

More About Online Professional Development: A Third 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: The two previous postings with [Mary Ellen Pinzino](#) about online professional development have addressed topics like course design and content. Now we ask Mary Ellen to address specific features of her online courses. In particular, I am interested in knowing how an online course might look and feel to the teacher taking the course.

Rick: How would you describe the user interface for your online courses and how easily do teachers find their way around?

Mary Ellen: The “online campus” of the Come Children Sing Institute is very user friendly. Teachers are directed into the Online Teacher Education Center, which offers many resources for different types of music educators—early childhood music teachers, general music teachers, and choral directors, plus resources for non-musician early childhood specialists and parents. Teachers have access to the many resources on music learning, tech tutorials, and Moodle, the course management system. Moodle offers a “residence hall” on the “online campus” for each of the courses offered. A teacher receives a “key” upon registration, allowing access to the right course.

Moodle guides teachers throughout each 10-week course. Each week’s lesson introduces and offers materials for the week, including required activities to do with children, complete with notation, recordings, and tips for implementation, plus links to all required online materials, including occasional questionnaires. Required online materials relate to each week’s activities with children. Weekly materials come alive as children demonstrate the principles addressed in the online materials. Week by week, both teachers and children develop the readiness for materials of increasing difficulty throughout the course.

Teachers can access the many resources of the ever expanding Online Teacher Education Center in addition to course materials, and in accordance with their own needs and preferences. An early childhood music teacher interested in parent education might favor the extensive “My Child’s Music Development,” written for parents. Another might be drawn to “Grammy Lab,” a series of postings about musical encounters with my four little grandchildren. Witnessing music learning in relation to overall development and on the child’s turf rather than in the music classroom presents quite a different perspective from which to view music development, while reinforcing principles of music learning. Teachers also have access to the extensive writing that I have done through many years that addresses various aspects of music learning in students of all ages. Very soon, teachers will also be able to access notation and recordings for more than 500 songs for children of all ages, as the Internet version of the Come Children Sing Institute SONG LIBRARY is under construction.

Rick: How much time does a course require for a teacher, and for how many weeks?

Mary Ellen: One hour each week for 10 weeks is required for 10 professional development hours/1 CEU. Each weekly contact hour is divided into 20 minutes of required activities with children, 20 minutes preparing the music activities of the week, and 20 minutes with the required online materials. Those taking the course for graduate credit are required to do an additional project. All teachers enrolled can spend as much time as they would like with the many additional resources of the Online Teacher Education Center.

Rick: What level of technical expertise is needed by the student?

Mary Ellen: Basic computer skills are all that are necessary. Tech tutorials are available for those who need a guiding hand, and tech help is always available.

Rick: Do teachers have to sign up for your courses according to the academic calendar?

Mary Ellen: No. Teachers wishing to receive 10 professional development hours or 1 CEU can sign up for any of the online courses at any time. They must be able to spend 20 minutes each week with the same group of children throughout the 10 weeks. Teachers who wish to receive graduate credit do have to honor the academic calendar of the credit granting institution.

Rick: Do you use forums for discussions and do you require group projects?

Mary Ellen: No. Teachers can enroll at any time, so there is no ready-made group, nor are individual teachers enrolled at any given time at the same level of experience or skill in the classroom. The model is closer to private study, with my role that of mentoring individual teachers. A teacher's own classroom becomes the "forum" in which the teacher can try out, work out, clarify, expand, and refine ideas addressed in the online materials, as the children challenge, affirm, and guide the teacher's understanding of those ideas.

Rick: Do you feel that your teachers might benefit from sharing their experiences with one another through forums, or through other types of interpersonal interactions?

Mary Ellen: It is always nice to connect with like-minded teachers, but with professional organizations like ECMMA and the accessibility of social networking, online communities are plentiful. I would, however, be apt to bring together particular teachers that I feel might be good for each other.

