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My Unexpected "Music" Lesson While Presenting a PD Workshop: The Day I Became a Maestro

by Joseph S. Pizzo

When the call to present a workshop came from the Fordham University Digital Literacies Collaborative, I immediately thought, "Why, I can do this. I'm a member of the DLC. My colleagues are wonderfully supportive, and the director Dr. Kristen Turner is most encouraging and professional. Besides, I've been presenting workshops for at least 30 years. I know all the dance steps. Just the music will be a bit different this time. The focus for this workshop is digital literacy. I can handle it."

I have been a classroom teacher for 42 years; the first computer I had ever used was a Radio Shack TRS-80 that I acquired during the early stages of my career. The computer was booted by a cassette tape that needed to be played at the correct volume level for almost five minutes. There was no way to tell if the volume level was indeed correct, at least until the five minutes had passed. If the level was correct, the computer booted up. If not, then I was required to adjust the volume slightly and repeat the procedure for as many five-minute segments as it took either to boot up the computer or cause me to toss my hands in the air in frustration and then grab an old-fashioned sheet of white-lined paper and a yellow number two pencil to begin the task that the computer was supposed to simplify.

Here I was, 40 or so years later, and I would be giving graduate students and highly-competent colleagues the opportunity to share strategies for teaching poetry in the classroom by adding digital options to the writing process. These options would not simply consist of my colleagues producing their work on a Google Doc that could be shared among the members of our workshop. Rather, I was planning to turn over control of the project to my colleagues, who would be selecting the applications they would wish to use. There was to be no pre-assigned list from which my colleagues could choose. Rather, there was to be a brief list of suggested applications that would mention familiar favorites that my middle level students had already been using in my classroom. The music that would be produced was expected to be as different as the TRS-80's boot-up "music" was from the handful of notes that have assured us users that our computer did indeed have Intel inside.

In retrospect, I found that my thinking was not as clear as I had hoped it would be. Oh, the music was indeed different - and I now realize that it needed to be. For this workshop, I would not have my colleagues working within some predefined limits from which creativity would spawn. Rather, I was going to be giving them the opportunity to take their concept and create a digital poem (digi-poem) by using any combination of words, shapes, and colors. The caveat I would issue would be that any digi-poem without words would need to be explained by the writers to clarify the connection between the significance of their creation and the rationale behind their choices.

My biggest challenge was actually being able to completely step out of the role of presenter and create a “classroom” within the workshop where all colleagues would feel secure enough to take reasonable risks. I was envisioning my role as being the “guide on the side.” I was planning to rely on the knowledge, skills, and insight of my colleagues in the workshop as they proceeded to create a digi-poem on the application of their choice. In my brick and mortar classroom, I had been breaking down tasks into simple, easy-to-follow steps that I could monitor. When necessary, I would adjust my instruction accordingly. In this case, however, I was working with a combination of seasoned professionals and students pursuing master’s degrees in a program known to be heavily reliant on proficiency in the area of digital literacy. It was time for me to let go, to give my colleagues the freedom they required, and to await patiently for the sharing session when they would spotlight their creations. My role as a maestro was changing. I was planning to continue being a conductor of my lessons. However, I was planning to do far less arranging of the options within my lessons.

My students in my middle level integrated language arts classes already had been using Google Docs to share their work and receive only positive feedback from their peers. We had been using some digital options as well. My students had created voice files using Audioboo, and they had made iMovies, PowToons, and Mic Notes to put a spin on the old-fashioned book report. My workshop was actually helping me to improve my own teaching by giving me the opportunity to learn from my colleagues about some additional digital options. I was hoping to be able to return with these discoveries to my own classroom so I might enhance my lessons even more.

It seems that I was actually becoming more confident in my ability to conduct a successful workshop by deciding to be less involved in my colleagues’ creations. I was giving these colleagues the freedom that I would soon be providing for my own middle-level students in my own classroom when we began a similar project. I was realizing that creativity does indeed require a certain amount of freedom of choice. This freedom provides the learning experience with a stamp of dignity that further fuels the creative process. At this point, I began to realize, “I have this challenge under control.” As I reassured myself, I hummed a tune that somehow seemed a little more New Age than I had expected.

I strolled down to the computer lab to begin getting set-up early for my presentation. I’ve learned over the years never to take even the simplest procedures for granted. Intuitively I knew that Murphy and his Law had an infamous reputation of introducing glitches to even the simplest tasks while somehow instinctively knowing that these glitches would have the greatest impact by occurring during the most inopportune moments. Why should this day be any different than any other day for Mr. Murphy and his Law? Well, the computer that was supposed to project to the screen at the front of the room was not cooperating. When I tried tightening the connection from the computer to the network, I could feel the presence of Mr. Murphy and his impish grin skipping playfully across the room while sarcastically humming a playful bit of electronica.

