

DIGITAL COMPOSING AND RECORDING AS ARTS INTEGRATION: THE CENTENNIAL PLACE EXPERIENCE

by

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One of the primary purposes for a consortium is for members to gather and share ideas. At the 2005 inaugural Learning Laboratory School Network (LLSN) conference in Boston, we were fortunate enough to be exposed to the work of Nick Jaffe and his DMT classroom practice. Nick's work provided the inspiration for what became one of our most successful music integration residencies to date through our Sound Learning Music-in-Education program at Georgia State University (Editor's Note: For more on the GSU Sound Learning program, please see the Atlanta section in Part II of this Journal).

We attended the Boston conference with teachers and administrators from two Atlanta area schools in our Sound Learning partnership that had agreed to join the LLSN – Centennial Place Elementary School and Fernbank Elementary School. Nick Jaffe's presentation inspired Centennial Place teacher Kristen Poteet to ask if we could work with her to facilitate a residency through which 3rd grade students would write song lyrics related to a particular subject, and then create and record their own songs using pre-recorded digital sound bytes, or "found sound."

Nick's presentation and Kristen's idea provided me with an opportunity to approach working with my students and graduate assistants at GSU, as well as Kristen and her students, in a slightly different way.

Since spring 2002 we have trained GSU music majors to conduct music integration residencies and have placed them in schools with an admirable level of success. I have always required that our Georgia State student residencies focus on the musical creativity of children, rather than on mere information about music. Our students are charged to design residencies that excite children about, and engage children in, authentic music-making practices, while integrating that music-making or musical creativity in some meaningful way with classroom learning. Many of these residencies have involved student composition. Over time, we noticed that such residencies inevitably led to tensions when our Georgia State "resident composers" attempted to standardize student compositional ideas through written notation, or began such residencies with genre, form, or instrumentation limitations. All of these limitations lessened the impact of student music composition as a sophisticated tool for arts integration.

Kristen's excitement about Nick Jaffe's digital composition project, and her desire to have her students do a recording project of their own, opened the door for our Georgia State students to structure a residency that would be free from past limitations.

In consultation with myself, and our graduate student site coordinator Michelle Mercier, students Adam Neal and Jason Pellet structured a residency with an end goal of creating a 17 track CD of student-generated songs. The songs were to consist of lyrics that students had written on their science unit "Body Systems" and music created and recorded by the children themselves in groups of five. Each group would compose and produce its own



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Georgia State University music majors have been trained to conduct music integration residencies since 2002. Centennial Place Elementary School is one such school where MIE residencies have been performed. In this picture, MIE Guided Intern Adam Neal challenges students to participate in a DMT music-composing activity.

song. The GSU students hoped to achieve this in four visits, mixing large and small group instruction.

This structure met Kristen's goals for the science portion of the residency, while extending the musical expectations for the children beyond her initial intentions and meeting our Georgia State expectations for musical creativity. The fact that these compositions would be recorded rather than written down, and that students would select the genre, instrumentation, and form of their songs, meant that this residency would be free of the limitations on student creativity that previous residencies had imposed.

Jason and Adam began the residency by helping the 3rd graders to break down, label, and then re-create the elements of a song. They met with the 3rd graders in two groups of just over 40 students, for 45 minutes each group. The visit was designed as a micro-version of the residency, and of the song writing process itself as outlined by Adam and Jason: "Listen, Analyze, Create, Practice, Record and Evaluate or change until you get a song you are satisfied with." The children

came prepared with their science-inspired song lyrics. They *Listened* to a model song that Adam and Jason were confident they'd be familiar with, and then *Analyzed* its components. Both groups agreed that songs had lyrics, a beat, a bass line, a melody or rap line, and "other fun stuff," like back-up vocals, horn lines, etc., and that these elements have to fit together. With Adam and Jason scaffolding the process, the children successfully set about *Creating* their own song components. Using their own voices, with Adam imitating them on a midi keyboard, they proposed and selected a bass line, a beat, a melody, and chose a lyric from one of their peers' science poems. They *Practiced* each song element they had created, choosing appropriate sounds on the keyboard for some, and producing others with their voices or feet or by tapping on their bodies. They *Recorded* each element on a single track, with Jason and Adam functioning as producers/ recording technicians, and then *Evaluated* each individual component or track, as well as the total song. In one case they re-recorded part of the song that they were not happy with after listening to the completed version.

If you want to read Jason Pellet's description of the residency and hear the 17 songs the 3rd grade students created as a result, go to <http://www.atlantabrassalliance.com/soundlearning>, and click on the 3rd grade at Centennial Place Elementary link. You can also listen to songs created by students at Fernbank Elementary School in collaboration with Jason and the GSU Student Woodwind Quintet.

For visit two, Adam and Jason had intended to help the students become more independent with Audacity, the computer recording program we had selected for the project. However, unanticipated technical difficulties with the laptop and other hardware purchased for the project, in addition to the anticipated challenges of working with Audacity proved to be a distraction similar to the musical notation and genre or instrumentation limitations of other residencies. As a result, we collectively chose to have Adam and Jason scaffold more of the technical aspects of the project. In the two visits that followed (visits 3 and 4), the children worked with Adam in Jason in small groups of four or five, functioning as artists and executive producers and providing the material, while Adam and Jason recorded it and then took direction from the students as to how to modify and polish the recordings.

As Kristen Poteet describes (see "Changing Career Paths Through the LLSN Project: From 'Musically Challenged' Teacher to Advocate for Music in the Classroom"), the impact of this project on her students, her own comfort level with music, and her view of the role of music integration in the classroom, was significant. At Georgia State University, the residency was a breakthrough for our students, and for our Sound Learning site coordinators and staff, in terms of engaging the musical creativity of children, without barriers, in a way that complements their learning in another subject area. We could not have done this without the interest and creativity of Kristen and the inspiration she took from her attendance at the first LLSN conference and Nick Jaffe's DMT presentation there.

Adam Neal and Jason Pellet are currently expanding their digital composition work for the 2006-2007 academic year. They are working at two schools and are further refining their approach. They hope to tackle the technical difficulties encountered in year one, and in doing so provide children with a more hands-on environment to experiment with. ¶