



Exploring the Educational, Artistic, and Cultural Impact of the Eastern Cape Voice Symposium on University Voice Students

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Article Info

Received : September, 2025

Approved: November, 2025

Published : December, 2025

Keywords:

Eastern Cape Voice Symposium, African Musical Heritage, Student Development, Inter-University Collaborations, Music Education in South Africa

Abstract

This study investigates the educational, artistic, and cultural impact of the Eastern Cape Voice Symposium on university voice students, with specific attention to how the event shaped vocal development, academic formation, and engagement with African musical identity. The symposium brought together 21 voice students from three universities in the Eastern Cape region, along with lecturers and African composers who facilitated masterclasses, discussions, and collaborative learning activities. A qualitative case study approach was employed, and nine students participated in semi-structured interviews to reflect on their experiences. Thematic analysis was used to interpret the data, focusing on academic growth, performance development, and cultural engagement. Findings indicate that the symposium contributed to improved vocal technique, artistic confidence, and motivation to explore African art music. Participants valued exposure to diverse pedagogical approaches, opportunities for cross-institutional collaboration, and direct interaction with African composers, which supported cultural pride and critical reflection on African identity in music studies. The study recommends institutionalising similar symposia as recurring platforms for collaborative learning, cultural exchange, and curriculum transformation. It contributes to existing scholarship by demonstrating the transformative potential of short-term immersive learning experiences in voice education and offers a framework for culturally grounded and decolonised vocal pedagogy in South Africa.

INTRODUCTION

The Eastern Cape Voice Symposium is a collaborative initiative established to bring together voice students, lecturers, and African composers from universities across the Eastern Cape region. Positioned as a site of artistic exchange and pedagogical experimentation, the symposium provides a shared platform for vocal performance, research development, and cultural dialogue grounded in African musical heritage. Hosted during South Africa's 30th year of democracy, the event acknowledges the historical role of music as a tool of resistance, identity formation, and social cohesion, while positioning vocal performance as a critical space for cultural reclamation and creative agency (Bergeron, 2020; Jaftha, 2021; Pooley et al, 2024). Through composer-led masterclasses, cross-institutional workshops, and collaborative performance spaces, the symposium enables students to engage with African vocal aesthetics, linguistic identities, and performance practices in ways that traditional studio-based training does not always facilitate.

Existing scholarship recognises the value of cultural immersion, mentorship, and experiential learning in music education, but university voice training in South Africa continues to be heavily informed by Western classical pedagogies (Clark, 2024; Yende, 2024). These systems prioritise Western tonalities,

phrasing, and vocal aesthetics, often marginalising indigenous African vocal traditions, performance epistemologies, and informal knowledge systems that hold equal artistic legitimacy. As scholars such as Ofosu-Asare (2024) and Royster (2020) argue, the integration of African art music into voice training is not merely a matter of content diversification, but an ontological shift that repositions African worldviews, techniques, and performance histories as central rather than supplementary. In this context, composer presence becomes pedagogically critical: interactions with living African composers move learning from textual consumption to dialogic knowledge-building, enabling students to experience compositional intention, cultural memory, and embodied meaning as part of the interpretive process (Malgoubri, 2025; Onwuegbuzie et al, 2024; Yanko, 2021).

Despite this momentum, current research remains fragmented. Studies have addressed components such as African art music, transformative learning, inter-university collaboration, or composer engagement; however, these dimensions are typically examined in isolation. No empirical study has investigated the combined impact of composer mentorship, inter-institutional collaboration, and immersive short-term learning encounters on the academic, musical, and personal development of voice students in the South African context. This absence is noteworthy, as the lack of evidence limits the extent to which

transformation in voice pedagogy can be demonstrated beyond theory and policy discourse. Without practical models, curriculum transformation risks operating at a conceptual level, disconnected from classroom realities and performance spaces.

Gap Analysis and Novelty

This study addresses this gap by examining the Eastern Cape Voice Symposium as a case of culturally responsive, immersive, and collaborative voice education. Its novelty lies in the fact that it:

1. analyses an actual pedagogical intervention, not a hypothetical model;
2. documents how students negotiate identity, confidence, and artistic belonging in African repertoire;
3. focuses on composer-student-lecturer triangulation, a relationship rarely theorised in South African vocal pedagogy;
4. explores transformation through practice and participation, not curriculum rhetoric alone.

