

A High Tide Raises All Boats: Creating Collaborative Opportunities Between Independent Studios in Your Neighborhood

by Carol Perry, with Dana Lentini and Jessica Fielder

Here Goes Nothing

When I logged onto my very first [NATS Chat](#) in February 2018, I had no idea what to expect. The evening's subject was Independent Studio Teachers, which intrigued me for two reasons: first, I was pleased to see NATS engaging with my particular demographic, and second, since this was specific to my Michigan district, I wanted to make friends. I had been running Studio Sostegno by myself since 2012. As much as I loved my job, I was lonely. When I attended the NATS Intern Program in 2017, I didn't want those ten days to end. I didn't realize how desperately I was starving for connection, and to suddenly have fellow voice teachers in my life was like a glorious feast. It taught me that teaching in a vacuum—like I had been doing—could have negative side effects for my students. Something needed to change. Little did I know that this Michigan Chat would lead to a rewarding partnership with other independent teachers.

An Independent Advocate

The chat was co-moderated by Jessica Fielder, a NATS chapter board member and experienced independent teacher specializing in Contemporary Commercial Music. Hearing her passion for collaboration among teachers to create opportunities for our students to perform for one another really spoke to me. As any studio owner will tell you, there are no colleagues down the hall or really any opportunity to regularly connect with our peers. We have NATS of course, but without institutional support professional development can be prohibitively expensive for an independent teacher. I am grateful to NATS Michigan for creating this (free!) opportunity for me to connect with other independents from the comfort of my home. It has changed my life and improved the way I think about teaching voice.



Jessica Fielder teaches a young student.

An Expert on Young Voices

Also attending the chat was Dana Lentini, an independent teacher, published author, and expert on teaching the young singer. I was excited to learn that these two accomplished educators were living so close to me. We immediately set up a time for the three of us to talk more. We were bursting with ideas in that first phone call and realized that we each had unique interests. From there the NATS Independent Master Class was born. We planned it for a Sunday afternoon in April, and Dana graciously provided a venue and hired a collaborative pianist.

We took turns working with each other's singers—two from each studio—aged seven to seventeen. Attendance was free, but the singers paid a workshop fee to cover the cost of the venue, the pianist, and our time.



First Impressions: “I Dana Lentini (right) teaches. was scared out of my wits!”

Dana, Jessica, and I were all really nervous before the master class! We were meeting for the very first time and teaching new students in front of one another. That's crazy! What were we thinking? As Jessica puts it, “I was scared out of my wits that I would be judged for my specific pedagogy,” and Dana said, “I was so focused on the logistics of the event and making sure that it ran smoothly” that the whole day was a blur. As for me, I was so anxious that I almost talked myself out of going. My inner critic was having a field day: “What if you embarrass yourself? Do you really belong here?” and so on. Somehow, we all managed to shut down our insecurities and work together for a successful class. We survived and had fun doing it! And then we made plans to do it again. And again! Since then, we've taken turns hosting three Independent Master Classes, and we have plans to expand our model. For our most recent event, I invited another local NATS member to send students while she

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observed in the audience. We also want to include other NATS members as clinicians so that we can share and collaborate with more independent teachers in our area. We are creating a custom template* to share with other NATS members, so that other interested independents can use our method to set up their own master classes.

Online Connections, Real-Life Results

The feedback has been overwhelmingly positive, showing us that we're not the only ones feeling lonely and isolated. During this process we were aided by the use of technology and social media. We could plan using Zoom online meetings and share our notes on Google Docs. Creating a Facebook Group for Michigan NATS members and the offshoot for those who primarily teach independently has also been a great way to meet new faces and connect. I'm also active on Instagram (@studiosostegno), and I try to help other voice teachers utilize this resource. We were also inspired to attend the NATS National Conference in Vegas last June as a group. Before, without existing network of colleagues, we felt less confident about attending as independent teachers.

Mutual Benefits



Carol Perry (right) teaches.

"When we collaborate, a student can suddenly hear what we've been saying all along, through the words of another teacher."

