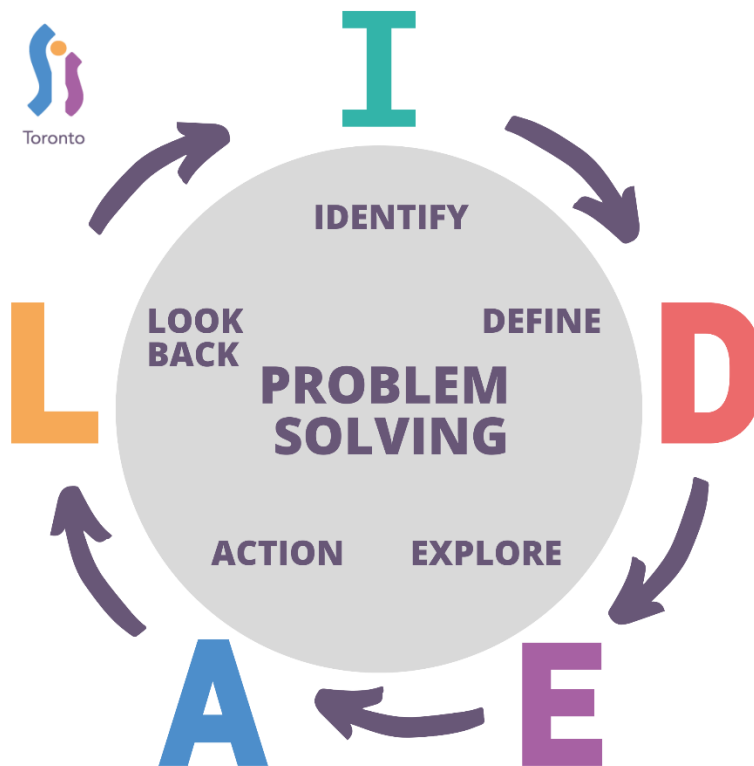


Focus on Social Learning

March: Problem Solving Month

Teaching music online was absolutely the last any of us expected to do when the year began. Little did we know how appropriate it would turn out to be that March was scheduled to be “Problem Solving” month in our Social Curriculum. It’s hard to think of a time when Problem Solving has been more relevant than it suddenly became in March 2020.

When we work with our students on problem solving, we try to give them ways to break big problems down into stages, so they are not overwhelming.



Identify, Define, Explore, Action, Look Back: Our IDEAL problem solving method

We had been working with our students on some card games that let us do just that, but school closures and the other physical distancing measures that began to be rolled out in March challenged our students, our staff, and our whole communities to put these problem solving strategies into practice.

IDENTIFY

In a way the first part of our process, **identifying** the problem was done for us. The spread of COVID-19 had quickly become the most important news story in the world, and we knew that physical distancing measures would be needed to curb its spread. Thursday March 12th was scheduled to be our last day of



programming before our students went home for March Break. Students and teachers alike were looking forward to a well-earned break to rest and recharge, but that afternoon at about 4 pm the province of Ontario announced that the schools would be remaining closed after the break. With schools closed, there was no way we could run our program normally.

For us the timing was as good as it could be. Most of our families had already made plans around their children being home for the following week, and we were able to send most of our students home with their instruments. The next day was already scheduled to be a PD session for our teachers, which we decided to hold online in what for many of us was our first ever Zoom meeting. This gave us an opportunity to **define** what we were up against.

DEFINE

We knew that our students and their families would be isolated at home with little to do, and that our staff would be relying on us for income. We didn't know what an online group violin class or a choir rehearsal was going to look like, and we didn't know how long the schools would remain closed, but we knew there was a real opportunity to make a difference for all of our stakeholders if we could figure out how to do it. We decided to move our program online for as long as the schools remained closed.

Our team met daily during this period and connected with parents and teachers in order to define the key elements that would help us successfully launch online learning:

- Access to technology: did our students have devices and internet connection at home
- Platforms: which applications or platforms would work best for online music classes?
- Knowledge: did our teachers, students and their parents have enough knowledge to connect online?
- Support: what tech support and help would our team need to provide to teachers and students?

EXPLORE

Now came one of the most important stages for our work, **exploring** the challenges before us. Through our research, our team quickly found lots of great resources about teaching individual music lessons online. Music teachers who have been using online video conferencing software like Skype, Google Hangouts, FaceTime, WhatsApp, and Instagram Live for years to offer distance-learning were a great source of information and experience. We realized quickly that we would be able to offer one-on-one violin, viola, cello, and bass *lessons* that would feel at least somewhat familiar. Group classes, however, were going to be a much bigger challenge: due to internet lag, there is currently no way for musicians to play together at the same time online.