Rick: Thank you for bringing up the value of ECMMA! Might you ever consider requiring videos - either for you to assess the teacher's progress or for the teachers to observe other good teachers?

Mary Ellen: The current online courses are designed to inform teachers about music learning and children's artistry, to engage teachers with their own children in meaningful activities and songs that propel children's artistry, and to help teachers reflect on their own teaching through dialogue between the online materials and the experience with children. Videos are not necessary to accomplish that, and requiring them could put undue pressure on competent teachers.

A gallery of short videos might be of value, but I really believe in the creativity of early childhood music teachers. Those who understand the principles of music learning and engage with children in activities that awaken and develop children's artistry will revel in their own creativity rather than having to rely on videos. Informed interaction with the wonder of children's artistry will guide teachers in their own classrooms.

Rick: What online courses do you offer? Can teachers continue with more advanced courses?

Mary Ellen: Online courses presently offered for music teachers include *Come Children, Sing!*, applicable to children 0-8, and *Giving Voice to Children's Artistry*, applicable to children 7-13, either of which can be taken for 10 professional development hours, 1 CEU, or 1 graduate credit. Music teachers who successfully complete either of these courses can

continue for additional professional development hours or CEUs, with the course of study tailor-made to the teacher. Courses are also offered for non-musician early childhood specialists, both at the graduate and undergraduate levels.

Rick: Are there any other types of offerings that you might like to develop in the future?

Mary Ellen: The Online Teacher Education Center is always expanding, as additional resources continue to be developed. The many materials offer opportunities for various new options. I have been intrigued by requests for advanced courses that address rhythm and tonal syllables and music reading, and by inquiries about developing online workshops or courses for particular educational organizations. Also, some teachers have requested continued access to the online materials after completing a course, so we are considering offering an online subscription that would include the Online Teacher Education Center and the Come Children Sing Institute SONG LIBRARY.

Rick: What will you do to maintain a personal mentoring relationship if your "classroom" grows beyond its current scope? Could you manage 25, or even 50 teachers? 100? ...or will you limit the number of mentored teachers in your program?

Mary Ellen: I have talked about this scenario with a well-respected colleague who would like to be a mentor in the program. We agreed that I would establish guidelines for mentoring teachers in the program, and that if additional mentors were needed, accomplished teachers who have come through the program could be good candidates.

Rick: What about teacher satisfaction? Do you have assessment strategies in place to measure teacher responses, or to have them self-evaluate?

Mary Ellen: Teacher satisfaction is essential. Course evaluation is built into each of the courses through regular questionnaires. The feature of the online courses that seems to be most valued by teachers is the direct and ongoing application of course content to the classroom, with online materials informing practice throughout the length of the course.

Self-evaluation is a regular part of each course as well. Regular questionnaires register ongoing progress while course design encourages reflection on the teaching/learning process. Email interaction, an arranged phone consultation, or even a Skype session can be used as needed to assure success.

Rick: You have given teachers much to think about in considering online courses. What else might you wish to offer to guide teachers in reviewing online courses for professional development?

Mary Ellen: Anybody can put up a relatively professional looking website overnight or offer links to a smorgasbord of unrelated articles, songs, and activities. A quality online course has to be more than a convenient library of online materials. Music educators deserve dynamic online courses that engage teachers intimately in their own learning and that of their students.

Rick: It sounds like you have a very thorough system in place for teacher preparation and support. Would you be interested in coordinating your curriculum offerings with the ECMMA Certification program at some future date?

Mary Ellen: Yes, thank you. I would be happy to explore that possibility!

Rick: Where can teachers find your online courses?

Mary Ellen: The Online Teacher Education Center of the Come Children Sing Institute can be found at www.comechildrensing.com/teachers.

Rick: Thank you, again, for sharing your ideas with the ECMMA community. I trust that your program will benefit many teachers and, as a result, many more children through the years.

© 2012, Mary Ellen Pinzino

Contact
Mary Ellen Pinzino

More by
Mary Ellen Pinzino