AN ETHNOGRAPHIC CASE STUDY OF COLLABORATIVE LEARNING IN
A HIGHER EDUCATION CHORAL ENSEMBLE

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BY
RENAE TIMBIE

DR. ANDREW CROW AND DR. KARIN HENDRICKS - DISSERTATION ADVISORS

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ABSTRACT

DISertation: An Ethnographic Case Study of Collaborative Learning in a Higher Education Choral Ensemble

STUDENT: Renae Timbie

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As a choral director in higher education, I grew increasingly attentive to the role of globalization on society and similarly on higher education. Believing that cultural awareness informs music performance, I examined how choral music education in particular might lead the way in challenging students to see the world in its increasingly culturally-diverse and internationally-connected state.

This ethnographic case study outlines the process and examines the benefits of implementing a collaborative learning curriculum into a higher education choral classroom. In this project, students encountered and examined the cultures represented by assigned choral repertoire in order to inform their performance. Throughout the semester, small groups of student peers gathered and discussed the individual findings they had posted weekly on a class wiki. Those findings and discussions were later synthesized into key cultural insights that they deemed valuable for the repertoire. Students then suggested action points for communicating the cultural insights to the audience in the context of a concert performance.

My main research questions investigated the educational, musical, and sociocultural benefits produced in this project. Results revealed that students found the student-driven learning and group learning aspects of the curriculum to be of educational benefit. Participants expressed
that the musical preparation, interpretation, and performance of the repertoire also benefited through this process. Additionally, this case revealed that the curriculum produced opportunities for social interaction, for encountering other cultures through the study of music, and for expanding the students’ worldview.

This report describes the events and perceived benefits of the student participants as they experienced it. The experiences and opinions of the conductor and students were explored through journals, weekly anonymous surveys, wiki posts, and a final survey. This study offers a viable option to use a collaborative learning curriculum to bring broader context to choral repertoire, to engage students in the study of culture through music, and also to engage students more deeply in choral music making.
To my parents
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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

Introduction

Students in institutions of higher education live in, work in, and will enter a world that is increasingly culturally diverse and internationally connected. Barriers between nations and peoples are diminishing due to availability and affordability of a phone call, an email, a TV report, a video chat, a plane ride, or other technological possibilities. A multitude of languages, lifestyles, values, relationships, and religious beliefs challenge the average American on a daily basis. These intercultural interactions create a society of multiculturalism, or an emphasis on a growing awareness of cultural identities that are outside an individual’s known identity (Duygu Eristi, 2012).

As globalization becomes a major factor in American society, institutions of higher education must be prepared to meet the challenges it presents, advance the development of the young population, and lead the way in determining effective methods of societal engagement across barriers of cultural diversity. This and future generations require educational reform that adopts creative and more effective curricula than ever before to reach the needs and goals of academia (Gaunt & Westerlund, 2013). Higher education, in particular, bears the responsibility to provide the knowledge and skills to allow the students in its sphere of influence to engage in the current cultural status of their world as informed contributors. Students depart from institutions of higher education to operate in their current workforce and community. Higher education can contribute to the success of an ever-transforming world by training up its graduates to be positive influences: Associate Professor of music education at Bergen University College in Norway Catharina Christophersen (2013) describes ideal graduates of current higher
education as “self-reliant human beings who are also valuable members of society” (p. 77). The educational concept of collaborative learning offers an effective tool to build such self-reliance while prompting students toward cultural awareness.

**Collaborative Learning**

In this project, I investigated a practical approach to bridging cultures by implementing collaborative learning curriculum into the choral classroom. Collaborative learning emphasizes the social aspect of learning by encouraging group learning. Advocates of collaborative learning in music classrooms, Cynthia Folio and Steven Kreinberg (2009/2010) claim that collaborative learning “seeks to empower students to discover information by working together within groups” (p. 165). Collaborative learning allows students to learn more deeply by struggling together in open-ended tasks, working together in long-term projects, and problem-solving, reflecting what is likely to occur when students go out into their professional world and are working with colleagues. Learning takes place by organizing students into groups that engage in meaningful conversation to build consensus.

Collaborative learning usually confronts complex questions that may or may not have one certain answer. This allows opportunity to promote critical thinking, teach problem-solving skills, and involve students in their own learning process. It also develops cooperation, self-esteem, a social network of support, classroom improvement, and an understanding and valuing of the diversity of others (Anderman & Anderman, 2009). A main objective associated with this concept is creating an environment of learning that is similar to how the outside world functions.
Central to the ideas of collaborative learning is the role of the teacher. In laying out the reasons for his book on this topic, Kenneth Bruffee (1999) expresses the role of teachers in education: “We should think of college and university professors not as purveyors of information but as agents of cultural change who foster reacculturation by marshaling interdependence among student peers” (p. xii). In collaborative learning, the teacher is the coach, the mentor, or the co-instructor with the students in searching for knowledge. Teachers assume to a greater extent that participants are capable of the social skills necessary for working as a group. They also trust that groups can self-govern through achieving a consensus. Collaborative learning aims to shift the authority of knowledge from the teacher to the learners. It challenges the long-established hierarchy of teacher-to-student dispensation of knowledge.

**Music as Cultural Study**

Music programs in higher education are situated to constructively aid in connecting the collegiate student to perceiving, examining, and communicating within culture. Music offers an opportunity for the performer and consumer to confront another culture through experiencing or recreating the art it has produced. Accordingly, music can be a gateway to understanding cultural value. As students focus on the context in which certain musics were originally created or have since developed, they encounter worlds outside their own native framework of thought, belief, and expression. Music teachers in higher education tend to emphasize and perfect the performance and creation of notes and pitches, but unfortunately sometimes overlook the potential to explore the context in which the music is given its meaning.

Because musics have the potential to teach us about the various cultures they represent, music can become an effective tool for teaching students about their diverse, globalized world. To equip students to engage in this current globalized society and to impact future generations,
music educators must realize the platform that is granted them. An untapped opportunity to shape today’s world citizens awaits in the foundation of music education. Professor of Music Anthony J. Palmer (2009) challenges:

> Music education is an important segment of the larger picture of education. And education is only a part, albeit fundamental and necessary, of the larger sociocultural and sociopolitical realities of contemporary life. To navigate the exigencies of today’s world, locally and globally, a new type of individual is required in the schools. (p. 123)

Understanding the power of music education to meet 21st-century demands begins with cognizant educators. Schools of music have the unique opportunity to educate students with a medium that reaches multiple facets of the learner. In his 1983 book *Frames of Mind* outlining his theory of multiple intelligences, Harvard Education Professor Howard Gardner recognized music as one of several intelligences in which a mind has the potential to learn. As a discipline that involves interactive, listening, cognitive, and even emotive skills, music may be an avenue for learning beyond pitches and rhythms. If students can see how cultures express themselves in music, they may also have the opportunity to learn about themselves and others. Music becomes a medium to study culture—whichever culture it may represent.

**Large Ensembles in Higher Music Education**

While individually focused learning may advance the globalized student, the ensemble framework embodied in choral ensemble courses presents opportunities for students to learn with and from one another. College Music Society’s report of the Task Force on the Undergraduate Music Major (2014) highlighted the importance of introducing new formats for large ensembles that connect music making to life experience and expanded learning outcomes. As for its recommendations for change, the Task Force (College Music Society, 2014) recommends that
large-ensemble instruction focus on restructuring its objective to further this goal of preparing 21st-century citizens:

Music schools and departments consider new possibilities in large ensemble instruction and format that are oriented toward the needs of the 21st-century improviser-composer-performer, and also the potential for the emergent artistic identity of the student to not only open up new programming possibilities, but to also bring new levels of vitality, meaning and understanding to standard large ensemble repertory. (p. 13)

Established communities in music education currently present in universities need a refreshed look at how they are raising up engaged, informed musicians in their classrooms.

**Choral Ensembles**

Toward that end, choral ensembles in particular hold an advantaged position to engage in cross-cultural dialogue. Choral singing is an art form that exists in cultures all over the world (De Quadros, 2012). It is a practice used in a wide-range of cultures for far longer than many other ensemble traditions (e.g., orchestra and band). More so, a choral classroom creates a ready community of musicians communicating through a vocal art. It is a personal art form as members of the choral ensemble are contributing their bodily instruments—their personal voices—to music making. Likewise, the advantage of considering the text of vocal music may engage students to more easily discover context of communication in any particular culture. For generations, choral communities around the world have brought together individuals using their voices and indigenous language to communicate through music. These social aspects, which are a large part of choral music making, provide an established resource for higher education. If students can observe how cultures express themselves in music, they may also have the opportunity to learn about themselves and others.
Using Collaborative Learning in Choral Ensembles

In this case study, I aimed to identify a method of using a collaborative-learning curriculum to promote deeper and wider learning within higher education choral classrooms. Using collaborative learning in the choral classroom combines the inherent benefit of learning through music making as well as the benefit of a methodology that promotes student-led learning. Students who participated in this study had the opportunity to reflect on

- the musical repertoire they studied and learned as a part of their course, providing opportunity for deeper learning and understanding of the music they were required to perform;
- the process of how they learned through collaborative learning in small groups; and
- the activities of collaborative learning within a choral rehearsal.

Study Purpose

The purpose of this ethnographic case study was to discover the effectiveness of a collaborative learning curriculum in a specific series of higher education choral rehearsals by describing the experiences of the college students through their own reflections and feedback, as well as through the conductor’s journal observations. In this project, students were given the opportunity to explore the cultures represented in the repertoire they were rehearsing in a given semester. In doing so, the students encountered more than notational music and pedagogy that focused predominantly on pitch and rhythmic production, but also contextual considerations involved in music making. By using a learner-led approach, the aim was to facilitate deeper learning as students discussed their interests and observations in light of their own ideas about culture and their connections to music.
The goals for this pedagogical experiment were to determine

- effective teaching methods that can be used by other music teachers and choral directors;
- ways the process may be improved for later versions of the project;
- themes of discovery that students were able to encounter through the project; and
- how the project positively enhanced the learning experience of the student.

Another desired outcome of this study was to motivate others to experiment with introducing new pedagogies into their classrooms by offering thick description of the experiences embedded with in this case study. As in any attempt at questioning our prevailing teaching methods, it is expected that proposing an alternate approach may raise doubt and resistance from teachers and students. For example, a common concern among educators using collaborative learning is the potential for the nebulous trajectory of the curriculum because students are allowed a more central role in learning. As students take charge of the knowledge that is brought to a subject, the inherent lack of predictability creates a challenge and concern for a teacher’s ability to make daily plans and project outcomes for a class. This study is offered as one experiment of a single case that may establish valuable and practical information for various choirs and educators. The concern for variability should not hinder educators seeking innovative approaches to music education, but rather should excite them to create relevant and enlightening opportunities for students of higher education. In his chapter in *Music Education for the New Millenium*, David Lines (2005) concludes with this courageous statement about interacting with the cultural work of music making:

> There is an element of unpredictability in this process; as we partake and respond to cultural work, we don’t know in advance what the nature and quality of each musical moment culminates in a revealing of cultural work—not abstracted musical sounds—but
rather, dialogical musical relationships, new musical idioms and cultural expressions of music. (p. 72)

In this chapter, Lines established the necessity and potential for this study and also revealed the purpose and goals intended for the study. In the following chapter, I will discuss current published literature that is relevant to the various areas of research addressed in this study, and I will project how this document contributes to the collection of choral education literature.
CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

Relevant literature to support this case study covers a wide range of topics. At the heart of the project is the blending of collaborative learning to facilitate cultural study through music in attempt to meet the need for educational reform. Figure 1 below illustrates the relationship of several areas of research to support the justification for this current study:

![Figure 1](image_url)

*Figure 1. How diverse topics relate to support the current project.*

As shown in this diagram, the project is supported and informed by three main topics: higher education reform, music as a cultural study, and collaborative learning. In this section, I will

- outline discussion leading to higher music education reform,
- introduce considerations and benefits of drawing connections between culture and music, and
• define collaborative learning in contrast to cooperative learning and how they have been presented in education.

Higher Education Reform

The role of globalization, diversity, multiculturalism, and intercultural relationships in current society is prominent in the minds of educational reformers (Altbach, Gumport, & Berdahl, 2011; Bruch, Higbee, & Kwabena, 2007; Chang, 1999; Gurin, Dey, Hurtado, & Gurin 2002; King & Magolda, 2003; O’Neill, 2009; Richardson, 2007; Volk, 2004). With compelling prose, Daryl G. Smith (2011), Professor of Education and Psychology at Claremont Graduate University and college administrator, expressed the urgency of educators and administrators in higher education to examine how to meet the needs of the current social diversity represented in American higher education enrollment. While future plans to address diversity is sustained by abundant research of our past challenges, the author suggested that it is “reasonably clear that diversity, as with technology before it, is likely to be central to higher education’s mission and excellence in the twenty-first century” (p. 474). He pressed that American higher education place diversity at the core of its institutional mission to remain viable.

Higher music education reform. Musicians and music organizations are calling for reform in music education that focuses on creating relevant and equipped musicians. The College Music Society (2014) task force was charged to examine current schools of music to determine what is needed for undergraduate curriculum to create musicians who are relevant to modern society. Their manifesto encouraged curriculums grounded on creativity, diversity, and integration to prepare 21st-century musicians. Members of the MayDay Group—founded to dialogue on the international status of music education—believe action as a result of critical theory and critical thinking must spur a change in music educational practice (Mayday Group,
Music educators, researchers, and journal editors Helena Gaunt and Heidi Westerlund (2013) promoted this call for reform by insisting that institutions must be swift in “creating vision, making what has previously been done more effective, but also in creating vision, extending preexisting realities through reflection and challenging established forms of education and expertise in our field creatively and constructively” (p. 3). Agreeing that a new kind of contemporary music student is required today, Anthony J. Palmer (2009) suggested incorporating interdisciplinarity in music curriculum to encourage students to consider other disciplines outside of music. Furthermore, Richardson (2007) criticized college faculty who believe in big ideas—particularly that critical thinking is crucial to music learning—but fail to reflect them in their syllabi.

In the past decade alone, a large number of publications have published models for reformed music pedagogy (Clements, 2007; Lines, 2005; O’Neill 2009; Palmer, 2009; Regelski, 2009). Clements (2007) urged faculty of higher music education programs to challenge their traditional methods and techniques offered to future music educators. As music programs evolve in the 21st century to reach more diverse students, the teachers need to be exposed to and prepared to implement alternative curricula. Regelski (2009) cautioned music educators to critically examine the status quo of practices that may now in fact be dysfunctional.

**Comprehensive musicianship.** Similar reform ideas of music education have been presented under the trend of comprehensive musicianship. Comprehensive musicianship has been a prominent discussion within music education since the 1950s (Hylton, 2007; Reimer, 2000). It is a more holistic and broader concept of music teaching and learning that goes beyond technical performance of music. Sindberg (2007) described comprehensive musicianship to generally emphasize teaching understanding of musical elements; the inclusion of theory,
history, and performance in learning; engaging students in the multiple roles of a musician (i.e., listener, performer, composer); and ensemble classes that are both a place to learn and rehearse. Hylton (2007) included that it focuses on the student rather than the teacher, explores varied repertoire that connects music to outside contexts of the students lives, should provide an aesthetic experience, and can be evaluated. Studies show that a comprehensive musicianship may benefit student motivation, students’ and outsiders’ perception of improved expressive performance (Hendricks, 2010) and students’ ability to describe music with non-technical insights and connecting music to outside contexts (Sindberg, 2007).

**Music as a Cultural Study**

One approach to a more comprehensive musicianship is to examine the cultural values and insights that shape the repertoire. Music educators are reforming their field by focusing on how to experience music beyond the notes and its relationship to culture (Clayton, Herbert, & Middleton, 2012; Jonda, 2013; O’ Neill, 2008; Stokes, 2004; Wade, 2004). In her attempt to contrast framework for educational theories in her various experiences as music educator in Africa from the apparent theories prioritized in the West, Emily Achieng’ Akuno (2001) clarified that “music is more than just the body of sounds or a concept, but also an experience bearing and communicating issues of socio-cultural significance to the community that practices it” (p. 3). Davis (2005) defended that “music is dialogically involved in the creation and renewal of culture” and thus has a place in education systems that recognizes its importance in understanding current and past societies (p. 57).

**Multicultural music education.** Many pedagogues have thus used the introduction and study of multicultural music education as an approach to confronting students with their world (Biernoff & Blom, 2002; Bradley, 2009; Bruch, Higbee, & Kwabena, 2007; Campbell, 2004;
Using multicultural music in higher education curricula may serve to teach beneficial skills needed to confront the globalized world. On a grand scale, it may aid developing students to “negotiate the complex web of musical and cultural diversity that exists in the world today” (O’Neill, 2009, p. 71).

However, the study of repertoire’s culture does not automatically imply using only international or world music. Any piece of music is rooted in the value systems, preferences, and context out of which it was created. A key point to understanding music education as a cultural study is realizing that different cultures have different value systems (Dunbar-Hall, 2005). Of the MayDay Group’s seven Action Ideals to create change in music education, the first ideal claimed “All music and music learning is culturally situated. Diverse communities generate and sustain diverse musical meanings, values, and individual practices. Thus, music learning works best when we are mindful, reflective, and critically aware of cultural contexts” (Mayday Group, 2015).

Consequently, educators are exploring how to study culture in music. For example, Junda (2013) explains using American folk songs as a key to a comprehensive understanding of an American culture and history. Overby (2013) suggested that listening to music from different cultures could bridge diverse culture groups with explanation of social, historical, and cultural context. In his study, explanations of song lyrics were given to the participants in different degrees. The basic tenets of song messages were understood by participants, but the given explanations did not necessarily increase their understanding.

Additionally, Aróstegui and Louro (2009) explained the need for music educators to consider the pre-existing musical identities students bring into music courses. Social and musical identities are shaped by sociocultural context and are confronted by new worlds of music in
music programs. Aróstegui and Louro proposed that teachers should give students new experiences to expand their universe and confront their worldviews, but that they must start by acknowledging what identities and experiences the students already possess: “We can and ought to work with their music genres and, as the instructional process continues, their designated identities could be expanded, thus letting them appreciate a broader gamut of music” (p. 27).

The understanding of cultural context’s significance to music is implicit in culturally responsive pedagogy, another educational concept applied in music education that is discussed below.

**Culturally responsive pedagogy.** Ladson-Billings (1992) was one of the earliest pedagogues to introduce culturally relevant teaching. She saw it as a way to promote multicultural education that is useful to the globalized demographic of students represented in classrooms. Her fear of asserting mostly dominant culture in multicultural education brought her attention to the need to empower children from all socioclasses and cultures. The aim of culturally responsive pedagogy is to approach teaching in a way that acknowledges student’s various cultural identities and connects them to global meaning and learning. This empowers the students to achieve educational, social, and cultural success. A prominent educator and writer on the topic, Geneva Gay (2000), defines culturally responsive teaching as "using the cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference, and performance styles of ethnically diverse students to make learning encounters more relevant to and effective for them. It teaches to and through the strengths of these students" (p. 29).

For example, addressing art education, Lai (2012) suggests micro-ethnographic projects for college students in which they can research the culture and art of a specific community. Lai encourages ethnographic approaches and fieldwork that cause students to do their own inquiry of cultures alongside printed artifacts. Lai believes culturally responsive educators aim to create
globally-minded students. By asking students to research culture, they confront global issues that impact society and ultimately affect art.

Toward that end, the culturally responsive teacher will focus on the inclusion of multicultural repertoire and materials to the curricula (Arbil, 2013; Gay, 2000). Shaw (2012) recommended selecting choral repertoire with students’ cultural identities in mind. With time and practical restraints put on developing curricula, she suggested a curricular design that begins with familiar repertoire then gradually adds the unfamiliar (Shaw, 2012). Mixon (2009) suggested a rotational system to feature various cultures in his music ensembles. He also created specialized (i.e., gospel choir) or alternative ensembles (i.e., African percussion ensemble) to incorporate additional culturally responsive pedagogy.

However, Abril (2013) warned that choosing repertoire and materials representative of the students’ cultures is not always appropriate or culturally responsive as students often do not identify with only one culture and selected repertoire may not authentically represent the culture. As in any situation, music selections should be chosen wisely without sacrificing quality and without stereotyping students. Ladson-Billings (1992) called a culturally relevant teacher someone who “sees teaching as an art” (p.113) in that it must be passionately configured to meet the needs of students and give back to the community. Many educators suggest an ethnomusicological approach to teaching by accessing cultural bearers in the community to provide closer and more authentic insight into cultures (Campbell, 2003; Lai, 2012; Mixon, 2009; Shaw, 2012). In fact, Campbell (2003) discussed the growing relationship between ethnomusicology and music education as they influence practices and theories within their respective disciplines.
Culturally responsive music teachers must recognize and inform students that there are multiple global and musical perspectives (Abril, 2013). Students can each contribute to the conversation as each has rich musical experiences of their own. Teachers should seek out the students’ culture and perspectives on meaning as well as coaching them to seek others’ perspectives through collaborative and inquisitive discussion. Inquiry-based education (Hayes, 2013) can validate the cultural diversity in a music classroom by encouraging students to share their own identities in the learning process. This can make strides away from bullying, cultural discrimination, and profiling within the music classroom (Hayes, 2013).

Shaw (2012) expressed concern that choral music education is prone to be mostly Eurocentric. She suggested that choral educators should consider various styles, learning methods, and vocal techniques in their curricula. Her belief in culturally responsive pedagogy is not simply to teach multicultural music; instead the primary goal is to impart the skills to thoughtfully value other cultures through validating the students’ own cultural identity and musical experiences. Singing, particularly, allows students to encounter culture and thus puts choral music education at the forefront of culturally responsive music education (Shaw, 2012).

Though representing the various cultures of students in the choral classroom is not a specific aspect of this study, it does correspond to the understanding that students come with their own perceptions of music and culture. The ultimate goal of the project is not a curriculum that teaches about specific cultures. Instead it brings students to a deeper understanding of the repertoire that is being performed as they consider how culture impacts and informs music, and that their individual musical experiences and opinions shape how they view another’s musics. My project employed a culturally responsive pedagogy to explore the larger benefits of collaborative learning in a choral classroom.
Practically speaking, how can educators—and specifically choral conductors—explore innovative ways that help the students create deeper learning in music ensemble courses? Educators throughout many disciplines of higher education have experimented with the use of collaborative and cooperative learning methods to encourage useful and effective learning opportunities.

