don Yaeger, in exploring

concepts of leadership and followership in the concert band at the United States Military Academy at West Point, uncovered some valuable reminders from the cadet-musicians in the ensemble. One musician told Yaeger: “When [conductors] micro-manage us, we give you exactly what you want. And nothing more! You get the bare minimum. When you back off, we listen more to our colleagues and we can play off of each other . . . when you micro-manage, you display a lack of trust in your team and you effectively suck the energy out of the room.”<sup>33</sup>

### Effective Followership

If we agree that the concepts of effective and engaged followership hold value as a component of learning in the ensemble setting, then the next step is to contemplate its potential applications. One means to do that is to explore potential learning outcomes based on the theories and ideas presented here. In my experience, it is imperative that the basis for any learning outcomes rest within the mission and philosophy of the overall music program—if we believe that followership is an important process for our students to learn, then our overarching belief statements should reflect that desire. Furthermore, those outcomes should be framed in such a way that they describe in very clear terms exactly what the students will be doing as they work toward accomplishing those outcomes. How will students demonstrate their followership skills, and how will we describe the levels of engaged followership achievement? In addition, it is essential that the evidence of a student meeting these outcomes is defined and outlined prior to initiating them in the classroom. Once these things are established, then, and only then, are we prepared to apply the concepts. The next part of this article gives consideration to these issues.

Using the dispositions and characteristics described earlier in this article, educators can develop a listing of outcomes that can be adapted for use in the setting of a musical ensemble. Chaleff

suggests the following, with potential adjustments provided in brackets:

- Thorough preparation of all parts for the [rehearsal], class discussions, exercises [and other activities];
- The courage to share your honest opinion and feelings, even when you suspect that these are not the same as those of your instructor or classmates;
- Your willingness to ask questions on [music and rehearsal]-related issues that are important to you [and the progress of the group];
- Your ability to draw out [and engage] the quieter members in your [section];
- Your ability to contribute to the overall learning climate through your enthusiasm, vitality, good humor, to help fellow students inside and outside of class, and informal leadership when appropriate.<sup>34</sup>

Hanzlik outlined some additional outcomes based on his research into chamber ensembles and engaged followership. Under the articulated mission of “fostering musical communities” among students, he desired that students develop a “notion of musical citizenship . . . that sought to broaden the concept of group or ensemble beyond that of mere music making: Those were *one another* (reciprocal respect), *collaborative leadership and engaged followership* (musical and social leadership), and, *thinking and moving together* (critical reflection and problem solving).”<sup>35</sup> These ideas also align with the dispositions and characteristics described earlier in the article, but it will be very important for educators to foster conversations about what each one of these mean before they engage in the rehearsal process.

Some additional outcome ideas specific to music education might be drawn from the National Association for Music Education (NAfME) *Workbook for Building and Evaluating Effective Music Education in the School Ensemble*. While this resource was not intended to outline followership objectives, some of the statements related to student efforts might serve the purposes considered here



well. These statements may be a means to consider students demonstrating engaged followership within the context of a rehearsal period. These ideas are presented with possible adaptations provided in brackets:

- Students assist teacher in developing [and supporting] rehearsal management guidelines and behavioral signals;
- [Students] remind classmates of their [followership] roles within the ensemble and redirect them when they get off task;
- Rehearsal routines are well understood and may be initiated by students;
- The rehearsal culture is an aesthetically vibrant and pleasing place, characterized by a shared belief in the importance of each individual student's musicianship to the realization of the musical score;
- Students assume responsibility for high-quality music-making by offering constructive criticism, suggesting various musical techniques or interpretations, and helping peers;
- Students monitor their own work habits and hold each other accountable;
- Students contribute to interpretative decisions.<sup>36</sup>

Kelley suggested that students participate in a form of training to ensure that there was an established sense of what effective and engaged followership meant. He suggested that the following topics might be considered: "improving independent critical thinking; disagreeing agreeably; building credibility; aligning personal and organizational goals; acting responsibly toward the organization; understanding the similarities and differences between leadership and followership roles."<sup>37</sup> While these ideas are very broad and not specific to music, they could serve as a starting point to initiate discussions with the students about what these dispositions mean as well as how they would be applied in a rehearsal setting. The next section of the article outlines how a music educator might convert these ideas into something for his or her classroom.

