



Confessions of a collaboration hater

By Camille Kingman • Orem Junior High School

Growing up, I hated group work in school. Thus, you can imagine my enthusiasm about eight years ago when my principal started mentioning this professional learning community (PLC) collaboration trend in faculty meetings. I didn't like the sound of it one bit. I just wanted to be left alone to do what I alone knew best. The last time I checked, I wasn't being held accountable for end-of-year testing. Wasn't this a math and language arts thing? Besides, I already went to district festival; didn't that count as my collaboration? I didn't have time for making fake assessments with a band, drama and art teacher, unless it was to make a rubric to measure the ridiculousness of this plan.

I've long since gotten over that previous version of myself, and good thing, because that educational trend is still beating loud and strong in the hearts of our administrators and is structuring everything in our schools from department meetings to teacher evaluations. What is my biggest problem about collaboration now? We need more time to do it. As music educators, we haven't received much guidance regarding collaboration, given the vast and complicated nature of our curriculum. How do we even get started?

In order to embrace collaboration, I had to learn to come to terms with the messiness that accompanies group work. There is sharing, compromise and vulnerability. There are disagreements and debates. I don't always get my way. Victories take time. I have to reveal my weaknesses. I get to show off my strengths. People don't work the same way I do. Getting a group of musicians to stay focused and on task – outside of ensemble work – is like herding a group of cats. I'm not really a fan of messy, but I've learned to play nice in the sandbox. The benefits outweigh the inconveniences, because my colleagues are geniuses. We accomplish more together than anything we could do in isolation.

I write primarily from the perspective of participating as a member of the Alpine School District Junior High Choir Teachers Collaborative Team. Here are some practical tips, *specific to music educators*, to help you and your colleagues get started on your collaborative journey:

Collaborate with those who share your discipline.

At the beginning of the collaboration process, it is imperative that you meet with those who teach *exactly* what you teach. A school music department, comprising of a band teacher, an orchestra teacher and a choir teacher, will not provide an environment which allows you to be as specific as you need to be, and this is why so many collaborators meet with early failure. If district or physical geography excludes you from collaborating with other educators who teach your discipline, connect with other music educators via email or Skype; the materials and members of our Alpine

team are always accessible via www.choirplc.com. As some of us within our junior high choral group become more at ease with the culture of collaboration, we find increased success in meeting with our mixed discipline school departments and choosing appropriate projects. Your school performing arts department *can* be an effective PLC; it is simply easier to familiarize yourself with the PLC strategies you need within a highly specialized group at the outset.

Collaboration is not the same as cooperative planning.

Collaboration, in the sense of which I am speaking, is not festival planning or coordinating special combined program events. We music educators are masterful event planners, and yes, you will continue to set aside time to coordinate such events as a group. Just realize that as you meet about these important activities, you are working in a capacity outside of collaboration.

What do we want our students to know?

What you *will* do during collaboration is create specific benchmarks that you want your students to achieve. You will convert broad national and state music standards into detailed, precise objectives in language that is friendly to your students, their parents, your administrators, not to mention a language that is friendly and useful to you. I think we music educators give ourselves too much credit; intuitively we know what we *think* we are teaching, but do we really know? Benchmark creation may not incite much initial enthusiasm, but it is actually rather exciting when you examine your group beliefs about “What does a ninth grader leaving our choral programs look and sound like? What tools do they have for continued music-making?”

Stay essential.

You cannot teach *everything*. What are the elements of your curriculum that you cannot live without? Are there essential concepts you are ignoring in favor of less essential elements that you happen to prefer? Making the critical decisions between good, better and best is where a large percentage of the philosophical clashes of our collaborative group occur, and that is okay. What is essential for each age level? Your group will arrive at a consensus and put it to the test. Despite all your best efforts, you will probably not get it right the first time. Don't worry. You can always change it later.

Start small and go slow.

Every aspect of curriculum mapping, benchmark writing, assessment creation, and technology expansion will take longer than you think. First, music standards function differently

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than math or science standards in the sense that we don't teach standard 1.1, check it off the list and move onto standard 1.2. It is more likely that we spend seven years teaching standard 1.1 everyday. Music standards are often not worded as concretely as the standards of some of our colleagues teaching other disciplines. In the collaboration process, music educators have to spend more upfront time, making benchmarks specific. *Which symbols do you want your students to be able to identify by the end of the seventh grade? Which rhythms do you want your students to perform accurately by the end of the eighth grade?*

Though we continue to get smarter about setting realistic goals, our collaborative group still underestimates the length of time a task will take. If at first you bite off more than you can chew, scale back so that you don't get discouraged. The collaborative process isn't what is wrong, it's the pace your group is unnecessarily forcing on itself. Tackle only one curricular level at a time. The first standard within the first level for which you create assessments will likely be the slowest and the most difficult.