While the tech person surveyed the situation, I began the workshop sans my introductory, tone-setting music. The workshop was entitled “The Color of Poetry,” and I wanted to play Chicago’s “Color My World” and Vanessa Williams’s “The Colors of the Wind” to establish the proper mood and inspiration prior to the start of my presentation. Both pieces included

wonderfully bright colors in their videos that accentuated the music. Because of Mr. Murphy's playfulness, however, I was not able to begin this way.

Undaunted, I drew upon my 40 years of middle level teaching experience. Those of us who have taught middle level classes know that we plan for the best and stand ready to adapt to any and all circumstances. Fire and containment drills, unannounced assemblies, extra music rehearsals, and special circumstances are commonplace for us middle level teachers. Therefore, I did what I would normally do with my own students when an unexpected glitch would arise: I was truthful about the situation as I explained what was happening. I assured my fellow professionals that the problem would be solved shortly since help had arrived, and I explained that which everyone would have seen had the opening of my presentation been free of this unexpected technological glitch. My honesty served me well as my colleagues laughed along with me at the circumstances and listened to me as I explained what they would have seen had things begun smoothly. After 10 minutes of my allotted 75 had elapsed, the problem was solved. Well, not exactly solved but made more manageable. Even so, I could feel the beat of an energetic rhythm bolstering my confidence as I assuredly moved ahead.

At this moment I realized how glad I was to have my assistant and colleague Lauren helping me. The Prezi that I was showing appeared clearly on the screen in the room, but not on Lauren's desktop computer. Therefore, she attentively changed slides and deftly moved the cursor that appeared on the screen at least 15 feet away from her lab station. With tremendous dexterity, Lauren allowed me to continue with my presentation while she clicked on the arrows to change slides. Only on two occasions did we have to pause for a moment while she rediscovered the location of the cursor on the screen and placed it in its proper position.

As things began to run more smoothly, I could feel a crescendo being introduced to the rhythm that was beginning to drive my presentation. I began to feel more confident about the upcoming activity I was going to be asking my fellow professionals to complete. I wanted them to select a color, write down its qualities and traits, associate the color with concrete objects and even abstract ideas, and then form groups of three to combine their information into something that I had begun calling a "digi-poem."

I was looking to expand this project during the next year in my classroom. As I had begun to explain earlier, I was hopeful that the creativity that each group would demonstrate would provide me with more digital-based ideas to engage my students in my own classroom. My hopes were soon realized. Not only did each group produce a wonderful project, but they also helped me to discover an additional resource or two for my students to explore.

The work that was produced by my colleagues in the workshop was magnificent. One group used Plotagon to create characters and settings, the authoring of scripts, and the viewing of a movie based on their input. Another group fashioned an iMovie that was fast-paced and filled with colors. A third used Canva to create a colorful visual poster with words and images that celebrated four colors: green, blue, gold, and red. A fourth used Google Docs to write a concrete poem in the shape of a tree, and they also added color and type style for visual effect. The final group created a Google slideshow that celebrated the color turquoise.

While each group was presenting its project, I was easily able to distinguish the unique rhythms and melodies that were contained within their works. Concurrently, the music of my own presentation was indeed changing from something up-to-date but familiar to something dynamic, high-energy, and bursting with freshness and creativity. Each group seems to have taken the music of Chicago and Vanessa Williams and rewritten the melodies to reflect the cutting-edge electronica of Moby and the dubstep stylings of Skrillex.

I was nervous while allowing the groups to choose their applications, as well as the directions they would be taking. Previously, I would not have had the same feeling if I were conducting the lesson with my students, but this could be simply that I am more familiar with the "music" my middle school students create. Realizing this gave me a deeper appreciation of the good fortune with which I have been blessed in the classroom. My middle school students are almost always cooperative and responsive, and I soon began to feel the same way about my workshop colleagues because the opportunity for creativity in the lesson resulted in the same responses. My colleagues were given ownership of their choices, and they were busily creating their own styles of music.

