

Distance learning and Montessori training

Is breathing the same air as our sages necessary for transformation?



BY **TAMMY OESTING**

If you had asked me ten years ago if I thought Montessori guides could be trained mostly online and undergo the spiritual transformation necessary to optimally practice Montessori in the field, I would have vehemently asserted, “Absolutely not!”

Today, I’m humbled and pleased to say that I stand corrected.

My revelations shared here are garnered after years as an instructor in a brick-and-mortar Montessori education program and now as a field consultant for both an on-site training center and a MACTE-accredited “blended” distance learning program. (“Blended learning” refers to a mixed online and face-to-face delivery model. MACTE requires 120 hours of face-to-face course delivery for instruction along with other requirements for blended programs and does not accredit 100% online models.)

Maybe more importantly, as a location-independent Montessori consultant, I have the unique privilege of visiting schools across North America practicing under the full gamut of alphabet soup affiliations (AMI, AMS, and others). My newfound perspective has been cultivated by hours of observing in classrooms taught by guides

from a variety of experiences and trainings, acquired through traditional on-site and blended distance learning programs. Additionally, my thoughts here were synthesized through a lively discussion in a Montessori Teacher Educators’ social media group that is inclusive of affiliation and delivery.

Montessori teacher education programs around the world stand on the shoulders of sages that share their essential nature and impart the wisdom and fidelity of Montessori pedagogy to eager learners. To simply breathe the same air as a master teacher educator is invigorating and inspirational. Yet the question arises: is it necessary for the transformation of the adult learner?

Standards for Montessori teacher education are set by MACTE (Montessori Accreditation Council for Teacher Education), and their Distance Education Policy clearly outlines the re-

are many Montessori teachers, administrators, and educators still wary of distance learning? I believe it’s because like the Montessori methodology itself, there continue to be many misperceptions of the model. Several concerns I hear about include: How is it possible to build a community of learners if they’re not able to be in the same room as one another? How can learners possibly acquire the nuances of content online? How do teacher educators evaluate whether the learning is transferring into practice?

The heart of the answer may be in the format of the program, whether it be on-site or distance. I’ve learned that not all training centers are created the same, live or online.

Let’s compare content delivery: as an on-site instructor, I found I had to sometimes curb in-the-moment questions and rush a bit to ensure all the

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quirements such as the same content, the same community engagement between educators and learners, and the same overall effectiveness as an on-site course is delivered. In fact, the policy states that distance learning “program outcomes must be comparable to those of on-site certification courses.” (www.macte.org/distance-learning/distance-education-policy/)

If MACTE has regulated these standards across the board, then why

content was covered in the time allotted. Our learners had to keep pace with my time management and there were rarely enough hours in the day for practice to become habit or to be reviewed closely. Additionally, as our program was a summer intensive (as many on-site programs are), by the fourth week our learner’s brains were at maximum capacity for new

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information and enthusiasm waned. Massive amounts of information imparted in a short amount of time means less time for deep reflection and processing and less effective training.

On the other hand, the distance learning program I'm familiar with offers videos of instructors over the course of eighteen months, which can be watched, processed, and reviewed at one's own pace, and when paired with rigorous peer and instructor engagement, deepens understanding. We know a lot about principles of optimal adult learning—for instance, interval time to process information is essential to deepen understanding. A distance learning format can provide self-paced intervals.

Evaluating whether learning is transferred is a colossal task for teacher educators whether they're on-site or online. Philosophical understanding is often revealed through discussions and appraised through practical and written exams. In a live setting, my task as a moderator was to ensure that every voice was heard, to make space for those that held back, and to guide those quick to demonstrate their understanding to acquire the grace of hearing others. Online, this task is far easier, as the guiding instructor is able to prompt every learner's voice with a wider variety of modalities such as weekly video chats, email, and forum discussions. As MACTE requires distance learning programs to implement a minimum of 120 residential (live) hours in addition to the online content delivery, practical exams continue to be an option for real-time evaluation.

My impression from opponents to Montessori distance learning programs is that authentic relationships and collaboration cannot be had online. I used to be of this same opinion, yet in the past few years I have had the amazing opportunity to cultivate professional and personal relationships with incredible people across the globe,

solely through online engagement. While my daily or weekly connections are enhanced at conferences when hugs ensue and real-time humor and joy is expressed, I can testify to the amazing power of technology that allows me to collaborate and learn from others.

Some aspects of the essential bonding that occurs in learning cohorts are the feedback given and taken, the ideas that blossom and grow, the connective tissue of understanding, and an external form of accountability to practice new content. I'm not convinced any of these characteristics of a collaborative learning environment are relegated to being in the same physical room. Actually, I'm hearing from instructional guides in distance learning programs that these qualities are more transparent and easily observed in the online format.

So as you can see, the format of a teacher education program may be more important than the method of delivery, yet the question remains, do our fledgling Montessori guides need to “breathe the air” of their Montessori gurus to acquire their greatness? To truly answer this we'd have to delve into far more than variables such as program formatting can expose. I agree with teacher educator Jana Morgan Herman who shared, “Adult learners love their trainers not because they breathe the same air, but because they are present for and participate in their spiritual awakening. Their shared experience and proximity are connected in the memory of the adult learner.” The delivery doesn't seem to matter to the learner, but rather whether their teacher educator is awakened. Teacher transformation is more about where the teacher is in their own deep inner work, and nurtured by those experiencing it by their side.

Whether you are in the “live training” camp or you've adopted the idea that technology has a role in the transformation of the adult, I think you can

agree that taking a closer look at the components that make Montessori teacher education optimal is imperative to move Montessori forward. The work of spiritual awakening, so imperative as a Montessori guide, seems to rely far more on the individual's inner work independent of their training as a teacher.

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