**Collaborative Learning**

A cursory search into collaborative learning produces a rampant collection of sources. Most confusing in the literature—and relevant to the decisions made for this study—is the interchangeability of the term collaborative with cooperative. Similar in theory, cooperative learning is often misperceived as collaborative learning. The difference in end goals and how that informs methodology, however, makes it imperative to draw attention to their comparisons as revealed in the literature (Bruffee, 1999; Johnson, Johnson, & Smith, 1991; Panitz, 1997). While some refer to both as generally under the umbrella of collaborative learning, Bruffee (1999) called them “two versions of the same thing” (p. 83). There are differences worthy of consideration for choosing the most effective methodology in a specific classroom. Matthews, Cooper, Davidson, and Hawkes (1995) mentioned the authority of knowledge, role of the teacher, and the nature of the learner as key decisions to be made by instructors in choosing between cooperative and collaborative learning.

Bruffee (1999) claimed that a major difference between the two involves the ultimate objectives for each approach. He believed the core of collaborative learning is the authority of knowledge given to the student and how that alters the teacher’s role. Giving the authority over to the students allows them take a greater role in pursuing knowledge and perspectives they may not already possess, even more so as they deliberate with their peers in discussion. Revealing a
constructivist perspective, Ventimiglia (1995) commented that “the shift from a professor-centered to a student-centered learning situation allows students to construct new knowledge by building on existing schema” (p. 19). In other words, students shape new knowledge from what understanding they already bring to a class or a discussion. In agreement, Bruffee (1999) believed that, within group discussion, students are challenged to consider evidence beyond their own convictions:

Conversation toward consensus requires them to confront and come to terms with the difference between their own fixed beliefs and the contradicting fixed beliefs of their peers. Collaborative learning places students in a position, that is, in which they must reconcile their preconceptions in conversation with one another. (p. 17)

Cooperative learning, conversely, centers on the training of small-group participation to reduce individual competition (Bruffee, 1999; Johnson et al., 1991; Matthews et al., 1995; Panitz, 1997). Ventimiglia (1995) explained her pursuit of cooperative learning at the college level as a way of encouraging students to discover how to work with mutual respect for one another.

Although the students assist one another and dialogue as in collaborative learning, a cooperative curriculum allows the teacher to specify social skills and academic objectives, teach basic information, monitor the groups, and intervene to teach small-group skills (Johnson et al., 1991). Folio and Kreinberg (2009/2010) argued that cooperative learning is still teacher-centered despite its emphasis on student-group learning. The group “seeks to produce a ‘correct’ response scripted by the instructor, who is in complete charge of the class at all times” (p. 165).

Both Bruffee (1999) and Ventimiglia (1995) also agreed that collaborative learning builds from where cooperative learning stops. Originally cooperative learning was developed for elementary and middle school classrooms (Matthews et al., 1995), and thus is often chosen for
younger learners. Collaborative learning activities are used more frequently in high school and higher education classrooms.

Many scholars and pedagogues are attempting innovative alternatives to lecture-based learning by implementing collaborative and cooperative learning in higher education (Al-rahmi, Othman, & Musa, 2014; Altowairiki, 2013; Gros, Guerra, & Rivera 2005; Järvelä, Näykki, Laru, & Luokkanen, 2007; Lin, 2013; Todd, 1990; Van Duyne, 1993; Wicaksono 2013; Zhu, Schellens, & Valcke, 2010). Websites, articles, and books abound with suggestions and lists for short activities and discussion questions. Barkley, Major, and Cross’s (2014) recent textbook offered practical techniques to integrate collaborative learning into the classroom in a handbook for college faculty. Higher education pedagogues in various fields are also experimenting with the use of computer-supported collaborative learning (Gros, Guerra, Rivera, 2005; Lin, 2013; Resta & Laferriere, 2007; Roberts, 2005).

Collaborative and Cooperative Learning in Music Education

British educator Edwin Mason was first credited for using the term “collaborative learning” in the 1970s, and he brought attention to the idea that most of life’s activities involve collaboration with others (Bruffee, 1999). He understood that, consciously or unconsciously, we are continually responding and relating to others. In collaborative learning pedagogy, the relational context of learning is brought to education. Building on Mason’s ideas, Gaunt and Westerlund (2013) advocated that this relational element of collaborative learning is needed to meet the demands of recent developments in higher music education. Collaborative learning provides opportunities to learn skills that are needed in contemporary society (e.g., networking, flexibility, dealing with diversity, etc.).
**Music courses.** In making a case for collaborative learning in higher music education, Christophersen (2013) noticed that recent history reveals the tendency of schools to develop pedagogies that advance individual learning and assessment rather than pedagogies that take advantage of the social aspects of music-making. Though music inherently may be experienced and produced through social interaction, a traditional lecture-structured teaching method is instead typical for music education. There is a sufficient void of research about executing collaborative or cooperative learning in music education programs.

There are efforts, however, toward using collaboration between organizations in music education. Toward building radical change in music teacher education, The National Association for Music Education’s (NAfME) published proceedings from a symposium on music education is entirely dedicated to concepts and practices for collaborations and partnerships among teachers, administrators, and organizations (Schmidt, 2007). Folio and Kreinberg (2009/2010) also discussed using collaborative technology to aid in music theory and history courses.

Most of the literature discusses cooperative over collaborative learning in music education. For example, in her University of Michigan doctoral dissertation Sarah Djordjevic (2007) revealed high school students’ positive responses to cooperative learning in an instrumental music classroom. Students in one class participated in two different types of cooperative groups throughout a six-week period for a total of six rehearsals. In their affinity for the project, participants praised the chance for their voices to be heard in this action research.

Some research displays activities that may be used to develop musicianship proficiencies. Several studies suggest that the implementation of collaborative and cooperative learning activities into music appreciation classes has had a positive impact on developing listening skills (Holloway 2004; Smialek & Boburka 2006). In his dissertation, Glenn Lewis Hosterman (1992)
explored a comparison of cooperative learning and traditional lecture teaching in higher education music appreciation courses. He concluded that cooperative learning is effective in improving students’ listening skills over students who were taught through traditional lecture demonstration. Fisher (2006) borrowed activities from cooperative pedagogues in other fields to incorporate keyboard skill-building assignments in university group piano programs for music majors. This document is mostly descriptive of cooperative methodology in group-piano teaching, however, rather than experimental in innovative outcomes.

In comparing cooperative learning and individualistic instruction in two fourth-grade general music classes, Cornacchio (2008) looked at more than just building musical skills. The study sought to determine its effects on compositional skills, social interactions, and acceptance of peers. The author suggested that cooperative learning groups would at least match the level of musical learning as individualistic instruction. Perhaps most useful in this study is the observation that cooperative learning may aid in classroom management as students in cooperative groups were less likely to be distracted by social interactions. Cornacchio suggested that the thorough structure of cooperative learning created boundaries for social interaction. In a higher education case study, Jung (2013) examined the use of peer (collaborative) learning in a group of Korean college voice students. The goal was to engage students to develop meaning in music as they researched literature of classical vocal music and presented a performance as a musical autobiography. The study revealed development of autonomy and a musician’s identity through the process of student-initiated learning.

**Technology in music courses.** Researchers also investigate the benefits of using technology in collaborative learning methodologies. Similarly noticing the lack of collaborative learning in music classes, Folio and Kreinberg (2009/2010) urged educators to consider using
and courageously exploring the unfamiliar use of wikis and blogs to enhance lecture-based music courses. In their experience, there are advantages to facilitating learning outside the classroom, supplemented by time for face-to-face interaction in class. Leupold and Snodgrass (2014) suggested using relevant and modern technology for students to engage collaboratively across institutions. A reason for this study was to highlight collaborating strengths and abilities of various students to enrich learning in a music theory project. Young and Perez (2011) highlighted the potential of technologies to further advancements in music education research. They promoted collective rather than individual-based research and suggested that the opportunity for several types of research processes to merge on a wiki is a convincing advantage to pursue technological communication in research.

**Choral ensembles.** There is even less research offered in the realm of collaborative learning in choral ensembles. Most literature focuses on the use of small-group collaborations to build musical skill. Parker (2007) studied team-based learning to build musical knowledge and sight-singing skills in high school choral music students. The purpose of her model was to improve sight-singing skills, but also to build confidence in student sight-singing performance. Most surveys and tests used for her study positively indicated the advancement of musical knowledge, skill, and confidence. Similarly, in a study exploring effective constructivist activities in high school choral rehearsals, Collmer (2012) concluded that activities engaging students in leadership and goal setting may have positive results on music learning and critical thinking. Although they did not suggest any examples of curricula, Di Natale and Russell (1995) also agreed that cooperative learning in music ensemble programs might enhance performance preparation and build social skills by giving students part in decision-making.
In an effort at testing specific activities, Becker (2011) tested the limits of constructivist learning theory in her middle school choir rehearsals. Constructivism—similar to collaborative learning goals—generally calls attention to learners building their own knowledge upon past knowledge. Becker’s objectives in implementing constructivist pedagogy included connecting the students more deeply to the music, encouraging creativity and self-expression, as well as addressing vocal and musical issues. She believed constructivism has unlimited possibilities in music-making applications, but that teachers are uncertain of how to apply it into rehearsals.

Research using collaborative learning in choral ensembles of higher education is relatively untouched. In his master’s thesis, Mastrogiavanni (2007) briefly discussed collaborative learning in a collegiate choral ensemble through learning communities. In his observations, he looked at the role of a community that may include various faculty, staff, and students to contribute to the overall knowledge brought into curriculum with co-curricular activities. Collaboration, in this sense, concerns sharing authority of knowledge in collaborative partnerships. Relevant and practical application of collaborative learning curricula in choral ensembles is absent from the literature.

In this chapter, I reviewed the literature relevant to this study and established the need for studies such this present one to contribute to the literature on utilizing collaborative learning in higher education choral ensembles. In the following chapter, I will outline the case study methodology I employed for this study in combination with aspects of ethnographic methodology. In Chapter 3, I will also describe my process for setting up the project studied, and the data sources I gathered for the study. Lastly, I explain how I collected and analyzed data, and reported the study.
CHAPTER 3  
METHODOLOGY

In this study, I describe a collaborative learning project implemented in a university choral classroom in the spring of 2015. The project offers a curricular possibility to engage students in cultural considerations of music making. Students were assigned to small groups and explored the culture of selected repertoire. This research details the process as well as the perceived benefits of the project. In this section, I present case study as the tradition of qualitative research used in my methodology. I also explain aspects I employed from the tradition of ethnography in order to affiliate my study with ethnographic case study methodology.

Case Study

A case study approach is appropriate for this research because it presents an in-depth study of a single, unique case bound by a specific time and setting (Stake, 2005). The purpose of this case study is to analyze the process and benefits of having implemented a collaborative learning curriculum in a college choral classroom and the experience of the participating college students and conductor of the University Choral Union at Ball State University. It can be seen as a single, holistic case study in that I am studying a definite group of students and one conductor in one unique environment (Baxter & Jack, 2008; Yin, 2009). My research documents the processes of the project in an active college class. According to Moore (2014), the appropriate use of case-study method in music performance and education relies on the specificity of and accessibility to the case itself. Serving as teacher of record as well as the lead researcher, I was able to closely observe the daily activities of the project and the specifics of its design.
It is important for a case study to research a phenomenon with multiple data sources (Baxter & Jack, 2008). In my research, this included the collection of qualitative data in the form of participant surveys, teacher-researcher journals, and wiki posts. My research stresses the personal interpretation of several of the project’s participants as an opportunity to learn from more than one data source or perspective (Stake, 1995). These multiple forms of qualitative data were used to provide in-depth description of the case and used to identify themes that emerged in the analysis of the data (Creswell, 2013).

In accordance with Stake’s (1995) categorization of case study, this is an instrumental case study because it examined the way collaborative learning may address larger issues and provide desired benefits. Stake (1995) claimed that in an instrumental case study, the issues are dominant over the case; the issues help organize how we observe and analyze a case. Yin (2009) suggested that a case study primarily must answer an explanatory how or why question. My instrumental case study evaluated how and why collaborative learning may be a productive method in producing musical, educational, and sociocultural benefits to the students.

**Ethnography**

Ethnography is a qualitative study of the shared behavioral patterns of a culture-sharing group formed from a significant amount of time spent together (Creswell, 2012). Ethnography methodology refers to both the study of the group as well as the written report of the study. The affiliation of my case study with characteristics of ethnographic methodology involved the research process of using fieldwork observations, as described below.

Traditionally, ethnography methodology includes examining the participants of a group and their behaviors through collected fieldwork. This may include interviews, observations, or artifacts. Through the use of participant-observer data, I relied on ethnographic fieldwork
methods to strengthen the description of the case’s participant community. In my study, I also offered my firsthand observations as I implemented the curriculum into weekly rehearsals. My experience as the teacher of a higher education choir was valuable in explaining the thoughts, worries, challenges, and successes that another teacher might experience in using a similar curriculum. As I conducted the project, I recorded my experiences in teacher-research journal entries. My observations, in addition to student observations, provide the reader with a more thorough understanding of the events, experiences, and reactions of all the participants in this particular case.

I also emphasize an ethnographic approach by inserting participants’ quotes as well as bringing a researcher’s interpretation of overall patterns of discovery (Creswell, 2012). Although this document includes participant quotes and reflections and utilizes an ethnographic approach, the present study is an ethnographic case study and not a pure ethnography because I limited the scope of my analysis to the benefits of implementing a specific curriculum in a university course. It examines a single case, rather than the behaviors of a culture group.

Project and Data Collection

While noting that there are other curricula that other directors are using to meet students’ needs in the choral rehearsal, this project meets all the proposed stipulations for a case study and represents what Stake calls a “specific, complex, functioning thing” (Stake, 1995, p. 2). The study is not a generality, but an individual instance observed for its particular character. In this section I outline this particular case by first describing the project. This includes how participants were recruited, a description of the participants, as well as how I executed the project in the classroom. I then define my multiple data sources and how they were generated and collected. Lastly, I present my approach to analyzing and reporting my data. This includes stating my
research questions and plans for organizing and coding data.

**Recruitment.** Participants were recruited only from the students enrolled in MUSC 351F/151F for the spring semester of 2015. Since I was the teacher of record for the course as well as the lead investigator, the faculty research advisor came to the first class to explain the project in order to avoid coercion from the instructor to participate. The faculty research advisor was from a separate department in the School of Music and was, therefore, not in a position of authority over the students in this course. The following week, the graduate assistant for the course read the information letter to the students. Students were asked by the graduate assistant to consider the information letter by the following rehearsal a week later.

I was absent from the classroom during all discussion of the project and distribution of the information letter. Students enrolled in MUSC 351F/151F were not required in any way to participate in the collection of data for a grade. Students were participating in the academic course project as part of the class requirements, but the collection of data regarding their experiences with the project was voluntary and anonymous. Data were collected by use of an online survey (see Appendix A) using Qualtrics software, which allowed participants to give written reflections without collecting identifying information.

**Participants.** This case study observed the implementation of the collaborative learning curriculum in the combined MUSC 351F/151F University Choral Union class offered at Ball State University. Choral Union met every Monday night of the semester for a 2.5-hour rehearsal. From semester to semester enrollment for the ensemble fluctuates from 40 students to more than 100 who meet in the Choral Hall of the Music Instruction Building at Ball State University. This semester, the total participants ($N = 44$) took the course for either 0.5 credits ($n = 36$) or no credit ($n = 8$). Most participants ranged from ages 18-22 years old, with a few students older than 22.
Students enrolled for the ensemble without an audition and represented three broad categories of academic majors: music ($n = 24$), undeclared ($n = 3$), and non-majors (e.g., anthropology, biology, landscape architecture, mathematical sciences, exercise science; $n=16$). This semester, a staff member of Ball State participated in the ensemble as well. Students represented all class standings: freshmen ($n = 16$), sophomores ($n = 16$), juniors ($n = 3$), and seniors ($n = 8$). With a mixture of all majors and school years, singers contributed to the ensemble with varying degrees of musical comprehension and training.

**The project.** Although a choral rehearsal is usually taught as one large class, the premise of the project required the formation of small groups in which students were placed and took charge of their own learning. In the previous semester, I experimented with students in small groups and asked them to contribute information on a class wiki. That experiment was a pilot for the project I completed during the present case study. I had not yet formalized my thoughts on a collaborative-learning curriculum, but experimented with the logistics of using wikis in a large-ensemble course.

Because of the nature of this study, the first few rehearsals introduced the participants to project procedures. The first rehearsals explained

- collaborative learning,
- how to access a wiki,
- expectations for the weekly course meeting,
- expectations for weekly assignments completed outside the course meeting,
- instructions for students who opt to participate in the study, and
- purpose of the project and case study.
I assigned the students into small groups of 4-5 students. Groups were selected at random with a few adjustments made to prevent students with similar strengths or interests from congregating in one group. Once the students were in their small groups, my first step was to ask each group to indicate a first and second choice from the selected class repertoire that they would like to research together for the remainder of the semester. Their task was to discover the context and culture with which the selection of music was associated. The small group was in control of which topic, which direction, and which final project they chose to pursue. As the teacher, I served as a mentor or coach to encourage interdependence as students constructed knowledge in their small groups.

Each week, all but one small-group member were responsible for posting a piece of information on a wiki that was built and accessed on the course’s online learning course management system (i.e., Blackboard). Information had to be related to the repertoire in any manner that the student found applicable and/or valuable. The information chosen by the student contributed to the group's discussion and learning of the music. Posts featured gathered information from outside sources that included video clips, audio recordings, pictures, articles, etc. The students were also required to include the following elements:

- information related to the song such as a YouTube clip, link to an article, link to a website, or a PDF,
- bibliographical information about the post, and
- 150-200 words description of and rationale for the post.
In class each week, time was given for students to gather in their groups and discuss the findings of their group members. The remaining member of the group was assigned the role of scribe and asked to complete the following task:

Scribe Task: The scribe should post 150-200 words summarizing what was discussed in the rehearsal regarding the four posts submitted by other group members. On the wiki, create a new page and label it "Last name-Scribe." Note: the Scribe will have to post a summary and find a new piece of information to post due the same week.

At the end of the meeting, a new member was selected by their peers to be the next week’s scribe. Scribes rotated each week. During this small group time, I reminded the participants that I served as a coach and mentor; I was their guide through the learning process who could lead them to expand their thinking, offer direction and clarification, or aid in deficient group dynamics. This was also a time for me to help individual groups as I observed their participation on the wiki over the week. Time in small groups allowed participants to collaborate and reiterate their thoughts and observations of the culture their music represents as well as how that informed their understanding of the music. As the teacher with access to weekly postings on the wiki, I made comments on individual posts to help guide their thinking and direct their search for new information.

The final weeks of the semester were reserved for synthesizing information as small groups. The students determined how to best present their findings to the large group and their audience in the upcoming concerts. As the project progressed, the students were asked to consider how they might successfully represent their song to others. During the three rehearsals prior to the concerts, as musical notes were being refined, the small groups shared with the large ensemble what they determined to be valuable to our study of these pieces of music. The
students considered how this information would impact our artistic contribution in the concerts.

The final concert was the opportunity for students to display their understanding of the culture and context of the learned repertoire. By giving them they authority of knowledge throughout the semester, I gave the students voice and ownership into how the concerts were presented. This was displayed through program notes, visual effects, standing formations, dialectal considerations, instrumentation, physical movement, or other mechanisms. With my coaching, the students were encouraged to be the cultural advocates of their pieces of music. It was their objective to use their collaborative insight to inform how we expressed our art in the concerts.

My aim was to effectively provide opportunity for dialogue and discovery of cultural context to deepen the students’ learning of music and its representation of cultural value. By bringing their own discoveries to small-group discussion, each group constructed a context of the songs surrounding the composition and performance of the selected piece they were researching. Their contribution to the music was based on research and subjectivity as they led their own discussion in collaborating their individual findings. As they reached consensus of opinion on what cultural insight was relevant to their understanding and performing of the music, they focused on how to share it with the large ensemble and, ultimately, their audience. The final steps of the project culminated in a concert in which they had the opportunity to shape and communicate the performance with the insight they collaboratively built.

**Data Sources for the Study**

In this study I analyzed and presented text-based qualitative data generated by co-participants and myself. The multiple data sources included: wiki posts, weekly participant surveys, an end-of-project survey, and teacher-researcher journal. I applied to the Institutional
Review Board (IRB) to review my proposed protocol that included data collection from human subjects. On November 20, 2014, the IRB approved my proposed action as exempt review (see Appendix B).

**Weekly participant surveys.** At the end of the rehearsal each week, study participants completed the weekly Qualtrics survey to reflect on the project experience. The survey listed 4-7 open-ended research questions that encouraged participants to give feedback on the process of collaborative learning. I created and altered these prompts each week as I observed how the project was developing. Prompts were geared toward understanding how they experienced small group dynamics, large group discussion, collaborative learning activities, or how they connected cultures to the music. I asked students to bring to class each week a technological device that would allow them online access so the survey could be completed in class. As the lead researcher, I exited the room to avoid coercion while the time was provided to complete the survey.

**Final survey.** Upon the completion of the project at the end of the semester, the participants of the study reflected on the project as a whole by taking an extended survey. These data were also gathered anonymously on Qualtrics through prompts (see Appendix C). The survey focused on overall observations and opinions of the curriculum as a whole.

**Teacher-researcher journal.** One of the aims of this case study was to evaluate the effectiveness of the teaching method. Thus, as researcher and teacher, I read participants' survey feedback each week as well as posts on wikis to determine effectiveness of connecting culture and musical understanding as well as the pedagogical method. As the semester progressed, my awareness of student perception of the project allowed me to make necessary changes to my teaching approach. Throughout the project and data collection and analysis, a music education
faculty member served as a research advisor. She observed the data collected from the participants, as well as my own observations. As the research revealed various interpretations, I redirected research questions, altering the direction of the project, and reexamined my own perceptions and biases to more fully recognize the effectiveness of the project (Stake, 1995; Moore, 2014).

Throughout the project I generated a self-narrative of weekly rehearsals, reflections, and ideas in a journal. My self-narrative of my then-current feelings, observations, and reactions provided valuable data to the ethnographic case study. I was able to capture how I was feeling and perceiving while I was experiencing the study. The journal was generated at several stages:

1. Within 24 hours following each rehearsal, I wrote my initial reactions, observations, ideas of the previous rehearsal while thoughts were fresh. These journal entries were not always complete thoughts or well-articulated sentences, but rather initial, vulnerable reactions and my perception to the rehearsal. As ideas came to me during the course of a rehearsal, I made a conscious effort to remember to record them in the journal entry later.

2. After reading the weekly participant surveys and wiki posts I also recorded any reactions—positive or negative—to what the participants were experiencing and recording in their surveys and wiki posts.

3. Occasionally, while planning for an upcoming rehearsal or after discussing the project and data with my faculty advisor I would journal thoughts and reactions to be remembered for later analysis. This initial analysis of the data and project occurred during the course of the project.

**Wiki posts.** My final source of data was the collection of wiki posts generated by the students throughout the semester. Though initially I believed this source would be useful to
provide insights into the learning process, after organizing the data I concluded that it was not largely informative to answer my research questions. The wiki posts played a major role as raw data that informed how the collaborative learning process unfolded throughout the semester. The wiki posts functioned primarily as indicators during the progress of our semester. They played a limited role in my analysis.

