Teaching El Sistema Teaching
By Judy Hill Bose, Director of Teacher Education, Longy School of Music

As Sistema-inspired programs spread across the US, and the wave of enthusiasm for the nascent movement gains momentum, the question looms large: how does El Sistema guide us in enacting a teaching practice that is unique, meaningful and successful? What’s particularly Sistema-like about it?

Last month in Boston, 30 educators from U.S. El Sistema programs gathered to learn from each other and to ask these questions in community. The professional development seminar “Enacting a Teaching Practice through El Sistema” was a collaborative event held by the Longy School of Music, the Conservatory Lab Charter School and the Abreu Fellows Program at the New England Conservatory.

Featured educator Lorrie Heagy (Alaska’s “Teacher of the Year”; first cohort of Abreu Fellows) shared her expertise in early childhood music teaching and helped us explore what kinds of skills/concepts/ideas – both musical and social – can be introduced for our earliest learners to carry them through to the intensive ensemble work of a Sistema program. Participants played alongside Conservatory Lab School students, jammed in a bucket band – and brought their questions and insights to the table in discussions around how we shape educational practice in our US nucleos.

What did we learn? What can we share? While teaching in a Sistema program may be resonant with darn good teaching practice anywhere, there seems always to be a larger, longer-term goal in mind. Imagine that you see (as we did) a fantastic teacher meeting the eyes of every five-year-old as they sing complicated songs, helping them learn to move together as an ensemble, to use simple rhythm instruments respectfully, to learn finger and arm movements that secretly do the important work of building muscles and correct positioning for hands that will later hold small violins and bows – and imagine that all these students are well aware that students in the next higher grade are playing instruments in an orchestra, and that it will be their turn soon.

It’s a uniquely Sistema-like model, and it seems to need educators who are inventing things at every turn, who are taking established practices and tweaking/turning/developing. It seems to require a teaching practice that is grounded, flexible, patient… and certain that it IS possible for every child to flourish musically and personally. This kind of teaching practice feels new, and teachers need every opportunity to share great successes and great flops with each other generously.

“From the minute a child is taught to play an instrument, he’s no longer poor. He is a child in progress...who will become a citizen.” – José Antonio Abreu
Dear Colleagues in the Movement...

By Eric Booth

Over recent pre-dawn tea, I mused, for the thousandth time, about ways to tap and expand the energy and potential of our movement.

We all know we need more connection to gain strength and visibility, yet few of us have the time to stay on top of what’s happening across the country. The idea of a simple national newsletter hit me. It could provide a greater sense of being a part of burgeoning national endeavor.

I decided to just do it. I’m lucky to be an advisor to many programs, to work as a public advocate, and I owned and ran a newsletter company for seven years—so it made sense. Since I don’t have the time for this new project by myself, I asked Tricia Tunstall if she might be willing to be the Editor. She literally wrote the book on El Sistema and the Transformative Power of Music (WW Norton, January 2012). She is a passionate independent advocate, observer, and follower of the growing movement. She was the perfect person to take it on, and with a heart as big as most who commit to this work, she agreed to be the Editor of The Ensemble.

And we rely on you to distribute the newsletter widely, through email and on the web, and by printing and distributing copies for students, families, funders and community, to let them know they are part of something huge and growing.

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"My mantra has always been, ‘There is no better time to help children than right now.’"
- Rey Ramirez, co-founder/director of “Soundscapes,” Newport News, VA