Purpose and Scope

The study, therefore, investigates how participation in the symposium contributes to students' academic formation, vocal development, artistic identity, and cultural engagement. It further examines how collaboration among lecturers and composers shapes student learning, fosters cross-institutional partnerships, and challenges Eurocentric pedagogical hierarchies within voice training.

Research Aim

This study aims to explore the influence of the Eastern Cape Voice Symposium on the academic, musical, and personal development of participating voice students while critically assessing how the event fosters engagement with African musical heritage, promotes inter-university collaboration, and contributes to the transformation of voice pedagogy in South Africa's post-apartheid higher education landscape.

METHODS

4.1 Research Design

This study employed an interpretive qualitative case study design to investigate students' learning experiences during the Eastern Cape Voice Symposium. A qualitative approach was selected because the study seeks to understand subjective perspectives, cultural meaning-making, and artistic development that cannot be measured quantitatively (Sharp, 2021; Williamon et al., 2021). The case study design was appropriate as the symposium represents a single, bounded educational event through which real-world learning processes can be examined in depth (Cleland et al., 2019). This design supported an analysis of how the symposium's immersive structure—composer mentorship, cross-institutional interaction, and practical vocal training—shaped participants' academic and musical development.

4.2 Participants and Sampling

Purposive sampling was used to identify participants with direct experience of the symposium. The broader cohort consisted of 21 undergraduate voice students; however, nine students voluntarily participated in interviews. They represented different academic levels (first to final year) and attended from universities across the Eastern Cape region. This sampling approach ensured the inclusion of individuals who could provide rich, relevant, and diverse accounts of the symposium's impact (London, 2022). For anonymity, pseudonyms were assigned, and institutional identifiers were removed.

4.3 Data Collection Procedures

Data were generated through semi-structured interviews, chosen for their ability to provide both structure and flexibility in exploring lived experience (Rabionet, 2022). Interviews were conducted individually (online or in person, depending on availability) and ranged from 45–60 minutes. The interview guide focused on five domains:

1. academic and vocal development
2. cultural identity and artistic confidence
3. Interaction with lecturers and African composers
4. Collaboration and peer learning
5. Recommendations for future symposia

All participants provided informed consent before participation. Interviews were audio-recorded with permission and transcribed verbatim.

4.4 Data Analysis

Data were analysed thematically following Braun et al (2023) six-phase procedure. Transcripts were first read repeatedly for familiarisation, after which initial codes were generated to capture significant expressions of experience. Codes were then organised into preliminary themes that reflected recurring patterns across participants. Themes were reviewed, refined, and named to ensure conceptual clarity and alignment with the research questions. The outcome was a structured thematic framework representing academic, artistic, and cultural dimensions of student development. The process enabled the construction of a coherent narrative that integrates commonalities and divergences in participant perspectives.

4.5 Theoretical Integration

Data interpretation was guided by Transformative Learning Theory (TLT) and Cultural-Historical Activity Theory (CHAT). TLT (Jin & Rowan, 2022) was used to analyse reflective shifts in student identity, confidence, and understanding of African vocal practice, particularly as influenced by composer mentorship and cross-institutional learning. CHAT (Vygotsky, as applied in Kim, 213; Lim, 2014) positioned the symposium as an activity system where knowledge is co-constructed through social interaction, cultural mediation, and shared artistic goals. Combined, these theories provided a lens to assess how learning occurred across personal, social, and cultural dimensions within the symposium environment.

4.6 Ethical Considerations

Ethical clearance will be obtained before the commencement of data collection. Participants were informed of the study's purpose, their right to withdraw without penalty, and the confidentiality measures in place. Data are stored securely and reported without identifying information.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section integrates the study's findings with Transformative Learning Theory (TLT) and Cultural-Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) to explain how the Eastern Cape Voice Symposium influenced students' academic, artistic, and personal development. Three thematic dimensions emerged from the analysis: educational and artistic enrichment; personal and interpersonal growth; and future developmental priorities. These findings are based on responses from nine participants out of the 21 students who attended the symposium.

5.1 Educational and Artistic Enrichment

5.1.1 Exposure to African Vocal Traditions

Students reported that interacting with African composers expanded their understanding of African vocal music as both artistic practice and cultural knowledge. Participants emphasised that learning directly from composers humanised the repertoire and revealed emotional, linguistic, and historical layers not typically accessed through traditional classroom instruction.

