

Writing as a Tool for Shifting Focus: From Content- to Process-based Teaching in FSEM

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Music

My First Year Seminar, “Soundscapes: Exploring Music in Multicultural America” introduces select musics of the world by exploring their transmission, reception and development in North America. If asked to describe my main goals in teaching the seminar, I would likely first discuss my interest in students developing more awareness of the diversity of musics and musical communities found in the United States. An equally important aspiration, though one that I might not mention until describing the course content more fully, is to give students the tools to learn for themselves about the musics and musical communities they will encounter throughout their student careers and into their adult lives. These goals represent differences in focus: one on content, and the other on process.

As I think about this course in the context of our writing workshop, I realize that in previous iterations I have focused more on content and that the second goal has not been addressed to my satisfaction. I am using this essay as an opportunity to think through some ways I can reconfigure the course, primarily through new and revised writing assignments, in order to emphasize a more process-based approach to its teaching.

In addition to the goals described above, the course functions as an introduction to ethnomusicology, a discipline in which we ethnomusicologists spend a fairly significant amount of time working to define, redefine or refine our understanding of the field. As a step-discipline of musicology and anthropology, ethnomusicology has been defined in various ways that reflect differing emphases on these two disciplines. “The study of all the musics of the world,” is a definition that privileges study of the music itself; from the more anthropological camp, ethnomusicology has been described as “the study of “people making music” (Jeff Todd Titon, 192) and defined as “the anthropology of music,” (also the title of one of the discipline’s seminal monographs, authored by Alan Merriam in 1964).

One thing that most ethnomusicologists can agree upon, however, is that our research methodology heavily emphasizes fieldwork: meeting people *in situ*, observing and participating in music-making and other activities, taking fieldnotes, interviewing, and then doing the work of connecting our understanding of “the music itself” to theories of cultural and/or musical significance.

Changes I propose for my seminar involve emphasizing the practice of fieldwork, in all its complex messiness, and deemphasizing writing by ethnomusicologists—the more polished end results of others’ fieldwork. Below, I outline changes to two writing exercises already in place in the course (a description of musical sound, and description of a musical event), one new area of focus (involving an interview project and two writing assignments), and changes to the final writing assignment. Again, my goal in crafting these assignments is to give students the tools to better understand how to learn from their everyday experiences of musical diversity and cultural meaning.

Revising the First Assignments

In previous years, during the first few days of the course I have typically focused on musical materials. I would expose students to a variety of musical sounds and styles, provide them with vocabulary for describing and discussing what they hear, and give them practice in doing so, usually through short, in-class writing assignments. I would often play a recorded piece of music once or twice and ask the students to jot down terms to describe the music as they were listening. After the example was finished, they would then write short paragraphs based on their notes and discuss what they heard. In this format, the writing and the conversation would generally take place in the past tense: timbres, melodic shapes, changes in dynamic level or texture that were heard, musical gestures that had already come and gone. With this assignment, I also found students’ descriptions to typically be fairly superficial, as they had not had the opportunity to play through the example several times, to pause or rewind at

interesting passages, or to spend much time in reflection.

I plan to supplement or replace these exercises with a writing assignment that utilizes online resources available through the Office of Teaching and Learning. With an online tool available through the Office, students can embed comments in a track of music so that they appear in “real time” while the track is playing. This will bring more specificity to the exercise: students will be asked pinpoint the precise moments when they hear changes to some aspect/s of the music, and I and other students will be able to comment with more accuracy on the descriptors used. One option for this assignment is for students also to practice field recording. In this additional step, students would go out and record live music and then upload the recording on which they would comment. This additional step would necessitate that we as a class discuss the importance of gaining permission for recording, and fieldwork ethics more generally. Whether or not I decide to have students comment on their own recordings, I believe this technology would encourage closer listening and engagement with musical vocabulary.

After spending several days discussing musical sound (relatively divorced from cultural meaning), most of the course’s remaining days have focused on articles by various ethnomusicologists based on case studies of particular musical communities in which they have spent a significant amount of time doing field research. Topics have included generational differences in musical practice within the Japanese American community in California (Asai), contexts for music making in Detroit’s Arab community (Rasmussen), the role of music in shaping identity within the Riot Grrrl feminist community of 1990s New York (Cateforis and Humphreys). Sometimes students have been given a specific prompt to

respond to in their writing about a particular article. At other times, students have been asked to write a more general “one-page response.”

One-Page Responses

Students are asked to structure the one-page response by writing two to three paragraphs: the first paragraph should provide a broad overview of the work; in the second, students are asked to choose one particular idea or aspect of the reading to explore in greater depth. In the third paragraph, which is optional and should be shorter than the others, students are encouraged to provide reflection on the topic that is more personal in nature, or to respond to other aspects of the reading such as the author’s writing style. Before I give students an outline of the structure of these responses, I hand out to each student one of four model responses taken from other courses and discussing articles these students will not read. Each student is first asked to take out a pencil/pen and write notes on his/her copy while reading, paying particular attention to identify the structure of the response and what s/he felt to be strengths and weaknesses of the writing style. The class then separates into four smaller groups (based on which article each student read) to discuss the response. Then each group summarizes for the rest of the class response they read and reports their findings.

Only after these presentations and discussion do I explain the structure outlined above that I want for their own one-page responses. While I do provide written guidelines for other assignments, I do not do so for this one. In the future, I plan to emphasize that this method of learning—gleaning information from observation and conversation—is similar to the fieldwork process. That said, if any students appears stressed by not having

written guidelines, I will repeat my description of the assignment so he or she can take careful notes. If after hearing the description twice, the student is still not clear, I will suggest that he or she interview other students and then report back to me what they understand the assignment to be.

