

Renaissance Arts Academy: Letting the Ensemble Sing Online

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A performing arts school built from the ground up around “ensemble learning” that blurs divisions between grades, subjects, and of course, special and general education, finds ways to hold the ensemble together even when teachers and students are not able to learn together in the same building.

Key Lessons:

- An all-hands-on-deck approach is necessary to keep students engaged, with diligent follow-up to connect with students who aren't visible during video lessons.
- Online learning can be structured to reinforce schools' most important values, such as those of collaboration, frequent feedback, and inclusivity.
- Prioritizing real-time interaction, and making it available to students even during independent work time, can help sustain communication and engagement during remote learning.

COVID-19 required many schools to dramatically reinvent themselves as a virtual program overnight, but this was perhaps no more evident than at Renaissance Arts Academy (RenArts) charter school in Los Angeles. The school's physical campus has no traditional classrooms and few internal walls. Teachers guide students in kindergarten through 12th grade in flexible pods and constructed performance spaces inside a remodeled auto garage. This unique use of physical space by a performing arts-focused school enabled nearly seamless collaboration among adults, and treated students with disabilities as full members of the ensemble.

When CRPE researchers first visited the campus in December 2018, ensemble learning unfolded immediately before our eyes. About half the students sat in multiage groups. Advisors (teachers) led small groups or supported students as they worked together on assignments in humanities or “smath” (science/math). We would have been hard-pressed to quickly identify students receiving special education services—not because the school neglected them, but because advisors mostly provided these supports alongside general instruction and never separated them from other students. Their curriculum was created entirely by staff, but rooted in many classics—students in sixth grade read “Frankenstein.” The school's cofounder compared ensemble learning to a large, lively family conversation at the dining table:

You don't shunt the kids away even if they don't understand everything that's being discussed. Not knowing everything is part of learning, and the best way to learn is to learn together.

At one point during our visit, we observed an advisor coach a child: "It's okay if you don't understand all the questions. Do as much as you can."

A large curtain divided the school space. The other half of the student body that we could not see rehearsed for a performance later that evening. They choreographed dance routines and practiced tricky passages on their violins, cellos, and basses. Putting on the semiannual performances was a whole-school effort; each student had a part in the show. When we sat in on the show later that evening, we saw that their dances referenced the classics they were reading, as well as modern events. String players wove together orchestral pieces and modern music, walking on stage while playing with the precision of a marching band. Multiage collaborations were in evidence here, too. At one point, high schoolers helped usher in kindergartners dressed as red "minions" to sing a Nat King Cole standard: *V is very, very extraordinary*.

The question RenArts leaders had to confront suddenly last spring was how to sustain an extraordinary, ensemble approach to learning when they were forced to leave their physical building behind.

The ensemble continued to perform even when face-to-face instruction was not possible

RenArts students achieve great outcomes. Nearly all of them graduate and go to college. For students with disabilities it's a positive outlier, with some of the strongest state test scores in [CRPE's recent nationwide study of special education in charter schools](#). But RenArts deployed no course exams, no graded assignments, no formal academic tracking, and little in the way of self-contained student work to get them there. Staff previously told us they worked long days, but they didn't bring work home, and were rarely at school when students weren't. Would remote learning force them to adopt more traditional structures? Could seamless collaboration continue when each child and adult was at home behind their own screen?

RenArts pivoted quickly to remote learning. Following the lead of the Los Angeles Unified School District and the county's recommendation, RenArts ceased on-site instruction at the end of the school day on March 13th. To maximize program cohesion, RenArts moved up its spring break to coincide with the first two weeks of the school closure. This allowed the faculty team to plan for the transition of RenArts' integrated, multiage programs to an online platform, including time to distribute laptops to families that needed them, ensure that every family had an internet connection, prepare and troubleshoot Google Classroom technical interface to accommodate increased usage and more robust instructional demands, and prepare the faculty team to facilitate learning experiences in an online environment. Instruction for all grades from transitional kindergarten through 12th resumed on March 30th.

Before the closure, we did not notice technology playing a prominent role in ensemble learning, but teachers used a bespoke online platform to collaborate and to support students, including those with disabilities. They used the internal system to trade notes on individual students and their needs.

Technology that was already in place was a starting point for their shift to remote learning. RenArts leaders told us they made Chromebooks and Google Classroom work for them last

spring. They called every home to ensure students had needed technology, and called each morning to every student who hadn't yet logged in. They turned off Google Classroom's grading features that looked like traditional schooling, but embraced the way the technology could bring everyone together. Staff met early each morning online and then began the day.

A strong culture of collaboration had always helped RenArts with students with disabilities; this continued to do so during the pandemic. The school does not pull students with disabilities out of class for special education services, and the staff does not have a separate special education team. The seamless nature of the school means adults wear many hats. The school psychologist, for example, also teaches humanities, and a lead math teacher (an astrophysicist) has a special education credential; both of these lead administrators teach. During the transition to online learning, school staff made over 450 phone calls to modify or adapt Individualized Education Programs (IEP). They adapted the Google platform to provide as many supports as they could, without removing those students from the larger sessions. A student with severe speech apraxia had two open "channels," including one with the interpreter so they could participate in online sessions. Other students entered written responses into Google Docs that special education advisors could read before small-group discussions.

An educational advisor told us:

It took a little while to figure out how to [master] multiple advisors in [an online] room with multiple scholars, students working at different places in their own work. [Technology allowed us to have] fluid conversations where all advisors are aware of [students with disabilities'] work and of the supports that they need, perhaps even better than they had practiced before.

Before the pandemic, the performing arts activities helped students with disabilities feel included, often letting them shine. Although RenArts could not mount its year-end show in person, it found a way to provide opportunity for students to practice and perform in a virtual setting. Where students once learned the art of live dance theatre, they embraced the opportunity to stage, shoot, and edit themselves in digital movies. They figured out workarounds to play violins synchronously, fiddling with microphone setups and adjusting expectations on how well it might sound. The "dinner table" lessons were even more inclusive online. Educators noticed occasional "stowaways" tuning in—siblings of their students who enjoyed the lessons and conversations too. Families felt supported just as they had before.

In this new and uncertain school year, RenArts students face challenges adapting to hybrid schedules, maintaining physical distancing in a large open space, and creating relationships with advisors they will not meet in person. Another semester without the capstone of a live show will feel like a big loss—but RenArts arts students seem likely to succeed. An advisor, also a parent, told us:

The positive shift and adjustment in the students and the staff to continue to provide a collaborative learning experience for everyone has been great to see.

What lessons can schools learn as they work through this new school year? First, RenArts took an all-hands-on-deck approach to ensure family and student engagement. This was in part already embedded in the school's culture, but it did not require a huge technological lift, just some coordination and diligence. RenArts relied on simple phone calls to make sure families had what they needed, that IEPs could be modified, and to remind wayward students to sign in when they weren't seen on video. Second, RenArts used the new capabilities of an online platform to reinforce its most important values, including those of collaboration, frequent feedback, and inclusivity. The school prioritized real-time interaction and made it available even when students were working independently. The ensemble held together, even though the pandemic had forced it apart.

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