Using these ideas, my students and I decided to develop our own set of effective and engaged followership criteria. I find that engaging students in this process is very similar to involving them with other facets of our ensemble, for example, selecting repertoire, establishing classroom rules, or any other facet of the band program. I would encourage those working with younger students to choose one idea as a starting point. Our final decisions about these criteria were made after careful consideration not only of the concepts shared here but also with the goals, objectives, and realities of our ensemble in mind. With all these things in mind, the students and I worked in small teams to establish and craft these statements as our "engaged and effective followership" criteria:

- Involved in all facets of rehearsals, including warm-ups, sectionals, and discussions;
- Shares honest opinions and criticisms in a respectful manner;
- Helps others before, during, and after rehearsals;
- Supports the short- and long-term goals and objectives of the group;
- Monitors and reflects on personal efforts to help the group improve.

Of course, an essential aspect of any learning—including learning the followership process—is finding an appropriate means to assess and evaluate the degree to which a student has met specific objectives and outcomes. With this set of skills and the approach outlined, one solution would be to ask the followers themselves to participate in the process. So, as outcomes are being discussed and developed, potential assessment tools should be addressed as well. Some additional tools may include the monitoring and noting of students' engagement throughout a discussion; student reflections and comments provided in the form of an essay, interview, or even short phrases; responses shared by students from questions provided by the teacher and other students; rubrics, checklists, and other instruments that

are developed from established criteria; or, as Chaleff suggests, a survey that asks students to rate themselves and/or their collaborators' followership skills through a survey tool.<sup>38</sup> In the end, the assessment and evaluation of these skills should appropriately represent the weight and importance that have been placed on the development of followership skills.

With the help of the students in the ensemble, I used the aforementioned criteria to create a short rubric (see Figure 1) that allowed for effective and engaged followership to be assessed by three different parties: myself (the director), a peer selected by the student, and the student. The averaged "followership score" is used to determine a student's course grade and is weighted at 50 percent, with the other half of the grade based on performance-related assessments. Of course, the greatest value of this tool is the increased accountability, sense of ownership, relevant discussion, improved participation, and increased performance levels that I have witnessed as a result of our implementation of these ideas. And, as always, music educators should adapt and adjust this type of rubric to the needs and guidelines established by their own schools.

## Engaged Followership

It is my hope that music educators will consider the "art of followership" as something worth further exploration and consideration. As the era of accountability rages on in the field of education and teachers are called on to explain their evaluation of student learning, the ideas presented here should support and describe the deep engagement that occurs in the ensemble classroom on a daily basis. I have found that thinking about class participation in the light of effective and engaged followership has greatly enhanced my students' class participation and, in turn, their growth as musicians. It has also helped me to redefine my role as a classroom "leader" and helped me to align my teaching with best practice.

**FIGURE 1**

**Engaged and Effective Followership Rubric**

	<i>High Level of Engaged and Effective Followership</i>	<i>Average Level of Engaged and Effective Followership</i>	<i>Low Level of Engaged and Effective Followership</i>
<i>Involved</i> in all parts of rehearsals including warm-ups, sectionals, and discussions.	Always on-task; Parts are prepared well; Responds to questions and suggestions; Serves as a model for others.	Mostly on-task; most parts are prepared; Responds to questions and suggestions, but without specificity.	Off-task at times; Parts are poorly prepared; Does not respond to questions and suggestions.
<i>Shares</i> honest opinions and criticisms in a respectful manner;	Opinions, ideas and criticisms are specific and include approaches to resolve issues or concerns; Serves as a model for others.	Opinions and ideas are appropriate, but not specific enough to suggest potential directions for improvement.	Opinions and ideas lack substance; Criticisms lack suggestions of what/how to improve.
<i>Helps</i> others before, during and after rehearsals;	Seeks opportunities to assist, encourage and reach out to others who have questions, problems, or concerns; Serves as a model for others.	Willingly assists, encourages and reaches out to others who have questions, problems, or concerns.	Needs to be prompted to support and encourage others.
<i>Supports</i> the short- and long-term goals and objectives of the group;	Understands and reinforces the aims of each rehearsal and champions the direction of the group; Serves as a model for others.	Understands and reinforces the aims of each rehearsal and champions the direction of the group.	Cannot articulate nor affirm the aims of each rehearsal or the direction of the group.
<i>Monitors and Reflects</i> on personal efforts to help the group improve.	Ideas and comments are very honest and specific. Personal goals are clearly outlined; Serves as a model to others.	Ideas and comments are general and suggestions for how to improve lack specificity.	Ideas and comments are not specific and do not share directions for improvement.

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