**Data Analysis**

**Phase 1: Initial analysis of participant feedback.** As stated above, an initial analysis of weekly participant surveys and wikis was conducted during the course of the project to determine how participants were experiencing the project in action so I could make appropriate modifications to the curriculum, address or clarify any concerns that appeared to be preventing understanding and forward motion of the project, and generate weekly reactions to the feedback in my teacher-researcher journal. This initial analysis included reading and commenting on wiki posts, reading the anonymously submitted responses to the Qualtrics surveys, then responding in a journal entry.

**Phase 2: Final analysis.** In the final analysis I organized the data by source (Survey, Journal, Final) and then chronologically by the project’s rehearsal week (e.g., Survey Week 1, Journal Week 5). All data could be analyzed week-by-week as both the students and the teacher experienced the progression and development of the project. As will be described below, these data were then coded according to my research questions, as follows:

- RQ1: How can collaborative learning be implemented in a collegiate choral classroom?
- RQ2: How can collaborative learning curricula be used to produce educational and musical benefits in a collegiate choral classroom?
- RQ3: How can collaborative learning curricula be used to produce sociocultural benefits in a collegiate choral classroom?
**Coding for research questions.** In preparation for data analysis, I coded data from each week to identify with large *a priori* research questions or themes. In other words, I began coding the Qualtrics survey and the teacher-research journal from Week #1 for the above-listed three themes. Each theme was assigned a color and I coded the data using the highlighter feature in Microsoft Word. Data concerning the collaborative learning process were highlighted yellow, educational or musical benefits were highlighted green, and sociocultural benefits were highlighted pink.

**Coding for emergent themes.** As is typical in case study analysis (Creswell, 2013), as I analyzed the data and the process of coding became more intricate, I looked for emergent themes and/or emergent subthemes within the larger themes. I used new colors in the highlighter feature of Microsoft Word to code new themes. Educational and musical benefits were separated into themes: education was highlighted cyan and musical benefits were assigned the green highlight. Implications for future research were highlighted teal, and challenges were highlighted gray. After highlighting data into themes, I labeled data with words that indicated a subtheme of the colored theme (e.g., ownership, new ideas, internalizing). This allowed me to recognize dominant benefits and opinions indicated by my multiple sources.

**Reporting**

When the *a priori* and emergent themes were coded, I evaluated the information and drew conclusions from the data. Through the lens of self-narration, I built detailed description of what all participants experienced in reference to the themes established. I looked for patterns represented in the data as well as contradictory data.

In Chapter 4, I string together my findings with my own perspective as the thread connecting the findings to the project as all participants experienced it. In other words, there are
insertions of quotes, dialogue, and small vignettes that interrupt my own telling of how our collaborative learning project was enacted and brought about responses to the themes.

In Chapter 5, I discuss the interpretation of my data of the final three research questions pertaining to benefits of the curriculum. The emergent themes relevant to answering each research question are outlined, discussed, and supported by student feedback. In Chapter 6, I conclude with a summary of the project and my findings, discuss implications from the research, and propose ideas for future projects and future research.
CHAPTER 4
THE PROJECT DESCRIPTIONS

Prologue

Spring semester choir retreat, January 17, 2015.

“In 50 years, what song will define this generation?” Pausing for a brief, contemplative silence, I continued. “When we are reading the history books or listening to the oldies radio stations, which songs will be the ‘classics’ that represent our era? What do you think?”

Slowly, one by one, a few hands started to pop up in the rehearsal hall. Maybe this tune? Possibly that epic hit? How about the latest radio-release? I receptively scribbled all their suggestions on the large whiteboard rolled in front of the seated and intrigued choir members.

When there were no more recommendations, I turned to the choir members and inquired even further. “Now, why do you think these are defining songs? What is it about them that you think makes them good representations of your generation?” And eventually, “If these represent you, what do you think these songs say about your culture?” For several minutes, students offered their own beliefs to the large group about the music they were claiming to be their own. Subtly and informally, we entered a conversation on origin and reception of songs, trends in political and social thought, and aesthetic preferences.

“This collaborative dialogue,” I eagerly nudged, “this is what I hope we can continue this entire semester. As we begin to learn music from various cultures, other generations, someone else’s worldview, I hope we can pursue what is behind the music beyond the notes on a page and additionally see a representation of a people group. Ultimately, I hope our pursuit will give us time and space to explore how that inquiry can contribute to our performance of these pieces.”

We were about to embark on unfamiliar territory for any of us who had ever experienced
choral education before. Though had I spent many months preparing to launch this new curriculum for a higher education choral classroom, I was just as inexperienced as they were to the daily experiences we were about to live through together. I had ambitions and research to give me hypotheses of what this semester might hold, but no one could know that which would become uniquely ours.

I knew as I trekked into this adventure that my own in-the-moment thoughts and feelings would prove valuable later as I tried to make sense of what happened. I vowed to journal my own narrative of the next few months, to offer my own emotions, frustrations, questions, and victories for the benefit of other conductors who might learn from my experience. But it would be hearing from the students that would give me a truly irreplaceable perspective into the culture of the very people group I was about to study. Gaining their insight all along the way would give me opportunity to learn and react as I analyzed what was happening in our exclusive group of participants.

This is our story.

Prepping Week 1

“This was the most intense rehearsal to prepare for!” (Teacher-Researcher Journal—hereafter “Journal”—Week 1). Even as Week 1 of the project was upon me, all the organizational demands rattled and unsettled me as I realized there were still foundational decisions to be made. I did not start our project on the first week of the semester. Since our choir only meets once a week for 2.5 hours, I waited until the third week of the semester to begin our Week 1 of the project. This gave me time to prepare the students for the adventure upon which they were about to embark, and gave me time to set up before the launch. And there was much to do: selecting last-minute repertoire and all the preparation that comes with it, dividing students
into small groups, setting up wikis, ensuring room technology was set up, and even making decisions on how to distribute labor for researching each song this semester. It felt like a never-ending, morphing mission even with all the preparation, thought, and research I had done prior to its launch. The pressure to be prepared and to prepare my students aptly characterized this stage of the project.

**Roster, group size, and wikis.** It was not my preference to finalize repertoire and form small groups so late into the semester and mere days before students began their research. However, since rosters of higher education courses are rarely confirmed on the first day classes meet, I had to wait until Week 1 of the project when I knew how many students were officially in the course before I could determine how to suitably divide the choir into small groups and then set up their individual wikis. I could not wholly guarantee the number of participants in this project until the roster had stabilized.

At that time I decided that I would divide our choir of 45 singers into nine small groups of five students each. I also concluded that it would be best that, for this case, each group have a different song to research. I had already planned on a repertoire of seven pieces that semester, but assessed that there was room to add a few more pieces if necessary. So when I was considering the several ways I could have divided the labor for researching each song, it was an easy solution to divide the 45 students into nine groups, find two more musical selections, and have each group solely responsible for one piece each. I then created individual wikis—one for each of our songs. Figure 2 below shows the opening homepage of the class wiki from which students could select their respective song wiki by clicking on the song title. It also reveals the left-hand sidebar of other resources available on the homepage.
On each wiki’s homepage, I displayed my rubric for the students’ individual posts. At a later point I would assign a small group to each wiki, but for now, I needed to have the website ready to orient students in the Week 1 rehearsal.

Crosschecking my roster of students with the Blackboard roster was invaluable to minimizing delay once the project started. As other university professors can testify, often there are perplexing reasons why students cannot access online resources at the beginning of the semester. In fact, I was curious if the staff member who was participating as a singer in the project would have access. Fortunately for me, each participant was listed on Blackboard’s roster, and this was not an issue this semester.

In addition to the nine song wikis, I also created a wiki labeled “Examples and Help.” Both the students and I could refer to those examples as we discussed what elements should be included, what caliber of work I was expecting, and visually how it should or could be organized. I also included links to guide students in the use of bibliographic citations.
After the Week 1 rehearsal, I realized I also then needed to establish how to add specific students to each wiki. This task required more time than I realized. It involved uncovering how to permit some members to be contributors and the rest to access as reader, and then painstakingly assign students respectively for each of the nine wikis. I had underestimated the time commitment required at the beginning of the project to configure technological necessities.

**Room technology.** I was excited to say that I—as a 21st-century educator—found a purpose for using technology in a music classroom. With the call for innovative pedagogy in the classroom, educators are often turning to technology. Even more, in the discussion of engaging globalized students, it seemed appropriate to me that technology should have a role in the modern classroom. Unfortunately, I felt vulnerably incompetent to use technology in a music classroom. I was inserting elements to my rehearsal that I had never experienced as a student. This was new for me as well as for the choir. For this project my classroom technology needs included:

- a large TV screen,
- a laptop to access wiki,
- internet access, and
- student laptops, phones, and tablets.

Wanting to avoid as many stumbling blocks as possible in the myriad of wiki-related details that needed to be relayed to students during class, I ensured that I could have a large flat-screen TV in the rehearsal space every week to visually access and navigate our online components. Fortunately, the university had recently purchased two flat-screens on rolling TV mounts, and stored them in a closet off of the rehearsal space. I proactively asked the graduate student who used the technology frequently to orient me on setting up the TV, connecting it to
my laptop, and troubleshooting any possible problems that might occur in the rehearsal.

A colleague had the presence of mind to remind me to check for reliable Internet access for the laptop I was using to connect to the TV. I also tested a few other laptops, tablets, and smart phones. The students would be bringing their own technology into the rehearsal space to access their wikis during class and if the Internet connection was not reliable we would add another distraction and waste time. Mercifully, the connection was never a cause for distress.

**Week 1 Rehearsal: Relaying Details**

This was the moment for which I had eagerly yet apprehensively been waiting. It was time to release the project into the students’ hands. Terrifying. What if I had failed to set up details? What if the students just didn’t care? What if it was just an idealistic dream and completely unrealistic and impractical? What if all of this was for nothing?

I felt overwhelmed with pressures of all that this rehearsal needed to accomplish. It needed to be planned down to the minute to guarantee that I relayed all the pertinent procedural information, but also had time to complete an overview of our entire repertoire. How was this all going to happen in one rehearsal? I made my indispensible rehearsal to-do checklist:

1. Overview each musical piece.
2. Introduce the students to their groups.
3. Impart instructions on posting to the wiki.
4. Ask students to give their first and second choices of pieces to study this semester.
5. Determine and announce song selections during the break.
6. Remind students about what is due next week.
7. Instruct students to assign the first scribe for their group.
Overviewing repertoire. Because I belatedly decided (based on the roster numbers) that each small group would research a different song, I needed to quickly add two pieces to our repertoire to guarantee one piece per each of the nine groups. Fortunately, I had some time to determine the capabilities of this particular group of students in the first two weeks of the semester, and I believed nine pieces at medium-easy to medium difficulty level could be managed (see Appendix D for a complete list of the repertoire). I introduced these two additional pieces in Week 1 in order to give the choir the opportunity to experience the complete repertoire. That enabled them to make a more informed decision about which piece they would prefer to research. Toward that end, I refreshed the students’ memories of our original seven pieces as well.

Meeting their small group. After singing through the last of the pieces, I read aloud the names of participants in each small group and asked them to sit with their group-mates. The groups were selected prior to the rehearsal mostly at random, but then I went through each group and made a few adjustments: There were some students I perceived needed to be motivated by peers with whom they would be excited to work. There were also some groups with too many seemingly reserved personalities that might have had trouble with weekly discussion.

As I inquisitively looked out at the groups noisily finding each other and imagined the group dynamics and group work we were about to experience this semester, I questioned my decisions for the umpteenth time:

Right now I am slightly hesitant that there are five to a group. That means each person will have to come up with four pieces of evidence over the semester. That is 20 pieces of information per piece. That is a lot. I am concerned it will be too much. Four members may be better. I definitely would not encourage six members per group. Momentum
would die. (Journal Week 1)

**Giving instructions.** Now that they were in small groups (chairs turned into small clusters or groups huddled on the ground) I guided the choir through the steps to successfully complete their first assignment due by the next rehearsal. Using the technology I had brought in, I showed them how to find the wikis on Blackboard and the “Examples and Help” wiki. Then I read aloud the rubric for their assignments:

“As you can see on the wiki homepages,” pointing to the TV screen, “I have posted the rubric for your weekly posts. Four of you each week will be responsible for finding and posting the following:

- information related to the song such as a YouTube clip, link to an article, link to a website, or a PDF,
- bibliographical information about the post, and
- 150-200 words description of and rationale for the post.” (Journal Week 1)

I then walked them through how to create and submit their posts. It was becoming real for all of us. Faces were engaged though hesitant, clarifying questions were asked, and momentum was building.

**Picking songs.** Now to assign each song to a group. The following is a recreated dialogue of my in-class explanation of our first steps of the project. Here we began turning the project over from the teacher to the students:

“Now that you know what we are doing and what you need to do by next week, each group take one little piece of paper we are passing around the room and write down your first and second choices for which piece you would prefer to study this semester.”

Students began to whisper and shuffle.
“Hear me now! I can’t guarantee you are going to get either one of your choices, but I am going to try my absolute hardest to give you one or the other. If you don’t get one of your choices, please understand it’s because there was too much overlap in your choices and I have to make the decision to have each song covered. I will base my decisions on knowing who is in your group and what I think your group might bring to the song.”

Faces were concerned, but trusting. “Once you have turned in your piece of paper to me, go ahead take a break. We will let you know your song before we leave rehearsal today.”

(Journal Week 1)

At our mid-class break, my assistant conductor and I hurriedly went through the little slips of paper we had received back from the small groups with their preferred song choices. This process was not as difficult or unfair as I thought it might be. It is natural that some of the pieces would seem more approachable to the students, appear richer in variety of research possible, or even easier at face value to identify the culture of the piece. I did think some of the groups had the potential to be deeper or more critical in their thinking to go for the seemingly more difficult pieces. I assigned pieces first by attempting to give each group one of their two choices. Because I had already spent time observing the small groups and made assumptions about their group dynamics, I used some of my own judgment and opinion to make decisions about assignments. Only two groups out of the nine did not end up with either of their choices.
Rotation. After the break, I illustrated how the weekly rotation worked by bringing five members of the choir up to the front as “props.” Pointing to four of my volunteers, I explained:

“Each week four members of the group will submit information on the wiki and one student would be assigned the role of scribe.” Motioning to the remaining volunteer, I continued: “Each week in rehearsal, we will gather into small groups, these four students will share what they had posted on the wiki as the scribe listens, perhaps takes notes, and asks questions.

“By the next rehearsal, it is that scribe’s job to summarize what the group had discussed and brought to the wiki that previous week. They will share their summary at the rehearsal after they have listened to their peers. The scribe also becomes one of the four students to research information for that next week.” I playfully nudged the scribe over to stand by the original four.

“Essentially, if you are the scribe, you have two written assignments that week and no assignments the week before. Does that make sense? Your group then picks a new scribe the next week. Here is what the rotation looks like.” I then drew their attention to the figure I projected on the TV screen (see Figure 3).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Week 1:</th>
<th>Week 2:</th>
<th>Week 3:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Meet small group</td>
<td>ABCD share</td>
<td>E shares summary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pick song</td>
<td>Discuss</td>
<td>BCDE share</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ABCD selected</td>
<td>E listens</td>
<td>Discuss</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E selected as scribe</td>
<td>A listens</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Week 4:</th>
<th>Week 5:</th>
<th>Week 6:</th>
<th>Week 7:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A shares summary</td>
<td>B shares summary</td>
<td>C shares summary</td>
<td>D shares summary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CDEA share</td>
<td>DEAB share</td>
<td>EABC share</td>
<td>Discuss</td>
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<tr>
<td>Discuss</td>
<td>Discuss</td>
<td>Discuss</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B listens</td>
<td>C listens</td>
<td>D listens</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 3. Rotation of student roles each week of the project.
When the students seemed to understand what was due for the next week and how their roles would rotate every week, I ended the rehearsal by asking them to decide who would be their group’s first scribe. I then announced the song assignments for each small group. To my surprise, there were no audible groans from the choir. Later that evening I recorded my unraveling feelings:

I am nervous about small group dynamic. If one person lets the rest down…there will be blood in the streets! I tried to make it clear that they are receiving individual grades for posts. Maybe I should make a group grade too? (Journal Week 1)

**Outside wiki work.** During the week following Week 1 rehearsal, four students per group were intended to post their research before the beginning of Week 2 rehearsal. At this stage in the project, I was expecting basic information. What do we know about the piece of music? How has it been received in history? What do these students find valuable about this piece of music? What information do they find interesting or important? For example, a typical post looked something like this (see Figure 4):

![Figure 4. Screenshot of a wiki post from Student #3 in “When I Fall in Love” Group.](image-url)
The figure above is a post from the jazz group researching “When I Fall in Love.” There is a YouTube clip, a brief description, and bibliographical information.

The kind of information posted by each group varied greatly, but most typically contained basic information about the title, composer, lyrics, style, performance, or other arrangements of the song. For example, the group looking into the Sacred Harp song had factual posts about shape-note singing, the metrical index indicated on the score, how to sing in a hollow square, and unpolished diction. As students gathered information, sometimes they also drew connections to their personal lives or expressed their personal opinions. As an example, this student post is one in which one student of the Sacred Harp group drew a personal connection to the song:

For my contributions this week I looked more into Hollow Square singing; the typical style in which [Sacred Harp] music, such as “Antioch,” is sung. Sacred [Harp] music is not intended as a performance but rather as participatory activity. Thus all singers face inward in a round, open square. The arrangement can vary but for the most part tenors, basses, trebles, and altos are all on a different side of the square. The director generally stands in the center facing the tenors, where most of the melody lies, and directs the ensemble. However there is no formal director, yet rather members take turns directing the ensemble.

In a way [Sacred Harp] music is to be sung much the way Taizé is. Taizé is a non-denominational service in which repetition and common melodies build over and over so you can focus on intentions rather than the music. It too should be sung in a round with no formal leader. As a regular organizer of Taizé performances I have lots of background and information thus I found this very interesting that this concept of music and worship
was not only being practiced in the states but also in the Taizé valley of France. (Wiki Post from Student #3 in the “Antioch” Group, Weeks 1-4)

Many students waited until early on the due date to post on the wiki. I was grateful that I had ensured that everyone had access to the wikis before this week, because I knew no one had an excuse not to do it. I feared that, even though I had walked through all my expectations, there would be unforeseen issues I was not prepared to resolve. As it turned out, 26 out of the total 45 students completed a post by the Week 2 rehearsal. I was disappointed in one sense that the first week did not show a higher involvement of participants, but I was also relieved for the amount that did find their way onto the wikis and completed the assignment. I anticipated that some would forget, some might be confused, and some would simply refuse to participate. I was pacified by the knowledge that my part in providing instruction and access was sufficient. The other reasons for negligence could be remedied or would show its effects in the students’ grades.

**Grading.** As was recorded on the course syllabus, attendance counted for 70% of a student’s grade and weekly group work counted for 30%. Each student should have a total of five posts on Blackboard in the course of the semester. Of the overall posts, four posts would be contributions of research and one post would be in their role as the scribe. This made each post to be worth 6% of their overall grade. In accordance with the rubric I shared with them, I assigned each post three points. One point was given for providing information, one point for providing a citation, and one point for their written description. I could use 0.5 points to accommodate how accurately they met the simple specifications of each of those requirements. I recorded their grades on the Blackboard Grading Center by making a column for each post (i.e., Scribe Post, Post #1, Post #2, etc.).
Teacher role. The outside wiki work allowed me to execute my role as mentor/coach in the learning process. As I read wiki posts, I made comments directly on their individual wiki posts concerning their research (see Figure 5). This provided an avenue for me to be in sync with the direction groups were going with research, and help me guide and challenge their research and thinking. It also provided a way to engage with students outside of the classroom, saving rehearsal time:

![Figure 5](image)

*Figure 5. Screenshot of teacher’s comment on student’s post. “What different decisions do you think they had to make when writing a score for a film instead of a live Broadway musical? Is the music different? What might they need to consider that they wouldn't have to for live Broadway?” (Wiki Teacher Comment for Student #2 in “Grand Night” Group, Weeks 1-4).*

**Week 2-4 Rehearsals: Completing and Repeating the Cycle**

Finally, all the groundwork had been laid and now we could enjoy finishing one complete cycle, then watch it begin again. After Week 2 rehearsal, I recorded my gratified feelings: “It felt hectic because there was much to accomplish. But I was glad that this is the first time we’ve been through the entire cycle” (Journal Week 2).

**Small-group discussion.** Week 2 brought it all together and was the procedural model for the next six weeks (Weeks 3-8). I planned the first half of the rehearsal to look like most college choir rehearsals with warm-ups and musically working the pieces. Then midway through the rehearsal, we switched to the collaborative portion of our rehearsal. I was surprised by how
smoothly students seemed to partake in the process:

There was much more discussion in their small groups than I have experienced in the last semester’s work with small groups! They each had to share the work they had already posted, but I also saw those who had been assigned the role of scribe writing down notes and listening. (Journal Week 2)

This ten-minute discussion time did not seem to be too strange or uncomfortable for the participants. One student described it as straightforward: “It was sort of like ‘I found this, this, this, and this’ for each person and that was pretty much it” (Student 12, Week 2, Q4). A participant from another group apparently had a somewhat less-productive experience saying, “My group was in a slaphappy mood and so we really didn't get to talk a whole lot about our wiki which was sad. But we did get to talk a little bit about it so that's good” (Student 25, Week 3, Q3).

Each small group experienced various degrees of participation. Some groups consistently had poor participation these weeks and had to figure out how to continue with the project despite not having fully-committed or involved group members:

It was good, most of my group wasn’t there or did [not do] the assignment but the ones who did gave good insight. (Student 13, Week 2, Q4)

Everybody contributed, though some people clearly actually learned something and others just retyped what they read. (Student 4, Week 3, Q3)

Everyone was willing to talk, but no one commented on anyone else's findings. (Student 22, Week 3, Q3)

Other groups really engaged with the process and each other:

Our group was very energetic and had lots of information to share. We actually had some contrasting research which means we need to look further and make sure our sources are accurate. (Student 28, Week 2, Q4)
People just chipped in some of their thoughts and built off of other's thoughts some too. (Student 11, Week 3, Q3)

By Week 3 most students (19 out of 33) indicated that everyone in their group contributed to the discussion to some degree. Only seven students indicated that only some contributed, with only two students mentioning that, in their group, one person dominated the discussion (Week 3, Q3). By Week 4 many students (8 out of 27) still seemed to think that there was good discussion taking place in small groups, even despite a steadily growing need for more direction and new research.

