

Author Dr. Alice Hammel discusses Her Three New Books and the Best Approach to Teaching Music to Students with Differences and Disabilities



Dr. Alice Hammel
Educator, Author, Public Speaker and Clinician

Interview conducted by:
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CEOCFO: *Dr. Hammel, you have had three books published this fall including, "[Teaching Music to Students with Differences and Disabilities: A Label-Free Approach](#)," "[Teaching Music to Students with Differences and Disabilities: A Practical Resource](#)" and "[Universal Design for Learning in Music Education](#)." Where did your fascination with music education begin?*

Dr. Hammel: I grew up in Sebring, Florida, which is a very small rural town, just north of Lake Okeechobee in Florida. In our little town, at that time there weren't any dance studios or gymnastics, or out of school soccer. We had no opportunities other than what we received at school. Therefore, I took advantage of every single thing in the performing arts that I possibly could, because I loved it.

I decided in the 7th grade that I was going to be a band director. We didn't have choir, so that was the only thing I knew. Until I was 16, I didn't even know that some students learned string instruments in school. We were very separated and very rural. However, I am always grateful for having had that experience as a child, because it also taught me the importance of public schools and public school education. Unfortunately, for many children the only thing they get in the arts is in the public schools.

CEOCFO: *Why the focus on teaching music to students with differences and disabilities? Why is this subject area so important to you?*

Dr. Hammel: My parents were both pediatricians, who worked in our small town, and were the only doctors in quite a large area who would take Medicaid patients. Therefore, all of the children with disabilities would come to my parent's office and I would see these kids that I didn't go to school with, because at that time the law had not reached Sebring, so we still had children in separate schools or not attending school. My parents were not big on child care, so I would go to the hospital with them, or to the office with them. I even made rounds with residents starting when I was 4 years old.

They would take me to medical conferences, and this was in the 1960s and early 70s, when parenting was very different, so they would hand me a badge to the conference and say, "Bye." Then I would go to whatever I wanted or go hangout in the exhibit hall. I was entirely by myself the whole time. My parents only spoke doctor talk, and I had no baby toys. My mom says that my high chair was the DSM-1, which is the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders. It is a book that tells us what is wrong with us, and I sat on that, so in order to communicate with my parents I learned how to speak doctor.

I eventually started working in their office, and began with emptying the trash can and worked my way up to working to helping with some of the Medicaid stuff when I was in high school. I broke many HIPAA laws I shouldn't have, but I was just so curious about anything that was different. I still to this day am fascinated by things that are different. I eventually found a way to combine my love for all things different and for people with disabilities who need extra for school, with my love for all things music at the same time. I put it all together and this is what I do.

CEOCFO: *My mother had Parkinson's disease and I found that applying vocal techniques that I learned while taking singing lessons enabled her to get back to talking again. How can music help students with differences and disabilities? Can it have a profound effect?*

Dr. Hammel: First my father had Parkinson's disease, so I understand how vocal techniques can help someone with speech. Also, oftentimes when we are not able to speak we can sing, because of the brain, as music crosses both of those sensors. So often we hear teachers telling music teachers that their students do that for you, but they do not do that any other time during the week. Then we have to explain that music crosses all areas of the brain and students who are neurodivergent often have brain sensors literally hardwired in different parts of their brain. This is why we have to teach in a different way. So yes, it is fascinating the way we can use music to help students with non-musical activities, as well as learning musical skills.

"My goal is to help people understand how to teach skills to students with disabilities. I would love to not have any more work, because everyone would know how to do it, so they would not need me anymore." Dr. Alice Hammel

CEOCFO: *What are some of the challenges in teaching students with differences and disabilities and how does a teacher overcome those challenges, instead of giving up?*

Dr. Hammel: One of the biggest challenges right now is that not every music education major in the United States has the opportunity to take a class or do any field work with students with disabilities or about students with disabilities. Many, who do have a class, have it in the education department or school, and they have a great difficulty transferring the information that is meant for elementary or secondary teachers to the arts classroom or to a music classroom. Some students are fortunate and they get this in a music education context. They get course work, they get field work, and that makes a huge difference. However, it is really difficult to teach someone how to teach in 120 credits, because there are so many things as far as preparation.

I think we are also still working to teach the way we were taught to teach, rather than teaching the way we were taught. We are often perpetuating systems that are out of date. They may have been good at a time when students with disabilities were not in the classroom, but it is very different today. That is a challenge, accompanied with the severe shortage of special education teachers, and special education staff, such as assistants and paraprofessionals. So having enough teachers to support the students that are coming to music is the issue, because they cannot appropriately help and individualize education for students with disabilities.

CEOCFO: *So reading your books would help special education and music teachers get a deeper insight in how to help these students with special needs?*

Dr. Hammel: Yes, and music teachers especially, as it would help them get the things they did not get when they were undergraduates. Then it is a practical resource because the whole book is full of lesson plans that have adaptations and winding modifications for students. That book was for early childhood through high school band. The whole 1st edition of the book is available on a companion website of ours, but they have all of it.

The really exciting thing about my book, "The Universal Design for Learning in Music Education" is that it is the first time the concept of universal design has been premised and approached from a music education approach. It has been used in general education, but this is the first time in music education; so here is how it works in music.

CEOCFO: *What do you understand about teaching in this area that other educators may miss?*

Dr. Hammel: I don't presume to know more than anyone else, but from my experience in my years of teaching one of the most important things I've learned is that we need to know who our students are outside of music, so that we can teach them inside of music. That is the first thing. The second thing is until our students know that we really care about

them, they will not give their best work to us. The third take away from my life so far is that teaching is a team sport, and being a part of the overall school team is really important. Therefore, consulting with special education teachers and staff, classroom teachers, administration and therapists, and joining the team that exists at your school is key.