Start with the concrete first.

Once our district group started to get beyond the event planning mindset (about five years ago), we agreed on what we felt was our most pressing need, creating a beautiful rubric that focused on four components of vocal technique. We then administered it to our women's choirs as they sang eight measures of a song. We collected data, discussed our experiences within our team and put the assessment away, never to use or really speak of it again. *What went wrong?* We chose a concept that was more subjective than we realized, not merely in of itself, but also for the physiological issues of the age group we taught. The subjectivity of the assessment rendered it inefficient and unrealistic for regular classroom use in large junior high ensembles. As choral directors, we could come to a general consensus of "tone" and "placement," but in the end it seemed that that consensus was still too broad.

We did quality work as a team, to a point, yet we failed to create a useful measurement tool of long-lasting value. Have we abandoned assessing vocal technique forever? Certainly not. We needed practice at assessing concepts that were easier to assess before jumping to the most difficult ones.

How will we know if they have learned it?

I was lucky enough to get my first teaching job in a school district that cared greatly about aligning curriculum for its thousands of music student constituents. As a beginning music educator in full-blown survival mode, it was comforting to have an appropriate frame of reference for *what* I should be teaching and *when* I should be teaching it. However, there was nothing, or no one, to hold me accountable to the district-proposed curriculum. Because there was no common assessment used or common data collected, at the end of the day, the district curriculum alignment could only be interpreted as a suggestion. Create assessments to keep you honest to what you think you are teaching within the kingdom of your individual classroom. Create common assessments to collect common data within your collaboration group so that you can help each other teach more effectively. At the same time, our priority always needs to be making music, not giving assessments. Assessments are only a tool to measure if students are mastering concepts. If concepts are mastered, one can only hope that the music making and enjoyment is heightened.

In larger PLCs, divide work amongst subgroups.

Do not try to write every assessment by committee. Divide into subgroups that work on different standards and their corresponding assessments. It is crucial that you arrive at a committee consensus for big picture items, but if you always meet as a large committee,

you will talk forever and accomplish nothing.

A common assessment isn't common until data is being collected.

As painful as it sounds, it's true. If we all give the same assessment but don't discuss the outcome, we're just playing in a make-believe PLC. No matter how well I believe I've taught a concept, I'm usually horrified by how many still don't get it. I'm filled with embarrassment that I'm going to have to admit to my colleagues (who I want to respect and like me) that I'm a failure as a teacher. When I go to my meetings to discuss data, I find that we all feel the same way. Remember that what is happening in your music classroom can never be reduced to an isolated number. We use data to help us improve our teacher practice. We use data to identify a student who doesn't get it, at the precise spot where the numbers tell us that something goes wrong, much like a doctor would give patient treatment for a localized medical issue.

If at first you don't succeed, revise.

After our first summer of hard work, about a year and a half ago, our district collaboration group was so proud of what we had accomplished. Eleven of us had aligned our beginning music notation curriculum, had written 22 common assessments, and written 80 teaching activities. But by the end of the first semester, we hated the crown jewel of our work, the comprehensive summative assessment. We couldn't believe all the mistakes we had made throughout our materials, essential terms we had left out, non-essentials we had included, assessments that didn't measure what we really wanted them to. . . the list went on and on. We didn't give up on collaboration though. We saw the value in what this endeavor meant for our students and for our individual teacher instruction. We edited and improved and restructured, and implemented version 2.0 which went more smoothly. In our professional learning community, we currently find ourselves right back where we were last year – with a long list of needed improvements.

Agree to disagree.

If you don't have strong opinions about what you teach and how you teach it, you might want to reconsider your chosen profession. You are likely surrounded by other highly-qualified professionals who feel just as passionately about what they teach as you do. You will have heated discussions, debates and arguments within your collaboration group, and you should. If you aren't disagreeing about something, there are voices in your group that probably aren't being heard. Make norms so that you can speak honestly and respectfully disagree as colleagues but still leave as friends.

Take ownership.

Our junior high choir collaborative team from the Alpine School District has freely shared their materials with anyone who wants them. We don't care if you use them verbatim or take them as a template on which to improve. We would love for others to collect data with us and show us better ways of teaching, using our own assessments. Many of our materials are perhaps not too different from what already exists out there. Why not just use those? First, we have found that most music notation methods don't offer the amount of practice our students need to master a skill. Second, the experience of clarifying curriculum and creating assessments together as a team is very empowering and unifying. You'll be much more likely to implement something in your classroom, if you have helped create it.

Do not tell people how they have to teach.

