

Principles, perhaps

Whether they are called techniques, systems, approaches, methods, explorations, or any other label, and whether their practitioners admit to it or not, anything we teach in the arts is based on some set of underlying propositions. If these propositions are examined regularly, poked at occasionally to enliven them, soundly thrashed if required, rearranged when necessary, dusted off, polished, and generally looked after, the owner can offer them – all shiny and nearly new – to the partaker as principles. If they are neglected or ignored they gradually atrophy into inert assumptions. I hope that the following list will bear scrutiny as the principles on which this text is based and that the text will bear witness to the principles.

1. **This work tries to respond to the genuine needs of the actor or vocal performer as related to speech.** The text attempts to stay true to the actual, practical needs of the actor as distinct from applying a system based on the convenience of the teacher.
2. **This work is based on the observation that the vocal and speech needs of the actor within performance are constantly changing and are never fixed.** The actor, as an enactor of human behavior, is a scavenger of all behaviors and therefore of all speech actions. They are all useful to the vocal performer.
3. **This work recognizes that biases about the beauty of individual speech sounds are endemic and inevitable.** All speakers possess them, no matter how broad their linguistic experience or eclectic their approach to art – or, for that matter, how virtuous their aesthetic politics. In themselves, biases are usually innocuous as long as the possessor does not take them too seriously; however, when combined with other social influences, they can inflate themselves into larger and always questionable judgments about the relative worth of accents or dialects. Then the actor is in dangerous territory.
4. **This work tries to place a firewall between these inevitable biases – including those of the author – and the pedagogy itself.** It does so not because of “political correctness” but because such biases – however subtle their manifestation in the teaching of speech – are always limiting to the actor if they start to set barriers against the explorations that the actor can make.
5. **The only “standard” that we can set for speech training is intelligibility.** By “standard” I mean a constant criterion that should be adhered to always. Actors must always be understood easily by their listeners. Everything else is optional: beautiful sound, interesting accents, speaking trippingly on the tongue – all are optional; highly desirable in many instances, of course, but not a constant criterion. Or, to put it in its opposite context, speech that is merely intelligible and nothing more is likely to be uninteresting, but it fulfills the most fundamental requirement of human communication and the only requirement that remains constant in all circumstances. Artful speech that is unintelligible serves no purpose at all.
6. **This work is based on the development of useful skills that the actor can own.** No training program can teach an actor all the accents she or he might need throughout a career. No set of classes can acquaint an actor with all the vocal demands that a career will elicit. But focused training can provide tools that the actor can use to shape the unique voice of every character that the actor will ever play.
7. **This work embraces complexity in its content.** Complexity nourishes art. Reduction of the complexity of speech choices reduces the art.
8. **This work embraces contradiction as an essential tool of teaching.** It is always interesting and useful to learn how to put more activity into speech actions. It is also always interesting and useful to learn how to do less. Getting stuck anywhere is never interesting.