CEOCFO: *What does it mean to have a "Label-Free Approach," and why is that important?*

Dr. Hammel: It might be my teenage rebellion; I'm still working on that. I was deeply steeped in the medical model of disability and all of the labels. As time went on there continued to be more labels, because there are so many disabilities. What we are learning is there is too much labeling going on. I often say that labels belong on cans, but not on children. If you know a label, all you know is the label and maybe some etiology and iteration or ideas, but you do not know who that child is.

If you were to look at those 6 domains; behavior, cognition, communication, their emotional needs, their physical and medical needs, their sensory needs, you can really understand the whole child. In addition, I don't think that the domain method applies just for students with disabilities. I think that is for everyone. None of them has an even profile, so many of my recommendations to teachers are actually for the entire class. We could do this for the whole class, and it would benefit the students who really need it, as it doesn't other them from being separate or different. Also, for students who do not have an identified disability, they might benefit from those adaptations as well.

Using "Label Free," does not mean that you do not know the medical model. It just cements your knowledge and it helps you remember that the most important thing is the child, not the label.

CEOCFO: *Are there particular instruments that work best in these settings or does it not matter?*

Dr. Hammel: Along the lines of that philosophy, every child should be able to sign up to play the instrument that they want to play. If someone has a beat up trumpet in their grandfather's attic and that is really what they want to play, then they should be able to try to play that instrument. It is the music teacher's responsibility to figure out how to adapt the instrument, the materials, and the methods, so that students can have success.

I also believe that we need to look at the whole child when we are thinking about what type of music experience would be best for them. Some students do much better in a more popular or more informal music situation, where they can form their own rock band, or their own hip hop group, or bucket drumming. There are so many things that are outside of the traditional band, choir, orchestral ensemble, that can be appropriate for all students, but also for students with disabilities.

Many students with disabilities feel like education is something that is done to them, that they really have no say in it. Therefore, for the educator it should be that whenever possible it should be, "What would you like to do?" If I have communications buttons that I'm holding and they push their answer, or they point on a card to what they would like, or however they can let me know what their preference is, I would try to give that to them. This is because they need to have some agency and choice.

CEOCFO: *You have had vast experience teaching instrumental and choral music in public and private schools. How has that shaped you as an author?*

Dr. Hammel: I have always been fascinated by different, so when I began my teaching career, I made a conscious choice that I really only wanted to teach in areas where students were in need and or at risk. Therefore, I always worked for schools that really needed someone who understood kids who were different. I looked for those schools, taught in those schools and I learned every single day from my students. I teach mostly adults now, but I still do learn from my students. Every day I learn more and that makes my brain really happy.

CEOCFO: *You touched on this earlier, but tell us more about "Universal Design for Learning in Music Education." How will reading this book make a difference in the work of an educator?*

Dr. Hammel: For a long time general classroom teachers would write a lesson plan and then say, "Now what do I need to do for that child." They look at what they need to retrofit, so this student can be included in class, but it was obvious to students that the teachers were doing that. Universal Design Learning (UDL) is setting up your lesson plan, your material and your classroom so that everything is accessible for every student all the time. Therefore, you do not have to retrofit or other anyone.

The book talks about other means of having students express their knowledge; can they say it, do they show it, do they draw it. How can they let me know what they know? There are multiple means of demonstrating that you are ready to learn, so show me what you are ready to do. There are multiple means of presenting your knowledge and multiple means of readiness when teachers use this UDL framework. However, no one could ever show music teachers how this can work in their classrooms too.

The reason why I am excited about this book is because that UDL framework that has been so important in general education classrooms, and special education classrooms, also gives music teachers another way to connect with our colleagues. This is because there are multiple means of engagement, multiple means of representation, multiple means of action and expression. It kind of helps with the vocabulary and the language, so that the student will not have to get used to another way of functioning, just because they moved to a different classroom.

CEOFCO: *Are there lessons that someone who is not a music educator can draw from and benefit from in reading your books?*

Dr. Hammel: Yes there are. There are probably not a lot of disability courses when you major in economics and finance, or business. It can then be a little bit difficult when you need to work with other colleagues who have disabilities; particularly ones who are neurodivergent and their brains work a little differently. If you haven't learned how to do that with your colleagues, or over the people that you supervise, it can be difficult. Also clients, when you are working with clients, understanding how specific disability areas may affect that client, may enable you to work with the client and continue to have that business relationship.

CEOFCO: *What is your goal in writing these books?*

Dr. Hammel: My goal is to help people understand how to teach skills to students with disabilities. I would love to not have any more work, because everyone would know how to do it, so they would not need me anymore. That would be fantastic.

CEOFCO: *I see you are also a public speaker and had some recent residencies at colleges. Can you tell us about those?*

Dr. Hammel: Some universities hired me to create curricula for them that we can spiral from freshman year through senior year, and help them make transfers from their classes that have to do with students with disabilities. Therefore, I will go each semester, be there for a week, teach all of the method classes to all of the students, and I tie it specifically to what they are focusing on that semester, so that by the time they student teach they will be ready. It is so exciting because I see them when they are first semester freshmen, and then to see them again during their student teaching semester. I will be able to watch them actively apply what they have learned, which will be fantastic. Every university is different and every university has a different sequence, so the curriculum that I design is different for every school.

CEOFCO: *In closing, with such a busy life and schedule, where do you see yourself a year from now?*

Dr. Hammel: Still doing this. I want to keep helping as many people in as many ways as I can for as long as I can.