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The Evolution of *Mapping the Beat*: A History and Geography through Music Curriculum

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with contributions from **William Boyer and Nina Eidsheim**

To understand the spirit and inner life of a people--the joys, values, and drives that caused it to find life tolerable and meaningful--one must examine its art, literature, philosophy, dances and music ... A study of the arts in relation to the life and times that produced them provides not only a broader and deeper understanding of human behavior in the past but a richer, more multidimensional awareness of the present... (William Fleming, 1970)

Project Overview

In 2002, the University of California San Diego ArtsBridge America program initiated a project, funded by the National Geographic Society Education Foundation, that was designed to address the lack of standards-based geography content and culture-based arts instruction within San Diego elementary schools. Representatives from host ArtsBridge institutions identified the following factors contributing to this deficiency:

- a perceived lack of arts and geography competence amongst elementary educators
- limited knowledge of arts and geography lesson planning resources and educational standards
- increased pressure to prepare pupils for standardized testing that does not include geography or art topics
- and district mandates that limit time spent on topics other than literacy and math

In the summer of 2002, two graduate music students in the Critical Studies and Experimental Practices program at UCSD proposed a geography-through-music project to ArtsBridge. The scholars, Nina Eidsheim and William Boyer, felt that music was a natural way to bring personal connections to geographic concepts. As graduate researchers in the music department, they focused their studies on the various political, cultural and sociological factors that affect musicians and their music. These factors include, but are not limited to, immigration and emigration, wealth and poverty, freedom and oppression, natural surroundings and technological advances, and community and isolation. With this research background, as well as guidance from specialists in the fields of elementary education, arts education and geography, they created *Mapping the Beat: A History and Geography through Music Curriculum*.

Mapping the Beat would integrate geography and music instruction into a single body of lesson plans. It was built around three main concepts—environment, identity, and movement—that reflected the standards outlined in *Geography for Life*, the full national geography standards publication for teachers, curriculum developers, and other educators. These particular themes were selected for their parallel significance in the study of music. In the classroom, these three concepts are explored through the analysis of graphic reproductions of space and demographics, discussions in oral and written form and participation in musical and performance-based activities.

Investigative discussions provide the opportunity to explore in depth the three main concepts connecting music and geography. Each unit begins with an introductory conversation of how the concepts apply to the students' lives, followed by the presentation of several musical examples that employ audio and visual tools to provide a clearer understanding of musical forms from around the world. For each musical example, the instructors encourage and lead the students in the investigative process outlined in *Geography for Life*: Questions are raised regarding the geographic context of the musical performance and the connection between musicians and their surroundings; students then gather data from graphs, maps and other sources; they organize that data and analyze it; and, finally, they deduce answers to their



questions. The issues that are covered in each investigative discussion are then applied to the musical performances and participatory activities that occur in the following weeks.

*Mapping the Beat*¹ examines the origins of various musical genres and places them in a larger environmental and socio-political context. It features music as a record of cultural migration, a product of geographic environment and a cornerstone of personal and group identity. Students consider how the physical character of a region shapes the music and how, in turn, the music shapes the cultural character of that same region. Integral to the success of *Mapping the Beat* in the classroom are guest performers who specialize in the music forms introduced in the curriculum and hands-on music making experiences for pupils.

Year One: Initial Development

During the 2002-2003 academic year, the project was piloted in five fifth grade classrooms at two schools in the San Diego Unified School District. Geography and music content were tied to the social studies framework for fifth grade American History. The ArtsBridge sessions were scheduled once a week for 2 hours over the course of 10 weeks.

Some of Southern California's finest culture-based music specialists participated in this project. Ken Anderson, UCSD faculty member, traced the roots of Gospel music to the Negro spiritual and demonstrated how music served as a means of communication for African American slaves. Alan Lechusza performed the music of Native Americans. Gustavo Aguilar performed percussive music from around the world and carefully traced the geographic roots of each of his instruments. The San Diego Children's Museum Gamalan Orchestra performed and led a workshop in which each student was invited to play a piece of the Gamalan repertoire. In addition to the guest artists, various video and audio recordings were utilized to explore the diversity of music and culture in the United States.

¹ Mapping the Beat curriculum is available at <http://repositories.cdlib.org/clta/artsbridge/>



A host teacher from the pilot year remarked, “It has been a wonderful experience for the students in my classroom. They were able to learn subject matter with all of their senses rather than the usual reading and learning from a text book.”

Upon completion of the pilot year, ArtsBridge scholars had developed and implemented twenty hours of geography-through-music lessons in five fifth grade classrooms and created an instructional guide for teachers. Host teachers expressed interest and excitement about taking on a more active role in the future implementation of the curriculum as well as a commitment to increasing the geography content within their classrooms. Students demonstrated the achievement of the educational content standards for music, geography and social studies outlined in the *Mapping the Beat* curriculum at the beginning of each lesson.

