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# Outside Ourselves: Becoming Better Teachers Through Ethnographic Fieldwork

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# Outside Ourselves: Becoming Better Teachers Through Ethnographic Fieldwork

## **Abstract**


"Two questions students often ask me are: "why do you travel so much?" and "why do you engage in so much research?" My answer to both is relatively simple, "to become a more informed person and teacher." [*excerpt*]

## **Keywords**

ethnographic fieldwork, teacher education, teacher development, music education

## **Disciplines**

Curriculum and Social Inquiry | Higher Education and Teaching | Social and Philosophical Foundations of Education | Teacher Education and Professional Development



Two questions students often ask me are: “why do you travel so much?” and “why do you engage in so much research?” My answer to both is relatively simple, “to become a more informed person and teacher.” Through travel, I place myself outside my comfort zone: I learn broadly about other cultures, and specifically about music teaching and learning by observing and participating in musical practices that are unfamiliar to me. I have found that conducting ethnographic fieldwork in conjunction with my immersion in various music learning settings has constructively challenged and developed my observation, communication, musicianship and teaching skills. Over the past five years at Gettysburg College, our students and I have traveled and conducted ethnographic research in a number of sites. In this short article, I briefly describe ethnographic fieldwork and one example of how I have used it within the Gettysburg College music education curriculum to step “outside ourselves,” with the goal of contributing to creative change within our future music classrooms.

### **Ethnographic Fieldwork**

Ethnographic fieldwork was developed over a century ago as a central method of data collection within the discipline of anthropology. Ethnographers spend extensive time observing and immersing themselves in a group they seek to describe or understand. The key to conducting successful fieldwork is intersubjectivity. “Intersubjectivity describes the creative, improvisatory process of shaping and sharing our understandings and knowledge of ourselves, our world, our spiritual life—in short, of ‘making sense together,’ in real-time interaction.” (Koskoff, 2015, lecture notes).

Engaging in fieldwork creates the potential for intersubjective understandings and negotiations between and among social, cultural and musical differences. It is, as Barz and Cooley (2008) describe, “a process that positions the scholars themselves as social actors within the very cultural phenomena they study” (p. 4). As scholars interact with participants in intersubjective spaces, each individual’s fixed identity changes in relation to their counterpart’s. When engaging in ethnographic fieldwork in sites where there is music, we create an intersubjective space in which three important symbolic processes can be negotiated in real time: (1) the process of “making and experiencing music,” (2) “constructing and performing” one’s self within music and (3) sharing and

merging “many intersecting social and cultural identities” through music making (Koskoff, 2015).

At Gettysburg College we engage our preservice music teachers in ethnographic research. Together, faculty and students practice a “pedagogy of outsideness” (Bakhtin 1990; Foucault 1994; Talbot & Broadway 2015), in which we question norms of teaching and learning music, and experience what it is like to be an ‘other’. We seek to prepare preservice music teachers for engaging in those three symbolic processes every day—just as inservice music teachers in each music context do when they take time to learn to know each student’s unique identity through the variety of musical, cultural and linguistic resources each student contributes to the community. Becoming aware of students’ resources and how they intersect in those processes can allow us to become more responsive teachers. In short, taking a moment to step outside ourselves, to reflect on our practices and to examine—through the lens of ethnographic fieldwork—what we do in our everyday classrooms, can make us better teachers and learners.

### **Language, Culture, Immigration and Music in Bali**

Across the commonwealth, our music teacher certification programs are required to address the 22 PA Code, Chapter 49.13(b) guidelines regarding the instructional needs of English language learners. To meet these requirements, Gettysburg preservice music teachers and I travel to Bali, Indonesia to experience what it is like to struggle in a music learning environment in which the primary language spoken and the surrounding culture is not our own. In this course, we learn music from Balinese instructors whose primary language is Basa Bali. We experience how teachers negotiate cultural identities and language when working with people outside their own culture. My students and I reflect on ways we are negotiating our personal cultural identities and language while learning in this unfamiliar environment and consider which linguistic and cultural tools and resources we draw upon to become successful as learners.

The course takes place for four weeks in the summer. We travel to three different settings in Bali, Indonesia. At the start of the trip, we attend the Bali Arts Festival in the capital city of Denpasar, where they observe professional Balinese musicians, dancers and artists perform. After a few days in the capital, we head to a facility for learning Balinese musical arts, near Ubud. There, we embark on a rigorous ten-day schedule. Each day begins with class discussions around assigned readings about culture, im-

migration and school policy in the USA, theories on language learning, and ethnography. For the rest of the day, we engage in six hours of rehearsal on various styles of Balinese music and dance.

Following our time in Ubud, the group heads to the village of Banjar Wani in Kerambitan. Banjar Wani is not on the typical tourist's path. As such, members of the village are less accustomed to running into Westerners. Our presence is often a fascination to our village hosts, and most of the gamelan players from the village join us in on our rehearsals. We practice on the village gamelan and continue rehearsing each day for two hours. As new music learners, we struggle in new ways, as we discover how a familiar tune of the island is performed in Ubud often conflicts with how it is known in Banjar Wani. When we are not rehearsing, we visit and work in the elementary schools and conduct photovoice and ethnographic projects with adolescents in the village. The trip ends with a culminating performance at a nearby performance center, featuring students' learning from their travel and research, with 800 audience members from the surrounding area attending.

### **Developing Awareness of Ourselves**

As music teachers and learners, our histories—contingent as they may be—orient each of us toward knowing music and making music. Putting ourselves in a new music learning situation and engaging in systematic inquiry about its process and outcomes are two possibilities that might increase our awareness of our histories, help us become conscious of our biases, and remind us to critically examine the resources we bring into our classrooms. In so doing, we can demonstrate empathy towards others—merging ways of musical knowing and norms of participation with an expanding perspective that embraces many intersecting social and cultural identities.

In sum, I suggest that each classroom and rehearsal space is one in which several histories of knowing and making music converge. Through travel and research, particularly ethnographic fieldwork, we can engage with musical practices from outside our own legacies of participation, not to somehow transpose ourselves into a new culture, but to expand our soundscapes, our ways of being musical, and our self-understanding. As Bakhtin (1990) says, "I must put myself in his place and coincide with [others]... followed by a return into myself... for only from this place can the material derived... be rendered meaningful" (pp. 25-26). By engaging in ethnographic fieldwork, we can step outside our normal roles to acknowledge others' perspectives and experiences, gaining freedom to discover who we are and who we are not yet through music.

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