**Scribe.** As the small group discussion went on I suddenly realized I needed to take notice of the scribes. This was the first time they truly needed to participate in the collaboration. I hurriedly flung some uninspiring and last-minute instructions out to the room:

“Scribes, you might want to lead the discussion. Feel free to ask questions.

Remember, you all need to help one another because at some point you will each be the scribe and rely on others to give you information.”

Despite my own staggering lack of formalizing the role of the scribe, it turned out that the students deemed the scribe as an integral part of the process: “It seems that we naturally turn to the scribe as a moderator or facilitator for the discussion” (Student 35, Week 3, Q4). Students also mentioned needing a scribe to make discussion more efficient and looked to the scribe to take charge: “Our conversation went well today, but it would have gone better if our scribe had been present” (Student 20, Week 4, Q4).

In general, they indicated that having a scribe helped the flow of the discussion, lead discussion, and helped connect dots of the posts. However, not everyone was fond of the role or saw its potential. A few students felt that having a scribe lead discussion caused group members to only talk to the scribe instead of the entire group; some scribes failed to ask guiding questions,
instead used the posts rather than the discussion to summarize; and some used the discussion time only to take notes instead of lead. One student felt the scribe’s impact on the group just created an unpleasant situation for the unfortunate soul selected to be scribe any respective week: “Ummm there is just more pressure on that person” (Student 34, Week 3, Q4).

**Large-group sharing.** As small-group discussion wrapped up, I addressed the entire choir with this pre-formulated question: “Who has something that will inspire or inform how we rehearse?” As I expected, this was followed by uncomfortable silence and questioning glances shot around the classroom. I reminded myself that this whole process was new for everyone, myself included. The first objective of my question was to build students’ confidence by revealing the kind of discussions that were taking place in other groups. My second and main objective was to provide a space for the research to reach the entire choir and to begin giving context to the music we were learning.

I forced myself to endure the silence or push for a response until at least two groups shared with the choir. After just a few minutes of sharing occurred (because it truly was never longer than a few minutes) I wrapped up our collaborative time by asking them to assign a new scribe for next week. I also reminded the current scribe that they had two assignments due the next week: the summary of this week’s discussion as well as their individual research post for the next week.

**Bringing wiki work into rehearsal.** In this stage of research and sharing, I was keenly sensitive to leaving the authority of information in the hands of the students, keeping the project as student-centered as possible. I began to realize, however, that taking information beyond small groups to the larger ensemble would require the teacher’s intervention. This is not something in which I ever greatly succeeded. I did try to remind myself every week to have the students share
with the choir what was happening in their small groups by asking the weighty question: “Who has something that will inspire or inform how we rehearse?” But I never did seem to find a worthwhile way to execute this.

To supplement taking the time for student sharing, I developed ways to reference their information in the context of the musical rehearsal. It was helpful for me, as the teacher, to make notes as I went through their wikis to make my own connections, to learn from them, to remember to bring up in the course of the rehearsal what was being shown on the wikis, and to challenge the small group or large group ideas. It also helped me remember in between seeing the wikis and the next rehearsal what I wanted to remember to point out. I would show YouTube clips students had posted as a transition into rehearsing the next song or playing as they entered at the beginning of the class.

My own notes looked as simple as these taken from Journal Week 3:

- Antioch: “a wall of sound,” seating, shape-notes.
- When I Fall in Love: slower rhythm of lyrics, simplicity of love (not complex), Nat King Cole.
- It is Well: loss of life, diction is important, full/round vowels, video (connection to some nights?).
- Grand Night for Singing: show student #2 video, “balanced”, facial expressions, old time feel.
- Baba Yetu: show student #1 video and explain where it comes from.
- Some Nights: arrangements, war within.
- Poor Wayfaring Stranger: show student #1 Ed Sheeran video (connection to Some Nights?).
I would also have my music in front of me as I went through wikis so I could occasionally make marks on the score of appropriate comments to make while rehearsing. As we rehearsed a particular passage in the music, I would have a note on my score to give information that pertained.

**Teacher’s research.** Giving students the authority of information did not relieve me of my responsibilities of outside research. If anything, I realized my need to have done my own widespread research well in advance of the students.

This project might be as enlightening for the conductor as it is for the students. It almost holds the teacher to a greater responsibility, because they must be able to direct the students, give support before they even know where the students will take the information they learn, and be able to direct in terms of authenticity. (Journal Week 1)

As the teacher, I needed to know the pieces well beyond just the musical analysis. Although the students were researching, I was the guide. I needed to be prepared for what they were going to bring to the table. Was their information correct? Were their sources reliable? Could their information lead our discussion to something for which I needed to be prepared in order to comment and give informed opinion? Were there pitfalls I needed to anticipate? Would we need to have rehearsed musically differently from the very beginning if I knew the cultural context of the pieces that was to be discovered?

My prior research was crucial to help direct students to find information that they may be missing. Many of the students got caught in the rut of just doing a search of the title of the song. They were not aware of how to research the composer, the lyrics, the genre, other songs of similar style, meanings of metaphors, where it was first performed, etc. My awareness of the repertoire’s cultural context helped me guide and enrich my students’ research.
Leading to Week 5: Taking a Step Back

What’s not working? Beginning in Week 2 of the project, I anonymously surveyed the students to gain understanding into how they were experiencing and understanding the project. I was specifically interested in their ideas and perceptions regarding their small-group discussions. From their responses, I recognized there was an arising concern that the open-ended research quest would eventually deplete the limited pool of available information on the repertoire. They indicated that their discussion was lacking because of the kind of face-value information they were bringing to their research. I agreed with what I was seeing on the wikis. The posts were surface level and repetitive.

A few students recognized it was their responsibility to find additional information. Others simply felt that they were responsible for engaging in deeper discussion of the research they already had (Week 2, Q5). By Week 3, students were beginning to realize that to have deeper and more intentional discussion (Week 3, Q5) a different approach to research might be necessary: “[Discussion] would have been more effective if we had tried researching things about the song but not directly about the song” (Student 28, Week 3, Q5).

They were realizing the shallowness of research, but seemed unable to discern how to augment their research. In my mind, they did not understand that their piece of music had a larger cultural context. Even though I believed I had been preaching that this project was about finding cultural context of music and not just information about the actual title, they seemingly were not grasping the concept. They were, however, detecting the disconnect: “Our group didn't talk much because there isn't much information on the piece that we are researching” (Student 21, Week 2, Q4).
As the creator of the project, I felt I was failing. I felt shamefully overwhelmed that I had gathered the troops and convinced my commanding officers to allow me to boldly take us to places no collegiate choir had experienced before…to nowhere! I sensed that, even though I believed in its merit, the students needed a clearer picture of what this whole thing was about and I was failing to bring it all together. I had been instructing them to research the cultural context of the music, but I now realized that it was imperative to take a step back and further define what I meant by culture.

**Defining culture.** In Week 3, I took the time reserved for small-group activities to explain the kind of research for which I was looking:

“I want to show you a YouTube clip of an orchestra playing a very famous movement of a symphony. I would be surprised if any of you have never heard this piece before. It’s composed by a famous composer and has been used for so many reasons over time.”

As I played a minute of the first movement of Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony, faces around the room responded knowingly. “Can anyone name this piece? How about the composer? That’s right! Anyone not heard this before?” No responders. I continued:

“So if I were to assign this piece as a research project, what kinds of information would you go out to find? What kind of kind of information would help us give context to its value in history and now?”

Finally, a dialogue ensued:

Student A: “I would look up Beethoven’s biography.”

Student B: “When this was first performed.”

Student C: “What was happening in history during the time he composed it.”

Student D: “Didn’t people use it during World War II for some reason?”
Student E: “Yeah, I would look into its past use in wars, history, and governments.”

Student F: “You could go find out how many movies have used it in their score and for what kind of scenes.”

As I compiled these suggestions into a list on our whiteboard, I encouraged their brainstorm with more probing questions.

Renae: “These are great suggestions. How about what kind of reputation the piece has now? Or how it has changed over time? You know there are several biographies about Beethoven, some written by people who knew him to one degree or another.”

Student G: “His musical style in general would be important, or maybe looking into Beethoven’s musical influences?”

Renae: “Have you ever heard another arrangement of this piece? Or maybe you could find different orchestras performing it and compare the differences.”

There was a lull in the suggestions so I brought the conversation back to my reason for this exercise.

“So do you see that we could look for more than just the title of the piece? All of these contextual clues you suggested give us insight into what makes this piece valuable. We may miss what has made this piece such a big deal if we fail to see the worldviews that give this piece value. Does that make sense? Music is created out of some culture; it is a reflection of culture—of elements that make up a people’s worldview.”

Adding a prompt. In Week 3, even after this exercise, students were still not grasping fully what I meant by cultural context and how to identify their song’s culture. “I learned that [music’s culture] is more than it appears to be. My music's culture is hard to pinpoint because my culture is now” (Student 26, Week 3, Q1). Several students also expressed they did not have
much to research about their song because they “didn't feel as though I had a lot of direction while conducting this research” (Student 9, Final, Q7).

In frustration, I took this issue to my music education advisor. As I explained to her, I was noticing that a major hindrance, in my estimation, was that the participants were getting confused with the terminology. Culture still made them think international, world culture. I needed to find a way for them to understand the definition of cultural context or this research was for naught. The aim was to enlighten the students’ understanding of the cultural context informing the music, but they seemed to need help understanding what elements display culture. I looked for a way for students to quickly and efficiently associate what cultural elements inform a music’s culture.

In the Week 2 survey, two students had suggested that discussion could be made more efficient if a specific prompt was given rather than my current setup of keeping the options open to any research they found interesting or valuable (Week 2, Q5). I began from Week 2 to consider generating a prompt question for each week’s posts.

Prompts could address a specific research topic that would help the students evaluate the culture that the piece came from and examine the fuller context out of which this piece was born. For example, one week might be to discuss musicians that have performed this piece, or finding different arrangements that have developed from the original production of the piece, or the instruments that are typical from the culture of this piece, or the lyrics of the piece, the music theory of the piece, the historical background of the piece, the meaning of the piece, etc.

A prompt could give more guidance for small-group discussion. Some groups seemed to do well with discussing together, but others did not find the point of their discussion. They wanted direction for their conversation and are used to a teacher directing the conversation. I
could not take for granted that they had the skills to conduct constructive discussion. I was asking them to do something not normally asked of them in a choral rehearsal. Was there a way to set up my project so they would learn how to discuss and collaborate? This was part of the point of the project, right? With adding a prompt, however, was I flirting with the line between collaborative learning and cooperative learning?

However, this curriculum was new and they needed more assistance from me to help them connect their research to relevant information about their music’s culture. They needed guidance in how to walk through the process of collaboration to achieve meaning. They were lost in a jumble of information and needed help moving forward. After wrestling through my frustrations and concerns, I formulated a prompt to help advance us to better comprehension.

**New direction.** Hoping to more fully define cultural context, I reminded the choir of a recent encounter we had with jazz musicians. After our Week 3 rehearsal, we had the rare and fortunate opportunity to participate in a professional vocal jazz ensemble masterclass. It was useful to have these jazz culture bearers come work with us as experts in the vocal jazz culture. They addressed several elements that come with singing a piece of music representative of the culture: straight-tone singing; using vibrato as a conscious choice for color and effect; push and pull of tempo; reestablishing forward motion at new verses; conversational-style singing; and having the option of breathing in places not written, considered, or classically-conventional. What I loved about the experience in general was that experts from the culture showed the students that a song should be sung differently because of the culture from which it comes.

Consequently, in the Week 4 rehearsal I asked the choir to recall three elements that our vocal jazz culture bearers instructed us to incorporate in our repertoire. Together we came up with a list. Then I tied it to our project:
“You see, these are elements of the culture that are important to those from within its culture. Jazz musicians sing music differently than any other culture. What might make them sing differently? The fact that they express art differently says something about what they think is valuable or beautiful. By understanding the context of the culture the song comes out of, we understand what makes the culture and the song unique. Is this making sense?

“For this coming week’s assignment, I am asking you to do something different. Instead of general research, go find another song from the same culture as the song you are researching. Once you have another representative song, list five elements from your new song that you observe as valuable from that culture. Just as we just did with the jazz piece, observe what seem to be characteristic elements of that culture. Let’s see if we can analyze what might make your culture unique.”

No one had any questions about it. Many head nods seemed to indicate that the concept was getting through to them.

My general observation was that most students seemed optimistic about having a specific prompt the coming week and seemed to have a new understanding of my intentions and importance of the project.

Renae’s explanation in class today helped me understand what she meant by culture for our assignments. (Student 2, Week 4, Q2)

We all got on the same page about what culture to be researching. (Student 3, Week 4, Q4)

Your talk about culture beforehand helped get us on the right track and have a mindset for what we needed to focus on in the future. (Student 25, Week 4, Q4)
To give them a prompt had not been my intention at the onset of the project, but I perceived that the momentum of this project was a risk and that I would learn (and needed to learn) through the process. I was fortunate that this group of students were, for the most part, trusting and willing to go on this journey with me. They let me lead them to new choral territories and trusted it would be for the good.

**Week 5 Rehearsal: Turning Point**

The rehearsal after I gave the prompt was a clear turning point in our progress toward understanding. During the small-group time in Week 5 rehearsal, there was much more chatter and discussion in the room. There was energy that had been missing before. There was camaraderie among group members that was lacking the previous couple of weeks.

**Prompt and research.** The reaction from the students to the prompt was overwhelmingly positive. It seemed they had needed more specific direction and—though it was still an open-ended question—they expressed that they were set up for greater success.

Yeah it was very helpful, it was much more straightforward and easy to do, it also helped me narrow my search instead of being very general and trying to find something interesting. (Student 3, Week 5, Q2)

It was incredibly helpful. Sometimes having some sort of guidelines makes it easier to focus your work. (Student 23, Week 5, Q2)

Yes, it gave us more direction, and we knew what was expected of us. (Student 13, Week 5, Q2)

To the participants, not only did the prompt make research easier and more directed, but it also switched up the variety and utility of information they had been finding:

It gave us something specific to look for so we didn't just keep getting the same information as we have in the past weeks. (Student 12, Week 5, Q2)
Yes! I feel like I was able to find something more useful with the prompt. (Student 12, Week 5, Q2)

I loved going and finding a different song that correlated with the one we were assigned. (Student 14, Week 5, Q2)

Only one student expressed reservation about the change of instruction concerning student research: “Honestly I think the prompt limited the possible responses” (Student 9, Week 5, Q2).

**Prompt and small-group discussion.** The expenditure of small-group time was unusual in this rehearsal. Some groups finished quickly (less than the eight minutes allotted), and some necessitated interruption because they were diligently making an all-inclusive list of their findings. As the teacher/mentor, I felt the more comfortable and valuable to the small groups this week. I had time to go around and give some specific guidance to each of the groups. I could ask questions and be helpful. I felt organized and in control of our projection. This eased my mind to spend time encouraging, directing, and basking in the energized momentum.

Though they seemed to be making strides in their research, the students voiced more disagreement with the effects of the prompt on their group discussion when surveyed after our rehearsal. For various reasons, several students believed it might actually have been cause for less discussion:

It helped to know exactly what to talk about, but we had less to say since we all wrote similar things. (Student 5, Week 5, Q4)

We just shared what we found. We did not talk about it. (Student 6, Week 5, Q4)

We all discussed our different songs, and how they related to our song, but we usually get done talking about our song rather quickly. (Student 12, Week 5, Q4)

We all pretty much had the same answers for the prompt. (Student 4, Week 5, Q4)
The most common positive attribute of the prompt to the discussion—according to the students—was its role in facilitating discussion.

I think it did help, because we knew what was expected of each other. (Student 8, Week 5, Q4)

People shared much more about their posting. There was more direction in how they shared. (Student 22, Week 5, Q4)

It gave us something to brainstorm. (Student 10, Week 5, Q4)

It gave us more of a purpose to our discussion and we had something in common to talk about. (Student 13, Week 5, Q4)

The information we brought to the discussion was [complementary]. People built off of one another as they added information to the conversation. (Student 19, Week 5, Q4)

**Moving forward.** In this rehearsal’s discussion I could almost see the students’ brains spinning. They were ready to move forward and start putting all the elements of their research and understanding together. I felt that we had enough raw information to move forward in making their research applicable to their music making. I was excited and yet terrified that I next needed to guide the students into a way to make it all make sense and impact our performance as choral artists. My brain filled with thoughts forming at a rapid pace:

We have the pieces and now it’s time to put it all together. What’s left to do?

1. Decide what they want to emphasize in our performance.
2. Figure out how to communicate it.
3. Share with choir.
4. Do it!

Let me step back. What is the most important element to using collaborative learning in this process? I wanted them to describe what is important to communicate.
They had background into the culture out of which this music was and is created. They needed to translate their findings into meaning—into performance. This concert could emphasize

- what is valuable in the culture,
- what is important to the composer/arranger,
- what is interesting to the current presenter,
- what role it has in the culture it is being presented, or
- how it compares to another culture or another song.

How do I bring them practically to this point? How do I get them to make the knowledge they now have and realize how it gives us insight into the music? They have lots of random information, maybe now they have to pick what seems the most valuable from it all. Yes! This is how they collaborate! After all these general research, what seems to keep coming up? More importantly, as the performers, what do they think gives value to the piece? What do they want to communicate to the rest of their choir and to their audience what makes their piece worth listening to and performing?

So truly, there are two things they need to decide in their collaboration: what is it they want to communicate and how we are going to do that. Then I need to make sure they have the time to decide as a group, share with the choir, and implement it in our performance. In our original plan for posting rotation, there is one more week to rotate the last group member into scribe role. This last post should be toward coming up with suggestions of what needs to be shared with the choir and what needs to be shared with the audience. The last month with give us the opportunity to refine how it changes our artistic output.
And we still have music to work on! Actually, they are still learning the music quite well. We are at about mid-term and I think we are at an appropriate level for our progress. I am glad that we have the rest of the semester to let this all sit and come up with what we are going to do with the information. What I like about collaborative learning is that now I leave it in their hands to make a choral concert like there has never been! (Journal Week 5)

**Week 6-8 Rehearsals: Forming Concert Ideas**

We were clearly at the end of our research phase. There was no reasonable way we could have gone another week of gathering information. I entered a stage of renewed inquiry (Stake, 1995): frantically scribbling questions in my journal that I had asked at the founding of the project. I wondered if I still had the same noble intentions and objectives that I had when I started. What am I doing with this project? Does it mean anything?

In my journal, I examined large issue questions: “Is collaborative learning in a non-conventional setting effective? What hinders the project? How can we model collaborative learning in real-life through this curriculum?” (Journal Week 6). I asked operational questions: “Am I challenging the students to see the broader picture? Is how we observe important? How am I phrasing my questions and teaching my class so that they are seeing that this plays into larger life skills?” (Journal Week 6).

And most pressingly, I probed with this question: “What questions am I going to ask to bring this together?” I questioned everything. I felt determined to create a project that was a part of something significant. If I was going to entice conductors to do something atypical, I needed to have some guarantees or even hopes that it has merit. Halfway through the project, I needed to secure its completion. Was it only in my own idealistic mind that this would benefit the students,
or would this actually make a difference? And would the difference be something tangible? Something that the audience could see; something the students could see?

As I reexamined my motives, objectives, and procedures, the objective for this new phase of the project became clear. We needed to progress from gathering to applying the students’ collaborated efforts. My focus remained on using collaborative learning as we switched to applying their research into a plan that would inform our performance. The next three activities that I created served to guide the students’ thought processes to bridge the gap between research and our final product. The final product was our concert. In the concert, the students would show their learned knowledge and how they applied it to their understanding and delivery of music.

“Round Robin.” We undertook Activity One in the Week 6 rehearsal. “Round Robin” involved processing all the students had gathered and helped them to begin synthesizing what it could mean to their performance. I discovered this idea while researching collaborative learning activities (Barkley, Major, & Cross, 2014). I asked the choir to get into their small groups. Scattered around the room in small clusters on the floor, in chairs, or an awkward combination of the two, I addressed the choir:

“Ok everyone, in your small group today we are gearing up to bring it all together! To get our ideas flowing, I want to try something new. This is an exercise called “Round Robin.” It’s almost a brainstorming session, but with quick-fire rounds. I would like each of you to pick one cultural insight you think is valuable to share with the rest of the choir and our audience about your piece. Having taken the past 5 weeks researching, you should have a pretty good overview of your song’s culture. Now, you need to narrow down what you find to be the most valuable insights into your piece of music. When I say ‘Go!’ you will each take a few seconds, one at a time, to verbalize an insight. This should
get our juices going! Ready? Go, go, go!” (Journal Week 6)

In retrospect, I should have given the instruction a bit more thought. There were definitely confused and lethargic dynamics around the room, and we did not spend much time on the exercise. I sensed they didn’t really understand the overall goal of the activity. Nonetheless, after one time around each small group, I challenged them to a second round of quick-fire brainstorm but to suggest something no one else had yet suggested.

Later through an anonymous survey, I asked the students how they experienced the “Round Robin” exercise. To my surprise, the feedback was generally positive:

I thought it was a good experience. Each person was forced to share their ideas which made the discussion much more lively. (Student 8, Week 6, Q1)

Most of the people in our group had similar ideas as what to convey. We went quickly and orderly. We even built upon each other's opinions and expanded on what they said or suggested with our own thoughts. (Student 18, Week 6, Q1)

I was particularly relieved to hear that the exercise was useful to creating discussion and an effective brainstorm:

It was useful to keep conversation moving and avoid stalls. (Student 9, Week 6, Q1)

It was effective in giving each member a chance to deliver his/her point. (Student 16, Week 6, Q1)

It was efficient, we were able to discuss all of our entries well. (Student 22, Week 6, Q1)

I found it helpful for coming up with ideas because I was forced to say something that was new to the conversation. (Student 20, Week 6, Q1)

But I was even more excited that to some students it was useful to building toward their final project:

It went well. We stayed on topic and got a collection of our ideas together to think about over the next week. (Student 14, Week 6, Q1)

I enjoyed it. It really helped with our thought process. (Student 13, Week 6, Q1)
I had a couple of good ideas to give to the discussion that I believe I will be developing more in the next week. (Student 15, Week 6, Q1)

The small amount of negative feedback indicated that two students experienced round two as too repetitive, one student struggled to think that quickly, and one student revealed that a group member refrained from participating. In the grand perspective, this activity was intended to function simply as a jump-start for the next activity.

**Individual assignment.** At the end of that same rehearsal, I explained their homework to be completed by the following week. This homework—Activity Two—gave them a second chance to process what they had learned, what they believe, what stood out, and what they had taken away from the past weeks. This time, however, I grew more specific and showed them this was a chance for them to truly gain ownership of the music. The activity emphasized what they believed to be valuable to the context of the music. I read aloud to the class from the prompt of instructions I posted on the class wiki:

“Now that you and your group have gathered information about your song, it is time to assess what makes your song valuable to our concert. What is it we want to communicate that may not be directly evident to the audience? You have become the “experts” on this song and have insight that others do not have. What is it that you would want your audience to know about this piece? Rather than just blindly listening to our performance, how can we communicate what makes this piece special, unique, valuable, interesting, worth having on our program, etc.?

