

Perspectives on Teacher Training in the ESA and SAA

by MaryLou Roberts, ESA & SAA Guitar Teacher Trainer



Teacher training in the ESA and SAA offers multiple opportunities for growth with lots of interesting and varied ideas. By connecting these great ideas from each region, we can all benefit and grow in our effectiveness in teaching. I would like to offer my perspective from serving in both regions as I have been offered the chance to truly see things from two beautiful sides of the ocean. The Suzuki Method is truly international, and with greater understanding, we can increase our effectiveness and growth, and contribute so much to the raising of the noble hearts of tomorrow.

In the ESA, teachers often begin with an audition with the teacher trainer, who reviews the experience, training and performance needed. The first course, Level 1, consists of 120 hours of philosophy, pedagogy and observation with the teacher trainer. Teachers have a plenty of time to study, reflect, ask questions, review, and immerse themselves in a Suzuki environment. There are breaks, as the course usually occurs during several sessions. There is time to go home and teach using the ideas learned, and return with experiences to share and receive further advice. The teacher trainer becomes more of a mentor, guiding and encouraging excellent teaching. There are also a minimum of 20 additional hours to observe teachers outside the training course in any instrument which may occur at larger workshops and conventions or individual studios. This helps build community, increases attendance at larger events, and gives the teacher a wide view of how to teach.

The syllabus for all training levels is cross instrument, ensuring that every instrument area gets the same concepts and ideal training. It contains sections on Philosophy, Performance, Pedagogy, Parent Education, and Supervised Teaching with Children, Observation and Journaling.

Each teacher teaches a combination of 5 lessons and group class activities and receives feedback from the teacher trainer. This helps avoid any common errors while helping to hone skills needed and making sure a positive learning model is in place. Emphasis is on the one point lesson, positive language, technical advice, and how to teach using the small steps to essential skills.

Level 1 teachers are quite often in classes with other levels of teachers, so they are exposed to the later repertoire, encouragement from peers, philosophy from many angles, helping parents, and group class ideas. Level 2 and up teachers gain by having more review of the Level 1 material, offer encouragement to the new teachers, offer their advice and practice small leadership tasks. Each course becomes a small community of mutual support and respect.

For the Journaling, each teacher gathers their materials into one notebook for later reference, and to be presented at the exam. The notebook contains observation notes, articles, teaching points in their own words for each piece, a philosophy paper, ideas on how to present the Suzuki method to prospective parents, description of lesson activities, and breaking down skills relating to their instrument and more. Teachers truly own their teaching through this process.

Teachers work hard to prepare for the exam, with diligent study and memorization. Exams include performance, teaching a short one point lesson, teaching points of the repertoire and their purpose, and answering questions about the Suzuki philosophy.

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Teachers receive guidance from the teacher trainer as they set up their teaching practice, so that all are using parents, positive approaches and group class as their foundation. The constant guidance and building of community is very strong, and lasting friendships and working relationships are very often formed.

In the SAA, teachers begin with a 6 hour introductory course in Suzuki Philosophy called "Every Child Can". In Latin America, the introductory course, "Philosophia" includes at least 16 hours of presentations and 8 hours of observation. With both courses include teachers, parents and administrators across all instruments. Teachers meet each other, work together, giving a wide sense of community. Both courses are organized with written and video materials, so all courses cover the same essential points, giving a common philosophical base the every training course.

Teachers may then upload their performance to take Unit courses. The audition is then reviewed by a qualified independent source. This ensures that all teachers in training are at an acceptable playing level at the beginning of training. In Latin America, teachers play the entire book fluently from memory near the end of the course for the teacher trainer. Attendance requirement in all courses is 100 percent in order to register the course. Unit courses are arranged by book level and are called Units.

Observations are a main staple in the courses. Teacher trainers read and may comment on the observations. This gives the teacher trainer valuable feedback on the understanding of each teacher and may influence the content and discussions in the next class. It also gives the teacher feedback and practice at organization of pedagogy and clear thinking. The whole process encourages good teaching habits: listen, observe what is happening, and choose the most beneficial aspect to work on, demonstrate, describe, and use repetition to verify understanding. Observations are handed in each day. Thorough detailed writing is encouraged, so that the teachers see clearly what has gone on in the lessons and understand the purpose behind each activity.

Teacher trainers hand out their pedagogy materials, which contains many years of experience and wisdom. This gives every participant a consistent and accurate base, and is available for later reference. Near the end of the courses in Unit 1,2 and 3, teacher trainers meet with each teacher for a short individual consultation to offer guidance and answer additional questions. Training courses are a great catalyst for teachers to learn and ask questions, invite creative ways to teach and see many observations.

The Practicum course offers teachers the opportunity to bring video recordings of their teaching to be reviewed by a teacher trainer with peer input from the smaller group of up to 5 teachers. There is practice teaching of students with input from everyone in the course, using specific characteristics of excellence in teaching, called Pedagogy Descriptors, and Performance Descriptors. The descriptors give teachers the goals in specific terms and are very clear and guide the discussions to be positive and descriptive.

The Suzuki Principles in Action course helps teachers incorporate the Suzuki philosophy in the lessons. It includes all instrument areas, and the focus is on how to teach. Teachers learn and define excellence, when a child is ready to move on, how to teach by ear, how to engage students in working on tone, giving accurate feedback, communication skills, and working with parents. In Latin America, many courses have a Teaching Strategies course at the end of each unit, so teachers can get feedback on their teaching in a step by step manner.

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As we develop our teaching methods for teachers, we benefit the parents and children even more. Around the world, parents and children have a lot in common; they are busy. Perhaps by working together, we can learn creative new ways to help. All teachers need advice on presenting the Suzuki Method in a clear and positive way. All Suzuki teachers want to benefit from the community of support and exchange ideas, and listen to new ideas. By working together in this world wide environment, we can truly make a difference.