As it turns out, teachers aren't the only ones who benefit from collaboration. Over the past year of working together, I have seen my students gain confidence and thrive. I learn so much

watching how they absorb information from someone else, and it gives me new ideas about how to better connect in the studio. When we collaborate, our students can suddenly hear what we've been saying all along, through the words of another teacher. There is such reward in sharing what we know, not only for our students, but also for us as educators. NATS has provided the foundation for this, and now we independents must continue the building process together.

The Scarcity Mindset: It's Not Pie!

When I tell others about this model, I hear things like "Aren't you afraid that these other teachers will undermine you?" or "They could poach your students!" While I hear these comments, I think they come from fear and judgment rather than genuine concern. This embodies the so-called "Scarcity Mindset," where we are worried that if we share, there won't be enough left. This is a common trap for voice teachers, and I first learned of it when I joined The Speakeasy Cooperative, founded by Michelle Markwart Deveaux. Being a member of the Speakeasy taught me that it's not pie! We're not going to run out of students who want to learn, so why limit ourselves? What would happen if we started collaborating instead of competing? In my opinion, an atmosphere of competition creates chaos and insecurity. To serve our students best, we need to be open, vulnerable, and willing to share. We have to put our competitive nature on the shelf and let it gather dust. This is scary, but it's worth it. Working with Jessica and Dana has shown me that a high tide truly raises all boats. I never want to go back to the lonely studio life I had before meeting them in the NATS Chat. When we prioritize collaboration and community, everybody wins.

"Why do independent teachers need a separate space anyway?"

As much as I love and appreciate the NATS environment, I found myself struggling to relate to my academic colleagues. We can all acknowledge that it is a different experience to teach at a university versus running your own business, but that isn't necessarily a negative. It means that we independents need to create our own opportunities where we can share and celebrate our unique experiences. We are creating our version of the camaraderie and collaboration that universities try to foster in their departments. So to answer the question above, we're advocating for what academia considers a given, except customized to our needs. And such a space doesn't take away from anyone else's position in the academic world. Remember, it's not pie.

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Just Because We Teach Alone Doesn't Mean It Has To Be Lonely

As an independent teacher and a NATS member, I've been able to carve out my own niche in college audition preparation, which I love, and collaborate with amazing academic and independent professionals to give my students the best possible opportunities. I've connected with Jessica Fielder and Dana Lentini and other fantastic voice teachers in my state to engage more fully with our students and the ways they learn about voice. And I've learned that the impulse to hide my vulnerabilities as a teacher does not serve my students or me. I am honored to be on this journey and to share the ongoing results with you. As Dana likes to say, teaching voice can be just as isolating for the student as the teacher, and she's absolutely right. We need to find more ways to serve them and empower ourselves in the process. I am so proud that our NATS Chat has yielded such wonderful results. We are building something great together and hope to continue for years to come.

*For more information, or to obtain your own customizable template, please email studiosostegno@gmail.com and put NATS Independent in the subject line.

Carol Perry is a NATS member, NATS Intern Program alumnus, and owner of Studio Sostegno in Grosse Pointe, Michigan, where she specializes in long term audition preparation for the pre-college singer. Most recently her student Errol Service won first prize at the National Student Auditions at the NATS summer workshop at St. Olaf College in Minnesota. Follow Carol's studio adventures on Instagram and Facebook @studiosostegno.

Jessica Fielder established The Fielder Studio, teaching voice, piano, songwriting and acting in Farmington Hills, MI in 1993. She will launch the opening of Musical RX: The Fielder Fix, (a last minute musical coaching service), in fall 2019. The alumni from her studio perform on Broadway, Opera, Pop & Rock stages across the world. Many of her students have opened their own



(from left) Jessica Fielder, Dana Lentini, and Carol Perry at NATS Conference 2018

independent music studios, teach K-12 music, as well as work in the music industry as songwriters, sound techs, stage managers and music business management. Jessica is the Secretary of NATS Michigan. She received the NATS Joan Frey Boytim Award for Independent Teachers in 2016.

Dana Lentini's 30-year career as an independent vocal instructor and performer has included teaching posts from universities to elementary schools and performances with regional opera companies and international concert venues. Dana is a 2018 recipient of the NATS Joan Frey Boytim Award, and the founder of Born 2 Sing Kids LLC. She is a noted pedagogue and expert in teaching methodologies for young singers, with articles and podcasts that have been distributed worldwide. Dana loves empowering young singers one lesson at a time.