

Teacher training goes remote at MNW

**Challenges,
opportunities,
and
innovations**



BY **KATHRYN E. PICANCO**

Change brings opportunity for innovation

Spring of 2020 brought change to all facets of our lives. COVID-19 restrictions necessitated all schools to adjust delivery models to ensure students were able to complete the semester, while also creating a plan for the future in a time of great uncertainty. Spring course adjustments also led to new processes and formats that have strengthened programs at Montessori Northwest (MNW), an Association Montessori Internationale (AMI) training center in Portland, Oregon that prepares Montessori guides and assistants at the Assistants to Infancy, Primary and Elementary levels. Challenges, opportunities, and innovations all emerged from the need for change.

Remote learning

When school closures happened, continuing instruction and keeping in contact with students became the focus. For the past two years, Montessori Northwest had been using the Populi Learning Management System for many aspects of course delivery and management. Ultimately, a combination of Zoom and Populi proved to be the most viable for consistency and a comprehensive course delivery approach. Program Director Sarah Werner Andrews said, “Although all of the students and faculty were saddened

to not be able to finish the programs in person with their cohorts, the transition to remote learning was generally quite smooth.”

Class time

Previously, classes had been full-day sessions with mornings reserved for lectures or presentations and the afternoons for supervised practice. In March, there were just a few required online synchronous course sessions weekly with the majority of time for independent work on album completion. When it became clear that classes would not be able to resume, a more consistent schedule of synchronous class sessions was scheduled to complete lectures, practice lessons, and prepare for exams.

Supervised practice and practice teaching

School closures limited the amount of practice teaching opportunities and work with the materials, both in the Montessori classrooms students were placed and also in the training center. Some elementary students continued their placements and ongoing work in classrooms, often taking responsibility for developing and delivering content for children online. But most MNW students had to shift to practice at home or in small groups via Zoom. Primary faculty member Rochelle Holmberg noted that, “Students watched recordings of Montessori communities. These were followed up with personal reflections and group discussion about the adult’s role as a guide in the environment.” Director of Training for the Bay Area Primary course, Polli Soholt, developed creative alternative assignments related to practice teaching designed to support classroom implementation. These methods

allowed students to continue refining their practice and understanding of instruction.

Exams

Written and oral exam preparation proceeded in the online environment through the class Zoom sessions and small group breakouts. In the academic year elementary program led by Elementary Director of Training Elise Huneke-Stone, students chose breakout rooms based on content to be discussed or practiced; faculty circulated to join conversations. Primary courses followed a similar format. With the training center closed for in-person practice, students found ways to remain connected to the materials and presentations as they prepared for exams, including using handmade materials prepared earlier in the course, printing out paper versions of materials, and visualization.

Oral and written exams were conducted online in an AMI approved format. Written exams were proctored on Zoom. Oral exams were done through scheduled synchronous sessions with the examiners and students. Overall, the online exam preparation and delivery was a success.

Professional development

Montessori Northwest also serves the broader community with professional development workshops. In-person sessions moved online for the spring and summer, in real-time or recorded sessions. Many participants in the online workshops expressed appreciation for the opportunity to participate, which they previously would not have been able to join had they not been online. Michelle Becka, instructor

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of the two-week AMI Primary Orientation course said, "Because this course was online, it allowed for a much wider diversity of students than one would typically encounter on a two week course. For example, this course had five students from Africa, one from Chile, one from Spain and others from across Canada and the USA." Participants in the online sessions were pleased with the richness of the discussions and diversity of perspectives provided.

From challenges to innovation

The challenges and successes from the spring led to new ways to offer courses. Huneke-Stone's three-summer elementary program had piloted a modified blended format throughout the course with some work between summers offered online, which helped the students to transition to summer completely online. All four Primary and Elementary courses used a full-time blended format of morning synchronous sessions and breakouts for practice and assistance to ensure students completed the course and exams successfully. The three-summer Primary program led by Director of Training Becka had many students from Taiwan and China, and so review session and exams were conducted at different times and in translation to support all the students from the USA, Taiwan, and China.

A new Primary Blended Course led by Director of Training Andrews began over the summer. While the first block was intended to be in person in Portland, continuing COVID-19 restrictions necessitates placing the course online until spring. Becka's academic year Primary course will also start online. Director of Training

Nancy Lechner's two-summer Assistants to Infancy course began online and is planning to be in-person for the second summer. The Bay Area academic year block format Assistants to Infancy course is set to start online in January and will also include on-site face-to-face blocks.

While all of the current courses at Montessori Northwest are designed to be taught principally through in-person instruction, the spring and summer modifications demonstrated the viability of high-quality remote teaching and learning. All programs are holding synchronous instructor-led sessions for three hours each morning with the afternoons available for independent work and time to meet with the trainers. Presentations are often pre-recorded by the trainer in the classroom environment and reviewed together with the class, providing opportunities for the students to revisit the model lessons during their independent study and practice time and to allow more time for discussion. Course modifications also include the intentional and systematic integration and application of anti-bias anti-racist and diversity, equity and inclusion practices. Supervised practice will be integrated into the afternoon sessions as the courses continue. Although questions still remain regarding practice teaching with children, video analysis of classrooms are available for the observation assignments. For students that are enrolled in the MEd in Montessori program at Whitworth University, the additional coursework offered in partnership with the National Center for Montessori in the Public Sector is available online.

The new remote learning formats have been well received by students. Enrollment is strong in all four new

courses and increased significantly once it was announced the first portions of traditionally in-person classes were to be online. Overall, Montessori Northwest is positioned to provide not only high quality programs for the 2020-2021 year to meet COVID-19 restrictions, but to utilize these formats for years to come for greater access to training and in turn, greater access to Montessori.

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