

Conference Proceedings

CIVAE 2023

**5th Interdisciplinary and Virtual
Conference on Arts in Education**

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Edited by MusicoGuia

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Introducing ‘Polycentric Intersubjectivity’ in the classroom: the case of the M.A. Seminar ‘Recent Trends in Ethnomusicology’

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Abstract

This paper outlines the theoretical and methodological approaches applied in the M.A. seminar ‘Recent Trends in Ethnomusicology’, which is offered by the Musicology Department of NOVA FCSH (Lisbon) as part of the M.A. program in Ethnomusicology. As its responsible teacher for the academic years 21-22 and 22-23, I implemented the principle of “polycentric intersubjectivity in the classroom” by integrating students’ interests into the seminar’s syllabus and inviting specialized researchers to conduct key sessions. Additionally, I provided students with the necessary tools to develop high-quality research projects in Ethnomusicology. Aside from presenting the syllabus, objectives, evaluation process, and teaching methodologies applied to this seminar, this paper also reflects on the preliminary results of this approach.

Keywords: Ethnomusicology, teaching, Expressive Culture, Music, Polycentric Intersubjectivity.

Introduciendo la ‘Intersubjetividad Policéntrica’ en el aula: el caso del Seminario de Maestría ‘Tendencias Recientes en Etnomusicología’

Resumen

Este artículo describe los enfoques teóricos y metodológicos aplicados en el seminario de Maestría ‘Tendencias Recientes en Etnomusicología’, que es ofrecido por el Departamento de Musicología de NOVA FCSH (Lisboa) como parte del programa de Maestría en Etnomusicología. Como profesor responsable de los años académicos 21-22 y 22-23, implementé el principio de “intersubjetividad policéntrica en el aula” al integrar los intereses de los estudiantes en el programa del seminario e invitar a investigadores especializados a realizar sesiones clave. Adicionalmente, brindé a los estudiantes las herramientas necesarias para desarrollar proyectos de investigación de alta calidad en Etnomusicología. Además de presentar el programa, los objetivos, el proceso de evaluación y las metodologías de enseñanza aplicadas a este seminario, este artículo también reflexiona sobre los resultados preliminares de este enfoque.

Palabras clave: Etnomusicología, enseñanza, Cultura Expresiva, Música, Intersubjetividad Policéntrica.

Introduction

The future of many disciplines in social sciences and humanities has been a concern for many authors due to threats such as the growing corporatization of academia, the increasing costs of higher education, and uncertainty about the professional outcomes of higher education (Speakman *et al.*, 2018). Ethnomusicologists also have engaged in these debates, mainly in the United States of America, highlighting the importance of redirecting courses towards public-outreach initiatives (Moore, 2021), the need to transform ethnomusicological praxis (Diamond & Castelo-Branco, 2021), the growth of works framed within ‘applied ethnomusicology’ (Pettan, 2015), and the recognition of the opportunities brought by Digital Humanities (Battershill & Ross, 2022). Accordingly, curricular reforms should evaluate conventional classroom teaching, rethink the professor-student relationship, and assess available online digital resources, including Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) and public outreach services such as digital exhibitions and collections, in order to create new and engaging teaching experiences.

For instance, my recent teaching activities have been shaped by my experience as part of the ROSSIO Infrastructure team, a digital research infrastructure in the social sciences, arts, and humanities, the largest of its kind in Portugal (Silva *et al.*, 2022), where I had the opportunity to develop and curate new public outreach products including digital exhibitions and collections, most of which are related to expressive culture, including music and dance¹. Following up on this experience, I have already reflected on the perks of adopting storytelling strategies in my teaching in the M.A. seminar ‘History of Ethnomusicology’ (NOVA FCSH), with the goal of creating a compelling classroom experience, transforming every lesson into an exciting intellectual journey (for more information, see Freitas 2021). While this model has shown many positive results and even granted me and João Soeiro de Carvalho a pedagogical award from NOVA FCSH², its applicability is very limited to seminars that deal with contemporary themes with a fast-changing contextual nature, requiring the adoption of a new methodology. This paper details the case of one such seminar – “Recent Trends in Ethnomusicology” – while considering the principle of “polycentric intersubjectivity” in the classroom.

