

Online Professional Development: A Second Conversation with Mary Ellen

(Series of conversations conducted by Dr. Rick Townsend, Managing Director, Early Childhood Music and Movement Association, for ECMMA, 2012)

Rick Intro: In a previous discussion, [Considering the Online Territory: An Interview with Mary Ellen Pinzino](#), we discussed the intimacy of face-to-face professional development opportunities as they compare with the online experience. Today, I would like to address what it looks like from the perspective of both student and teacher. My previous conversation with Mary Ellen also introduced the compelling topic of children's artistry. We have decided to continue both topics in separate threads, with this one focusing on online professional development.

Rick: You set your bar very high as you described your vision for developing childhood artistry. What elements of the online relationship you build with your teachers contributes most to helping them understand this vision as you guide their teaching skills?

Course design is critical. The online courses coach teachers throughout 10 weeks while providing appropriate music activities for children each week, leading teachers and children to grow simultaneously, both developing the readiness for each successive step. The music classroom becomes a teaching/learning laboratory in which teachers witness children's artistry emerging on a weekly basis, through their own informed teaching. Children demonstrate not only the principles addressed in the online materials, but also the contrast between previous practices and those generated by the online instruction.

Course content, both pedagogical and musical, is key to guiding teachers to understand and nurture children's artistry. Extensive writing has been done for each course. Required postings address the process of music learning and children's artistry, guiding teachers week by week. Artistry building music activities for children are also provided weekly, establishing a "sound environment" and sequence in which children's artistry can take root and begin to bloom.

The length of the course is another major factor in developing teachers' skills to uncover, interact with and nurture children's artistry. It takes time for children's artistry to unfold. It cannot become manifest overnight, nor can teachers grasp it overnight, with or without children. Teachers and children need time to grow together into children's artistry. Teachers learn from children while children learn from teachers in the artistry building music activities.

Ongoing one-on-one coaching is another factor that propels teachers in the pursuit of children's artistry. Teachers always have access to the instructor. Immediate email feedback can answer questions, offer support, make suggestions, encourage creativity, and empower teachers in the process of teaching.

Rick: Current teacher education models include significant amounts of personal interaction and feedback between teachers in the field, and developing teachers. Are you able to observe and critique your teachers similarly through online processes, or do you have another strategy for feedback?

The online courses generate a great deal of personal interaction and feedback through various means. Course materials invite questions, suggestions, comments and phone consultations as needed or desired. Regular questionnaires throughout the 10 weeks provide for monitoring of teachers' progress and generate suggestions, questions, or comments from the instructor. Additional discussions via email are frequent. Teachers might relate challenges, but more often share their thrill of discovery in the classroom as they uncover children's artistry.

The observations and insights that teachers have shared have communicated far more about their teaching than any video could have revealed. Like journaling, the process of writing a live coach/mentor encourages teachers' reflections on their own teaching. Unlike journaling, there is a listening ear on the other end who appreciates those reflections and will respond.

There is another significant dimension of interaction that we might call "virtual coaching/mentoring." Online postings for each course take teachers from where they are, week by week, to new horizons, with each week building on the experience of the week before, developing teacher readiness for successive weeks as well as children's, and encouraging teachers' creativity in the classroom. Online materials, written specifically for each course, are well founded in both theory and practice and speak directly to the teacher in a conversational manner, addressing music learning in practical terms without theoretical jargon, and serving as a non-threatening "virtual mentor" looking over the shoulder of the teacher in the classroom. As a teacher from Greece volunteered, *"That lack of face-to-face presence creates a kind of intellectual presence. I experience it like your written words are in constant dialogue with my experience from the class."*

This "constant dialogue" promotes greater reflection on teaching in action, greater understanding of music learning in process, and greater awareness of musical behavior—both teacher's and children's. Engaging in ongoing "dialogue" between one's heightened awareness of the process of music learning and what one sees and does in the classroom is a practice that will serve music teaching and learning long after the course is over.

Rick: Could you describe a typical week of working with your teachers?

Every week is different. The online courses are designed to meet the needs of the individual teacher, and every teacher's needs and desire to communicate are different. Some days I interact with several teachers, other days not at all. Questionnaires are required every other week throughout the course. One teacher might also engage in regular online communication, another only occasionally. One might connect to address challenges, another to share triumphs. I check in occasionally if a teacher does not. Courses are designed for independence and flexibility, allowing for individual preferences. Teachers can take 14 weeks to complete the 10 week course, also allowing for illness, travel, and holidays.

Rick: How long have you been offering your curriculum online?

The professional development courses have evolved over a period of about seven years. Originally, I developed online music classes for young children, taking children and parents week by week through the process of music learning over 3-4 years of instruction. In the process, I became enamored with the online context as an effective means of teaching adults and children simultaneously, and as a compelling medium for writing about music learning.

I then collaborated with Geminus Head Start of Northwest Indiana and Indiana University/Purdue University, Indianapolis, to create a hybrid course for Head Start teachers, using the online classes for children with a few face-to-face classes. Shortly after, the University of Delaware offered a graduate course in music education on my work. The pilot engaged music teachers in all that I had developed, including the online classes for children. During these years, an early childhood music teacher in Greece found the children's online music classes on the Internet and requested to study with me long distance. She engaged with the children's online classes for three years and continues in the teacher education courses. Throughout these years I also did a lot of workshops for daycare

providers, parents, and early childhood specialists, and for decades have been involved in music teacher education.

It became apparent through all of these influences that teachers, like parents, could learn to engage with children in appropriate music activities for music learning through online instruction, whatever their own music skills; that MP3 files created for the online children's classes could be used in the classroom as needed; that an online teacher portal would be a welcomed addition to the website; and that additional materials written specifically for teachers were needed. The Come Children Sing Institute Online Teacher Education Center was born. Moodle was integrated as the course management system, allowing for a variety of courses, and I have written extensively for all courses. The Online Teacher Education Center (OTEC) now offers courses for both music teachers and early childhood specialists. Courses can be taken for professional development hours, CEUs, or graduate credit. I continue to write about music learning and children's artistry, OTEC continues to expand, and all courses can be extended for additional professional development hours and CEUs.

Rick: What prompted you to work in an online environment?

I had done a great deal of teacher education in an ongoing setting at the Come Children Sing Institute, in graduate courses, and in teacher workshops, seminars and conferences. The way to reach the most teachers was through one-hour presentations at conferences, which were inherently frustrating. An hour presentation, though it might excite teachers and give them greater insights into the process of music learning, was not enough to take them very far on the road to children's artistry. I had also taught numerous one-week graduate courses, and it was obvious that an understanding of the process of music learning, exposure to Art Songs for young children, and even demonstrations with children were not enough to equip teachers to discover, uncover, and develop children's artistry in an ongoing way in their own classrooms. I also found that many teachers obtain required professional development hours by attending presentations, without any classroom application required.

It became apparent that a new model of teacher education was needed—one in which developing understanding about children's artistry and the unfolding of that artistry in children could go hand in hand; one in which teachers could learn to engage children in more sophisticated song literature and music activities than are typically done in the music classroom; and one in which appropriate time was provided for development—both teachers' and children's.

The online environment offers the unique opportunity to teach teachers and improve instruction in the classroom over an extended period of time, as children demonstrate the principles addressed in course content, and both teachers and children develop the readiness for each successive step. The online environment also offers the opportunity for an extremely rich and satisfying teaching/learning experience for both teachers and online instructor.

Rick: Thank you Mary Ellen. We look forward to talking with you again soon.

© 2012, Mary Ellen Pinzino

**Contact
Mary Ellen Pinzino**

**More by
Mary Ellen Pinzino**