“I want to hear your opinion. What do you think the audience (and the rest of the choir) needs to know to more deeply appreciate our performance of it? This can be a point that interests you, a point formed from your opinion of where the value lies, or a
point based on fact you uncovered in your research. After thinking about this individually
and brainstorming with your small group, do the following assignment due March 16
(Week 7) up on your wiki. This is your last post.

“Assignment: List two points/values that you find valuable to communicate.
Please use any of your or your group members’ bibliographic information that you used
in your posts to show from where your opinion is based. With that value point in mind,
list four suggestions to how you/we can communicate it to the choir and our audience.”

(Assignment posted on wikis)

I also included an example worksheet they could fill out (see Appendix E).

As they left rehearsal that night, most students positively anticipated completing this
activity, even though one voiced some concern: “I think the writing portion will go fine, I'm a
little skeptical about actually implementing the ideas” (Student 24, Week 6, Q2). But more so,
students suggested that the “Round Robin” activity prepared them for this step, that they were
entering a thought-provoking part of the project, and that they saw how this activity would help
us move forward. At least no one indicated that it would be too hard or too much work.

I think it will go well because we generated some good ideas in the Round Robin
exercise. (Student 7, Week 6, Q2)

I believe the next phase will go well, and will be the most interesting part since we are
putting everything together. (Student 8, Week 6, Q2)

I think it will be interesting and a change because we are basically in charge now.
(Student 11, Week 6, Q2)

I'm excited to see what ideas are presented and I think it will definitely enhance our
concert performance. (Student 13, Week 6, Q2)

This was their final individual post (#5) to submit on the wiki. The final scribe eventually
turned in the group’s submission for the next activity.
During the next rehearsal (Week 7), the groups shared their individual ideas with one another. I had prepped them by explaining that the next step was to pull their ideas into one group submission so they could anticipate what was coming next. In small group time, collaborative learning was fully evident as discussion was lively:

It was great today everyone participated. (Student 6, Week 7, Q2)

It was nice to see everything come together. (Student 14, Week 7, Q2)

Today was very productive. I think we are pretty solid on what we want to do with our song. (Student 11, Week 7, Q2)

It was very productive and the assignment due next week is practically done due to the positive discussion. (Student 18, Week 7, Q2)

**Group assignment.** By this point, the majority of the choir had clarity on where they stood in terms of their individual beliefs of the music’s value. The final activity allowed them to coordinate their individual ideas one final time as they sought a group consensus. In Week 7 rehearsal, I explained this group assignment:

“Here we are at our final step, your final submission. We have to bring it all together! How are you going to communicate to your audience the value of your piece of music? What are we going to do that will help make our music come alive? After all the research and all the discussion in your small group, after narrowing down what you individually believe to be the most important cultural insight to communicate, you as a group must now narrow it down to three key insights.”

As I referred to the TV screen showing the wiki, I continued by reading aloud the instructions posted on the class wiki:

“Create three cultural insights/values you wish to communicate. For each insight, suggest two ways of implementing it in our concert. You will present to me in writing
1. Three insights

2. Two action points (six total)

3. Who is going to introduce each point

“You will discuss what you would like to do today. Next week in small group discussion your scribe will share a summary of the group’s concert ideas and you will have another chance to synthesize a plan submission. Then you will have one more week to clean up before submitting a hard copy to me.” (Assignment posted on wikis)

In summary, the activity went as follows: First, the students individually brought in research they thought valuable to the conversation, or insight they observed. The small group then collaboratively discussed those findings, bringing other opinions and possibly countering beliefs and observations. Then they individually took the group discussion and research and came to individual stances based on their overall observations and discussions. What did the individual student believe to be valuable in light of the collaborative engagement? Finally, once again, I asked the students to come together and consent to what they believed were the three most important cultural insights on this music.

As students prepared to submit their group ideas, they were extremely positive about their final chance for discussion:

It was good! We used our time well last week and had all of our points pretty much figured out for this week. (Student 4, Week 8, Q2)

It was short and sweet, as we had worked together last time to successfully gather what we needed. (Student 18, Week 8, Q2)

Each member constructively contributed various ideas for our assignment. (Student 3, Week 8, Q2)
Overall, the students seemed confident about implementing their ideas into our concert. The next three rehearsals were dedicated to bringing those ideas to fruition in our choir. Three different groups were given time during each rehearsal to share their findings with the rest of the choir. Following each presentation, we then attempted to enact the suggestions each group recommended. Our semester was coming to an end and the number of rehearsals left was dwindling. Though I was feeling the pressure, the students seemed prepared and ready to take on the challenge:

I feel confident, I know what we will say and how to achieve it. (Student 8, Week 8, Q1)

I feel good, our song is a little difficult to understand...but from a more [complete] understanding of what we need to do, now it’s going well. (Student 7, Week 8, Q1)

Confident that we have found valuable information that will help us better perform the piece. (Student 12, Week 8, Q1)

I feel great with what we have discovered and ready to share with everyone else. (Student 18, Week 8, Q1)

I was glad that most of the students were excited about the prospects of the end product. As for me, looking at the musical work still left to accomplish and having given up some of my time to group sharing, I knew rehearsals needed to be planned to the minute from here on out.

**Weeks 9-11 Rehearsals: Putting it Together**

The last three rehearsals were split into two sections: musically refining several pieces and culturally informing the other three. Each week three small groups were responsible for informing us on our music by sharing their cultural insights to the choir.

Generally, we began each rehearsal by working musically on six of our pieces. At the mid-class break, the groups who were sharing that day gathered together to review their plan for sharing. Once reassembled as a choir, I gave each group a 20-minute block to share their three
cultural insights and their action points. Based on my assessment of the plans they had turned into me, I planned for the groups who seemed most organized and prepared to share the first week.

Typically, one student shared one cultural insight followed by its two action points. One student from the group assigned to “When I Fall in Love” led their first point:

First, we discussed how we want to convey the cool jazz tone of the song. We need to acknowledge the way this genre of music is performed. Unlike some of our other songs such as “Some Nights” and “Hallelujah to the King of Glory” which are very high energy, “powerhouse” songs; the jazz style of “When I Fall in Love” is all about a smooth sound, and lingering on certain words, notes, and emotions. (“When I Fall in Love” Group final project submission)

After they shared their insights, I sometimes asked a few questions of the group if more clarification seemed necessary at that point. But if the first point was explained well, I asked the small group to share their suggested actions points. For the “When I Fall in Love” Group, they suggested “lingering on certain, key words; and using a smooth, straight-tone timbre” to achieve the jazz tone (“When I Fall in Love” Group final project submission).

Often other small group members piped in at that point to further clarify how they foresaw their action points implemented. I then led the choir through the suggested action points while the group remained standing in front of the class to give feedback and work with the choir. As the small group listened, the choir and I did our best to incorporate the small group’s ideas into a passage of the piece and make changes as suggested. Sometimes a few of the choir members would ask for clarification from the teaching small group, or sometimes they added an alternate variety of the small group’s suggestions.
In the three weeks of sharing, sometimes it was more appropriate for the group to share their entire plan first and then we worked with the choir. Some of the final projects did not offer particularly innovative insights and so there was no need for additional explanation or time to expand on each individual point. But each time it was important to let the small group remain before their peers, deliver the information, and give feedback. The student leadership in this final step of the project displayed the central element of collaborative learning that students are actively involved in building their own learning. In our classroom, they were our expert informants on a given composition.

As the conductor, I was tasked to stand in front of the choir and help incorporate their interpretive ideas into visible or audible realities. I led the choir all while referring to the small group for direction. The suggestions had been submitted to me ahead of time so I could preview what they would be sharing. Sometimes this meant providing modifications to their action points; sometimes it was saying it just cannot be done with our resources and time constraints. In Week 10, my delicate role in implementing their plans was tenuous. I wanted to support their ownership of the repertoire and adopt as much of their ideas as possible into our performance, but I also had to know what was reasonable and possible to accomplish considering the time and resources available to us. I encountered these conflicting objectives with the “Baba Yetu” Group:

The “Baba Yetu” group mentioned wanting to play the game trailer in background of our performance with the lights out because the musicians aren’t important. I love this idea of ‘collaborative arts’ but we would need permission. This kind of stuff is hard because we would have needed to know about this well in advance to get permission. So how do I help them accomplish the same purpose? The valuable insight is the video game culture…a new genre of music. Do I open it up to the group at large? (Journal Week 10)
Additionally, I realized that not every group was coming up with inspired ideas. I noted in my journal that week: “I am feeling scared about not helpful projects turned in. What do I do with that? We need more time to give it to the ensemble” (Journal Week 10).

As students shared during those three weeks, I was surprisingly relieved that the sharing was in fact somewhat successful in preparing us for a concert, and that the students were generally positive about the experience. Truthfully, I had anticipated more resistance from the students or that the curriculum might fail to meet its objectives. I was glad to be surprised. After Week 9 rehearsal, many students expressed feeling either prepared to share in the coming two weeks or confident in what they had shared that week:

I feel that my group has exciting ideas to offer. (Student 8, Week 9, Q2)

I felt like our group was very prepared and killed our sharing today :). (Student 9, Week 9, Q2)

I felt pretty confident, my group is pretty solid. (Student 20, Week 9, Q2)

Some students shared in some of my own hesitations.

I don't know if we've found enough info honestly. It was hard to find history on the actual song. (Student 5, Week 9, Q2)

I felt bad because I was not here last week, but we talked two weeks ago about what we were going to present, so we all had an idea of what we were going to say. (Student 7, Week 9, Q2)

Others felt unprepared especially after seeing the first week of most prepared groups share:

I feel unprepared and that I need to go over my notes so I feel confident. (Student 10, Week 9, Q2)

I personally did not realize we were presenting today, so preparation was pretty much throwing together what we had been talking about the past few weeks. (Student 13, Week 9, Q2)
I would have liked a little more instruction regarding exactly what/how much Renae wanted us to present, and I would have liked more time to prep with my group as well as present our findings. There was a lot more in our wikis that we didn't/couldn't share. (Student 14, Week 9, Q2)

I feel like our group needs a lot more preparation to live up to the groups that presented today. (Student 17, Week 9, Q2)

After the second week of small group sharing (Week 10), most of the class had already shared and the feedback suggested that, overall, they felt more positive about sharing experience.

I thought we were prepared! We just had to share the insights and action points we gathered a few weeks ago. (Student 3, Week 10, Q2)

My group's presentation exceeded my expectations. (Student 6, Week 10, Q2)

My group already shared, and we were confident in our sharing due to adequate preparation. Our insights/action points were also easily accessible because we wrote them down on paper, instead of having to fiddle with phones to find them. (Student 9, Week 10, Q2)

After we worked on the action points, I ended by asking the small group if that was what they had in mind, how we could change it, or how we could better accomplish their ideas. We then moved to the next insight and proceeded in similar fashion. By the conclusion of the Week 11 rehearsal, cultural contexts of our repertoire were established to some degree in the minds of the singers. More importantly, cultural contexts played a part in the choices made for our performance. All that was left was to hope that the students and audience were impacted by the place our cultural study had in our musical preparation. The concert was before us! I was grateful that we still had the dress rehearsal to reinforce the finishing touches, the logistics, and the vision that the ensemble had for our approaching performance.
Concert

We all were molding and changing our perceptions of music, education, and choral rehearsals. Though we had experienced significant change already, the performance was the place to see if all of our labors truly paid off. We had experienced something unique, unlike any other semester or any other choral curriculum. By the time we had completed the stages of researching, forming ideas, sharing, and rehearsing, the students entered the performance with confidence about implementing their own ideas into our concert.

We opened the concert with a selection from the Sacred Harp tradition: “Antioch.” From the beginning of the concert, the audience was confronted with an atypical choral concert. The students’ research had uncovered the cultural practice of using a singer who comes from within the group to stand and lead the singing. They suggested in their action points that we recruit a student director to take my place in leading this portion of the concert. One of the students in our choir had attended a shape-note singing event and was willing to be our song leader. In a hollow square, facing each other and surrounding our audience, the students sang from shape-note scores. They also encouraged the audience to sing along in an informal sing along. This accomplished the demonstration of another insight of this culture that “singing [is] intended for the choral members not for an audience” (“Antioch” Group final project submission).

Throughout the concert, audience members followed along with the students’ cultural insights and suggested action points by way of a handout made available to them (see Appendix F). With each piece, the audience was invited to read about the reasons for the various performance decisions made throughout. From swaying and clapping to staging and movement, the result of these interpretive decisions made by the students was a vibrant concert with cultural expression accentuating a diverse repertoire.
There were still elements that I contributed to the performance. Just as in any concert, I was responsible for the overall product and preparation. In advance of the students’ input, I organized a bluegrass band to accompany one of our songs, worked with the piano accompanist, decided the final order of our concert, and so on. But the student choices had a marked and evident presence in the concert, outlined for the audience in the handout. One of the more poignant moments and evidence of the students’ ownership in the concert was a reading before we performed “It Is Well with My Soul.” The reading was written and spoken by one of the group members responsible for the piece during the semester.

“‘It Is Well with My Soul’ is a song about perseverance. It was originally composed as the result of a tragedy when the composer lost his family members in a shipwreck. We believe that he is trying to tell us that even though he has gone through such tragedy and loss in his life, he has found a way to say it is well. What we are asking of you tonight is to connect to the song. We ask that you think of a hardship in your life right now that is on your mind. It can be a loss, a bad day, an argument, a bad grade, anything, and find strength in the peaceful declaration of this song. Thank you.” (“It is Well with My Soul” Group student submission)

With attention to the meaning and history of the song, students connected emotionally to the song and delivered a solemn and moving performance.

Perhaps the most tangible picture of the difference the students’ insights made to the concert was concerning the performance of our vocal jazz piece, “When I Fall in Love.” As I shared earlier, they believed that the “jazz tone,” as they called it, was the first cultural insight important to the music. Secondly, they identified a “conversational delivery” to be important in the interpretation of the piece. Their third and final cultural insight was the intimacy of the song.
This is what the small group shared about this insight and how they suggested communicating it:

Finally, and in our opinion most importantly, we want the audience to experience the intimacy of the song. Again, we want to take away from the idea of it being "just" a performance, and really communicate the words to the audience. We need to remember to sing to not at the audience. One way to ensure this is by having the piece completely memorized. The audience is not going to believe our words if we have to check our folders to remember what they are. Secondly, we propose that in our performance in Choral Hall, the choir spreads a part a bit and Renae conducts us from the back of the room, behind the audience, breaking all barriers between us, the audience, and the experience of this song. ("When I Fall in Love" Group final project submission)

The first time the small group shared this with the choir and we rehearsed it as they suggested (singing from memory with me conducting from the back of the room), I felt and heard a significant difference in the cohesive and expressive qualities of their delivery. Many of the students verbalized in the rehearsal that they observed the same. There was a confidence, excitement, and intimacy to their performance that was engaging. So when it came time for the concert, we took it a step further. I challenged them sing this piece to the audience without a conductor at all. Believing they were able to do so, I gave an opening preparatory gesture and stopped conducting, allowing the choir to sing directly to their audience without interference.

In the concert, students were united by collectively sharing in a unique performance that brought their knowledge of cultural context into action. They had built an agreement of what was required of the ensemble for each song and were accountable to themselves and their peers to bring together their interpretation of the music. Their research came to life through performance. As one student shared, it was only during the concert that one student finally allowed himself to
“let loose” to express the song, and felt the piece was “much more enjoyable and effective” as a result (Student 2, Final, Q3). I giggled when one student confessed that, in the excitement, the student needed to remember to “calm down” from one piece before beginning the next (Student 14, Final, Q3). The concert revealed not only the evidence of the students’ research, but was also culminating proof of the many benefits of the long process as they demonstrated an active role in music making.
CHAPTER 5

INTERPRETATION OF DATA

In this chapter I discuss benefits produced by the project as stated by the students and as perceived by me. Because of the themes that emerged during the coding stage of interpreting my data, I deemed it necessary to expand my original three research questions to the following four:

RQ1: How can collaborative learning be implemented in a collegiate choral classroom?

RQ2: How can collaborative learning curricula be used to produce educational benefits in a collegiate choral classroom?

RQ3: How can collaborative learning curricula be used to produce musical benefits in a collegiate choral classroom?

RQ4: How can collaborative learning curricula be used to produce sociocultural benefits in a collegiate choral classroom?

I coded the data according to the final three research questions that pertain to the benefits of this project. This chapter explores the emergent subthemes within categories of educational, musical, and sociocultural benefits that developed as a result of the project.

**Educational Benefits**

Research Question 2: How can collaborative learning curricula be used to produce educational benefits in a collegiate choral classroom?

**Student-driven learning.** As described in Chapter 2, a predominant benefit of this collaborative learning curriculum is its student-centered approach. This stands in contrast to a more traditional teacher-centered teaching style in that it gives authority of learning to the students rather than learning being driven solely by the teacher. Participants appreciated that “the students had some of the authority in what [they] discussed about each song” (Student 3, Final, Q1). We experienced the student leadership in the researching stage, in the direction of the
artistic decisions, and in the discussion that took place in the classroom.

The opinions and insights gathered that informed our performance came from the students’ initiatives and not from a teacher’s lecture or a director’s demands. It was valuable to students to “have input in the final performance and to have our ideas put into action” (Student 13, Final, Q1). Many students agreed that a benefit of this project was “the fact that the outcome of this project was predicated not by just the conductor, but also the participants” (Student 6, Final, Q1).

**Peer teaching peer.** We observed the benefits of student-led learning when students shared their findings with the rest of the choir. The students were receptive to important information about their repertoire when it came from other classmates. In Weeks 9-11, when the groups shared their findings with the entire choir, some students began to see how this process would affect their performance. “My ‘aha’ moment was when the first group ‘taught’ us about their piece” (Student 17, Final Q3). In explaining how their research brought them to certain artistic decisions, students engaged their peers in learning. The choir appreciated “learning about the different pieces from student” peers rather than from me (Student 17, Final Q1).

Not only were students sharing their own findings, but they were also giving feedback to their peers. “It was also neat that people our age were giving us advice” (Student 7, Week 9, Q1). In Weeks 9-11 particularly, small groups stood before their peers and integrated their understanding of their song into the large ensemble’s performance. One student expressed appreciation about being consulted for knowledge gained by “being able to critique my class as they sang the song I had worked on so hard” (Student 17, Final, Q1).
Ownership. It is then not a surprise that one productive outcome was the ownership assumed by the students when their ideas and thoughts took center stage. In this student-driven project they saw the direct result of their individual and collective thoughts come into the final project. They each, then, had an individual investment in what and how learning occurred. The students appreciated that “every student had the chance to be involved in forming the performance” (Student 3, Final, Q1). One student commented that the performance “felt more personal because we spent so much time on the specifics of the culture. It was ours.” (Student 14, Final, Q5). I aspired to support the students’ vision for how they wanted to present and communicate what they were discovering. The more ownership they assumed, the less I felt I had to convince them of the project’s objectives. They were invested in their own education because they had a hand in its progress.

I think this project forced us to be involved personally with the music rather than allowing us to glaze over its value while tuning out during a lecture on its importance. Because of this, the music is more enjoyable to perform because parts of ourselves are invested in it. (Student 3, Final, Q5)

Participation. As students became more comfortable with student-led learning and established their authority in the project, it further engaged the students to participate in the music making and in the classroom. As one student commented, “Having some course work for the class helped me feel like I was participating in a class, rather than just a choir” (Student 11, Final, Q1). Another student appreciated that it “made us more involved in the class” (Student 1, Final, Q1). And ultimately the project provided motivation to excel: “I think it made students want to do better in performing because they invested the time in researching and wanted to give the song justice” (Student 8, Final, Q5).
Creativity. Students accepting their role in learning and claiming ownership in the project also gave them freedom to creatively explore. Several students commented that what they appreciated most about this project was the opportunity for innovation: “It allowed myself and others to think outside the box,” (Student 6, Final, Q1) and it “let us have some control and creativity in our concert.” (Student 1, Final, Q1). A few students referred to their joy of experiencing the creative process underway in this project and wished would always be nurtured in this way: “Always allow the student to contribute in the rehearsal process. You never know who has a gem that may change the whole perspective of a song” (Student 6, Final, Q8). For those who felt likewise, this might have only teased an unmet desire to create without any restrictions.

Once students believed that they were truly free to explore creativity, it gave them renewed perspective of their performance. “My ‘aha’ moment [was] when we shared around the room. I was able to see what others were thinking about the same song and how we should approach the song” (Student 15, Final, Q3). Indeed, the student-centered learning approach, though tentative and surprising for some, fashioned an environment that challenged the choir educationally. Even before the project started I foresaw that we had the potential to originate a new routine for choral rehearsals that would challenge the status quo of a fully, conductor-led practice:

Choral professors may build a new culture within the classroom that is so radical to the normal process in the collegiate classroom that students will observe and learn how their own learning has changed. They can see how they are directly involved in their own learning. (Pre-Project Journal)
**Group learning.** Another benefit of collaborative learning is that it organizes students into small groups to learn together and from each other. Many students identified benefits of working together as a group rather than as individuals: it was more efficient, exposed students to new ideas, produced deeper learning, encouraged confidence, and embraced different styles of learning.

**Efficiency.** With four or five students looking into one song, the labor required to delve into the cultural context was made more efficient with a divide-and-conquer method; in other words it “gets the job done more easily” (Student 15, Week 7, Q4). As they brought their insight into group discussion, the students’ understanding of the piece was multiplied by their peers’ contributions. Small group members got to “bounce ideas off each other and discuss to gain more insight than we would alone” (Student 11, Week 7, Q4). According to one student, the group method facilitated a simpler way of analyzing a piece of music: “Getting to discuss our ideas about our song as the semester has progressed has made it easier to figure out what I want to write. Discussing the posts is a great aspect of the group work” (Student 22, Week 7, Q4).

**New ideas.** Likewise, an overarching benefit from the students’ point of view was exposure to new and various opinions and insights: “I have thought of ideas that I would never have thought of before. I’m learning a lot about music” (Student 21, Week 7, Q4). Their work together brought new and various perspectives as they examined a piece of music from five researchers’ approaches. “We can really see each other’s different ideas and [experience] fresh ways to see certain things.” (Student 4, Week 7, Q4). “I learned things that I would have otherwise not known/not considered. For example, 'Baba Yetu' reminded me of the efforts towards universal unification.” (Student 2, Final, Q2)
Concurrently, as the students discussed their findings together and new discoveries and opinions were made, they were expanding my own understanding of the music. Since I was tracking along with their discoveries via the wiki, I was privy to all the knowledge contributed to the conversations. In reading and checking their posts, I encountered several times when they were making connections I may never have put together in my own preparations! Through group contributions, students were exposed to more knowledge than I might have been able to convey to them by offering only my research.

