

CHORAL CONVERSATIONS



A Conversation on Collaboration with Judy Bowers

by Jeffrey Benson



Judy Bowers, Professor Emerita at the Florida State University College of Music, retired after almost three decades. Bowers has taught music education classes and choirs, in addition to conducting numerous all state/honor choirs in the U.S., Canada, and Africa. A unifying principle in all these settings has been the use of Developmental Teaching strategies, which allows singers of varying skills to successfully rehearse and perform together. Music partnerships between university students and school/community participants have served as building blocks for university students to master skills in music teaching. In 2014, Dr. Bowers was inducted as a Lowell Mason National Music Education Fellow.

How did your career filled with partnerships and collaborations get started?

First and foremost, I'm a teacher, and all of my collaborations/partnerships were a response to some problem or need in my classroom. I like partnerships because the premise of a true collaboration is that

it's a win-win. It's not a partnership if two groups or two people come together and one of them has all the power while the other does not. But if everybody wins, things are better, usually for everybody. It's a very positive way to live life. This was my rule from the earliest partnerships (I learned this in my counseling master's program). Each partner must benefit somewhat equally, and each has a voice in determining how the partnership might work. If all of us have a say, then it will likely be a success.

My starting point is always: know thyself! It's incredibly important to know who you are and know what you care about. For me, I always wanted to be a teacher. I wasn't sure it would be music until about the ninth grade, but always knew I'd be a teacher. In addition to music education degrees, I also hold a master's in guidance and counseling because I had no access to graduate music education study. We all know that we deal with music, but we deal with people first and foremost, so I thought counseling was a reasonable option. If we start from educating and wanting to help the whole person, then partnerships and collaborations naturally come out of that, and my graduate counseling study was a convenient accident.

When I started at the Florida State University, I was already an experienced teacher (sixteen years of K-12 teaching), but I was a brand-new college professor. I had to establish a means for success with undergraduate choral music education majors. Thus, I identified immediate challenges. Because student teachers were placed all over the state with few local placements nearby in Tallahassee, they needed to reach teaching independence before leaving for the internship. Thus, my first partnership was born: Adopt-a-Choir (AAC). This was specifically designed for my students who needed to gain practice and teaching independence before they left for student teaching.

AAC involved my college students partnering with at-risk high school students for learning three pieces alongside a college buddy and then performing together at the college choir concert. (This later evolved into adopting any choir from all levels of excellence and student experience.) Thus, students headed to internships were able to actively teach music to the AAC students in the partnership choir. Reflecting back on these partnerships, I now realize they were a rehearsal for student teaching, perhaps a “student teaching” for student teaching. This collaboration model is a short-term commitment of one semester (one and done, if needed).

Before the internship, it provided direct experience for university students to teach and work with all types of students (with two teachers in the room), as well as having my mentorship for planning and rehearsing the partnership choir. Over time, this evolved into having choral majors do the initial teaching at the three partnership rehearsals, pairing volunteer collegiate buddies and their adopted student. I also invited the partnership teacher to conduct one of the three songs. Area schools lined up to get “adopted,” and across my twenty-seven years at FSU (with 2 semesters per year = 54 semesters), I had AAC for thirty-nine semesters.

The short-term benefit for me was connection with area schools, because my college students could be out there any time I needed. The long-term benefits included enrollment gains in my university ensemble, as those singers, regardless of major, loved serving as mentors and singing buddies. During my first year (1990), there were twenty-two singers enrolled in my

treble, non-auditioned choir. As I continued to create collaborations, word spread and students found the choir. My peak enrollment was 108, though I preferred 70-80 for ease of managing everything and ensuring I still knew my students to some degree.

Were your collaborations organic or always well planned out from the start?

I always started with a plan, but things constantly changed as partnerships advanced. I originally wanted the teachers to introduce the three partnership songs to their choirs, and then my university buddies would have an after-school or weekend rehearsal together on those pieces, for at least three meetings. Adopted students attended the college dress rehearsal and joined us for the concert. My university choir volunteers received bonus points if they chose to participate. Initially, many non-major collegiate students were hesitant to try because some were not strong musicians and felt unprepared. I promised to make them successful; they were, and they loved it!

I always chose the repertoire, but the music reflected opportunities to learn specific concepts or skills chosen by the high school teacher (sight reading, singing high notes more effectively, structure of a mass, etc.—anything they wanted, this was their power). Each first rehearsal started with buddy assignments, and each buddy pair was assigned to a “teaching group.” I always used an ABA structure in these rehearsals, with A being music rehearsal and B providing social interactions among the partners, as planned by me. Initially I fully structured the student interactions and guided the interviews with handouts I created. During rehearsal (A), buddies reinforced my teaching by reteaching the task to each other. For more complicated things, buddies joined their small teaching groups such that a music major (usually choral music education) ran the mini rehearsal to fix things we were addressing.

At some point, other partnership opportunities began to magically appear, so I moved from only short-term, one-semester commitments, to long-term investments. These new settings still involved people working together for common success, but the time commitment and the ability to control important aspects took

more time and attention. That being said, these collaborations were aimed at powerful systemic change, thus commitments on my part were in terms of years rather than semesters. Three important long-term partnerships include: 1) Florida State University/Raa Middle School (instrumental and choral music education); 2) Middle School Memphis (Memphis City School District/University of Memphis/Choral Clinician); 3) MTC Glee Club (FSU singers, Gadsden County Correctional participants).

Did Middle School Memphis come from a need within your own classroom? How did that partnership come about?

Memphis City Schools, which is an urban school district, had middle school programs that had been decimated by a number of things over the years. There were thirty-seven middle schools, but only twenty-three had choral music teachers. Most were struggling, though four or five programs were considered quite good. Overall, many Memphis middle schools were struggling programs with teachers who were trying their best but barely surviving. It had gotten to the point where the high school choral programs were being negatively impacted, and some of these schools were nationally recognized choirs.

When they first called me, I thought, “I’m in Tallahassee and you’re in Memphis. This is not going to work.” But I had a connection at the University of Memphis. Dr. Nicole Robinson had been a former FSU student, and the Memphis City School District was willing to help create a partnership that could include all three participants. Jim Holcomb was an extraordinary fine arts supervisor, so he and Nicole convinced me that I would just have to come up to Memphis and become the person who retrained the teachers to use effective teaching strategies in order to meet standards found in the Tennessee State music curriculum. Basically, I was recreating my undergrad FSU methods class, but in smaller steps with more repetitions. Between my class meetings, Nicole Robinson reviewed classroom management, pacing, teacher effectiveness, etc., as well as providing unlimited support through site visits to assist teachers alongside Jim Holcomb.

Memphis City Schools and the University of Memphis created a partnership in response to a middle school choral music problem. They convinced me that providing a core of strong, effective choral teachers would be a powerful contribution to the thousands of middle students the teachers served; I was hooked. So I went many, many times. (We planned it for three years, but it turned into six years.) Honestly, it was so much harder than we all thought it would be, but I will go to my grave feeling deeply proud of those teachers in Memphis. They showed up on a Friday night, from 5pm to 8pm and then again Saturday mornings until noon. I’m sure not all of them loved it. They didn’t trust me for the longest time; I was surprised by this. Though I already had experience teaching in a challenging at-risk school early in my own career, it was really eye opening for me to once again have a first-hand view, now in a challenging urban setting. I gained so much insight about things to do and things not to do. Urban schools are different experiences for students and teachers than suburban and rural schools, whether all students are personally at risk or not. All three settings (rural, suburban, urban) have their own unique challenges.

So, can we make change through partnerships like this? Yes. Is it easy? No. Is it worthwhile? Yes. I believe collaborative projects and partnerships can bring out the very best in people. It takes patience and the consistency of folks fully buying in and committing to the mutual goals of a collaboration. I left Memphis admiring those teachers so very much. They started at the most difficult place I could have ever imagined, but they were good people who truly cared. They had the support of a supervisor of music and an outstanding music education professor. The University of Memphis played a big role in that partnership, and they managed to pull it all together. To this day, those teachers are still doing great work.

It may feel like choosing which child is your favorite, but what was your most memorable collaboration?

