

Community Drum Ensemble

Drumming Outreach for All

STEVE
CAMPBELL &
LINDSAY RUST
INTERACTIVE DRUMMING LAB
THURSDAY
9:00 A.M.

By Steve Campbell and Lindsay Rust

Robert is a talented young drummer fluent in many musical styles. Nancy is a new MD with regular shifts in the ER. Milton retired from his aerospace engineering job 10 years ago. Rosalina is a third grade teacher at a local elementary school. John is an international executive for a major corporate brand.

What do these five people have in common? They all play in a Community Drum Ensemble.

The language of rhythm echoes through towns, cities, and schools across the U.S. in happenings like drum circles, drum corps, parades, and live band performances. The Community Drum Ensemble (CDE) approach combines the high-energy and inclusive nature of drum circles with the solid arrangements of a drum corps, the danceable rhythms of a parade drum ensemble, and the excitement of a live band performance.

CDE is, at its core, a drum team where everyone is welcome—a social gathering for people to drum and perform as an ensemble. There are no try-outs or auditions, only a requirement that members of the ensemble attend rehearsals and learn the rhythm and break arrangements to the best of their ability. All ages, from 10 to 80+, are welcome, and participants don't need formal training

in music to learn, practice, and perform with the group. Outreaching to all members of your community—seniors, adults, parents, and students from middle schools, high schools, colleges and universities—will help build a strong and diverse CDE that unites everyone through drumming.

Creating a CDE in your school or community can be an excellent use of your skills and training as a percussionist. Though it has a few challenges, the process of setting up and running an ensemble is fairly simple. This article will give you some of the tools and concepts you need to get started.

Dancing Drum's interactive session at PASIC 2009 will cover more techniques and leadership skills needed for conducting a successful CDE, and participants will play CDE rhythms throughout the course of the presentation. This workshop is based on our newly released *Community Drum Ensemble, Volume 1* instructional book and DVD, which includes techniques, tools, concepts, and a full set of rhythms to help you start a CDE in your city or town.

First of all, as director of the ensemble, remember that the inclusive nature of the CDE is essential to its success. Musical mastery is secondary to the importance of guiding your group through the learning and rehearsal process, and leading them through a successful performance.

When directing an ensemble with varied levels of drumming experience, it is best to present the music through a variety of modalities to appeal to different learning styles. The majority of your participants may not know how to read music notation, and their primary modes of learning will be observing, listening to, and memorizing the music through repetition. To help aid in this process, we use a method that we call Rhythm Phonics. This approach teaches and reinforces the pattern of a rhythm or break using syllables, letters, words, numbers, and



vocalized drum sounds that match the exact rhythm pattern of the musical phrase. In essence, we are using the rhythm of language, or a song, to teach rhythms on the drum.

The music for the CDE consists of a basic, two-part polyrhythm and a "break" played in unison. The two parts of the polyrhythm are played on djembes (hand drums) and djun-djuns (stick drums). The djembe and djun-djun rhythms range from simple to moderately challenging on their own, but when played in polyrhythm together the complexity and fullness of the rhythm is heard.

The break is played once at the beginning, several times in the middle, and once at the end of the piece. The break is an exciting, rhythmic phrase that unifies the djembe and the djun-djun players for a few measures before returning back to the main polyrhythm. The leader of the ensemble plays a short staccato pattern, known as the "call," on a djembe to signify when the break will occur throughout the piece.

A two-part polyrhythm helps drummers to distinguish their rhythm more easily and allows for a higher level of success throughout the various degrees of musical experience within the community group. This two-part

polyrhythm will achieve its best sound with our recommended group size of at least eight djembe players and two djun-djun players. A CDE can have more or less players than this, but a group of ten or more enables drummers to not only hear, but also feel the music.

After the members of the ensemble have learned the rhythms and breaks, the concept of improvising a solo on top of the rhythm can be introduced. Though the more experienced players may be first to volunteer, it's important to encourage everyone to try playing a solo. Soloing allows for individual drummers to have the spotlight for a moment and develop their own unique "voice" or style that they can play in addition to the arranged rhythms and breaks.

Now that we have covered a basic overview of the musical concepts of the CDE, here are ten steps you can follow to start an ensemble in your town, city, or school.

THE 10 STEPS TO STARTING A COMMUNITY DRUM ENSEMBLE

1. Find a space where you can hold classes

You'll need a large, open room with enough space for your group, drums, and chairs to set up in a big circle.

2. Have a sufficient setup of drums

We recommend at least ten drummers: eight on djembe and two on djun-djun drums. Plan to provide the djun-djuns and some extra djembes for your group (6–10, or more) because beginners may not have their own instruments to play. Let them start on one of your "loaners" and eventually they'll want their own drums to practice with.

3. Book a final performance

CDE is a goal-oriented program, and the goal of the final performance is one of the most crucial considerations for a successful CDE. A final performance at a festival, music club, or school or community event will inspire people to participate in the ensemble. You can create an event that will feature your CDE, or you can find a local event where your group is a good match with the other activities that are already planned.

4. Recruit drummers for your CDE

Post fliers around town, blast your e-mail lists, and send notices to your local newspapers. Make sure to include all of the important info about participating in the ensemble: dates, times, location, cost, etc. Encourage participants to bring a friend or two to class.

5. Develop a set list

Each Dancing Drum *Community Drum Ensemble* volume contains a "set" of drum music, with five to six rhythm/break arrangements inspired by music from West Africa, the Ca-

ribbean, Latin America, and the USA, as well as original arrangements by Dancing Drum. The sets are designed for a 30–60 minute performance, depending on how quickly you want to move the show along. As the director of the ensemble, you should also feel free to compose and present your own creative arrangements for the group to perform.

6. Build the Buzz! Publicize your final performance

Develop your publicity strategy as soon as you plan the dates for your session. Local publications are always looking for good community events to include in their pages. Other avenues for getting the word out include fliers, handbills, radio spots, and social networking sites like FaceBook, MySpace, and YahooGroups. Encourage the members of your ensemble to bring their friends to the show.

7. Rehearse your set

We recommend 6–10 rehearsals, 90 minutes each, to prepare your group for the performance. Members of the ensemble should attend more than half of the planned classes. The rehearsal process, and the improvements people experience, are some of the most rewarding parts of running a CDE.

8. Develop solos to enhance the performance

Good soloing can lift your performance to exciting, new heights, and gives your drummers a chance to improvise. Passing around solos among the djembe players should be practiced during rehearsals, so they can hone their phrasing and feel prepared for the performance.

9. Put on a great show!

By the time you reach the show date, your group should feel prepared and confident. Remind everyone to do his or her best, have fun, and *smile!* If the performers are having fun, the audience will have fun, too. Finally, remind the ensemble to keep an eye on you throughout the show for the calls to start and stop the different parts of the arrangements.

10. Strategize for the future

Be prepared to publicize your next session during and immediately after your performance. Have a mailing list sign-up, rehearsal dates, and fliers for the next session on hand and ready to distribute to the audience. Take advantage of the excitement that your performance creates, and your CDE is sure to grow.

Steve Campbell and **Lindsay Rust** are professional artists and educators who perform and teach together as Dancing Drum. Their educational and recreational drumming programs and publications have reached thousands of people nationwide. For more about Dancing Drum, visit www.dancingdrum.com. **PN**

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