Lithuanian philosopher Algins Mickūnas defines ‘polycentric awareness’ as the foundation for communication through linguistic and cultural media, from which an individual not only becomes aware of a particular issue or topic, but also acknowledges the limitations of its perception and analysis. The author further adds that “the entire pedagogical system is founded on the notion that we access understanding of the world by ‘borrowing’ the perceptions of others” that are “inscribed in texts, in libraries, in archives, in stories, in pedagogy, and in daily discourses” (Mickūnas 2018). As I considered incorporating research themes into the seminar, I questioned whether I could maintain the same rigorous teaching standards dealing with topics I have barely explored through the academic literature as I do for topics within my area of expertise. This led me to the realization that I could invite those very same authors to directly speak to my students about their fieldwork experiences, transforming the seminar into a showcase of recent research trends in music research and ethnomusicology, thus fulfilling what is expected by a seminar bearing the title “Recent Trends in Ethnomusicology”.

The history of this and other seminars offered by the Musicology Department of NOVA FCSH, some of which I have participated in – firstly as a student and later as an invited speaker –, served as inspiration for this endeavour. For instance, Professor Salwa Castelo-Branco and Professor João Soeiro de Carvalho have previously coordinated many successful teaching experiences tailored around contributions from guest speakers, many of which were implemented within this seminar. Professor

1 For more information visit: <https://rossio.pt/>

2 For more information visit: <https://www.unl.pt/en/news/nova/prize-pedagogical-innovation-nova-professor-isabel-catarino>

Maria de São José Côrte-Real has also coordinated many seminars and conference cycles on relevant themes, including “Music and nationalism today: Ethnomusicology and cultural policy in the transition to democracy” (2019) and, more recently, “Music and the Body” (2021), counting with the participation of several internationally renowned guests. As we will later see, my teaching experience at “Recent Trends in Ethnomusicology” aims to expand upon this legacy.

Defining the end goal: the evaluation process

The M.A. seminar “Recent Trends in Ethnomusicology” is part of the NOVA FCSH Master Program in Musicology (specialization in Ethnomusicology) and is usually taught in the second semester. From 1990 (the year of the foundation of this Master’s Program) until 2005 (the application of the Bologna process in Portugal), this seminar was part of a full-fledged annual discipline entitled “Ethnomusicology”, including contents from the now-autonomous seminars “History of Ethnomusicology” and “Recent Trends of Ethnomusicology”. Since the Bologna reform, this seminar has been taught by in-house NOVA FCSH professors, notably Salwa Castelo Branco and João Soeiro de Carvalho, and many other invitees. I already had the opportunity to reflect on the remodelling of HE, where I implemented a tripartite structure grounded on storytelling premises while preserving the original content. For this seminar, I followed a radically different (and more flexible) approach, that aimed to develop what I acknowledged as “polycentric intersubjectivity” in the classroom, through the integration of the student’s interests into the seminar’s syllabus and the invitation of specialist researchers, while providing students with the necessary tools to develop quality research projects in Ethnomusicology.

Firstly, I decided to address a recurring problem: in the past few years, many students had consistently submitted their projects late, missing the September deadline, even though they had already received passing grades for all six disciplines included in their first-year course plan (see Image 1). While there were some minor cases where the delays were due to circumstances beyond the students’ control, in the vast majority of cases, the delays resulted from students choosing their dissertation topic and supervisor at a very late stage. This situation worsened with the CoViD-19 pandemic, with the delays ranging from two to three months. Aiming for a solution to this issue, the first decision was to set the evaluation around the development of a 15-page research project so that students had enough time to prepare for the September deadline.