These one-page responses serve a number of functions. In writing the first paragraph, students practice succinctly describing the scope of an author’s work. The second paragraph gives students a bit of freedom to select a topic of interest to them and tease out some of its facets. The third gives students practice using the first person singular pronoun, one that so many of them are taught to avoid at all costs! More practically, these assignments help ensure that students have done the assigned reading and have thought about the issues we will discuss in class.

Through these assignments, students work with the connections scholars have made between music and cultural meaning, but they do not get much practice in attempting to draw similar connections for themselves. And while the majority of the class readings are based on fieldwork, in previous iterations of the class we have not spent a significant amount of time discussing this basic method for learning in the field, and have not focused enough on writing exercises that have students engage with the crucial steps between experience and a written product.

Interviewing and Writing

The most important new aspect of the course will involve a series of interview experiences and writing exercises drawing from those interviews. Students will first be asked to interview someone they see in their daily lives (though not another student) about his or her musical tastes, what kind of music s/he finds meaningful, and the memories s/he associates with

that music. Each interview should not last more than twenty minutes. After students complete this interview, their first assignment will be to select three minutes of the interview they feel are the most revealing to transcribe and turn in. The transcription should include three levels of writing: the words spoken (as close to verbatim as possible), description of the interviewee's body language, and the thoughts and/or interpretations taking place in the interviewer's mind during this portion of the conversation. Students will be given an example of this type of multi-level writing found in the edited collection *Shadows in the Field*. The second assignment should integrate these three levels of writing into a more fluid narrative in which students describe the interview context and use quotes to reinforce their descriptions. We will read and discuss in class at least one example of this style of ethnographic writing before students turn in this assignment.

Ethnography Revised

Past iterations of this course have included only one ethnographic writing assignment. In this assignment, students have been asked to describe a musical event of their choice, focusing on three aspects of the event: sound, setting and significance (see Appendix). They were expected to draw on the musical vocabulary previously learned, to describe the setting of the event, and to speculate on the significance/s of the event for those they observe and with whom they communicate. The purpose of this assignment was for students to experience a musical event as an ethnographer, to practice describing the setting, and to attempt discussion of significance.

In the future, I intend for students to all base this writing assignment on the same musical event. Having students all generate ethnographic descriptions of one

event will facilitate the peer review process, in that students will more easily be able to identify effective descriptions and to compare theirs and their peers' writing styles more concretely. Assuming that various students will highlight different aspects of the event, this assignment will also lead to discussion of the multiplicity of experiences of a "singular" event. I will also ask them to identify the thesis (the statement of significance) in each paper they review. As a class, we will then discuss and debate various statements of significance, again to better understand experiential subjectivity.

In the past, I have asked each student to produce a fairly typical final paper project based on a music community of his or her choosing. As I reflect on the time needed for the projects described in this paper, I feel it is enough for students to learn about and practice these tools for ethnographic work. To ask that each student then conduct fieldwork for his or her own topic that is substantive enough to craft a thesis and generate evidence-based discussion is impractical and worse, might undermine the sense of respect I hope to generate for the time and depth of field research ethnographic writing necessitates.

Instead, for the final writing project, I intend to assign a research proposal. Students will be expected to do enough fieldwork/research to be able to craft a working thesis, and to detail how they intend to go about learning more. I will provide them with sample research proposals and let them know that the grade for this assignment will partly be based on the credibility and persuasiveness of the proposal. I hope that such an assignment will leave many students with a desire to carry out their research projects, and with the sense that ethnographic work is never really finished.

Appendix

Writing Assignment: Ethnographic description of a local music event

Your 4-6 page ethnographic description of one musical event should focus on the three concepts we've already discussed in class: SOUND, SETTING and SIGNIFICANCE. Your argument regarding the significance of the event should be foregrounded, *by including it as a thesis statement in the introduction to your paper*. This thesis should be strengthened in the body of the paper through description of sound ("musical" and otherwise) and setting.

A few pointers:

- While witnessing/taking part in this event, observe the goings on as broadly as possible, noting details such as the physical layout of the building/room/outdoor space, how the participants are configured within that space, age, ethnicity, dress, body language and mannerisms of the participants, the progression of the event and how, when, and if possible, for what purpose music plays a role in the event. What else strikes you?
- Talk with participants at the event; ask them questions related to why they are there, and what the event means to them (i.e. the significance). Try and speak with as many different people and kinds of participants (musicians, dancers, audience members, other workers at the event,

etc.) as possible.

- Take a small notebook with you, though you are the only one who will be able to judge whether it's appropriate to write notes in the midst of this event. If it is not possible or appropriate to write observations down, fieldworkers take what we call "headnotes"—a mental outline of points that you will want to write about when it is possible. If there is some quote or list of things that you are afraid of forgetting later, you might excuse yourself to go outside or to the bathroom and write a few things down there (although this likely will not be necessary for the concerts you are attending).
- **MOST IMPORTANTLY:** Write down everything you can recollect after the event BEFORE going to sleep that night. This might mean expanding on your notes, or writing down and expanding on your headnotes. Describe. Don't filter your experience at this time, simply write everything you can remember. Later, when you return to your notes you can choose what is relevant as you write more pointedly about the role of music in the event.

Please contact me if anything here is unclear. -Prof. Morelli