A pre- and post-project vocabulary test was given which included both geography and music vocabulary. The average pre-test score across all five fifth grade classrooms was 57%. The average post-test score was 71%. Those students participating in the project during the spring quarter when the curriculum was most refined demonstrated the greatest improvement as having increased their pre- to post-project vocabulary scores by 25%. While the improvement was an interesting and pleasant outcome, exit interviews indicated that vocabulary had not been stressed in the implementation of the curriculum at either grade level and that the mapping work and participation in music making activities proved to be the stronger learning experiences. Unfortunately there was no research design in place to quantify this learning accurately.

Upon exit interviews, host teachers indicated that, as a result of their participation in *Mapping the Beat*, they recognized the importance of offering varied learning opportunities for students. They said they had observed students who were normally shy and withdrawn becoming engaged in this curricular format. Teachers identified the “hands-on” exposure to new



cultures as a key asset of this curriculum and very strongly favored continuing to offer these kinds of opportunities in the future.

In addition, the teachers stressed the importance of the visiting artists. They cited these visits as the strength of the curriculum. They give students the opportunity to experience the artist and art form in an intimate way that is not otherwise replicated in their lives. The experience provides an opportunity for exchange of information and thoughts that does not happen with large assembly performances or recorded materials.

Year Two

ArtsBridge received a second year of funding from NGSEF to refine the fifth grade curriculum and pilot a body of *Mapping the Beat* lesson plans to be used in conjunction with the sixth grade social studies curriculum, Ancient Civilizations. In the second year, teams of teaching scholars were trained on how to implement lesson plans developed by Nina Eidsheim and a collaborating geographer, James Baker. Those scholars then took the lesson plans and simultaneously implemented *Mapping the Beat* in all seven classrooms across the fifth and sixth grades at Freese Elementary (San Diego Unified School District).

Most of the teaching scholars were music majors, but two were selected from the UCSD Teacher Education Program (TEP). Both TEP scholars agreed that they felt comfortable presenting the lesson plans without formal music training, and both verbalized a commitment to integrate arts and geography into their own classrooms upon graduation. This project design allowed testing of the theory that *Mapping the Beat* was a curriculum that any generalist educator could pick up and implement in his or her classroom without training in music or specialization in geography. Vocabulary assessments indicated that those pupils assigned to a TEP scholar had improved their test scores as well or more than those pupils taught by a music scholar, a result suggesting that teachers without a background in music were equally capable of conveying the information.

A foundational principal of *Mapping the Beat* is that the guest artists provide the musical expertise and the classroom teacher provides context to those performances. In this way, guest performances and classroom instruction support each other. No longer are they unrelated entities. This format creates strong connections among music, geography and social studies that foster deeper learning of all three topics.

Pre- and post- vocabulary tests were again administered. The fifth grade students improved from 46% on the pre-test to 61% on the post test. Sixth grade students improved from an average pre-test score of 25% to 68% on the post-test. Host teachers were asked to complete pre- and post- project surveys. Pre-project surveys indicated that none of the teachers felt that they were covering geography standards thoroughly in their classrooms. All agreed that it was important or somewhat important to integrate arts content into their classrooms, and most indicated that there was not currently sufficient geography or music instruction in the public schools.

Post-project surveys indicated that *Mapping the Beat* adequately to thoroughly addressed geography standards content regarding “Places and Regions” and “Cultural Diffusion”; and it adequately covered the use of maps and other geographic representations to acquire, process, and report information from a spatial perspective. All fifth grade teachers indicated that they would recommend *Mapping the Beat* to other teachers and that they felt more confident teaching geography and music content than they had before *Mapping the Beat*. All agreed that they would not hesitate to use *Mapping the Beat* with future classes.

Post project assessments at the sixth grade level revealed problems with the project structure for the pilot year at that grade level. It was clear that having a curriculum development team writing lesson plans and then handing those lessons off to a teaching team was not an effective model for the pilot year. Teachers felt that there needed to be more communication between the teaching scholars and themselves. The curriculum development team found it difficult to anticipate the challenges of implementation in the classroom. Specifically, each lesson was rich in history, geography and music content,



but often that content was not presented in an engaging, experiential way. Therefore, it was generally felt that it would have been more effective to have the person writing each lesson be the same one to implement it in the classroom.

Year Three

In the first two years, host teachers indicated that when *Mapping the Beat* lessons were delivered over a 10 or 12 week period the lessons often did not coincide with social studies instruction. Therefore, it would be more effective to span the entire school year. For the third year, *Mapping the Beat* began at the start of the school year in an attempt to synchronize topics with the social studies curriculum. One of the host teachers at the fifth grade level at Freese Elementary had taken over the independent implementation of those lessons with only administrative support from ArtsBridge (i.e. booking guest performers, obtaining recorded materials and preparing overheads and handouts). An ArtsBridge scholar was assigned to teach the remaining fifth grade classrooms at Freese.

A specialist was hired to develop a comprehensive pre- and post-project student assessment form that more closely reflected the learning taking place than a simple vocabulary test. Final results are pending completion of this year's project. Plans to refine the sixth grade lessons and disseminate the fifth grade curriculum to a network of three new schools were put on hold as the funding for the third year did not materialize as anticipated. ArtsBridge is currently reassessing ways in which to assure replication and sustainability of this innovative and important curriculum.

References

Fleming, William. (1970). Art, music and ideas. San Francisco, CA: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc.