



MUSIC-CENTER  
PERFORMING ARTS CENTER  
OF LOS ANGELES COUNTY

## Teaching **Artists** Study Group

# Focus Group Report

“... I started forgetting the magic about what I teach... the most valuable thing I have gotten from this experience is reconnecting with why we all do what we do, and that we should never forget that we are magicians first and foremost, and technicians second.”

— *TASG participant*



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**ETI**

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“...this gave us a chance to think outside the box...”

“I came to this project because I was absolutely looking for something like this...something that would allow me to interact with other artists and actually teach me and allow me to grow.”

“...my favorite part of the evening sessions was watching other people teach. And watching other participants participate. It was incredibly joyful and educational.”

## Introduction

*The Teaching Artist Study Group (TASG) Project, sponsored by the Los Angeles Music Center Education Division (MCED) is designed to build upon existing training programs by creating an environment in which artists can exchange information and support each other. The project's goal is to build the MCED's capacity to address the needs of its partner schools by investing in intensive professional development for a cadre of leading professional teaching artists from its roster.*

*More specifically, the study group is intended to increase the capacity of teaching artists to advance in-depth arts education programs in partner schools; strengthen communication and collaboration among teaching artists and between artists and MCED staff; and to provide a forum where artists can contribute to and enrich the development of strategies for in-school program design and evaluation.*

*From June 2005 through April 2006, twenty teaching artists on the MCED's active roster participated in the pilot study group project which required them to:*

- *Attend eight three-hour study group session;*
- *Attend four school-based teaching experiences in the field – two at which they taught and two at which they observed colleagues teaching (four hours training);*
- *Develop a personal learning project tied to a key learning goal identified in their TASG application; and*
- *Participate with their colleagues on a team learning project that addressed a common issue or challenge of working with K-12 students and teachers.*

*Key areas of learning included the creation and implementation of lesson plans, the honing of skills required to work in partnership with classroom teachers and school/district arts specialists, and further development of the artists' ability to conduct teacher in-services which relate to artist residencies and MCED Artsource curriculum.*

*In 2005, the Evaluation and Training Institute (ETI) was contracted by the Los Angeles Music Center to evaluate its pilot of the Teaching Artists Study Group (TASG) Project. As part of this evaluation, ETI conducted a focus group with twenty (20) participants that included sixteen (16) teaching artists and four (4) mentors. The focus group was conducted to assess participants' attitudes and experiences participating in the TASG Project.*

The findings presented in this report reflect the content of the focus group conducted during the last study group session on May 9, 2006.

As displayed in Table 1 below, participants were a mixed group of male and female artists from a cross-section of disciplines:

Table 1.  
TASG Participants

	Dance	Music	Theatre	Visual	Subtotal
Female	5	0	3	3	11
Male	3	3	2	1	9
Overall	8	3	5	4	20

“I felt the group project was a great way to explore new ways to connect the disciplines.”

Specifically, the focus group gathered information related to the following:

- New skills and knowledge gained;
- General experiences related to the group projects;
- Collegiality and collaborative processes;
- Mentorship process;
- Personal experiences;
- Leadership and management; and
- Program suggestions from participants.

Any quotes that appear in this report represent the opinions most frequently expressed by the focus group participants.

Because the study group involved several different components such as the personal learning projects, team learning projects, field observations and teaching experiences, it was not possible to study the program in its entirety with a single focus group. Consequently, the focus group was limited to discussion of the group project component of the TASG.

Toward that end, two separate observations were conducted of the group project presentations. Observations from the initial visit were used to inform development of the focus group protocol. A second visit was conducted immediately preceding the focus group discussion. Between these two observations, ETI staff attended all group project presentations.

The focus group was audio taped and transcribed to provide an accurate account of the discussion. Any additional written feedback from participants received after the focus group is was incorporated into this report.

A copy of the moderator’s guide can be found in the Appendix.

### **What brought you to the Teaching Artist Study Group?**

“... [for] the chance to work with other artists. Because we work in isolation all the time and we don’t often get to meet...and exchange ideas.”

“...I wanted to expand some of the areas that I work on in terms of teaching, and [become] connected more to other disciplines.”

“...to hear from all of the other artists and share some of my challenges that I face when I go out to the schools...[and] learn from everyone how they deal with some of these things...”

### **How have your teaching skills and knowledge changed since you began the study group? Did you learn useful teaching strategies?**

“...when you’re teaching in a classroom, your point of view is...the overriding concept...but it’s nice to be looking at it from a different perspective, working on the same project.”

“The notion of artistic excellence is thrown around a lot. About being a master, about perfecting skills. About being highly proficient. One thing that I’ve learned and taken away from this is that as an artist, although theater is the main form that I choose as a vehicle to express myself, as an artist I am capable of all the art forms.”

## **Reasons for Study Group Participation**

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Nearly all respondents shared a sense of loneliness and isolation as the driving force behind joining the study group. Specific complaints ranged from feeling that they worked in a void or vacuum to personal loneliness as a result of teaching alone.

- The opportunity to dialogue with other working artists, share experiences and challenges from teaching, and exchange ideas were key reasons for participation.
- For some, the study group was merely a natural progression of involvement with the Music Center, related workshops, and a step in their ongoing career development as a teaching artist. Others participated for their own personal growth as artists.
- A few artists had very specific desires to share their medium (e.g., hip hop dance, West African music) with others.
- The stipend provided by the Music Center was a plus that drew at least one artist to apply to be part of the study group pilot.

## **New Skills and Knowledge**

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All participants were enthusiastic about the study group, with classroom observations of others noted as one of the most rewarding experiences. Furthermore, everyone agreed that the group projects really got their creative juices flowing and provided new ideas about how to teach more clearly.

- A noted benefit of working on the collaborative projects was that it exposed participants to diverse points of view and new ways of doing things.
- The group projects often took participants out of their comfort zones and forced them to consider other teaching methods and to incorporate other artistic mediums into their lesson.
- Numerous participants reported that experience in the study group gave them newfound confidence in themselves and their abilities.
- Focusing upon the process of learning and always valuing what students express was an important concept taken away from the study group by some participants.

***Did you create any new teaching tools? How will those tools benefit other teaching artists?***

“I had gotten an idea, when I saw the puppets in the shadow play...I haven’t been able to implement it, but I thought...this could be incorporated in dance.”

“...seeing [another artist’s] approach...gave me some new ideas as to how I might...bring some more sophistication to [my own teaching]...”

***Have you gained skills that will help you as you work in partnership with classroom teachers or school art specialists?***

“...it was actually really comforting to know that everyone else had the same experiences I had, and that we didn’t have any answers...we just have to try to win them over and find them a partner.”

***Do you feel better prepared to conduct teacher in-services related to artist residencies and MCED Artsource curricula?***

“...just even getting to know each individual artist that much more, I understand more about their art form...I connect more with people whose units I can understand because I’ve seen them do them...it’s a direct benefit of this and becoming more familiar with what everyone else does as their art. And being able to relate to that and understand it.”

***Do you feel prepared to implement what you’ve learned out in the field? What might you change or do differently?***

“What if we really could collaborate as artists? How much richer would the experience be for the students and how much more re-energized would we be?”

***New Teaching Tools***

- One respondent felt that other artists’ anticipatory projects generated a lot of good ideas that could be transformed into their own medium of choice.
- Even when new teaching tools weren’t actually created, some participants acknowledged that study group activities had sparked ideas for further development later. In one case, a tool in one medium (puppet shadow play) had spawned an idea for use in another (dance).

***New Partnership Skills***

- One project group worked on bringing the level of the [artistic] experience down to the appropriate grade level being taught so that they could work in partnership more effectively with teachers.
- A key learning point generated by the study group was to ensure that activities are accessible to their partner classroom teachers and that the teachers always feel confident in doing what is being asked of them, regardless of artistic background and/or ability.

***Preparation to Conduct Teacher In-services***

- Although little emphasis was placed on directly linking MCED Artsource materials to the group projects, several participants agreed that the process of working with other artists in various mediums increased their awareness and knowledge of what could be used.

***Preparation to Implement Learning***

- Most respondents felt that all of the group projects could be implemented and taken out to multiple school sites with just a few adjustments to fit the population, context, and other variables.
- Some participants expressed concern that more development was needed to implement their program ideas in the field. Since everyone based their projects on a best case scenario of 25 plus weeks in the classroom, obvious scaling down would need to be done to implement them in a more realistic 12 week residency period.
- TASG participants agreed that they would like to find a way to collaborate with other artists on an ongoing basis despite obvious financial and practicality issues. They all felt strongly that collaboration is the best way to teach and that schools support the idea.

***Did any of you experience challenges as you worked on your group projects? How did you respond? What would you have liked to have done differently?***

“...I was really scared that I wasn’t going to even be in a group because I didn’t know what I wanted to do and I didn’t know a lot of people...it was really scary and stressful...”

“...there was a lot of pressure in the beginning [to find a group and come up with a topic]...until we voiced it and said it was a problem because we didn’t know any topics.”

“Something even as basic as scheduling. Trying to schedule, or...to try to find an afternoon to get together is tough. It is very difficult.”

“I realize there was stuff to be covered, but I would have liked a little bit more time put aside for the time that we were scheduled to be here, to actually be in our groups.”

“...every single one of us put in time beyond what time we were here. I mean hours. Hours and hours beyond...and all voluntarily.”

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## ***General Experiences***

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All participants found the Teaching Artists Study Group to be a rewarding experience and overall a valuable use of their time, despite any challenges they faced. The collaborative group projects and artist presentations were highlights of the program that everyone enjoyed and learned from.

### ***Group Project Challenges***

- *Everyone found the initial process of establishing groups somewhat confusing and/or stressful. Some participants would have liked more time to get to know each other before selecting people to work with, while others expressed frustration with the lack of guidelines from Music Center staff for project topics.*
- *One challenge faced by all participants was simply scheduling time to meet outside of the regular study group meetings.*
- *Finding locations to hold outside group project meetings was also an issue, with some meeting at their homes, others trying to find open rooms to use at the Music Center, and one group opting to rent space. It was suggested that the Music Center set aside rooms free of charge that could be used as needed.*
- *The ten to fifteen minutes set aside at the end of monthly study group meetings was felt to be inadequate to meet in project groups. A suggestion to help alleviate this problem was to have the study group meet two times per month instead of one, with the second meeting for the sole purpose of breaking into project work groups.*
- *Although most participants realized in advance that at least some time would be required outside of the study group meetings to complete projects, many acknowledged that they had put in extra time well above and beyond what they felt the Music Center had anticipated or what they were paid.*

**How did the multi-disciplinarity of the group influence your experience? Was it useful to work with artists from disciplines other than your own?**

“...coming to an idea of different corners, different disciplines...that was really neat. I really enjoyed that a lot.”

“...[I enjoyed] the thought process of the fellow artist, to see what goes on in their minds.”

**Has this group developed a sense of community?**

“Certainly, no doubt about it.”

“...it turned out we were all speaking the same language.”

“It really is different once you have been to someone’s house. [They are no longer] just somebody who you pass in the hallways at the Music Center.”

“I feel...connected to my people and not just because we worked on this project.”

**How did you collaborate with others during the project? What kinds of processes and strategies for collaboration worked best?**

“...we took a half hour each to teach our arts to the others...When you see them doing the thing they do best...it was such a good, strong, quick way to get to know somebody...”

“Email. Email is very important.”

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## Collegiality and Collaborative Processes

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As mentioned previously, all respondents enjoyed collaborating on the group projects and found it to be one of the best components of the program. Relationships were established that will continue on well after participation in the study group is over.

### Multi-discipline Group

- Participants enjoyed coming together from different disciplines and becoming familiar with the thought processes of artists in mediums different from their own.
- They were excited to see how themes evolved into something very different than initially conceived as aspects of various disciplines of their project team members were incorporated.

### Development of Community

- A primary facility in the development of a sense of community was talking over food. Participants would often use their break time to approach others whom they did not know well, or to share ideas for activities outside of the study group.
- Meeting in each others’ homes to work on group projects was another way that some gained a deeper understanding of other participants and fostered friendships that will continue outside of the study group.
- Others preferred the “intellectual energy” they were able to stimulate in each other and share by meeting in a dance studio or being on campus to work on their project.

### Process and Strategies for Collaboration

- One group took time out at the start of their project for each person to provide a teaching demonstration of what they did in their medium, which fostered a deep appreciation and understanding of each other and their varied disciplines.
- Email was a crucial tool for the collaborative efforts of at least one team.

### Safe Environment for Expression and Critique

- The study group meetings were seen as very democratic forums where everyone could speak freely without fear.
- The structure of the study group fostered safe communication and established a model that participants were successfully able to emulate in the group projects.

***Did you feel that the environment was safe enough to express yourself freely? Critique others freely?***

“It seemed to be very democratic, like everyone could say what they wanted to say...I really think that everyone got to say what they wanted to say...”

“...I think that being part of the larger group influences how you deal with the smaller group...”

***Do you feel that you were provided with useful constructive feedback by your peers?***

“...when you're critiquing, you're going at it from a growth aspect instead of saying, 'Oh that stinks.' You say 'How about, what if we add this? What if we tried this way, what would that get us?...'”

“...everyone was really nice. There [were] no big egos or anyone who was overriding anyone else.”

***How did the mentorship process unfold? Did you find it helpful?***

“...we wanted to represent the artists...and be their voice...But whenever we went to a meeting, it had already been planned...I didn't feel that we were really able to represent [the other artists]. And that was frustrating for me.”

“...we are all on the same level...all of us have a very extensive background. And so to...say this person is [up] here, and this person is [down] here...you're trying to be in a community and you have already separated people.”

- *It was further noted that once participants felt like they were part of the larger group and had an established means of communicating, it was a natural continuum for working in smaller groups.*
- *Criticism was given freely in an open and positive manner that encouraged collaboration and helped group projects evolve in a positive manner.*
- *One artist noted in particular how nice everyone was and that no single person dominated discussions.*

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## ***Mentorship***

*Feedback about the mentorship component was quite mixed and at times emotional. Some members expressed confusion as to what the mentorship aspect of the program was intended to be, and most respondents agreed that it was not adequately fostered.*

- *Some mentors felt that their role wasn't taken seriously by the Music Center and that they were not given appropriate opportunities.*
- *Mentors were initially told that one of their roles was to serve as liaisons and to provide ideas to Music Center staff for the development of artist-driven session topics. They were disappointed then to only be asked to approve schedules already compiled without their input.*
- *Some respondents, including one mentor, had a problem with the whole mentorship concept and felt it unfairly labeled a few artists as somehow being better and immediately set the mentors apart from the rest of the group. They would have preferred a “peer-to-peer mentoring” model.*

***What did you gain from the guidance of the mentors?***

“...I felt ... [they gave] me some really good feedback and felt like I had someone that I could talk to about issues... [they were] a great example of a mentor...”

***Were you satisfied with the level of leadership provided by the Music Center?***

“...I think there is a reluctance to really give control over [to the artists and mentors]...very difficult for them to do...”

“...they modeled very well how to create a safe atmosphere, a safe and supportive atmosphere... [that] permeated throughout.”

***Would you recommend the TASG to other Music Center teaching artists?***

“I would recommend it to someone, but it would come with a warning... it’s a great opportunity, but... it’s going to be a lot of extra work.”

- A suggestion was made that it would have been more appropriate to label the four mentors differently, perhaps as “artist representatives,” since there was no real mentoring that occurred.
- One artist applied for the study group specifically in hopes of having a mentor and was immediately disappointed at the first session to discover that it would not be a real mentoring program, per se.
- However, another participant felt that they had had a very successful mentorship, noting that feedback obtained during the site observations from his/her mentor was extremely helpful.
- Yet another artist shared his/her confusion when he/she had a different mentor in the smaller group than expected based on what he/she had been told in the beginning.

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***Leadership and Management***

Respondents in general were satisfied with the level of leadership provided from the Music Center apart from the mentoring aspect of the program.

- Some participants felt that Music Center staff had difficulty giving up control and letting the program truly be artist-driven.
- Meetings were felt to be very informative, although there were some complaints that things were often rushed at the end, with very little time to break out into their smaller project groups.
- Visits from outside artists was a favorite part of the monthly study group meetings.

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***Conclusions***

In terms of the overall objectives, the Teaching Artists Study Group pilot was an unequivocal success.

The Music Center effectively provided a safe forum in which selected artists from their roster were able to work together and hone their teaching skills. All participants were extremely positive about the collaborative process and the opportunity provided for them to work across disciplines with other teaching artists.

As mentioned previously in this report, group projects and artist demonstrations were highlights of the program that everyone enjoyed and learned from.

The only portion of the program that met with general dissatisfaction was the mentorship process, which most felt was not well defined. Mentors felt that they were not afforded the chance to function as originally intended, while other attendees were confused, frustrated or even upset by the concept.

### **Recommendation to Other Teaching Artists**

- All of the respondents indicated that they would recommend the Teaching Artist Study Group to others.
- The only caveat noted was the time commitment outside of the regular meetings to complete projects.

### **Suggestions for Program Improvement**

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- A key area for improvement is the mentorship component, which needs additional clarification. In particular, the roles, relationships and responsibilities of mentors versus Music Center staff and other artists needs to be more clearly defined. If mentors are to function as liaisons to the other participants, then Music Staff also needs to give them the authority and opportunity to help plan study group activities.
- The Music Center should review the scope of projects and actual time spent in relationship to stipends provided. Clearer guidelines of time commitments should be provided to future applicants.
- Additional outside resources, including more demonstrations by artists not affiliated with the Music Center, should be included to broaden exposure of participants to various instructional techniques.
- More time needs to be allocated at the monthly meetings for project group discussions. Options include having a second meeting each month specifically for the groups to meet, or adding additional time to the agenda to accommodate separate breakout sessions of each group.
- Group project guidelines should be provided on advance, with sample topics offered to help generate ideas.
- Selection of project groups should be delayed until participants have time to get to know each other and establish a higher comfort level and understanding of each other. This will alleviate the stress and discomfort some participants experienced when asked to immediately form a group with people whom they did not know.

- *It may be beneficial to give every participant the opportunity to give a brief teaching demonstration of their art to the entire study group. This would enhance appreciation and knowledge across disciplines and could also serve as a thorough introduction of participants if done when the study group first convenes. More detailed demonstrations could be scattered throughout the sessions if desired*
  - *The Music Center should more actively assist participants with finding different types of space to meet with their groups or make arrangements in advance with places that participants can contact.*
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# Appendix

**Music Center  
Teaching Artist Study Group Project  
Moderator's Guide for Participating Artists**

**I. INTRODUCTION**

My name is \_\_\_\_\_. I am from the Evaluation and Training Institute (ETI), a research firm in West Los Angeles. ETI was contracted to conduct a program evaluation of the pilot of the Teaching Artist Study Group (TASG) that you have been participating in. So, to better understand your experiences with the study group, we have invited you here today to talk about the program with you. The information we collect from you will be synthesized into a report that the Music Center may use to improve the pilot for teaching artists who participate in the future.

Because the study group has involved a several different components such as the personal learning projects, team learning projects, field observations and teaching experiences, it would not be possible to study the program in its entirety with this focus group. As such, today we will focus solely on the group project component of the study group. When you respond to the questions I will be asking shortly, please answer only in terms of the group project component.

We're very glad that you are here. I hope everyone is comfortable.

**II. GROUND RULES**

- 1) All of your answers will remain confidential. Your names will not be linked to your comments in any report.
- 2) There are no "right" or "wrong" answers. We welcome everyone's opinion.
- 3) It is okay to say, "I don't know."
- 4) We are audiotaping the discussion to help us correctly recall the discussion. We also have an ETI staff person taking notes. For the sake of the note-taker, please let someone finish speaking before you begin.
- 5) The discussion will last approximately one hour, and to keep things moving, there will be no breaks. However, you can leave to use the restroom at anytime. (Explain where the restroom is located.)
- 6) Do you have any questions before we begin?

### **III. PARTICIPANT INTRODUCTIONS**

Let's have each of you start by (display a list):

- Introducing yourself by your first name only;
- Tell us your discipline;
- Describe how you became involved in the Music Center's Education Division; and,
- What brought you to the Teaching Artist Study Group.

### **IV. New Skills and Knowledge**

- 1) How have your teaching skills and knowledge changed since you began the study group? Did you learn useful teaching strategies? If so, please provide an example.
- 2) Did you create any new teaching tools? How will those tools benefit other teaching artists?
- 3) Have you gained skills that will help you as you work in partnership with classroom teachers or school art specialists?
- 4) Do you feel better prepared to conduct teacher in-services related to artist residencies and MCED Artsource curricula?
- 5) Do you feel prepared to implement what you've learned out in the field? What might you change or do differently?

### **V. General Experiences**

- 1) Did any of you experience challenges as you worked on your group projects? How did you respond? What would you have liked to have done differently?
- 2) What do you consider to be your group's greatest success?
- 3) Do you feel that this has been a valuable use of your time?
- 4) Would you recommend the TASG to other Music Center teaching artists?

### **VI. Collegiality and Collaborative Processes**

I also have a few questions about your experiences working collaboratively with others. As you respond to the next few questions, please be mindful that this is not a time to disclose anything personal about other individuals. Rather, please focus on the process of collaboration and how negotiations were made or challenges overcome.

- 1) What has it meant to you to have an opportunity to work with others on your teaching process?

- 2) Has this group developed a sense of community?
- 3) **(Key Question)** How did you collaborate with others during the project? What kind of processes and strategies for collaboration worked best? Did any challenges arise in terms of collaboration? How did you respond?
- 4) Did you feel that the environment was safe enough to express yourself freely? Critique others freely? Do you feel that you were provided with useful constructive feedback by your peers? How could the feedback process for the study group be improved?
- 5) How did the multi-disciplinarity of the group influence your experience? Was it useful to work with artists from disciplines other than your own?

### **VII. Mentorship**

- 1) How did the mentorship process unfold? Did you find it helpful?
- 2) What did you gain from the guidance of the mentors?
- 3) Do you have any suggestions to improve the mentorship process?

### **VIII. Personal Experiences**

- 1) How did the experience affect you personally?

### **IX. Leadership and Management**

- 1) Were you satisfied with the level of leadership provided by the Music Center?
- 2) Do you feel that the meetings were well-organized?

### **X. Suggestions for Program Improvement**

- 1) What would you change about the program to make it better in the future?
- 2) Was anything missing that you would add to the study group?
- 3) Do you have any additional comments or suggestions?