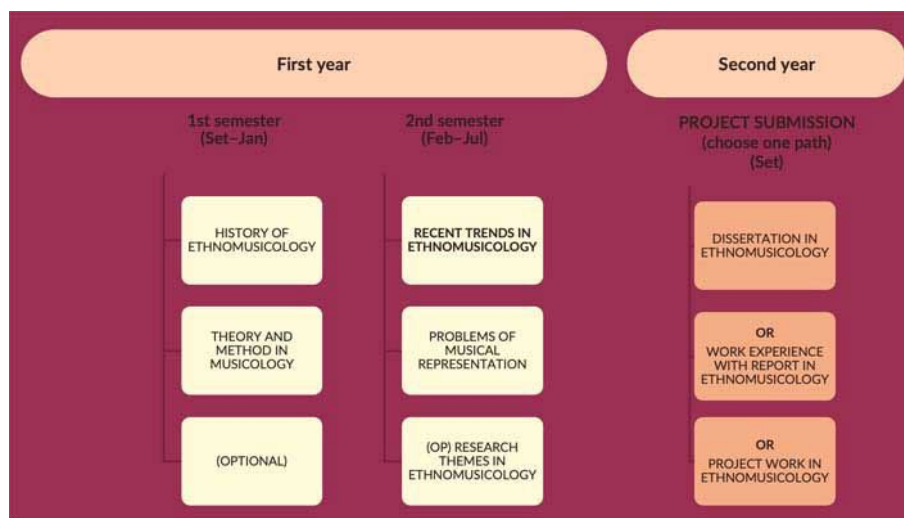


Figure 1. The curricular path for the Master in Musicology (specialization in Ethnomusicology) at NOVA FCSH

Henceforth, I defined the evaluation process with the assumption that in-class sessions would serve as the groundwork and preparation towards that main goal, and was thus divided into three activities: 1. Student participation and in-class presentation of texts (30%); 2. Annotated bibliography of five articles on theory and methodology related to the student's to-be-developed project (20%); and 3. Research project in Ethnomusicology, with a presentation and discussion in a public colloquium (20%), followed by the submission of the final project (30%, 15 pages).

Discovering the path: the syllabus

Once the seminar's leading objective was set, then came the next big question: How to provide students with the necessary tools to develop their project? I found answers by dissecting the word "trends" into its possible meanings, from thematic, theoretical, methodological, and public outreach trends. The objectives of the seminar were thus defined, with those meanings in mind, as follows: a) To identify the main topics, methodologies and theoretical perspectives within Ethnomusicology from the 1990s to the present day; b) To acquire the ability to critically analyse ethnomusicological literature; c) To develop the ability to identify ethical issues related to the topics covered, as well as the application of theoretical and methodological tools to specific case studies; d) To develop communication skills to disseminate ethnomusicological knowledge; e) To apply the skills and knowledge acquired to the development of a research project/essay in Ethnomusicology.

João Soeiro de Carvalho, the latest teacher responsible for this seminar before my involvement, had already implemented a similar format in 2021: he invited scholars to teach selected sessions and, as a result, received overwhelmingly positive feedback from students. Therefore, I was entrusted with expanding on this approach and extending invitations to even more specialists. This led to new considerations, such as determining whom to invite and what criteria to use in the selection process.

The answer to those queries directly relates to topics to be included in the syllabus: firstly, it should consider the students' theoretical interests and themes they intended to work on for their M.A., be it a dissertation, work experience with a report or a project work. This assessment is possible because the curricular unit is taught in the second semester, and as such, I already have prior knowledge of their interests. Secondly, it should consider the topics' relevance within the national and international ethnomusicological contexts and current contextual factors, as is expected by a seminar bearing the name 'Recent Trends in Ethnomusicology'. For instance, following the 2022 Russian-Ukrainian War, efforts were made to provide more information on expressive culture and war-related outcomes such as forced migration and the study of refugee sites. Thirdly, it was decided that all invited specialists should hold a PhD in Ethnomusicology or in an adjacent area, such as Media Studies, Sociology of Music, or Anthropology, and be nationally or internationally recognized as an authority on the subject being taught. Finally, the choice of trends should also consider and promote the researchers, study groups, and projects currently being developed at the Instituto de Etnomusicologia: Centro de Estudos em Música e Dança (INET-md NOVA FCSH). Henceforth, as a result of the confluence of all these factors, the 2022 edition of the seminar had the following thematic line-up:

1. Ethnomusicology at the turn of the 21st century: theories, methods, and research trajectories (Marco Roque de Freitas)
2. Who are we?: Music and Identities (Marco Roque de Freitas)
3. Global imagination and the study of World Music (Marco Roque de Freitas)
4. Festive policies in pandemic times (Andrew Snyder)
5. Music as an instrument to touch other human beings (Alix Sarrouy)

6. Gender of distortion: the case of women in rock in Portugal (Rita Grácio)
7. Scoring, jazz networks & gender studies: dialogic ethnography as an ethnomusicological tool (José Dias)
8. How to build a nation through sound?: the case of Mozambique (Marco Roque de Freitas)
9. Music and sexual dynamics: 'drag queen performances' and 'seduction as performance' (Marco Roque de Freitas)
10. Touristification, sound environments and urban transformation (Iñigo Fuarroz)
11. Theorizing musical heritage (Salwa Castelo-Branco)
12. Transforming Ethnomusicology: challenges and prospects (Marco Roque de Freitas)
13. Colloquium with students' presentations (Marco Roque de Freitas)

Sessions 1, 2, and 3 provide an introductory basis while wrapping up the recent history of the seminar, while session 12 includes reflections and future proposals. All other sessions are subject to change on a yearly basis according to the aforementioned criteria. For instance, the 2023 edition, which is still ongoing, involves the participation of even more researchers, including Lee Watkins (via Erasmus+ programme), Catarina Valdigem Pereira and Pedro Aragão, and includes new themes such as: "PRESS START: towards a theory and method for the study of music and sound in videogames", "Partying: material culture and change in Galicia's rural/urban landscape" and "Liber|Sound: Innovative archiving practices for the liberation of sonorous memory". The improved 2023 syllabus was thus defined as follows:

1. Ethnomusicology at the turn of the 21st century: theories, methods and research trajectories (Marco Roque de Freitas)
2. From 'individual' to 'global': expressive culture, identities and world music (Marco Roque de Freitas)
3. Scoring, jazz networks & gender studies: dialogic ethnography as an ethnomusicological tool (José Dias)
4. YOUSOUND: Music Education as an inclusive tool for underage refugees in Europe (Alix Sarrouy)
5. From decoding to the media perspective as practice: radio reception in the Goan home in colonial Mozambique (Catarina Valdigem)
6. Music and activism: festivity politics in times of crisis (Andrew Snyder)
7. How to build a nation through sound?: the case of Mozambique (Marco Roque de Freitas)
8. New media and participatory research in decolonial contexts (Lee Watkins)
9. Music and sexual dynamics: 'drag queen performances' and 'seduction as performance' (Marco Roque de Freitas)
10. Partying: material culture and change in the rural/urban landscape of Galicia (Iñigo Fuarroz)
11. Theorizing musical heritage (Salwa Castelo-Branco)
12. Libersound: Innovative archival practices toward sound memory liberation (Pedro Aragão)
13. 'Press Start': theory and method to the study of music and sound in videogames (Marco Roque de Freitas)
14. Ethnomusicology today: challenges and prospects (João Soeiro de Carvalho [tbc] and Marco Roque de Freitas)
15. Colloquium with students' presentations (Marco Roque de Freitas)

Providing a structure: the sessions and tutorials

Every session is taught by the responsible teacher and invited experts and is complemented by tutorials that provide scientific support to the students' projects. Each session is divided into three parts: 1. Presentation of the topic lectured, and identification of the main theoretical and methodological trends associated with it, as well as relevant publications and scholars; 2. Presentation of a case study, ideally part of the invited specialist's research; and 3. Discussion of relevant bibliography with students, aiming to identify, among other issues, the main research challenges and associated ethical issues.

The participation of invited scholars encourages students to establish direct contact with recent ethnomusicological research, thus living up to the name of the curricular unit. Depending on the cases, some specialists were invited to advise or co-advise their work. Additionally, the presentation of specialized publications by students also tests and opens the possibility of improving their science communication skills which, in turn, is stated as one of the objectives of the seminar to be evaluated in the final colloquium. Therefore, the tripartite sessions, in their multiple valences, decisively contribute to fulfilling the seminar's objectives.