**Deeper learning.** Not only was there more insight, but also the discussion was richer because of the intimate group size: “People are able to share their opinions more in-depth because there is less people” (Student 16, Week 7, Q4). In this collaborative, group setting, deeper learning occurred as small groups brought together individuals with different ideas for discussion. Many students commented that they appreciated how this project brought about a deeper insight into the entire repertoire. They appreciated “the chance to look into a piece in depth” (Student 5, Final, Q1) and “learning about each piece thoroughly and not just one piece” (Student 12, Final, Q1).

For one student, the group context brought even deeper learning into a topic with which he was already familiar:

With the particular song assigned to my group I thought I knew the piece pretty well. But, as we began delving deeper in to the culture that the song came from I realized that I didn't know as much as I thought. I guess it was one of those ‘didn't know how much I didn't know’ type of situations. (Student 16, Final, Q2)
Confidence through consensus. The small-group, collaborative setting also created an environment where the individuals were required to come to a consensus. Specifically as they prepared to share their final cultural insights and action points, it was necessary that consensus be reached in order to present a unified case to the ensemble. Their individual opinions had to agree together in how they would interpret and focus on performing their piece. One student explained that, during discussion, the group was able to identify the core concept that brought all their collaborative efforts together to make sense:

It seemed as though it was the idea all of us were trying to get at, but we couldn't put it into words. Once we discussed the song being like a conversation, all of our other points seemed to fall into place. (Student 13, Final, Q3)

Some students considered this a benefit of the project because it brought confidence to their beliefs. As one student commented, “Brainstorming together instead of second guessing yourself” is advantageous to small-group learning (Student 3, Week 7, Q4). It was considered a benefit to “bounce the ideas of others and see what they have to say and see how similar everyone’s topics are” (Student 18, Week 7, Q4). On the contrary, one student suggested that working toward consensus was actually the cause of sacrificing some good ideas for the preferences of the majority (Student 11, Week 7, Q5).

Different learning styles. Several students mentioned that this curricular approach opened different opportunities for learning. One student was grateful that students were not required to speak to the whole class, but only to their small groups. Another student enjoyed the combination of individual research and group collaboration. Yet another student thought it was helpful that the small groups also came together into the large ensemble to share. A self-proclaimed verbal processor commented, “I am frequently one to want to talk ideas out with
others rather than sit with them in my own head. Being able to discuss my topic with a group really helped me better form my thoughts” (Student 16, Final, Q6). For another student, however, a traditional, teacher-led approach would have been preferable: “I think I would learn more from being told information than finding it myself because that’s just my personal learning style” (Student 28, Week 4, Q6).

To my curiosity, one student commented that this project actually aided in the retention of the contextual information about the music and its performance aspects:

Given that we only meet once a week, it can be difficult to move beyond memorization and into actually remembering performance aspects you want to incorporate into the final work. Having the discussion points in my mind helped me to recall what we had been working on in rehearsal. (Student 16, Final, Q1)

**Musical Benefits**

Research Question 3: How can collaborative learning curricula be used to produce musical benefits in a collegiate choral classroom?

I aimed for the semester’s undertakings to ultimately produce perceptible musical benefits. I hoped that this curriculum would convince other conductors of its merit if there were observable benefits to the music and music making itself. To be honest, I was not sure at the onset of the project if any musical asset would result. My hope depended on the students’ performance. I gave a vague musical charge to the ensemble early in Week 1: “I am giving you time and space to explore what our artistic contribution will be!” I hoped the freedom to be creative would produce unforeseen musical benefits. In this section I outline the themes that emerged as answers to my third research question. Their musical benefits included the following: preparing repertoire musically, building understanding that informed musical value and likewise
improved performance, musical interpretation, and creating inquisitive performers.

**Musical preparation.** Apart from the time reserved in each rehearsal for small-group discussions, the majority of each rehearsal was scheduled for conventional musical preparation: pitches, harmonies, balance, rhythms, diction, and so on. Our musical efforts remained productive throughout the semester and I remained optimistic with the choir’s overall sound. Even in the thick of the research stage, one student thought the choir sounded “more cohesive” and produced a “richer, more mature sound with every class” (Student 20, Week 3, Q6). By the Week 5 rehearsal, I was convinced the music was not suffering from the time we took away from musical preparation and gave to discussion: “Whether it is this specific group or not, they are still learning the music quite well. We are at about mid-term and I think we are at an appropriate level for our progress” (Journal Week 5).

In fact, the musical rehearsal was enhanced by what they were discovering in small-group discussion and on the wikis. As they posted their findings on wikis, I noted their relevant observations and incorporated some of the musical remarks into my rehearsal plan. For example, in Week 3 one group described a typical timbre from their designated culture as a “wall of sound.” Another group noticed “slower rhythms of lyrics” in their culture’s music. These were musical elements I could point out and work toward in rehearsals.

The prompt given in Week 5 to find common elements between our repertoire and another piece from the same culture gave us many musical elements to consider and rehearse. I compiled a large list for my own reference taken from the students’ wiki submissions (see Figure 6).
When I Fall in Love

- Smooth legato
- Vocal slides
- Lack of strict rhythm
- Emotion (Facials, dynamics)
- Strong bass line
- Different improvisations
- One emotion
- From the perspective of the performer
- Lyrics about love

Hallelujah to the King of Glory

- Precise lyrics
- Body as instruments
- Choir energy influences the audience
- The chorus is the focus
- Simple lyrics

Grand Night for Singing

- More vibrato
- Not belting
- Wistful motions at the end of phrases
- Repeating phrases with small changes in the phrases
- Movement when they sing

*Figure 6.* Example list of cultural elements gathered from student wiki posts.

I incorporated some of these observations into my rehearsal plan for Week 6 to make them a part of our preparation. This also further emphasized the student authority I encouraged in our learning. Students were just as aware and pleased that the project served our sound: “I think the thing I appreciated most [about the project] was the fact that this research did actually help our sound” (Student 5, Final, Q1). One student believed that after the small groups were able to share their insights and action points, they “sounded better” (Student 18, Week 9, Q1). These sharing times in Weeks 9-11 were “definitely effective. It provided the mindset and techniques we need to use when we sing the songs” (Student 20, Week 9, Q1).

**Building understanding informs value.** When asked what was most helpful about this project, 8 out of 17 students mentioned that building understanding of the repertoire was a helpful feature (Final Q6). This project provided the opportunity to put the music under a microscope: “It let me really get to know the pieces. They are written with such care and every
Learning more about the history and stories that shaped the music was a large part of what made this whole project useful. In Week 2, when asked if the new discoveries into their assigned cultures aided their understanding of the music, 20 out of 25 students responded affirmatively. In building knowledge of the culture, students were able to better understand the music: “I learned a lot about culture and how music pertains to culture that I didn't know before. It really helped me understand the music better” (Student 1, Final, Q2).

As the students consulted outside examples of performances, considered stylistic elements, and conjectured the music’s original intent, they discerned and formed opinions on the value of these musical pieces. By understanding the context of the culture out of which the song arose, they understood what makes the culture and the song unique.

According to the students, the project enlightened them to the value of the music. It was vital that they understood its value before they could convince their audience what the music was about and, even more, what gave it a worthwhile place in our concert. This project gave them the opportunity to examine the music beyond the notes on the page. It was rewarding to hear one student say, “This project has helped me appreciate why the song we're singing is a good song to perform” (Student 19, Week 3, Q6). To another student, uncovering the song’s value changed prior judgments of performing the piece:

Personally, I wasn't a huge fan of the song I was chosen to research. I did not understand the song's value beforehand. When I found out what it was originally written for, I was able to relate and connect my life and emotions to the song. Because of this, I was able to express honest emotion during the performance. (Student 3, Final, Q3)
Understanding improves performance. When research was in its beginning stages, the musical benefits of this project were not as evident as they later became since the students were merely finding nuggets of knowledge. But eventually as knowledge and understanding revealed the value of the music, new ideas were generated that changed the performance. As one student articulated, “Learning more about the cultures of the pieces we were singing helped me connect with the performance” (Student 16, Final, Q1). In Week 2, I wrote my early thoughts on waiting for the connection to be made between research and performance:

I will be interested to see what the students say and what feedback they give on how we can quickly start changing our performance dependent on what they have found. Three groups shared this week and the information was mostly background to their culture. They didn’t necessarily suggest something that would inspire or inform our rehearsal. Perhaps the scribe will be able to synthesize and make suggestions. Again at this point in the process I’m not necessarily looking for changing right away. (Journal Week 2)

Because of our experience with the vocal jazz performers in the masterclass, students had a tangible example of how focusing on elements characteristic of the music’s culture can affect the performance. The jazz musicians’ approach enticed the students. Afterward, I was able to build on this experience to help make the connection of context and performance in our project:

What I loved about the experience in general is that it gave the students a chance to see how this song should be sung differently because of the style it comes from. They saw that it is to be sung differently than any of the pieces, and this advice came from people who were experts in the culture. It was a picture of how knowing about the context and culture of this music makes a difference in how we sing…I think the students were excited about the possibilities that the vocal ensemble was offering. (Journal Week 3)
By the end of the project, students verbalized that one of the aspects they appreciated most about it was “being able to put together ideas to set the performance apart” (Student 5, Final, Q1). A connection between understanding and performance was established, at least in some minds: “[The project] has influenced me not to take for granted the music I am performing. Every song has a story and culture and knowing those things can only help in the performance” (Student 16, Final, Q4).

**Becoming interpreters.** Once the students became informed performers of their music, their role changed to interpreter. Their objective was to communicate their newly acquired understanding to their audience in a way they could receive it. That transition from research to action was crucial in helping them understand their role as interpreters of music. They became the suppliers of a product, eager to convince their consumers of what they were offering. For several students, this realization was a poignant moment in this process:

Really only in the last three weeks did I realize the value of this process. Once I got to hear what the other groups found, I was able to realize the wonder of each piece and that they needed to be performed uniquely. (Student 11, Final, Q3)

Another student was impacted by the music and readily accepted the charge to bring the music to audiences:

When we were discussing "It is Well" and the enormity of the writer's loss hit me. I started tearing up just thinking about what all this man went through and how many of the millions of people who have sang the song probably had no idea. The piece came out of real suffering and the ability to see beyond the pain of the moment and I just felt like that was something that needed to be communicated in the performance. (Student 16, Final, Q3)
For many, there was a responsibility to interpret the songs in a manner that was honoring to their newly discovered culture and intentionally packaged for the audience (Student 6, Final, Q1). Expanded in their own understanding, they could “get the message to the audience more clearly” (Student 17, Final, Q5) as intentional and prepared communicators (Student 19, Week 9, Q4). They understood that a song presented with consideration to context could be powerful (Student 5, Final, Q3). Students were making decisions that would uniquely and purposefully communicate the music’s value: “I think [the project] encourages us to understand the context of a piece and then implement this understanding into a unique performance” (Student 9, Final, Q5).

**Engaging.** Before our concert, I asked the students to express their perception of how the cultural insights gathered by the choir might impact our audience. Their responses indicated that they hoped it would give the audience context or “new perspective” to the music, but also would offer vitality and intrigue to the performance. Offering a “very unique” and “memorable” musical experience seemed to be an exciting prospect to the students. Their gained insight could be used to enhance the music for an outstanding performance. Students believed that audiences would be influenced by elevated energy and would “connect to the performance rather than being bored with the songs” (Student 10, Week 9, Q4). One student spoke out to say that choosing to engage the audience with an expressive performance was more valuable than a technically perfect performance: “A choir with perfect technique and no expression will always, in my opinion, be overshadowed by a choir with flaws in technique that have an expressive and engaging performance” (Student 6, Final, Q3).
Even before the performance had taken place, students believed that they could make an observable difference in the music, even if it were simply “more fun to watch” (Student 5, Final, Q5). Wanting audiences to engage encouraged the performers to engage and further contribute to an intentional musical performance. “If our faces are bored, the audience will be bored, but if we are having a blast, the audience will get something out of it” (Student 4, Week 10, Q5). They examined music from the audience’s perspective and aimed to involve them in this musical exchange. “Hopefully it will throw them into the middle of the music and help them experience it the way we do when we sing it” (Student 13, Week 9, Q4). Once again, students took ownership of the music-making process to connect their audience to “see the music as more than just notes on a page and hopefully connect to it and enjoy it more” (Student 9, Week 9, Q4).

**Expressing.** In the course of our semester, the topic of expression arose many times. Expression was a repeating point brought up as a suggestion in groups’ action points of how we should communicate cultural insight. I wondered why this had become such a central discussion for us. What was the connection between cultural context, music, and expression? So I asked them: “Why do you think so many groups have brought up that pronunciation and facial expression is important?” (Journal Week 10). Their answers suggested that students believed expression was both a physical and easy way to communicate and could represent the music’s intended message.

Many students drew their own connections between knowledge and expression. To them, “knowing the context gives you better insight into the best way to perform the pieces” (Student 10, Final, Q5). Expression was an active response to knowledge and a means of presenting the song “in the way that it was originally intended” (Student 10, Final, Q5). Expression informed by cultural insight, expanded the music on the page and added depth, color, and “texture” to the
music (Student 4, Final, Q3). As interpreters, they highlighted the significance of the music, thereby drawing the audience’s attention to its value.

I think this [project] has a great benefit in that students have been trained for an entire semester to look past the notes and the bars and into the real music…if we follow the rhythm and the bars on the sheet music we are going to be accurate, but we [won’t] be singing the song as it was meant to be sung. (Student 4, Final, Q5)

The music was no longer abstract but rather a message with a history, with a reason, with a story. Ultimately, the musical performance itself benefitted from the addition of appropriate expression and it was “more enjoyable to watch because there is genuine emotion behind the words” (Student 3, Final, Q5).

**Internalizing.** Taking the inclusion of expression into music a step further, many students empathized with the meaning or emotions behind the music and related those emotions to their own experience. In other words, not only did they seek to understand and reflect the music for how it was composed, but also internalized its significance and translated it into the relevance of their own lives. They chose to “relate the song to [themselves] in some way” (Student 13, Week 9, Q1).

This takes one step beyond expressing the meaning of the piece. Students took a perspective of the piece and related that sentiment, expression, or meaning to their own lives (Student 11, Final, Q2). Singers expressed feeling “more emotions when performing” because of their familiarity with the music’s context (Student 15, Final, Q5). Instead of an intellectual understanding of the appropriate expression, the students were experiencing their own, genuine emotions.
The emotions that they were discovering were, in a sense, attaching them to that culture: Numerous times, I was overcome with pure joy while singing this piece due to the swaying, clapping, and general enthusiasm exhibited by my fellow choir members. It's one thing to perform a piece and be captivated by its beauty, but it's another thing entirely to understand the context of a piece while performing it and simultaneously feel as if you could belong to the sub-culture of that context. (Student 9, Final, Q3)

Internalizing the music engaged the performers in music making. The students demonstrated motivation, ownership, and an investment in performing because they were connected to genuine emotion (Student 8, Final, Q3). The music became their own tool of expression, their own art. As one student fervently stated: “Music is about passion, and if you can relate a piece to you personally, it automatically requires some passion” (Student 11, Final, Q4).

Connecting to the sentiments of the music by relating its emotion to something personal in the students’ lives, made it simpler to communicate a genuine and relevant expression of the music to the audience. In other words, the easiest way for them to express music in performance was to put the song in a personal context, and knowing the cultural context facilitated this process. One student mentioned that it was “easier to connect to the songs emotionally when you knew the background” (Student 10, Final, Q1). This personal connection, or internalization, was perhaps the most efficient tool for making the music come alive.

I found it easier to express the meaning of that song because I was aware of why it was conceived and I could further relate an experience in my life to which I could sing through to, perhaps, feel the emotions of the composer of that song while I was singing it. (Student 6, Final, Q5)
Creating inquisitive musicians. A musical benefit of this project that will carry into the future is that the students have come to understand that there exists a deeper context to music. Every piece has a backstory, a past, a history, or a purpose. For future performances, music has become multi-dimensional to these performers. “I am more interested in the history of the music pieces than I was before this semester” (Student 12, Final, Q4). Furthermore, students expressed wanting to be performers who actively investigate the fuller context of music. “I really want to get to know my music better before I just sing it” (Student 15, Final, Q4).

When asked how this project has influenced them to treat music differently in the future, 9 out of 16 students revealed the intention to include additional research into their music preparation. This project has helped set a new standard for many of these participants for preparing and performing music in the future: “It gave me incredible insight into the way I should always be analyzing and performing my music” (Student 11, Final, Q2). Students desired to explore a cultural context before judging or performing a piece. They expressed the intention to dig deeper to understand music in the future.

The biggest influence this [project] has had on me is simply the idea that every song has a past. I couldn't go and listen to Chopin's Fantasy Impromptu and not try to figure out the influences and emotions that it is trying to convey. All music deserves to be learned in entirety before performance especially. Knowing the notes and rhythms to a song is one thing, but knowing the inspiration of the piece, or at least an inspiration of your own, is what will make the musical experience blossom. (Student 4, Final, Q4)
Sociocultural Benefits

Research Question 4: How can collaborative learning curricula be used to produce sociocultural benefits in a collegiate choral classroom?

In this section I discuss my findings of sociocultural benefits produced from our collaborative learning curriculum. I use the term sociocultural to refer to the traditions, beliefs, lifestyles, and worldviews of social groups. In this case study, there were benefits that concerned the societal interactions of the ensemble members with one another as well as the ensemble interacting with cultures unlike their own. These benefits involve humans interacting with other humans, engaging in cultural exchange, and encountering other worldviews in a unique social environment.

Social interaction. One substantial category of responses to this study revealed that students found the social interaction component of the project to be a favorable advantage. Interacting with other classmates in small groups was looked upon fondly by many of the surveyed students. They enjoyed getting to meet new people and getting to know each other more personally. The interpersonal relationships enforced throughout the semester were indeed atypical of most choral courses in higher education, but were met with many appreciative responses. One student was glad for the particular opportunity to interact with classmates from various disciplines:

With coming from so many majors and classes I often didn't get to talk to the people I was in choir with outside of class. The project gave me a fantastic opportunity where I would not have otherwise had one. (Student 16, Final, Q1)

Not only were interpersonal relationships established, but those new relationships also generated interpersonal exchange. By working in small groups, an environment was created in
which all were expected to share their perspectives and opinions with one another. This is not to reiterate the educational benefit broached earlier that new ideas or deeper learning was achieved from group learning, but rather to point out the sociocultural benefit of persons sharing opinions and understanding to edify their group members. Voicing opinions in small groups positioned individuals to consider and to be challenged by another’s view. Members in a small group, or even any member of the ensemble, could benefit from the exchange of ideas. “Hearing others’ perspectives of what each piece means and combining them provided for a broader perspective overall” (Student 11, Final, Q1).

As they shared their opinions and findings with one another, they likewise imparted their enthusiasm. When students engaged with one another, specifically on the topic of music, their sharing often went beyond reporting dry facts to the inclusion of personal tastes. A member from the vocal jazz group experienced this positively as her group discussed the jazz culture together: “The members of my group were very passionate about music and the jazz genre, so it was really enjoyable to hear everyone discuss what they had learned because we all genuinely liked what we were discussing” (Student 13, Final, Q2). The students were benefitted by the interpersonal exchange of their own beliefs and opinions as they simultaneously increased in the knowledge of their assigned music.

**Encountering culture.** It is an educational benefit that group learning produced new ideas and a musical benefit that understanding brought value to the repertoire, but it is a sociocultural benefit of this project that individuals were given the chance to encounter another’s culture. In this section, I outline the sociocultural benefits of encountering culture produced by this curriculum.
Understanding the music and culture relationship. Digging into the context of music, students were confronted by other peoples’ beliefs, feelings, and responses. In doing so, students recognized culture reflected in music. For example, when students observed music produced as a passionate reaction to social movements, they recognized a relationship between music and culture.

I found out that the song may have been created in response to a new social issue of the time. (Student 21, Week 5, Q1)

I discovered that my music was actually part of a sub culture that was a counter movement. (Student 23, Week 5, Q1)

Students were uncovering the role of culture in music. They were seeing art as evidence of someone else’s culture. In essence, students became budding ethnomusicologists or anthropologists who had an artifact (music) and needed to work backwards to discover its source of origin. They were looking at the evidences of a culture and putting together pieces of how those evidences got there.

Regardless of its connection to music, participants enjoyed the excuse to encounter culture because of the music: “I really enjoyed seeing what was important to each culture” (Student 15, Final, Q2) and, “It was a new cultural insight for me and I liked that fact” (Student 8, Final, Q1). Another student realized that this insight they were gaining into culture would benefit the class far into the future beyond the current semester:

The project has a great many benefits, not the least of which is deepening the performer's understanding of the many cultures that music is drawn from. This not only helps during the specific time frame of the project, but [also] adds to the knowledge and understanding the performer takes with them into future work. (Student 16, Final, Q5)
Defining culture. Early in the process, it became clear that most of the students were confused with some aspects of the terminology. The word culture was limiting. It seemed that they were referring to culture as signifying country or ethnicity. This is a common misunderstanding. It was for this reason that I chose not to pick international music repertoire for this semester but instead all the pieces of music I selected came from cultures present within the United States. In Week 3, some students were labeling their assigned culture simply “American.” I challenged them to be more specific. As related in Chapter 4, this took some time for many of the students to identify.

Eventually, students began to understand that each piece represented a subculture of America. They gathered that culture is not determined by ethnicity alone, but can be a combination of many factors that influence a people group.

Through discussions with my small group members and the larger class, the word culture came to encompass a broader range of associate customs, beliefs, and practices. I identified the pieces of music as belonging to American sub-cultures by the end of the project, and this offered me new insight into what it means to understand the context of a piece and where it comes from. (Student 9, Final, Q2)

The piece that seemed to most aid many students in comprehending the wider definition of culture was the choral piece written for the soundtrack of a video game, “Baba Yetu”:

“Baba Yetu” could be considered part of a video game culture, which isn't necessarily a culture thought of very much because they are video games but there are a very large number of people [who] participate in video game centered events and conventions. Even entire orchestras tour playing the music. It's its own thing with a lot of different people and its unique. (Student 8, Week 3, Q1)
Since this piece had Swahili lyrics, students automatically assumed it represented an African culture, when in fact it was written to accompany an American video game. It belonged to a group of people who valued what the piece highlighted in the aesthetics of the video game. A video-game community has its own culture partly in that it functions with its own insular ideals and ways of communicating. It is also a comparatively new culture that only in past few decades has been brought into in the music world and thus not a normal encounter for choral singers: “Video game culture is extremely new, so it was a big learning experience for me” (Student 5, Final, Q2). It was an unusual practice for students to identify cultures as particular groups characterized by a common set of beliefs, customs, traditions, and not necessarily nationality. But in refining the students’ definition, they were able to identify the uniqueness of individual people groups.