Truthfully, every partnership had some very wonderful aspects, especially our collaboration with Raa

Middle School in Tallahassee. When you get a lot of middle school kids excited to sing with college students, the nonsense that comes out of their mouths is often hysterical. And there were wonderful things about Middle School Memphis. But if I had to choose only one partnership, I think I would say the MTC Glee Club, involving women in prison singing with buddies from the Florida State University choir (Photo 1). I believe it is fair to say that every single FSU student experienced at least one epiphany while working with individual buddies in the prison choir. We always included time in the middle of rehearsal for collective activities with students and their buddies that did not involve singing. I focused on an ABA rehearsal format (the B section was a communication circle for discussions). It was truly life changing in many different ways for all of us.

Early in this partnership, it hit me so deeply when one woman in the prison choir walked up to me and said, “Dr. Bowers, I just wanna tell you I didn’t want to come to choir today. You know, I wanted to sing, but I just felt I’ve had the worst day of my life. But I feel much better now. Our songs saved me today.” That day opened my eyes to the experience of these women and what music and this collaboration meant to them. We learn (and teach) so much empathy through partnerships like this one. *Watch a video about this partnership that was put together by the Gadsden Correctional Facility.* Either scan the QR code or visit <https://tinyurl.com/5n7xr63c>.



That sounds tremendously rewarding. How did that empathy impact other collaborations for you and your students?

Helping others provides reinforcement all on its own. However, not only is contributing to others beneficial, it’s the insight that occurs from having multiple people know something about others, even when people are simply able to accept the differences. This was particularly apparent to me in the Adopt-a-Choir with the Senior Singers (a county funded group of senior citizens who sang in a partnership choir with FSU singers). Ultimately, when they knew each other, they

overwhelmingly liked each other.

When we first began this partnership, I paired my university students with their senior singer buddies. I was working on a paper at the time, so I was collecting data hoping to show the world that music could change ideas and opinions. I had been reading about how older people really get sick and tired of adolescents and college-aged folks. And college students get really impatient with older people, so I planned a pre/posttest to measure changes in attitudes. I passed out pre-surveys and asked the seniors to rate their feelings on a continuum between two adjectives (thoughtful/selfish, etc.) about adolescents and university students. Conversely, I asked the university buddies to rate the same scale but responding about their attitudes toward senior citizens. I was a bit surprised by responses (much more negative than expected for both groups).

Across the semester of rehearsal during the B of the ABA format, each pair discussed assigned topics and then analyzed together how old and young might view things differently and perhaps some reasons why. During the connection time (the B portion of rehearsal), these barriers started to break down. After the post-test, the attitude scores were a bit higher, though not by much. However, most of the seniors wrote notes on the back of their score sheets explaining to me that they answered honestly about people in general, but their college buddies were clearly not the ones honking at them when the stoplight turned green. They assured me that the FSU students were far superior than other young people in the world. (Of course they were not. There are good people everywhere!) These college students weren’t the ones revving their engines loudly or speeding around them on the local roads. They had genuinely made some true connections through their stories and sharing of life experiences.

I will not forget the day a senior buddy responded to a discussion prompt about some memorable moment involving music that was personally important. He was British and spoke of being in London during World War II and enduring the heavy bombing. The power was out, there was no food or water, and he sat through either stone silence or extremely loud bomb explosions. Police sent everyone into the underground train stations and told them to silently stay there or risk injury



Screenshot from the Gadsden Correctional Facility video showing a collaboration with the MTC Glee Club. Scan the QR code on the previous page to view the full video.

or death. This much-loved senior softly described the challenges of keeping small children and babies contained and quiet.

It evidently became very tense as time passed, plus a lack of food and water continued. Several men slipped out and managed to get into a bar that had an old piano, which they brought underground in the dark of night. Although the bombs were still loud and it was still pitch dark, someone began playing the piano and everyone began to softly “sing their hearts out,” as he described it. You could have heard a pin drop in our choir; we were almost holding our breath throughout his description. He shared that he would never forget that moment. He had always loved music and singing, and he would always sing because it made his life a little better.

Across this partnership, we worked to prepare beautiful music for the concert. But more importantly, we actually started to see stereotypes break down, opinions change, and real relationships flourish among people who viewed the world in different ways.

What were some of the most difficult aspects of your collaborations? If you could go back in

time, how might you do one or two things differently?