Playing together is such a fundamental element of our program that at first it seemed inconceivable to work without it. Our program students almost never sing or play by themselves, and nearly all our activities are planned and structured so that the students can learn *through* the experience of playing and singing together. Whatever we were going to do, we knew it was going to look and feel very

different for our teachers and our students, and we were going to have to rely on everyone to adapt as best as they could. We had figured out a certain amount through our research and preparation, but it was time to take **action**.

ACTION

Our team used the information we gathered during Spring Break to put together our first two-week phase of online classes that would combine one-on-one lessons and group classes. We hypothesized that a two-week phase would allow us to try some ideas, evaluate what would work, and then revise our approach for the next two-week phase. Breaking down the problem into smaller working periods also allowed our team to reduce their own personal stress and stay focused on the more immediate and solve-able problems ahead.



Phase one of SOS, launched on March 23, involved private strings lessons delivered by our strings teachers and 30-minute daily group classes focused on choir and percussion. Our goals in Phase One were:

- Connect with as many families as possible
- Provide tech support for students, teachers and families
- Find out what additional supports were needed (instruments, devices, internet connection)
- Measure student engagement in online classes
- Determine whether group classes were feasible

LOOKING BACK

The first thing we discovered was that most of our students were eager to connect, and hungry for interactive activities that let them see their friends: engagement was high. Tech support was indeed key, and our team helped parents install software, log in to classes, and set up their devices so our students have enough room to take part in class comfortably.

We also found that some families did not have any devices at home, lacked internet connection, or were sharing one smartphone between several kids. We found ways to safely deliver devices we already had on hand and instruments to students who needed them, and our team is working with sponsors to provide more devices and internet connection to those in need. With high engagement among the 90% of Sistema Toronto students logging into online classes, we felt sure that providing access needed to a big part of Phase Two of SOS.

We also discovered that offering group classes via Zoom was key to student engagement and connection, and that students were learning a lot during each class. Even though students are not able to play together, they are able to learn as a team by taking turns. This approach has helped us all more



fully appreciate the value of getting our chance to sing or speak. We have discovered that the best way for us to sing or play “together” in group classes is to mute all microphones except the teacher’s microphone. Some students, normally shy and withdrawn at school, have proved bolder at home, and we have heard voices in these online classes that we never heard in in-person classes. We have also learned that movements and visual cues are also very helpful in group classes. Having each student answer a simple yes or no question can take a long time in a large group, but having everyone give a thumbs up or a thumbs down can give instant feedback without interrupting the flow of class.

Using all that we learned in Phase One, we launched Phase Two of SOS on April 6, incorporating strings group classes as well as expanding on private strings lessons, extending the time for Music and Movement classes to one hour per day, and broadening the content of our daily choir, percussion and theory classes. Using the IDEAL problem solving approach for each phase of our SOS initiative has been hugely helpful in implementing online learning during a stressful time and, more importantly, shows our students that problem solving skills can help us connect and thrive even when problems are very big.

SUMMARY

Now, at the end of April, we’re coming to the end of our fifth week of online classes. It has been more than forty days since our last regular class, and we’ve learned a lot about what works and what doesn’t. In that time every part of our organization and community have had to solve problems for themselves, for us, and for each other.

Our SOS experiment never could have worked without our incredible staff of dedicated, skilled, creative, and open-minded teachers. They have talked parents through how to use tuning pegs, helped students turn their microphones on and off, safely delivered instruments and music, and had to change their whole approach to teaching and communicating in a matter of days, and they have done in all with incredible grace and patience.



Our students, too, have shown incredible resilience and determination in the face of huge changes, using their problem solving skills in the best possible ways. We have seen groups of students living in the same apartment complex find a way to safely share a single cake of rosin, we have seen students reach out for mental health support, we have seen smiling faces and cheers after helping a disconnected classmate finally able to login to class. Living up to our Sistema Toronto motto every day, our students have consistently been a team, tried their best and helped each other at every turn.



In the past six weeks our Sistema Toronto community has solved many problems together, from mundane technical issues to complex management and organizational problems, and found creative ways to work around many others. We have discovered, most of all, how we all rely on one another. We all look forward to meeting in person again, whenever and however that turns out to be possible, but until then we will all work together to do our best, solving one problem at a time.