**Identifying general cultural characteristics.** Through efforts to research and establish the specific culture of their piece—and aided by my prompt—the students began to see threads within each culture. Their rudimentary research led to some generalizations of their assigned culture. For example:

We discovered that many other church hymns from the same time period share characteristics such as a slow tempo, an inspirational backstory involving tragedy, and religious text. (Student 19, Week 5, Q1)

I learned that every pop modern song turned into choral form can share many more traits than I thought. (Student 20, Week 5, Q1)

Of course, there were dangers in labeling generalizations, since they could be judgmental, stereotyped, exaggerated, or frankly wrong. As one student bluntly shared, “The urban, modern music culture is highly derivative and unimaginative” (Student 15, Week 4, Q1). This is an occasion for which I was grateful for collaborative learning where group members might,
hopefully, challenge this student’s perspective. Yet that student was still able to make a comment based on a brief encounter with a specific culture.

The opposite can also be true, that by identifying generalities, variances are highlighted: “I learned that although sometimes generalized, gospel music still is variable. A group member talked about seeing a gospel choir perform recently and how their style is different from choirs we’ve seen perform our piece in videos online” (Student 32, Week 3, Q1). The benefit was that the students were able to generalize some main characteristics of each culture, but still understand it is an actively changing culture and cannot be labeled decisively. Students could explore the general characteristics of a culture to give them appreciation for someone else’s world. In Week 2, when asked if research aided their understanding of the culture, 17 out of 26 responded affirmatively. If anything, researching and coming to some generalization gave them an understanding that people have life patterns that may function differently than their own.

Building skills. At the beginning of the case, I had hoped that the semester would introduce the class to skills they could take with them beyond the classroom.

[The students] can see that these skills they are practicing in the classroom to discover one culture represented in the one song they select are skills that can become habits in approaching new cultures wherever and whenever they confront them! (Pre-Project Journal)

This was never fully identified by the students, but some skills were implied in their comments. For example, the skill to discuss sociocultural truths was mentioned in several surveys. Through discussion of culture, they came to understand or form an opinion on a certain piece of music’s potential in a given society, realizing that not every society embraces music in the same way.
We were all discussing about how much we learned about the different arrangements available. There are a lot of takes on this arrangement in a number of styles, so we decided as a result that the song is more accessible. (Student 12, Week 3, Q1)

Again, though never verbalized as such, I observed students developing skills to synthesize cultural insights from multiple sources and disciplines. For example,

I learned that “Antioch” was in the part of history that I am currently learning about in my history class. (Student 21, Week 3, Q1)

...it reminds me of the Puritan pieces that we performed in concert choir and puts me in the same mind set. (Student 17, Week 3, Q2)

I was curious if this experiment, of discussing cultural context, was too foreign for the students. Is this a skill students are asked to exercise frequently? Would this project help them develop an ability to become familiarized with another’s culture? So I asked how difficult or easy it was to talk about cultural insight and value in their small groups (Week 7, Q1). Most students said it was relatively easy and even enjoyable:

I like discussing cultures and their values. (Student 19, Week 7, Q1)

I think it is easy. If you understand the culture and the song, it's easy to see how they relate to each other. (Student 12, Week 7, Q1)

For those who thought it was difficult, it was “still interesting” (Student 3, Week 7, Q1), but was too abstract or broad of a topic and hard for those who “struggle to think in a creative big picture” (Student 21, Week 7, Q1). This was not a standard topic for one choral student and so it was difficult to discuss because it was never asked before. “If we ever talked about it our teacher just told us what to convey,” one student admitted (Student 6, Week 7, Q1).

As the semester went on, discussing culture became easier. It seemed especially less complicated once they were able to take the step beyond simply collecting knowledge and into
identifying value (Student 22, Week 7, Q1). Once they had built their research, they had the means to facilitate discussion. “It's fairly easy to discuss these things in our small groups at this point, given the research that we've already done” (Student 8, Week 7, Q1).

**Expanding worldview.** In my opinion, the paramount sociocultural benefit of this curriculum was the students’ exposure to various worldviews. With this exposure, which was gained through the examination of the cultures of their musical repertoire, students expanded their worldviews by considering other’s point of view, by appreciating diversity, and by comparing worldviews to their own.

**Seeing someone else’s point of view.** Through this project, students looked at the world through someone else’s eyes—a worldview that was not their own. Yes, factual knowledge was gained and music was enhanced, but even more so, students stepped into a position where they were moved to examine people. In an open and secure environment, they were encouraged to examine and assess someone else’s view of the world. By speculating on the decisions that formed the repertoire, the beliefs and thoughts of another culture’s insiders were brought into the choir’s conversations. As the groups worked to uncover meaning, students felt they “can really understand how important this song is to [their assigned] culture” (Student 24, Week 3, Q2). To an extent, they were granted the occasion to consider life from someone else’s point of view.

The choir wanted to bring the audience to do the same. They attempted to bring their audience into the representative culture’s realm through an informed performance:

I hope it [cultural insights] will help [the audience] better understand the culture of the piece so that when we perform it, they think about the culture and what the song represents. Hopefully, this will help evoke emotion to which the audience will respond positively. (Student 14, Week 8, Q4)
Though not the main objective of the project, an incredible benefit that emerged was that music became the means by which students could experience a new world of beliefs and perspectives. Within the comfort of a music classroom, they examined value systems of different people groups within the United States.

*Appreciating diversity.* In this outward perspective, students were apt to notice cultural differences as just that: different. Not wrong, different. The cultural intricacies were a credit to its people group: “Everyone's culture is unique in it's own way and this came across in this assignment” (Student 14, Final, Q2).

The curriculum opened the door to view the world beyond oneself and to appreciate that society exists in ways other than one to which one may be accustomed. They had to consider alternate worldviews that might challenge their own assumptions of the world. Even more so, they appreciated the new discovery that diversity exists within their own country: “Our repertoire showed me how diverse and widespread a culture can be and that each portion of it is equally valuable in its own way” (Student 3, Final, Q2). For some, that was possibly the first time they had considered that their country was actually more diverse than they thought. Exposure to diversity further benefited students by countering ignorance. And as one student put it, “diminishing ignorance benefits everybody” (Student 2, Final, Q5). By appreciating the diversity represented in the repertoire, students appreciated diversity in cultures.

*Comparing worldviews.* Lastly, as students grappled with comparisons in the course of discovery, their worldviews expanded. The end product was already set; the music was already established and was originated in a specific culture. Someone’s worldview was represented in this music. The students, as the secondhand interpreters, were brought to evaluate where their own thoughts and beliefs stood up next to another’s as they deduced meaning in the music.
It was not the purview of the choir to invalidate art belonging to another people; instead it was their obligation to understand it. For this project, comparison was encouraged for the purpose of identifying alternate worldviews, not for an evaluative ranking. They practiced the skill of asking before making judgments in order to realize there is usually a reason for deliberate decisions made for the music. Why, for example, did the composers of the song “Some Nights,” choose to incorporate, what seemed to one student, a “stark contrast between the music and lyrics” (Student 29, Week 3, Q1)? Another student questioned why something created and thought of as valuable in another day and age remains valuable today: “My song was a much older piece than I had anticipated. I found that very interesting given that it is still widely used even now” (Student 32, Week 2, Q1).

If the students’ views did not coincide with what they were presenting, it was almost irrelevant to them. They considered what they believe, but still did their best to represent the contrasting worldview in a way that was honoring to its members. As I look back, however, I do not ever recall hearing students express demeaning thoughts, irreverent actions, or belittling attitudes toward another culture. Their opinions, if different from those of their focused culture, became more informed than prior to comparing their worldviews.

Perhaps comparing worldviews caused some students to alter their worldview. Perhaps it further solidified their beliefs, strengthening what they already knew or believed to be true. Perhaps it made them appreciate their own culture’s strengths by observing another culture’s weaknesses. Perhaps it elevated their desire to advance in comparison to what other cultures have already realized and experienced. Or perhaps comparing worldviews produced no new conclusions in the students’ minds. Whatever the result, there was great value in the discussions that occurred, bringing various worldviews into the same conversation:
The goal is to interact with a culture so we can better understand why they do what they do, or at least identify what they do that is unique to that culture. What makes that culture sound like that culture? Thus using music is an excuse to look deeper into a group that we may not normally interact with or take the time to consider. (Journal Week 5)
CHAPTER 6
DISCUSSION AND FUTURE STUDY

Summary

The purpose of this ethnographic case study was to evaluate the process and benefits of implementing a collaborative learning curriculum into a choral classroom of higher education. Through the examination of their assigned repertoire, students encountered and analyzed the cultures represented by the music. This report described the events and perceived benefits as my students and I experienced it. Throughout the semester, small groups of peers gathered and discussed the individual findings they had posted weekly on a class wiki. Eventually those findings and discussions were synthesized into key cultural insights valuable for understanding the repertoire. Students then suggested action points for how to communicate those insights to the audience through our concert performance. As the conductor of the choir, I monitored the student-led learning by coaching on wiki and small group discussion, and advocating for their contribution to our music making. Our experiences and opinions were explored through journals, weekly anonymous surveys, wiki posts, and a final survey.

The review of the literature indicated that educators in higher education are eager for innovative and sometimes radical approaches that will meet the needs of the 21st-century learner by connecting them to the globalized world. In this project, collaborative learning was chosen because of its learner-led pedagogy that sets the students into an active role of building knowledge and opinion. Through discussion with their peers, students discovered various insights and beliefs of their chosen culture, and were engaged in meaningful dialogue to reach a common goal. Large choral courses specifically have potential to be fertile environments to collaboratively study culture since they are an established social gathering preexisting
throughout many times and cultures. As a review of the literature shows, however, few have reported implementing collaborative learning in a choral ensemble to discuss cultural context, and none have reported it in higher education.

This study was created to meet a need in education and research: I explored how collaborative learning could indeed be a valuable endeavor for higher education large-ensemble programs. Thus, I probed the following research questions:

RQ1: How can collaborative learning be implemented in a collegiate choral classroom?

RQ2: How can collaborative learning curricula be used to produce educational benefits in a collegiate choral classroom?

RQ3: How can collaborative learning curricula be used to produce musical benefits in a collegiate choral classroom?

RQ4: How can collaborative learning curricula be used to produce sociocultural benefits in a collegiate choral classroom?

I coded the data gathered from surveys and journals in accordance with the four research questions of this case study: collaborative process, educational benefits, musical benefits, and sociocultural benefits. As the large sum of data on the participants’ weekly collaborative learning experiences was organized, an exciting narrative emerged. The following gives an overview regarding how each research question was answered.

Responses to Research Questions

Response to Research Question 1.

RQ1: How can collaborative learning be implemented in a collegiate choral classroom?

As experience revealed, the first four weeks of the eleven-week project were devoted to research and small group discussion. Eventually, sensing a need for clarification on terminology and project objectives, I introduced a prompt in Week 5 that helped students more clearly
identify the culture of their assigned composition. The prompt also helped the students understand how cultural elements and musical choices informed the creation and performance of the repertoire.

This was a turning point in our project. The remaining rehearsals were dedicated to consolidating and analyzing what the students believed to be the most valuable insights representative of their music’s culture. By Week 8, small groups submitted plans that included three main cultural insights and two action points for each insight. These plans were suggestions for ways to alter our performance in order to communicate what the students had determined to be significant concerning our repertoire. Small groups were then given the opportunity to teach their ideas to the remainder of the choir and subsequently to critique the choir’s implementation of suggested action points. By the time we arrived to our concert, students had made informed decisions and the resulting effects shaped our performance.

Analysis of data revealed that there were indeed many educational, musical, and sociocultural benefits to the collaborative learning curriculum. Findings were further coded into emergent themes within each research question and included the following:

- social-driven and group learning benefits
- musical preparation, understanding, and interpretation benefits
- benefits to social interaction, cultural engagement, and worldview expansion.

I will more fully summarize these benefits in the following points.

Response to Research Question 2.

RQ2: How can collaborative learning curricula be used to produce educational benefits in a collegiate choral classroom?

Agreeing with literature on collaborative learning, a dominant educational benefit of this curriculum was its student-driven learning. Students responded positively to bringing their own
opinions to the discussion and to having a stake in setting the direction of content studied in the course. Students overwhelmingly appreciated being included in the educational process rather than submitting to a purely teacher-centric model. In the final weeks of the semester, most students described instruction given by their peers as an advantage of the curriculum.

As they worked together to build a case for their culture, they developed ownership in the process. Learning became more personal since its product was a reflection of their investment. They were encouraged to actively participate in the class and to engage creatively in the learning process as they investigated how they could create their art. Students found that collaborative learning allowed them to explore new ways of creating within the choral classroom.

The group-learning environment that is essential to collaborative learning brought efficiency to the division of labor and created a pool for new ideas. By sharing the responsibility of the music with a small group of peers, students were able to find more information and more varied ideas in less time. The insights that they explored in small groups exceeded what one student might have uncovered alone, and likely exceeded what I might have been able to produce as a sole teacher. With varied perspectives and several voices contributing to the conversation on culture, students were able to learn at a greater depth as well. They reflected and I observed that group learning benefited the individual’s confidence in their understanding of the information learned. The entire group worked together to make sense of the information they were connecting to the music. Additionally, introducing this new educational method to a choral rehearsal was helpful to students who enjoyed or needed a varied pedagogy to meet their learning style.
Response to Research Question 3.

RQ3: How can collaborative learning curricula be used to produce musical benefits in a collegiate choral classroom?

The curriculum was not purely an educational innovation; it produced musical benefits as well. Students found that their collaborative work aided their musical preparation by informing them of key stylistic insights. For the majority of the students, musical preparation was not hindered because of time taken away for small-group discussion.

As the students grasped a wider understanding of their music’s culture, an intrinsic value of the music was revealed. With an increased understanding of what makes the music valuable to be heard and sung, the students were better informed on how to perform it. They embraced their role as messengers of a culture. The choir and I observed that expression through the music was a key to interpreting the culture for the audience. Either by expressing the information they had uncovered, or by internalizing its significance into their own lives, the students sought to engage themselves and their audiences by conveying the music’s culture, and from this, the performance was benefited musically. The students encountered a greater understanding of the elements that inform music and indicated that they wanted to take this revelation into subsequent musical performances.

Response to Research Question 4.

RQ4: How can collaborative learning curricula be used to produce sociocultural benefits in a collegiate choral classroom?

The collaborative learning curriculum established several small groups of students and caused them to interact as they examined the culture of another people group. On a fundamental level, a benefit was the interpersonal relationship students formed within a choral classroom. Rather than feeling lost in a sea of people, students appreciated getting to meet and interact with
their peers in the rehearsal. But on an elevated level, students encountered culture through music. They came to realize that people’s values interplay with the music they compose. They saw the importance of knowing the people represented by the music. Furthermore, they expanded their own view to acknowledge that people are defined by more than their national associations. Students looked at elements that more deeply unify a people group such as preferences, experiences, and beliefs. The curriculum caused the students to think about what stands out from one people group to the next. They began learning to ask the questions and build skills in investigating culture.

Ultimately, the curriculum brought a foreign culture into proximity and with it a richer understanding of its music. It also expanded the students’ worldviews as they looked at music through someone else’s eyes. Music opened the class to examining cultural groups, their beliefs, their value systems, and their customs.

**Implications**

This case study responds to the cries for a reform in higher music education to invest students in effective, critical-thinking, and relevant curricula (Gaunt & Westerlund, 2013). Within the educational literature, this case study offers a rare and essential methodological addition to the predominantly theoretical literature. It reveals the mindset of the students and the teacher as we utilized and examined a pedagogical process.

In a 2014 manifesto, the College Music Society (2014) called for higher music educators to meet the needs of the 21st-century student and to bring renewed vitality and understanding into standard ensemble repertoire. This case study answers that call with a viable option for those who are seeking to make music more than just notes on a page (Junda, 2013; O’ Neill, 2008; Stokes, 2004; Wade, 2004).
Through collaborative learning that investigates the culture informing the repertoire, students led each other to uncover significance beyond a shallow, one-dimensional understanding of music on a page. They found that music’s value can be multi-dimensional. One student said it beautifully: “[This project has] opened my mind even further to look past the notes and words to read between the lines. When one reads between the lines, it allows a performer to sing the story and not just the text” (Student 6, Final, Q4).

Such a perspective brings greater significance to the choral art. By looking at music in a broader context, the students engaged culture through music, but also engaged music more deeply through the discussion of culture. As observed by educators promoting a more comprehensive musicianship approach in music education (Hendricks, 2010; Hylton, 2007; Reimer, 2000), the students in this case study were motivated, educated, and engaged by a more comprehensive understanding of the music they were studying.

The findings of this case strongly indicate that “music learning works best when we are mindful, reflective, and critically aware of cultural contexts” (MaydayGroup, 2015). In agreement with culturally responsive pedagogy, students recognized that there are multiple perspectives on the world and on music and it is important to explore these in the study of music (Abril, 2013). By studying culture by way of music, students were made privy to the beliefs and values systems of others and were challenged to think beyond their own natural tendencies of egocentric thinking (Aróstegui & Louro, 2009). This informed their understanding of the art they were borrowing from another culture. It gave them insight into some else’s world and made the difference between “singing a song with words and singing a song with a story and meaning” (Student 10, Final, Q3). Additionally, because of collaborative learning, students brought their own observations and opinions of culture to the conversation.
General Implications from Across Themes

Throughout my analysis of emergent themes that answered each of my four research questions, there were overarching implications that reappeared across the themes. Here I bring attention to these overarching implications as lingering concepts that can be assumed in light of this project.

Expression is important. Findings of this study agree with Broomhead (2001) in that achieving expression within ensembles should be a major objective for music educators. Throughout the study, students indicated that expression was important to communicating the message and value of the culture. They believed it was a central role in performance and an easy way to convey the background that informs a musical work. While expression is valuable for the performers engagement, expression was particularly important for the role of engaging their audience in the music-making experience: “It's not just singing for fun; it is singing to effect people. Half of the performance is the audience, and if we don't involve or intrigue them, we haven't done our job” (Student 11, Final, Q5).

Ownership is important. Students taking ownership of the music is valuable both educationally and musically. In this collaborative learning curriculum, students were empowered to take ownership of the pursuit of knowledge (Bruffee, 1999; Folio & Kreinberg, 2009/2010). Agreeing with Jung’s study (2013), I found that peers learning together developed autonomy in music learning. They seemed to revel in making the music a product of their creative contribution. It resulted in more engaged participation, additional ideas, and connection to expression of the music.

I think this project forced us to be involved personally with the music rather than allowing us to glaze over its value while tuning out during a lecture on its importance.
Because of this, the music is more enjoyable to perform because parts of ourselves are invested in it, and it is also more enjoyable to watch because there is genuine emotion behind the words. (Student 3, Final, Q5)

**Process is important.** This process to bring the topic of culture into the choral classroom was somewhat messy, and often left us feeling vulnerable. Students felt their assignment was ambiguous, and I often felt ill equipped to lead the group to a renewed choral experience. I knew that the motivation behind the process was good, but I was terrified I would not find a way to bring the students along. I further describe several of these frustrations and challenges we encountered throughout the process of the project in Appendix G.

In the middle of the semester when I was still determining my future steps for the project, I was encouraged by Koopman’s (2005) claims that art must have room to be creative:

Artistic activity cannot be forced into a scheme in which clear goals are defined, after which appropriate means are established and put to use in most efficient ways. In the arts there must be room for the free exercise of imagination. The artist does not usually start with a clearly confined conception of what he is going to produce. She needs time to explore, to try out, to adjust, and sometimes to start again from the beginning. (Koopman, 2005, p.118)

This freed me to believe that the process by which we were all coming to a new choral experience was, in fact, the end goal. The journey preparing us for the performance was just as important if not more important than the final concert. The questioning, the discussing, the digging for clarity was the room we needed to produce our art. I found students engaged in learning, creating, and delving deeper into their art. The innovation was in the method.
Recommendations and Suggestions for Conductors and Educators

Having now completed a case study of a collaborative learning curriculum in a higher education choral classroom, there are several recommendations I will make here for educators who wish to replicate my specific curriculum. I will also make several suggestions to conductors and educators about possible ways to tailor the curriculum for future projects in their own classrooms.

Recommendations from this project.

1. Clearly set objectives for the students and define their targets for project completion from the outset. Similarly, it may be advantageous to spend time defining the concept of culture and identifying the underlying cultures of the individual repertoire. Beginning the cycle with exercises that identify and define the culture could help to avoid confusion with the terminology.

2. The first time experimenting with a full-blown collaborative project like this one, conductors may consider repertoire consisting of songs that have more easily distinguished cultures. A few groups in my project expressed that their song had little information available. It may, therefore, be valuable to have completed a pilot investigation of the research available so you can aid the students to expand their research. Because of the additional pressures put on conductors, consider recycling repertoire that is familiar to you in order to save time and energy in preparation. Also consider choosing some repertoire with limited musical challenges. For the first semester using a collaborative learning curriculum, it may serve you and your students to choose music that is not extraordinarily difficult. However, all this does not mean collaborative learning cannot happen with challenging repertoire. I was happy with the level of
difficulty in the repertoire I chose for this project; the styles were varied and we had a few pieces that were musically challenging. One practical way to evaluate your choice would be to determine if your ensemble could offer a successful performance even if the collaborative project struggles or fails.

3. To help eliminate confusion, it may be useful to clearly articulate during the first rehearsal the role of the scribe. For example, you might take some time to explain the scribe’s vital role as leader of discussion and consolidator of research. You could also outline how the role is rotated each week. Another possibility is to have students write down the order of who will serve as scribe each week so that they can anticipate the rotation. I recommend reiterating the expectations for the scribe’s post again during the second rehearsal.

4. Distractions and unplanned interruptions can be expected in any classroom. Because interruptions are normal, I suggest protecting the students’ and the teacher’s objectives by always guaranteeing a group collaboration time in each rehearsal, even at the expense of other plans. This portion of rehearsal should be reliably present. The teacher might find it most helpful if it was decided, prior to the rehearsal, what duration of time is appropriate for small-group discussion and then to guard that time.

**Suggestions for future projects.**

1. When planning a collaborative learning curriculum, consider that the students may not know how to research. It could be effective to have a handout that explains what kind of research and what kinds of sources are acceptable. Perhaps identify a diagnostic framework or a list of categories that students may choose from to broaden their research. In other words, give them elements of culture that they can explore, such as: history,
musicians, reception, composer, instruments, etc. Teachers may also consider dividing roles in a way that gives each student a specific topic or element of the culture to explore. Another way to divide the work could be to allow each group a category of culture to investigate for all the songs. It might be better to come up with a category of research for them to look into each time, a prompt. As this project showed, many students felt empowered when they “had a specific agenda. Having a purpose gives people more confidence and allows leaders to emerge” (Student 3, Final, Q9).