Aside from the specialists in charge of a given session, other invitees can participate in the role of "commentators" or "analysts", as were the cases of event organizer Leonor Azêdo, who spoke about the challenges and ethical issues regarding the organization of classical music concerts with Russian and Ukrainian musicians, two weeks after the war had started; or the PhD candidate Sofia Lopes, who spoke about her experience in the 2022 Eurovision Song Contest, five days after participating in the venue in Turin, Italy. Other invited "commentators" included PhD candidates Caio Mourão e Rudi Garrido and film producer Francisca Marvão; the former two presented their PhD projects, while the latter presented a documentary film related to the session's topic. These segments took only a small portion of the session – more or less 30 minutes – and would typically take place in the sessions conducted by the responsible teacher.

In addition to the regular classes, the seminar offers individual online tutorials that provide personalized support to students in developing their evaluation documents. Students can apply for one of four 30-minute weekly slots available. During these one-on-one meetings, I guide them in identifying suitable study objects, while framing relevant research questions, and directing them to pertinent authors and publications. In some cases, I may even assist them in finding a dissertation advisor or a supervisory team. Conducted in a safe and dialogic setting, these tutorials also allow students to discuss their expectations, interests, and career objectives. For instance, if a student expresses interest in pursuing a research career, I assist them in defining good long-term research topics for their master's dissertation and a future PhD thesis.

I also provide frequent feedback and improvement suggestions, so students can incorporate them into their final project to be submitted in September, which will be implemented during the second year of their M.A. program. This methodology fulfils the seminar's specific objectives and prepares students for their M.A. degree, as well as their medium and long-term goals.

Some results

As previously stated, the adoption of the mentioned evaluation objectives was motivated by the need to address a pressing issue: ensuring that students have a project ready to execute by September. I am pleased to report that during the academic year 2021-2022, all students submitted their MA thesis projects on time, thus successfully achieving one of the main objectives of this seminar. Their classifications in the subsequent accompaniment seminar, which aims to evaluate their progress during the M.A. second year (organised by the M.A. coordinator in Musicology, Professor Luísa Cymbron), were remarkably high compared to previous years, an achievement that can be explained by the fact that most students started working on their projects much earlier than what was previously common.

Furthermore, I'm happy to report that six out of the eight students found supervisors or co-supervisors within the group of invited specialists, which can also be interpreted as a positive outcome of this new teaching approach. Moreover, two students won fellowship grants at another university and worked directly with Professor Rita Grácio, further stimulating collaboration and partnerships between scholars, students and institutions.

At last, in the anonymous evaluations made by the students (for the 2022 edition), their satisfaction with the seminar was extremely positive in all parameters (contents, organization, clarity, evaluation process and teachers' performance), achieving classifications that ranged from 5 to 6 (out of 6). The 2023 edition, which is still ongoing at the time of writing, includes the participation of eleven students: five from the MA in Ethnomusicology, and six from other MA and even PhD courses, a fact that can also be interpreted (and, in some cases, confirmed) as the result of positive word of mouth reputation of last year's edition of the seminar.

When applied to this seminar, the principle of 'polycentric intersubjectivity' reports to the wide range of perspectives presented in a singular setting, including presentations by ten very different researchers, and the demonstration of numerous research themes and objects that, first and foremost, took into consideration the student's main interests and subjectivities. Moreover, the seminar aimed to create a safe environment that fostered open discussion and respectful debate, where students were encouraged to question their assumptions and engage in critical thinking. Aside from teaching key sessions and offering the necessary accompaniment, my role in this seminar was to provide an overarching narrative that glues all sessions into a cohesive whole, while acknowledging invited scholars' potential divergences. It is important for students to understand why that happens, clarifying that there is no single way to experience a given topic and that there are several research styles and fieldwork procedures. After acknowledging the pros and cons of all perspectives, it is up to them to decide which one better suits their research plan. Overall, through the lens of 'polycentric intersubjectivity', I'm confident that students gained a deeper appreciation for the diverse ways music can be created, performed and experienced across different human groups.

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