You are phenomenal at what you do. Your colleagues are

continued, see "Collaboration," p.42

2008, Mr. Wolf was named to the Davis School District Hall of Fame, in addition to receiving the district's Excel Award. That same year, Mr. Wolf was also honored with a Huntsman Excellence in Education Award by the Jon M. Huntsman Foundation. In 2007, he was awarded a KSL News/Radio Teacher Feature and the KSL Television High Five award. Mr. Wolf is also the recipient of the University of Utah Young Alumni Association Award and Murray School District Teacher of the Year. He has been listed for several years in *Who's Who Among American Teachers*. As a performer, Mr. Wolf enjoys an active schedule as a freelance percussionist and as a member of the Utah Chamber Orchestra, which provides the musical accompaniment for Ballet West. He is an active adjudicator and clinician throughout the Intermountain West and has written articles for the *Percussive Arts Society*, the Utah Music Educators Association and SBO magazine. Mr. Wolf is a member of PAS, UMEA, the National Band Association, and the Utah Band Masters Association. Mr. Wolf received both his Bachelor of Music Education and Master of Music degrees from the University of Utah. While at the University of Utah, he studied music education with Mark Ely and Edward Asmus, conducting with Greg Hansen and Barry Kopetz, and performance with Doug Wolf, George Brown and Jay Lawrence.

Outstanding Music Educator Award Alan Allred



The professional career of Alan S. Allred includes work as an educator, conductor and violinist. His work as an educator began in 1979 after graduating from Utah State University where he studied violin and conducting with Ralph Matesky. His first teaching assignment was in Snowflake, Arizona where he taught orchestra, choir and guitar. The following year, he entered the Brigham Young University Music performance program and studied with Percy Kalt and Ralph Laycock. In addition, he worked as a teaching assistant to Rendol Gibbons in the String Ed. Area. He performed a master's recital but ultimately decided to complete his Master's program in Music Ed. rather than performance. After completing a year on campus at BYU, Alan took a job with Cache County School District, teaching at North Cache Jr. High and the surrounding elementary schools. This assignment eventually included Cedar Ridge Middle School and Sky View High School where Robert Frost had been teaching for many years and who was, incidentally, Alan's high school orchestra director. During his time in Cache County, he was

concertmaster of the Cache Chamber Orchestra and the Utah Festival Opera Orchestra. Eventually, additional schooling was sought at Arizona State University that led to a one-year assignment at California State University Humboldt and the College of the Redwoods. After returning from California, he continued to teach in Cache County until his move to Provo School District in 1994. He took over the wonderful string program that Terry Hill had built at Timpview High School and the supervision of the elementary string program, as well. The orchestra program at Timpview has continued to grow, and over the last three years, he has also taken the Provo High School Orchestra program under his wing. This is on top of his full-time assignment with Timpview and the district elementary orchestra programs. For a change of pace, he teaches and supervises the technical theater students at Timpview. He recently resigned after eight years as the principal conductor of the American Fork Symphony and has performed on and off with the Utah Valley Symphony. Alan has served twice as Vice President for Orchestra of UMEA. He was also honored by the American String Teachers Association and the National School Orchestra Association as the secondary teacher of the year for the state of Utah in 1999 and 2003. He and his wife Challi reside in Payson and are the parents of seven children and seventeen grandchildren.

"As a music educator I have always tried to provide the music making experience to any who desired to learn. Aptitude is not a determining factor in allowing students into my orchestras. Helping each student have a musical experience is at the core of my values as a teacher. I try to exemplify the adage of high expectations and high care. I am so grateful to have been blessed to work at something that I love and to have wonderful students to create music with."

from "Collaboration," p. 17

too. Don't insult them by telling them how to teach. We want to maintain integrity in our craft by teaching students the curriculum we should. However, belonging to a professional learning community should never feel like being subject to an educational dictatorship. Teachers always need to maintain the autonomy and creativity that they rightfully should enjoy in their personal classrooms.

It's not about *your* students versus *my* students.

This is the most beautiful part of collaboration amongst music educators. There's so much to do that you forget that you are working with your "competition" to make their students better.

They forget that they are sharing their most sacred best practices with you so you can teach your students more effectively. Or maybe we're not really forgetting. You realize that to advocate for your students at your school is not enough. It's about wanting the best for all of *our* students.

Camille Kingman is in her eleventh year, teaching junior high choir. For the past nine years, she has taught at Orem Junior High School in the Alpine School District. Ms. Kingman holds a Bachelor of Music Education degree from Brigham Young University, a Master of Music Education degree from Northern Arizona University, and is currently a doctoral candidate in music education from Boston University. She can be reached at ckingman@alpinedistrict.org.



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