

Online Professional Development for Early Childhood Music

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Evolving technology offers new options for professional development. Online courses have become standard in many disciplines. Can online professional development serve early childhood music?

Recent initiatives of the Come Children Sing Institute demonstrate that online professional development can effectively train teachers of early childhood music, informing day-to-day teaching while providing long-term monitoring and mentoring of teachers. Three innovative models serving teachers from non-musicians through graduate music education students bring new insights to the challenges of training teachers.

One new model was developed in collaboration with the music department of Indiana University/Purdue University, Indianapolis, and the two-county Geminus Head Start of Northwest Indiana. A three-hour graduate or undergraduate course, "Early Childhood Music Learning," was designed as an online course for Head Start teachers, with three face-to-face classes on their own site. Participating Head Start teachers had Associate's degrees in early childhood with many years in the Head Start classroom. They were non-musicians, novices at the computer, and had never taken an online course. Yet these seasoned professionals became an inspiration in their development as teachers of early childhood music.

Another model was created in November, '08, when a teacher in Greece requested long-distance study at the Come Children Sing Institute. She served as both music therapist and teacher of early childhood music classes in Greece. She had a Master's degree in psychology, extensive coursework in music, and no experience with online learning. The tailor-made, online course continues in its second year.

A third model was born in the fall of '09 with a graduate music education course at a state university. The year-long course, designed and taught by a university professor, is primarily online and meets with the professor monthly on campus.

All three models for online professional development used Come Children, Sing! Online Music Classes for young children as "text." Teachers implemented the developmental online music curriculum with their own children, establishing an ongoing music learning laboratory for each teacher. Online material about the process of music learning and the implementation of each lesson informed teachers throughout the course of study, while sequential lessons and MP3 files served the classroom. Each of the different models included use of the Come Children Sing Institute SONG LIBRARY CD-ROM, and all but Head Start teachers engaged with the e-book, *Letters on Music Learning* (Pinzino, 2007).

The greatest triumph in the online professional development was the extraordinary growth of the teachers. Early childhood teachers rose to a new level of understanding about music learning and a whole new level of artistry. A unique benefit of the online training was the ongoing mentoring and monitoring of teacher growth, through every step in the process of music learning. "Online

support” serves teaching as well as technology. One of the greatest joys was the close connection that developed between the online instructor and the students of music learning. The intimacy of online instruction can sometimes exceed that of live classes. More than four years of addressing music learning in online classes suggests that the virtual classroom can be as vibrant as the live classroom.

In Practice

Head Start teachers and the teacher in Greece had previously done music and movement activities in their classrooms, but they were unaware of the process of music learning, its importance in the earliest years, and the kinds of musical activities that stimulate music learning. It was necessary to differentiate between music for entertainment, music for learning, and music for music learning; to present the similarities between learning language and learning music, but to distinguish between the thinking mind that processes words and the musical mind that processes rhythm and tonal. Courses were designed to provide the tools for teachers with and without musical background to experience the ongoing process of music learning, to find joy and confidence in nurturing music learning in the classroom, and to unleash the artistry of teachers and children.

Head Start Assignments included weekly implementation of sequential online lessons with MP3 files, “lab reports” with lesson plans and reflections on each week’s lessons, weekly “online items” that included quizzes, surveys, self evaluation, and peer sharing, reviews of songs for music learning for children from birth through eight, and short papers on music learning addressing early childhood teachers and parents. The non-credit course for the teacher in Greece was designed for the teacher to move through the online curriculum at her own pace, with the periodic submission of reflections on her teaching, her own growth and that of the children. Occasional Skype sessions rounded out her study.

The Head Start teachers were masters with three, four, and five year old children. These non-academic, non-musicians were very committed teachers, undaunted by the challenges of disadvantaged children. They were highly creative, adaptive, and able to use what they had in the classroom in new ways to stimulate music learning. They were comfortable with movement and non-verbal communication with children, very observant of children’s response, and delighted to open new doors for their children’s development.