Do you know what you need to avoid at all costs? You don’t want to work with somebody who just needs you to do something for them, perhaps treating you like someone who can check off an item on their to-do list. This potential disaster is prevented if a collaboration gives equal work and equal benefit to both parties. However, if someone has a need and their solution is simply asking you to do it, this is a very unequal pairing and resentment may well result. “Saving” some group or person can also become a negative, as it may seem condescending or not equally beneficial. Of course, dumping a problem on someone, particularly if one has authority over the other, is equally unfair. In addition, we should not agree to a partnership that requires us to do something we don’t necessarily support.

Years ago, a grant opportunity came my way for the Raa Middle School/Florida State University partnership. It was more than \$20,000, which was exciting. However, one grant component asked that the partnership participants help publicize their grant dollars provided. When I asked what this would look like, the

supervisor said noontime concerts for local community clubs and newspaper photos of the at-risk students being served. My response was twofold: 1) I couldn't ask university students to miss their classes in the middle of the day, and 2) I could not support newspaper photos labeling the middle school students in the program as at risk. I took the grant but negotiated the terms.

So, if you are partnering with another group, find the people who want to solve the problems together. Don't let them just give you their problems, hoping you'll solve it for them. It's easy to say yes, but much more challenging to remove yourself from that situation if it becomes negative. It really winds up not being collaborative at all.

I had a wonderful partnership in place with Raa Middle School, strongly supported by the principal, music faculty, general faculty and FSU music education program. We had before-school jazz, steel pans, strings, and a world music choir—it was wonderful. My students were able to pull off their own full concerts with Raa Middle School, and then they moved seamlessly to their student teaching because of that Raa partnership.

How might we encourage those who may be feeling discouraged or having a hard time finding the time for a partnership? What are the best steps to take in a collaborative direction?

1. Make a plan. What do you want to accomplish? Is there a problem, or do you want to add something to your choral program that would benefit your program or your students?
2. Start small so you can control most things that might make you miserable as you learn from mistakes.
3. Adopt-a-Choir (AAC) is easy to do. I've had many former students set up a short-term, combined event with feeder programs. A teacher in South Carolina decided to create AAC with middle school singers and volunteer singers in a nursing home. Most any combination of singers can be adopted if approached in a tactful, diplomatic way.
4. If your choral program is not currently thriving, then

connect with someone who can help you. If you are not a singer and tone is not happening, partner with a voice person—you'll have to think of something valuable to them that can make this an equally beneficial event.

5. Rule of thumb: if you drive by a school each day as you go to work and you know that the program is struggling, perhaps you could connect with them in some small way that might be helpful and that would also allow your students to gain something as well. Don't just reach out to "save" a teacher or program that is struggling. The secret is for you to need something they could contribute to help you or your students. There needs to be a sense of equality, a mutual contribution and mutual benefit.

The Raa MS program was valued by the middle school students because I asked them to invest in making the FSU student teachers the best on the planet. To do that, we needed middle school singers who would work hard, pay attention, and then politely verbally provide specific examples of successful teaching during that rehearsal. They knew their job was to help me make them better and they took it seriously (and they also loved having all those highly motivated young teachers trusting them to help). This school district had once been a fabulous place to attend but had suffered student enrollment loss due to families moving farther out to the suburbs. This FSU/Raa partnership turned the school around. Anyone requesting to attend was accepted, and more than 100 academically moderate to very strong students transferred to the school for the arts enrichment provided by FSU College of Music.

Has advocacy for the choral art played a role in your career? How do we explain to the general population (to parents, administrators, and our audiences) that we are a naturally collaborative field and we provide more than excellent music?

I don't consider myself particularly strong as a professional advocate—I don't think I do that very effectively. During my career at Florida State University, I found my colleagues involved in the Florida Music Educators Association (FMEA) to be amazing advocates,

so I looked to those experts to be the professional voice. However, I do believe that collaborations and partnerships greatly increase visibility, and it helps to have more people in the community knowing what goes on in our music programs. For those teachers who feel invisible to administration or parents or professional music groups, a partnership might advance your cause.