"Meeting composers and hearing their stories helped me understand that every song

has an emotional story we must reflect when performing." (P2)

This reflects TLT, where new encounters function as "disorienting moments" (Milton, 2025) that prompt reflection and transformation. For many students, the recognition of African music as expressive cultural memory, rather than a supplemental genre, triggered a shift in artistic values and strengthened cultural identification (Rochester, 2024).

Additionally, the interpretive focus on isingqi (rhythmic speech patterns) supports CHAT's emphasis on cultural mediation, where language and voice operate as social tools that shape knowledge and performance practice (Xueying & Xin, 2024).

5.1.2 Development of Technique and Performance Confidence

A recurring theme was improved vocal assurance and technical agency. Students described the environment as non-judgmental and pedagogically diverse, which encouraged risk-taking:

"After working with coaches in a judgment-free space, I left the symposium feeling more confident in my voice." (P3)

This outcome is consistent with TLT's link between internal reflection, confidence, and identity re-negotiation. Exposure to diverse teaching strategies also supports CHAT's activity system, where learning emerges through collaboration between tools (voice, repertoire), community (students and lecturers), and rules (shared artistic goals).

5.2 Personal and Interpersonal Growth

5.2.1 Confidence, Identity, and Emotional Renewal

Many participants reported a reduction in performance anxiety and heightened self-belief:

“I am usually nervous, but here I found the freedom to sing and be myself.” (P5)

This suggests that learning experiences were not merely skill-based but transformative of self, aligning directly with TLT’s premise that shifts in assumptions can lead to identity reconstruction.

5.2.2 Peer Learning and Social Cohesion

Students highlighted the benefit of engaging with peers from other institutions, describing the experience as motivating and creatively inspiring.

“Hearing students from other places helped me learn different styles... I wish we had done a choral piece together.” (P9)

This illustrates CHAT’s notion that learning is situated in community interaction. Even informal interactions acted as “sites of knowledge production,” reinforcing that cross-institutional collaboration can fill gaps left by isolated training environments.

5.3 Priorities for Future Development

While students were highly positive, they identified three areas for growth:

1. Structured ensemble activities (e.g., choral works) to reinforce collaboration
2. Longer session times for deeper engagement
3. Broader representation of African linguistic, cultural, and stylistic diversity

These priorities align with recent scholarship arguing that decolonial arts education must intentionally create structures

that support participatory learning, shared authority, and reflexive collaboration (Melro & Ballantyne, 2022; Rosselli et al, 2025).

5.4 Synthesis

The combined impact of composer mentorship, collaborative learning, and intercultural dialogue demonstrates the symposium’s effectiveness as a culturally grounded learning space. TLT explains how students re-evaluated their artistic identities and cultural positioning through reflective encounters, while CHAT clarifies how learning emerged through social systems, tools, and collective participation.

Together, these theories help illustrate that the symposium did not simply “teach” students; it repositioned them within the learning environment as active co-constructors of knowledge, identity, and cultural meaning.

CONCLUSIONS

The findings of this study demonstrate that the Eastern Cape Voice Symposium functions as a meaningful educational intervention that advances the artistic, academic, and cultural development of undergraduate voice students. Through encounters with African composers, exposure to diverse pedagogical approaches, and opportunities for cross-institutional collaboration, students experienced both cognitive and affective shifts that extended beyond technical vocal practice. These outcomes illustrate the role of Transformative Learning Theory (TLT) in explaining how new artistic experiences prompted reflection, identity negotiation, and increased confidence, while Cultural-Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) clarifies how learning was co-constructed through interaction, dialogue, and culturally situated mentorship.

Instead of treating African repertoire as supplementary content, the symposium repositioned African musical knowledge as the organising principle of the learning process. This ideological shift underscores the symposium's significance as more than a training event; it operated as a pedagogical space that validated African epistemologies, challenged Eurocentric norms in vocal education, and promoted culturally grounded understandings of artistic practice. The nine student narratives analysed in this study illustrate how the integration of African aesthetic values, communal learning, and composer-led instruction can foster a renewed sense of artistic purpose and affirm students' positions within South Africa's evolving musical landscape.

The study contributes to ongoing scholarly debates on decolonial music education by evidencing how short-term, immersive, and culturally responsive initiatives can produce measurable pedagogical impact. It also extends theoretical discussions by providing concrete examples of how TLT and CHAT interact in practice to support holistic student development. The Eastern Cape Voice Symposium, therefore, represents a viable model for culturally embedded learning that foregrounds identity, collaboration, and reflexivity as essential components of vocal pedagogy in post-apartheid South Africa.

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