

Changing Career Paths Through the LLSN Project: From 'Musically Challenged' Teacher to Advocate for Music in the Classroom

BY KRISTEN POTEET

I TRULY LEARNED ABOUT THE MUSICAL CREATION PROCESS, AS WELL AS THE COMPONENTS OF A SONG, WITH MY STUDENTS. INSTEAD OF TAKING ON THE TRADITIONAL TEACHER-STUDENT ROLES, MY STUDENTS AND I BECAME PEERS IN THE LEARNING PROCESS.



Inspired by CAPE teaching artist Nick Jaffe's presentation at the MIENC's first Learning Laboratory School Network Conference, Centennial Place Elementary School classroom teacher Kristen Poteet became interested in an interdisciplinary artist residency that would link classroom curriculum with songwriting and music production. Here, Poteet meets with a student to go over song lyrics written by a student group.

When we began planning our digital music project, I was unsure about the entire process. I was definitely excited about learning a new approach to teaching, but I also had high expectations for my class and felt uneasy about achieving these goals without a familiar plan. I was in many ways like a doe-eyed college freshman once again: excited about the future, but with little idea about what the next step would really entail.

As the project continued, however, my wealth of knowledge in both teaching music and creating digital music grew and grew. Georgia State University faculty member David Beauchesne, graduate assistant Michelle Mercier, and composition and technology students Adam Neal and Jason Pellet all provided my students and me with the necessary scaffolding. I truly learned about the musical creation process, as well as the components of a song, with my students. Instead of taking on the traditional teacher-student roles, my students and I became peers in the learning process.

As with any project, we faced a number of unforeseen challenges and had to rethink our process accordingly. Initially, Adam and Jason had planned to train the 3rd grade students on the computer recording program Audacity and allow them to use it by themselves in the 'recording studio.' However, after two visits with all 90 students in the 3rd grade (divided into groups of 20 or more), they realized that training the students for technological independence would steal focus from cultivating the musical creativity and individuality we strived for. Instead, Adam and Jason took on the roles of producer and coach, with the students as the artists and co-producers. To make this happen, Adam and Jason devoted themselves to spending two thirty-minute sessions with every group of 4 or 5 students. During this time, Adam and Jason did not compose the music; they simply guided students towards musical productivity. We took great care to ensure that the artistic individuality of my students was never compromised.

Overall, my students absolutely loved the project. With the thought of emulating their favorite Hip-Hop star, they immediately 'bought into' the idea and at the same time successfully reinforced their learning of their science unit on "Body Systems." From the very beginning they were motivated, and at the end when they received their personal CDs with their own cover design, they played them nonstop. One parent told me a funny story about several boys playing the CD long into the night during a birthday party sleepover. It was not really until that point that I realized the depth of this project. This was not just a school assignment for some, but rather a lifetime achievement.

The digital music project also had some unforeseen social-emotional benefits. Perhaps the most obvious example of this involved a student who had transferred to Centennial at the beginning of the year from a school where he was ridiculed because of his "feminine" personality traits. Immediately my



Centennial Place Elementary School teacher Kristen Poteet presents her Sound Learning partnership experience at the 2nd annual meeting of the MIENC Learning Laboratory School Network conference. Poteet told the gathering of music educators, artists, and classroom teachers the story of her transformation from reluctant participant in the program to the music integration advocate in her school. She found the co-learning she accomplished with her students particularly enriching both as a teacher and as a person.

students noticed the same quality, and I struggled with the correct approach to the situation. However, the digital music project not only helped break down the usual teacher-student roles, but it also had a noticeably positive effect on the ways the students perceived each other. In this case, instead of falling into the typical pattern of ridiculing the "different" child, the collaborating students were better positioned socially to notice this child's unique abilities. His love for drama and the arts instantly made him a celebrity within the classroom; instead of teasing him, the students asked him questions about his passion for singing, dancing, and acting. To this day, he is still 'Mr. Popular.'

As for my own professional development as a result of this project, I cannot begin to measure my progression as a teacher. It has truly changed the path of my career. Prior to the project, I viewed myself as musically challenged and a reluctant participant in music integration. I am now the advocate for music in the classroom at our school. I have also been fortunate, by way of the grants

committee that funded this project, Sound Learning at Georgia State, and the Music-in-Education National Consortium Learning Laboratory School Network, to be part of a team that presented our experiences at the LLSN conference in Boston this past summer to some of the leaders in the music-in-education field as well as to hundreds of other teachers and artists engaged in similar projects all around the country. As it was in the previous year's LLSN conference that we were inspired by Nick Jaffe's DMT presentation to create this project, I hope we were able to successfully pass the idea along to someone else. Above all I want other classroom teachers to understand that I once believed that music was simply a gift; you either had it or you didn't. I also thought that the Sound Learning program, and music integration in general, was 'just another thing I had to do.' But I have learned that we all possess the gift of music and that this musical intelligence should be brought out via hands-on experiences. And perhaps most importantly, I've learned that even in the age of standardized testing, or maybe especially so, music can be meaningfully integrated into all aspects of learning.

At the end of last year, I took a position at Centennial Elementary teaching gifted students. I now instruct over seventy children every day in Grades 2-5 and am working on incorporating music into my lessons. At the LLSN conference this summer we discussed ways in which I could still continue to aid the Sound Learning program. Because I am not part of a grade level, the suggestion was made to create the position of site-based coordinator. Currently, I serve as this coordinator, acting as a liaison between classroom teachers and the Sound Learning community. So far, this position has been wonderful because it allows me to be part of the planning process for all grade levels, as well as to share my insight from my experiences. I am looking forward to sharing our growth at next year's LLSN conference. ¶

Kristen Poteet is currently a Gifted and Talented teacher at Centennial Place Elementary School in Atlanta, Georgia, and the site coordinator for the GSU Sound Learning project there. During the 2005-2006 school year, she taught third grade and served as the Sound Learning Representative for her grade level. Not only did she facilitate the digital music project within the grade level, but she also wrote and received all funding for the project.

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