I once took an Adopt-a-Choir tour with my ensemble to various community colleges in Florida, where we then invited high schools to join all of us—each choir sang individually and then we combined for three AAC pieces. I wanted to ensure that community colleges felt connected to a four-year school (many students transfer to in-state public universities), while also giving them an opportunity to provide services for high schools in their area (on-site hosting of the partnership event).

It's important to think about advocacy through the lens of partnerships because it naturally amplifies your

voice. If only one person is speaking up in your community, it could truly be the most important thing in the world, or it could be someone whining to people they don't know, like the local school board or administration. But if you've got partnerships going, people start to take notice. You've naturally doubled your participants and you have raised the volume of your voice in your school, community, and beyond. This allows individual teachers to broaden their influence, professional leadership, mentorship, and expand horizons for their students. Through our actions, we're really able to advocate more meaningfully. Advocacy naturally comes out of the collaborative process.

Advocacy is not a single person or even a group of people using their words to say, "we need this," or "why aren't you supporting us here?" Through the collaborative aspects of the partnerships we make, we are demonstrating to communities what advocacy looks like.

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Associate Professor Nathan D'Shon Myers conducts the ASU Gospel Choir.

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Audiences see positive collaborations and outstanding performances that result from the combined efforts of a partnership. They see hard work and success demonstrated by our students in conjunction with the other partnership participants.

Do you want to know the biggest key to success? When you are partnering with other groups, the performance must be good. This is my unbreakable rule! Even if you have to select music that is quite easy, it can still be a beautiful performance. Difficulty level doesn't matter if everything else is beautifully done. It's our duty to make sure that AAC events and performances are respectable and high quality.

What do you see as the future of choral music in America, especially when thinking about collaboration?

I've been thinking about this a lot recently because the next ACDA conference in Dallas will have the theme, "Celebrating the Choral Art: Past, Present, and Future." If you think about the history of music education in America, in the 1910s, 1920s, and 1930s, we focused on creating ensembles and participating in shared competitions. We spent decades making beautiful music, and we didn't worry too much about training and music education because most people grew up around music. Many took piano lessons and sang or played music every week in their homes. And then we got to about the 1960s and 1970s and realized not everyone had that musical background anymore; we realized we needed music literacy, so sight reading and score study became real parts of national guidelines for curriculum. We wanted music education for all because music is the key to making everyone's life richer.

And so we get to today. In order for choral music to continue its vibrancy in school and community settings, we need to ensure all our students have opportunities to become independent musicians. We need conductors and teachers to fully embrace developmental teaching! Developmental teaching is less important in highly selective schools that have hundreds of trained singers, where most choristers are already high-achieving independent musicians. That's not the norm throughout a large percentage of U.S. schools, especially smaller

schools, rural schools, and schools without adequate funding or administrative support. It's also not the norm in many church or community choirs.

We should be able to combine novice singers who know little about music with more experienced singers. This can be done without some singers feeling lost or some hating it and becoming bored. Mixed-ability choirs can be successful, and those singers can be happy together if a teacher chooses to embrace developmental teaching.

All the partnerships I have created include singers of diverse levels of skill, training, and talent. I repeat: *Teaching in such a way that singers with limited experience can work together with expert singers is not impossible!* For example, I always quickly teach my "Rules for Expressive Singing." This is simply a shortcut to achieve the performance you desire with students who may lack the independence to look at the page and know what to do. Performing things correctly seems like a good first step (follow the rules), and then across time with sequenced instruction about how a singer can determine when to use a rule, our singers can demonstrate independent musical knowledge and skill.

If we are truly focusing on developmental teaching with effective pacing and feedback, where the sequencing is broken down, we're creating repetitions for the new singers and the superstars alike. One group is learning basic information (perhaps for the first time), while the more experienced group may be memorizing or singing in quartets around the room, etc., but all in response to effective teaching modeled or taught by the teacher. We give everyone a chance to succeed, and it doesn't bore students who can become off task and disruptive—they are all engaged at some level. The future is bright if we all commit to teaching singers musical independence. We can't let people fail when we are changing so many lives for the good.

I especially want interested (and sometimes very talented) singers who have not had any musical opportunities to *not* be "auditioned out" of a choir. Instead, I am hopeful we will all learn to "teach people in." Partnerships and collaborations can help us accomplish this goal. 