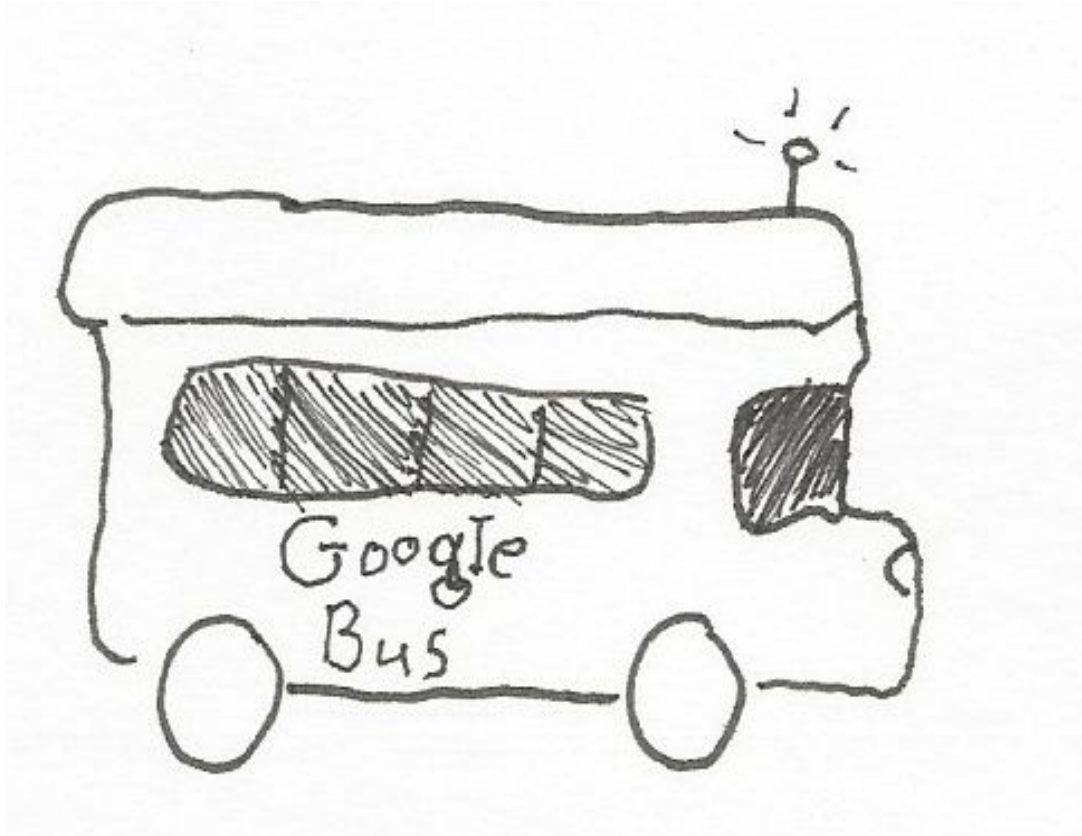
Providing the opportunity to have choices in the creative process does indeed reap great rewards. Even so, I was exploring new territory by leaving the digital choices completely to each group. I was now hoping to be able to give my own middle school students a similar open invitation of choice, but I knew that I would continue to have them conference with me to share their ideas so I might troubleshoot any potential problem areas. These conferences, however, would provide my students with opportunities to share their planning strategies, ask questions, justify their choices, and take ownership of their learning. If I listen closely, you may be able to hear a new style of music already beginning to play. Playing the role of a maestro was becoming a desirable part of my teaching style.

Presenting this workshop had provided me with a wonderful opportunity to tap into my colleagues' creativity. The results of their efforts would serve to enhance not only the poetry unit that I would be assigning my middle level students in the spring, but also the book reports, speeches, and writings that I would be assigning throughout the entire academic year.

The music to which I had "danced" and the music of my instruction which I had conducted while presenting this workshop was a bit different from the music to which I may have been accustomed. Even so, I was reminded through the efforts of my colleagues that despite the era from which the music may originate or the melodies and harmonies that defined it, the need for a catchy beat and a meaningful rhythm remained. I was able to appreciate the beat of this new music, to enjoy this professional "dance" with my colleagues, and even to smile playfully at Mr. Murphy and his failed attempts to make me an unwitting victim of his Law. By being willing to change my perspective and change the focus of my efforts so my colleagues would have the freedom to let their creativity thrive, I was also able to change the approach I would be bringing into my own middle level classroom.

A new style of music was now playing. I was becoming not just a teacher, but a maestro as well.

Joseph S. Pizzo has taught for 42 years at the Black River Middle School in Chester, New Jersey. An adjunct professor at Centenary College and Union County College, he is a past-president of NJCTE and the Affiliate Liaison to NJEA. A NJAMLE Board member and Core Team member of NJ Schools to Watch, Pizzo has been NJCTE's Educator of the Year, the Arts Council of the Morris Area Educator of the Year, a Teacher Who Makes a Difference for WMGQ FM-98.3, and an inductee to WWOR-TV Ch. 9's A+ for Teachers Hall of Fame. The host of radio's *When the School Bell Rings* and cable TV's *Spotlight on BRMS*, Pizzo has served as a staff announcer for WRNJ AM-1510 and WNTI – 91.9 FM. He is the author of Barron's *NJ Grade 7 ELA/Literacy Test*.



Artwork by Izzie Boyce-Blanchard