Weekly assignments guided Head Start teachers, while their growth in nurturing music learning became apparent through weekly lab reports, email, and online assignments. The teachers could not read music, yet immersed children in various tonalities and meters, engaged children in rhythm dialogue, resting tone activities, macro/micro beat activities, and art songs for young children, and reviewed many musically sophisticated songs for children from birth through age eight.

Teachers implemented two assigned lessons each week with the children, creatively designing the activities and scheduling them as they chose. Each lesson included a rhythm activity, a tonal activity, and a song, and teachers could revisit previous lessons at any time. Lab reports invited teachers to reflect weekly on their own growth and their children’s, the lesson plans they

designed for rhythm and tonal activities, use of movement, classroom management, children's response, and observations of musical behavior.

In Their Own Words

Regular reports came in about children's growing attention to rhythm and to tonal, teachers' own musical growth, as well as comfort and creativity in leading activities for music learning. Teachers experimented with various times of the day, large and small groups of children, and different techniques. Some teachers found the assigned lessons aided classroom management. Some related surprise when children requested the rhythm or tonal activities, and described various occasions when children spontaneously started the activities, including during lunch, playtime, or in the bathroom. Some noted individual children's responses in relation to other subject areas, and reported incidents of non-English speaking children reticent to engage in anything verbal, participating in rhythm and tonal activities.

Teachers logged observations of their children's new musical behaviors and artistic movement. They described their own growing musicality and comfort level with the sequential music activities. Most stunning were the teachers' accounts of reaching a higher level of artistry as musicians themselves and with the children, and their ease with music concepts and terminology that were all new to them. Head Start teachers chose to continue the online music curriculum with their children after the college credit course had ended.

Head Start teachers work with our most challenging preschoolers. The love, understanding, and acceptance that these teachers radiated for their children, both in writing and in the three face-to-face classes, were commendable. Their creative know-how in working with their children, while soaring to greater heights in music learning, was inspiring. Their more limited writing skill could not mask their extraordinary growth as teachers of music. Here are the teachers' own words, unedited, drawn from various online assignments throughout the semester.

Early weeks:

"I was a bit surprised at their faces and how much fun they had with the Tonal activities."

"The rhythm gets their attention, the tonal they liked the best. the behaviors that seem to show their growth is their attentiveness."

"I was even more surprised that the children were able to do the second Tonal as a group and continued the Tonal after I turned off the computer."

"I am beginning to notice that in this group the children that I have the most concerns about respond to the music activities more than their day to day routines that include verbal directions."

Later in the term:

"It was delightful seeing the tonality dominate the activity."

“The children imitated my swaying and bouncing movement with a natural flow while exercising the Macro/Micro Beat with very little support from me. The children also initiated the Rhythm Dialogue chanting BAH in Lesson 6 as if they were engaged in a language conversation with each other.”

“The children feel their movements within themselves and begin to move accordinglyit’s natural as well as very beautiful to watch.”

“I was quite surprised how attentive the children were to the The Frog and the Cherry Petal activity. (Art Song) We did this activity for at least ten minutes and no one gave any indication that they wanted to stop the song.”

“My attention was drawn to the Art Song, Never In a Hurry. The children were mesmerized as I sang this song. The more I sang it the more compelling it became to the children as well as myself.”

“I remember how the children sat so quiet and still when I started to sing the Art Song, Never in a Hurry. It was like someone had cast a spell on them...”

“Wow, I’m having so much fun leading these artists into musicianship. I find great satisfaction in being intimately involved with the activities. I take the music seriously, yet playfully.”

“This music class has really been a part of my daily schedule and routines in my class. I have grown and didn’t realize that I was really teaching music to my children and they liked it. I felt like a real music teacher.”

Language limitations of the teacher from Greece, whose first language was Polish, did not inhibit her growth as a musician and teacher or the expression of her excitement for the musical growth of her children. Here are her unedited words, as written.

“I feel a great solidarity with my little pupils. We grow together, step by step. It is amazing!”

“...yesterday children were listening rhythm and tonality like hypnotized. I was worried for a moment what happened to them. They were deeply serious with music”

“FLOWING movement - it is the big discovery!!!”

