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## Cathy DePentu: The Benefits of Pushing Out of Your Comfort Zone

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I believe in the importance of MAEIA and its resources. I always try to set aside my ego and throw myself into difficult challenges or situations in order to improve, from an advanced violin class (I am anything but advanced on the violin) to a challenging yoga pose (headstands anyone?). Technology can bring me to my knees. By the time I figure out how to do something, it's obsolete. As I have prepared for my first solo MAEIA presentation, my MAEIA colleagues have been unfailingly patient while trying to teach an old dog new tricks. I am slowly getting better, which means a lot more obsolescence is on the way, but that is another story.

### Stepping Out: Fears, Firsts, and Following

I am a talker—no one who knows me would dispute that. I am fearless in front of my students or with people I know, but generally not eager to speak formally in front of large groups. In fact, that is one of my fears. Another major fear is using technology, it hates me. So why is this what I am doing? What do I hope to gain? What do I hope to give people?

So, I made my PowerPoint and my Process Agenda, Heather Vaughan-Southard (my MAEIA guru) proofread it and I rehearsed it over and over in my head. I knew my content and knew my audience (another big fear). I was ready!

The Professional Development day got off to a roaring start. We had one of the best keynote speakers I have ever heard! Dr. Adolph Brown talked (and danced and sang) about how to truly reach every student and make a positive difference. Cornerstones of his inspiring words were the Four "F's": Be Fun, Fair, Flexible and have Faith. At the same time as I was devouring every word, a little voice spoke to me: "How will you compare to this? You're not even close to his fluid, choreographed delivery style. They won't like you."

### Processing in Real Time

Time to present! I got there 30 minutes before my session to set up and scope out the space. When I got to the room, I discovered that the room was too small for the anticipated audience. From now on I will double check with organizers to make sure we coordinate details! The computer and hook-ups were on the teacher's desk, in a corner of the room. This was awkward as I had to be positioned behind that desk to access my notes. I felt like I was hiding from my audience from there! As being able to move freely about while presenting and interacting with your audience can "make or break" the vibe in the room, I will carry a set of notecards, or a printout of my notes so that I am no longer "trapped". Of course, when I become as adept a presenter as Dr. Brown, I will be able to get this all done as easily as a casual conversation with friends (dare to dream!)

Once I began my presentation I noticed I was covering material much more quickly than I had anticipated on my Process Agenda. This could have been due to being trapped behind that desk! I started with the background of MAEIA and the website, but think I may move that until later in the session, as a few participants would have preferred to follow along with me on the website (or break off and explore on their own). Later in my session, I was moving around the room assisting people and realized I had skipped a couple of things that needed to be added, particularly our next project, Collaborative Scoring.

The last thing we did was break into small groups and explore the assessments. Each person found one or two they liked, and shared with each other and then with the entire group. I had stressed throughout the presentation that the assessments were just tools to be used as is or modified to suit the class or situation, so our next step was to take an assessment and modify it for use at a different grade level. As I walked around, I heard comments like "Look at this!", "I could use this!", "This is great!". One

group of art teachers stepped out of the room to work on ways to incorporate the assessments into their SLOs right away!

As we finished up, I asked my colleagues to fill out the Quality Quadrant and leave it for me when they left. Regardless, only about 60% completed the form. I am not sure what to do about that, maybe I will use them as “Exit Slips” and stand by the door to collect them and say thank you and goodbye as people leave. In the week following the presentation, I have received several emails and notes from colleagues who are excited about MAEIA and all of our resources , and are eager to work together to incorporate some of the assessments into their classroom.

Finally, I am deeply appreciative to colleagues who shared these words of wisdom as I was preparing my session. I list them twice because of their importance.

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### Flexibility as a Practice

The focus of our PD this year is, “Take Chances, Try Something New, Start With “Why?”. For years, we as arts teachers have had to “build bridges” from the content of Professional Development to our own subject area. At general PD the next day, I was seated with a group of math, science, and business teachers focusing on technology in the classroom. I typically sit, listen to them and try to build those bridges. But I jumped out of my comfort zone, took a chance and asked if we could also address the use of technology to better suit the needs of the arts or solitary teacher. We had a great discussion, and I think we all learned something. I thanked them for being willing to be flexible and I think we all benefited from the session. I know I did.

I plan to present this session again to the K-5 music folks who couldn’t attend this one. I have also offered to present to colleagues in the Michigan American String Teachers Association (MASTA). I know as I continue to work with the sessions I am creating, my delivery will become more natural and intuitive. I’m not Adolph Brown yet, but I’ll get there (he has a crew to do all his tech)!

*Cathy Depentu is a MAEIA Leadership Fellow and is the Director of Orchestras for Plymouth Canton Community Schools.*