“...I reminded myself where my musicality had been one year ago and where I have reached today.” “No, it is impossible, it has empowered my own musicality”

“Most of children responded with so many different rhythmic patterns - they know more than me!” I was surprised to see and hear their freedom to create their own patterns in the duple, triple and unusual paired meter. Also, I could observe their own preferences; some of them respond always in duple meter, some in triple meter. And yet, some of them expressed with excitement a long sequence in unusual meter. Always there was a structure of the meter! I was jealous of their ability to do this so free.”

“I am working hard delighting the process of awakening artistry in children ,parents and me.”

Considerations

Technology was the greatest challenge for Head Start teachers. All had previously used email and filled out Head Start forms online, but most needed assistance to function in an online environment. A couple of assignments were designed to walk them through website and software usage. Telephone tech help was made available, assisting some in functions as basic as how to save a file. Teachers stretched well beyond their comfort zones to meet technology requirements. Once they got up to speed, they were able to handle all of the various online components—using MP3 files, navigating the online music classes, reading online assignments about music learning, tracking and submitting weekly assignments online, and maintaining email contact with the instructor.

Keeping pace with the online course required continued effort from Head Start teachers. Music learning for both teachers and children requires regular activity without procrastination or cramming. Children’s and teachers’ musical growth were dependent upon weekly progress with the sequential music curriculum. Lab reports reflected on each week’s experience, and other online assignments were dependent upon the successful completion of previous assignments.

Online courses for early childhood music may have the greatest potential for teachers who are already skilled with children. Head Start teachers know children and rein in the most difficult children. They understand language development and tune in to subtle cues of children’s learning behavior. They are flexible in the classroom, skilled with classroom management, and creative in successfully reaching the children, whatever the challenges. They can learn about children’s music development and implement appropriate activities just as they do for physical, emotional, or social development.

Notable Benefits

Online professional development is an effective option for early childhood music that offers benefits over short-term workshops, seminars and conferences. Online courses offer a unique opportunity for sustained, individualized instruction throughout the length of the course. The combination of online resources, laboratory of children, online developmental curriculum, and direct access to the instructor provide for ongoing teaching and learning, tailored to the needs of the individual teacher. A teacher’s own classroom of children validates or challenges the teacher’s understanding and implementation at every step of the way. Online material addressing music learning, lessons, musical behaviors and creative activities offer a constant resource. MP3 files can be used for teachers to practice as well as in the classroom. Assignments can be designed to teach as well as to provide the online instructor with a full profile of each teacher’s individual needs and ongoing progress. Online one-to-one coaching from the instructor serves to support, guide, and teach throughout the term, with immediate follow-up as needed. The various components create a set of checks and balances for each teacher—a multi-faceted, “personal trainer” throughout the developmental program.

Online instruction provides for teachers' intellectual and musical growth over an extended period of time. Teachers need time to understand the process of music learning and to observe firsthand, developing musical behaviors in their own classrooms. Teachers new to tonalities and meters, musical dialogue, resting tone, flowing movement and art songs for young children need time, just as the children do, to musically grow into those dimensions. A sequential, online music curriculum informs day-to-day teaching as well as providing for the long-term growth of both teachers and children.

Online professional development can reach many more teachers, including preschool teachers, Head Start teachers, and daycare providers. It has the potential to benefit many more children, as it empowers non-musicians to take very young children through several years of an online developmental music program, supported professionally at every step, with their own children demonstrating the sustaining power of tonality and meter, the growing focus of children's musicality, the wonder of children's artistry.

Online teaching and learning is a practical option for teachers. It offers access to professional development without the cost of travel, housing, or conference fees. It provides for teachers to learn in the comfort of their own homes and classrooms, and on their own schedules. It enables direct support of teachers over time and at a distance.

Early childhood music deserves the benefits that technology has to offer professional development. Technology will continue to evolve and create new options for teaching and learning. Let us continue to evolve and create new options that inspire the wonder of music learning.

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