2. Conductors may want to try switching songs occasionally among small groups. This would give each group and individual a more personal encounter with the entire repertoire rather than just one song. After some weeks of research, conductors could coordinate groups in a variety of ways to come up with main cultural insights and suggested action points. There is also the possibility of letting each group choose the song they would like to research (as I did), but not being concerned that all the songs are represented. Some songs may have more than one group assigned to it, but it would mean groups could receive their first choice of song.

3. It was advantageous to interact with the professional jazz vocalists during the semester. These culture bearers gave authentic insight that informed the music. Conductors can seek out culture bearers in the community or online who might serve as a resource to the students’ research or as a supplement to a rehearsal. By bringing them into a rehearsal or referring the students to seek them out in research, students can get a picture of cultural contexts impacting performance from advice offered by experts in the culture.

4. Consider establishing one or several outside meetings for the conductor and each small group before they share their cultural insights with the choir. This would give the
conductor time to intentionally invest in each group and better assess how to mentor and guide. This also may give students further confidence and ownership as they bring their thoughts to the teacher for feedback.

5. I would modify the process by creating an assignment or activity that would require the students to look at each other’s wikis within their small group. This might help the students communicate and understand one another more fully as they watch the clips or read the informative facts that their group members discovered. It would give the students a more efficient way to have discussion. One person in the small group could be appointed to bring a laptop to rehearsal and be in charge of navigating the wiki for the small group during discussion.

6. Finally, I ardently recommend remaining open and expectant for new insights and unexpected surprises. The conductor’s attitude will make a difference in the level of success the project achieves. Within ethical, moral, and legal boundaries conductors can challenge the extent to which creativity finds a place in the choral arts. As one student commended: “Never put up walls. Always be open to suggestions and radical ideas. It just may be awesome!” (Student 6, Final, Q10).

Recommendations for Future Research

I encourage the following recommendations for useful next steps in researching collaborative learning in the higher education choral classroom:

1. Study and survey audience members to learn how they experienced the concerts and how they perceived the benefits to the performers and themselves.

2. Using this curriculum, compare the benefits perceived by more-experienced choral singers with the benefits perceived by less-experienced choral singers.
3. Further research should consider the same or similar curriculum applied in various classroom styles and abilities. For example, research could investigate the benefits for choirs composed primarily of music majors, or advanced a cappella choirs, or gospel choirs, or world music choirs.

4. Though not addressed in this case study, the sample group of participants were predominantly Caucasian. It would be beneficial to observe a more diverse choir to explore the factors of students’ ethnicity as it impacts their experience in collaborative learning of culture.

5. Experiment with an interdisciplinary collaboration between a choir class and another class in the university (i.e., anthropology, sociology, or music history class).

6. Conduct a study of a similar curriculum employing autoethnographic methodology to report the insider experience of those who participated in the project in a stronger, more personal voice. Autoethnography looks different in each case according to the unique experience and perspective of the researcher, and may be presented as personal writing and research, stories, vignettes, poetry, novels, dialogue, or other forms.

**Conclusion**

In my Week 6, March 16 journal, I asked myself, “How is this building bridges?” In my imagination, I set out to create a curriculum that would tie music and culture together. I hoped to help my students emerge as global citizens. I dreamed of an educational experience that would enlighten students to the opportunity of stepping into another’s world. My wish was to witness the vitality of music making being encouraged through the study of cultural contexts in music. I longed for an avenue by which 21st-century populations could proactively cross cultures through music and comprehend the value of their neighbors’ cultures and praise them for it.
I believed that the perfect avenue to bring choral music, culture, and higher education together presented itself in the guise of collaborative learning. How better to begin convincing students of the sociocultural significances of studying choral music than to have them lead their own investigation? With their peers, they would reach an informed and debated conclusion from a 21st-century, college-student perspective of what makes music significant. They would get to determine what makes any piece of repertoire worthy of a performance.

So rehearsals were planned, concepts were examined, tools were set up, and we embarked on an educationally and musically innovative expedition. Despite the hiccups and mishaps, the confusions and the frustrations, we moved forward and came to certain understandings of the cultures behind the music we were examining. But how was this building bridges?

Only when all the student research was finished, the collaborations had been decided, the actions were planned, and the last rehearsal was complete, I finally found the bridges I had sought. During the concert I realized there was one small bridge built between the students and the cultures they had researched all semester. That bridge was named Music. Through the music, students encountered another world and a small part of the world was brought to them.

There was another small bridge built between the students and the music; its name was Culture. By asking questions about another’s culture, students came to a deeper and fresher understanding of their music. The music was even more significant to the students who came closer to it, realizing its value in its context.

But the biggest and most significant bridge—the bridge I was blind to until the concert—was the bridge that spanned both music and culture and brought them to its audience. That bridge was named The Choir. In the final performance, from my very biased but deeply invested
opinion, the choir outmaneuvered all my plans and all my theories when they showed themselves to be the bridge spanning the gap between choral music and its unaware audience. As informed musicians, they took the responsibility to bridge peoples and music together as active and intentional interpreters. Performance was not just a production of sound; performance was an engaging connection, and exchange.

We are here to do more than just memorize some songs and sing them on stage. We are here to learn about the subject at hand (choral performance) as well as broaden our view of the world…That is what a liberal arts education is all about. (Student 16, Final, Q1)
REFERENCES


Al-rahmi, W. M., Othman, M. S., & Musa, M. A. (2014). The improvement of students’ academic performance by using social media through collaborative learning in Malaysian higher education. *Asian Social Science, 10*(8), 210-221.


APPENDIX A

Example Weekly Survey

Q1: What new discovery/information did you encounter about your music’s culture? Specifically or in general.

Q2: Does this new discovery aid your understanding of the culture? How or why not?

Q3: Does this new discovery aid your understanding of the music? How or why not?

Q4: Discuss your evaluation of the group dynamic today in rehearsal.

Q5: How could your time in small group discussion today have been more effective?

Q6: What overall opinions, observations, or questions do you have?
APPENDIX B

Institutional Review Board Approval

B A L L S T A T E
U N I V E R S I T Y

Office of Research Integrity
Institutional Review Board (IRB)
2000 University Avenue
Muncie, IN 47306-0155
Phone: 765-285-5070

DATE: November 20, 2014
TO: Renae Timble, MM
FROM: Ball State University IRB
RE: IRB protocol # 674478-1
TITLE: Bridging cultures through collaborative technology in a higher education choral classroom
SUBMISSION TYPE: New Project
ACTION: APPROVED
DECISION DATE: November 20, 2014
REVIEW TYPE: EXEMPT

The Institutional Review Board reviewed your protocol on November 20, 2014 and has determined the procedures you have proposed are appropriate for exemption under the federal regulations. As such, there will be no further review of your protocol, and you are cleared to proceed with the procedures outlined in your protocol. As an exempt study, there is no requirement for continuing review. Your protocol will remain on file with the IRB as a matter of record.

Exempt Categories:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category 1: Research conducted in established or commonly accepted educational settings, involving normal educational practices, such as (i) research on regular and special education instructional strategies, or (ii) research on the effectiveness of or the comparison among instructional techniques, curricula, or classroom management methods.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Category 2: Research involving the use of educational test (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures or observation of public behavior</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Category 3: Research involving the use of educational test (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures, or observation of public behavior that is not exempt under category 2, if: (i) the human subjects are elected or appointed officials or candidates for public office; or (ii) Federal statutory(s) require(s) without exception that the confidentiality of the personally identifiable information will be maintained throughout the research and thereafter.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Category 4: Research involving the collection of data, documents, records, pathological specimens, or diagnostic specimens, if these sources are publicly available or</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
If the information is recorded by the investigator in such a manner that subjects cannot be identified, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects.

**Category 5:** Research and demonstration projects which are conducted by or subject to the approval of Department or agency heads, and which are designed to study, evaluate or otherwise examine: (i) public benefit or service programs; (ii) procedures for obtaining benefits or services under those programs; (iii) possible changes in methods or levels of payment for benefits or services under these programs.

**Category 6:** Taste and food quality evaluation and consumer acceptance studies, (i) if wholesome foods without additives are consumed or (ii) if a food is consumed which contains a food ingredient at or below the level and for a use found to be safe, by the Food and Drug Administration or approved by the Environmental Protection Agency or the Food Safety and Inspection Service of the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

**Editorial Notes:**

1. **Approved- Exempt**

While your project does not require continuing review, it is the responsibility of the P.I. (and, if applicable, faculty supervisor) to inform the IRB if the procedures presented in this protocol are to be modified or if problems related to human research participants arise in connection with this project. Any procedural modifications must be evaluated by the IRB before being implemented, as some modifications may change the review status of this project. Please contact (ORI Staff) if you are unsure whether your proposed modification requires review or have any questions. Proposed modifications should be addressed in writing and submitted electronically to the IRB (http://www.bsu.edu/irb) for review. Please reference the above IRB protocol number in any communication to the IRB regarding this project.

**Reminder:** Even though your study is exempt from the relevant federal regulations of the Common Rule (45 CFR 46, subpart A), you and your research team are not exempt from ethical research practices and should therefore employ all protections for your participants and their data which are appropriate to your project.
APPENDIX C

Final Survey

The Project

Q1: Name 3 specific things that you appreciated about this project.

Q2: Describe how you experienced the discussion of culture as it related to our repertoire.

Q3: Name a specific “aha" moment for you, where you realize that this study could help you better perform?

Q4: How has this influenced you to treat music differently in the future?

Q5: What benefits do you think this project has on students, on music performance, or choirs?

The Process

Q6: What about this process was helpful?

Q7: What about this process was frustrating?

Q8: What do you recommend that I do in future semesters to make it easier and more effective?

Q9: What would you recommend to get students to work better together with their groups?

Future Research

Q10: What would you recommend for me to better my research?

Q11: What do you wish you had to better and more effectively participate in the case study?

Q12: Other than through surveys after every rehearsal, what other formats might I have used to get your feedback?
APPENDIX D

List of Repertoire

Antioch (#277)
Original Sacred Harp, 1911 Edition
Music by U. G. Wood

When I Fall in Love
Hal Leonard Corporation
Victor Young (1900-1956)
arrangement by Phil Azelton

It’s a Grand Night for Singing
Chappell Music Company
Music by Richard Rodgers (1902-1979),
Words by Oscar Hammerstein II (1895-1960)
arrangement by William Stickles

Some Nights
Alfred Music Publishing
Nate Ruess, Andrew Dost, Jack Antonoff, and Jeffrey Bhasker
arrangement by Andy Beck

Poor Wayfaring Stranger
Hal Leonard Corporation
arrangement by Keith Christopher

My Love Walks in Velvet
E.C. Schirmer Music Co.
Gwyneth Walker (b. 1947)

Baba Yetu
Alfred Music Publishing
Christopher Tin (b. 1976)

It is Well with My Soul
Lorenz Corporation
Words by Horatio G. Spafford (1828-1888),
Music by Philip P. Bliss (1838-1876)
arrangement by Lloyd Larson

Hallelujah to the King
Word Music
Jason Michael Webb
APPENDIX E

Individual Assignment Example Worksheet

For the performance of _______________(title of song), I think it is valuable for the audience to know/understand ______________________________ (what gives this piece value in our concert?). Here are my four suggestions for how we may appropriately and effectively communicate this point:

1. __________
2. __________
3. __________
4. __________

References to consider:

Source #1
Source #2
Etc.
APPENDIX F

Final Projects

The following is an abbreviated reproduction of cultural insights and action points offered by Choral Union small groups for each song performed this evening.

Antioch

Cultural Insight #1: Singing intended for the choral members not for an audience
   Action Point – sing in a hollow square
   Action Point – face each other
Cultural Insight #2: An informal director
   Action Point – recruit a student director
   Action Point – encourage the conductor to sing along
Cultural Insight #3: Rough, unpolished diction
   Action Point – sound like a gathering of people, instead of a college choir
   Action Point – do not try to use perfect vowels

When I Fall in Love

Cultural Insight #1: Jazz tone
   Action Point – linger on certain words
   Action Point – use a smooth, straight-tone timbre
Cultural Insight #2: A conversational delivery
   Action Point – alter rhythms to have a more relaxed, communicative sound
   Action Point – words should flow seamlessly
Cultural Insight #3: Intimacy of the song
   Action Point – memorize the song in order to sing to not at the audience
   Action Point – choral members spread apart while Renae conducts from the back

It’s a Grand Night for Singing

Cultural Insight #1: Romantic musical theatre song
   Action Point – convey the feeling of first falling in love
   Action Point – use more animated facial expressions as in musical theatre rather than classical choral traditions
Cultural Insight #2: Musical written for television
   Action Point – attempt facial expressions as if actors
   Action Point – allow free body movement to express the joy of the song
Cultural Insight #3: Sung in the context of dance
   Action Point – have a couple dancing to engage the audience
   Action Point – choir should sway as if dancing
Some Nights

Cultural Insight #1: War theme
  Action Point –percussionists and soloists wear war face-paint and dark colors
  Action Point –choir formation splits in half to resemble opposing sides in battle

Cultural Insight #2: Importance of rhythm in pop culture
  Action Point –utilize percussionists
  Action Point –incorporate simple choreography

Cultural Insight #3: Direct confrontation of the song’s message
  Action Point –soloists interact directly with audience in aisles
  Action Point –use wireless microphones and spotlights

Poor Wayfaring Stranger

Cultural Insight #1: Sung by travelers
  Action Point –walk in as we sing
  Action Point –use darker vowels to express exhaustion from a journey

Cultural Insight #2: Religious piece
  Action Point –explain to the audience the importance of crossing Jordan signifying passing into the promised land
  Action Point –encourage raising of hands like a worship service

Cultural Insight #3: Somber journey toward a great reward
  Action Point –singers are to communicate perseverance in hardship
  Action Point –singers think of a hard time in their lives and relate it to the song

My Love Walks in Velvet

Cultural Insight #1: Relationship of piano and voice in an art song
  Action Point –piano placed in a different location to highlight the relationship between voice and piano in the art song
  Action Point –choir stands in mixed formation rather than in separate section to imitate one voice dialoging with piano

Cultural Insight #2: Lyrics are a poem set to music
  Action Point –alter rhythms to have a more relaxed, communicative sound
  Action Point –words should flow seamlessly

Cultural Insight #3: Composed for a wedding
  Action Point –let the audience know in program notes
  Action Point –gestures could be made to express love to one another


**Baba Yetu**

Cultural Insight #1: Video game music to accompany entertainment medium  
*Action Point* – turn lights out to signal that musicians are not as important  
*Action Point* – show video game trailer in background  
Cultural Insight #2: Unifying cultures-American game, Swahili words, Christian prayer  
*Action Point* – surround audience for unified feel  
*Action Point* – add percussion instruments for an ethnic feel  
Cultural Insight #3: Connects audience emotionally to international awareness  
*Action Point* – improve pronunciation  
*Action Point* – facial expressions should express the words

**It is Well with My Soul**

Cultural Insight #1: History of song  
*Action Point* – read passage about song before the choir sings, providing background  
*Action Point* – make a short film showing events that inspired the piece  
Cultural Insight #2: Purpose of song  
*Action Point* – read a passage about the purpose/message of the song  
*Action Point* – use clear diction to help audience understand  
Cultural Insight #3: Emotion of song  
*Action Point* – singers find an emotional connection to the song  
*Action Point* – pay attention to dynamics and flow of the piece to emphasize important words and phrases

**Hallelujah to the King**

Cultural Insight #1: Song of praise  
*Action Point* – give a lot of energy and emphasize powerful words  
*Action Point* – use body motion such as swaying and clapping enthusiastically  
Cultural Insight #2: Importance of lyrics in gospel music  
*Action Point* – discuss the meaning of words “hallelujah” and “glory”  
*Action Point* – singers connect personally to the joyful emotion of the words  
Cultural Insight #3: Dynamics as an important element  
*Action Point* – grab the audience’s attention and engage them in the performance  
*Action Point* – vocally dynamic and powerful carried through a cappella phrase
APPENDIX G

Realities of Being a Teacher

Now, my fellow choral directors, those who may still be unsatisfied with questions unanswered: Let me speak to some of the trying realities I encountered on this journey. I could continue to share all the wonderful attributes of integrating this curriculum in my classroom, for this experience has been a gratifying one. But as any teacher will testify, days in the classroom rarely fare as you plan them, no matter how diligently and realistically you make your preparations.

This flash into what I hope to be my long teaching career was an extremely personal and vulnerable existence. As is strewn throughout the relaying of our collaborative learning story in Chapter 4, there were many times along the way when I doubted my vision, my organization, and myself. It was the workings of my own precarious yet hopeful mind that forced my pitiable choir to advance into this enterprise. I felt a great responsibility to carry this initiative to completion. Much was on the line: the choir’s success, the students’ opinion and morale, the inevitable concert, the project’s triumph, the aspirations for future choirs, and, of course, my pride.

Teacher Pressure

While documenting this case study I aimed to emphasize the influential role of the teacher-mentor. Since the students took a more central role in their learning, my responsibility was to direct them through the collaborative process by giving encouragement, suggestions, feedback, and insight. I was there to steer them away from disaster, to nudge back onto a more certain path, and to challenge them to explore beyond the safe and familiar. But, I wondered, does handing over authority to students make me too much of a “backseat” conductor? On the
contrary, I found that this role came with pressures that were more intense than those of semesters past when I did not feature collaborative learning.

**Repertoire.** One of the best examples of this fact was the depth to which this rehearsal process required more preparation, better research, and more thorough understanding of the repertoire. In a normal, teacher-centric rehearsal, I would inform the students about what I thought was important for them to understand about the music. It was up to me how much insight we learned about our music. Since I would also be the monitor of musical preparations, bringing cultural context to the repertoire would be a haphazard second thought in the rehearsals. In reality, the route we took this semester placed greater pressure on me to know the ins and outs of the repertoire.

In order for me to know how to mentor, guide, and correct the students in their discoveries, I now had to be prepared for whatever direction they would go. I needed to have completed my own research so I was aware of any tendencies, beliefs, or errors they may come across. I had to be informed enough to comment and aware enough to challenge inconsistencies. When they were stuck and needed help moving forward or when they needed to be challenged to see big perspective, I had to be prepared to coach. The pressure to thoroughly examine the repertoire was more intense than if I had retained all authority and power to decide what information and to what extent students were informed.

**Meeting goals.** There is a great responsibility on the part of the teacher to fight for her students’ ideas, to grasp the visions of the students and make them a reality, even beyond what they expect. I was encouraging them to dream big and convincing them that they had an actual say-so in our performance, and I truly wanted to honor those ideals. They were spending a good portion of the semester in collaborative discussion coming up with their own ideas and making
the music their own. I was watching students develop opinions and it created for me significant pressure to bring all of their visions to fruition. However, I was also working under a time limit. The responsibility fell on me to both protect the students’ contribution and be realistic about the time and resources we had available. That meant staying open-minded to creativity yet attentive to practicality. That was a heavy load to bear.

**Limiting my talking.** My journals throughout the semester often included a statement to this effect: “I thought the rehearsal itself went very well but I realize I am struggling to make sure I’m not talking too much” (Journal Week 3). This was difficult, particularly since we only met once a week. With a new design there was much to explain. I wanted to remind them of how to accomplish assignments, encourage student-led education, explain my objectives for the project, keep the ensemble apprised on each of the group’s discoveries, and re-convince them that their eagerness about this project should match my passion! I often chided myself while I was talking to desist and to be economical with my words.

**Uncertain of my goal.** There were many times during the semester when I realized my own negligence in preparation or direction. For example, I had neglected to emphasize at the very beginning of this process that part of the small group discussion needed to include showing the wiki posts to the rest of the group. Looking at the posts rather than just explaining the posts would have been helpful, especially with videos. It would have required that each week someone in the group have the technology to show the wiki. This would guarantee they would look at each other’s work. But once I realized that I had not set up that expectation, it was too late to incorporate a new element. By Week 4, I was tossing it into the instructions as an afterthought before sending the students to their small group. It was said, but with very little authority.
I also felt disappointed by inconsistent attention to the ever-important question I vowed to raise weekly: “Who has something that will inspire or inform how we rehearse?” I wrote it on my rehearsal plans, I reminded myself every week, yet I usually failed to press for an answer from the choir or even ask it at all. In my reasoning, the purpose for this question was to constantly keep the greater goal of the project before them. The problem I kept encountering during the course of the semester was that I wasn’t entirely certain what was that greater goal. In my opinion, there were so many appealing benefits to this project that it was difficult to narrow down one overall goal. I risked becoming distracted by the many ways this project could benefit students, teachers, choirs, and even universities.

The process felt unstable to me as I led. I was inventing elements of the curriculum as we went along. As I observed what was emerging to be successful and what was a futile battle, I made changes and decisions about what we realistically could accomplish. At times, it seemed I was in “survival mode” doing whatever it took to keep the project moving forward. A student’s comment showed that at least one student expected more communication of criterion, saying that he or she needed “more of an idea of what the projects end goal might look like so I know what I am working towards” (Student 8, Final, Q11).

**Unexpected distractions.** I planned my rehearsals to the minute, but often encountered unexpected distractions that threatened to destroy our progress and fill me with anxiety. This happened to us in Week 4:

Today the rehearsal was moved to an alternate location because of administrative planning with the School of Music. I was worried about how we were going to be able to continue momentum and sharing without the technology that we usually have. There were no TVs or screens available for the rehearsal. This forced me to spend more time in
small group sharing as well as in actual note learning. Perhaps this was helpful in reminding me that we also do have to work on music! We ended up working on all but one of the pieces of music. (Journal Week 4)

The distraction, in our case, turned out well. It was important to redeem the time with musical preparation, but also to remember that collaboration can still happen without the technology. It was easy to get caught up in the technology part of the project and forget the objectives. The important things were allowing them to discuss context, tying it to the music, and working together.

Facilitating Small Groups

Bringing small groups into an ensemble rehearsal did create challenges. Trying to mentor, monitor, and motivate the groups at each rehearsal kept me on my toes, particularly as the semester approached finals week. Everyone was stressed out, students were skipping rehearsal, and there was a general lag of energy (Week 8). The most concerning realities I had to contend with were attendance and participation issues.

**Attendance.** Any one member’s absence in rehearsal was glaringly more obvious in these types of rehearsals. The members of each small group relied on one another for discussion, for providing information, and for contributing to the project. An absence made a difference to that offender’s small group. There was at least one less wiki post and it also often confused the rotation of the scribe. If the scribe didn’t show up, there was no one there to document the group’s collaborated thoughts and it left the group deficient. Absences sometimes made a difference in the quality of work, as well, when not everyone was there to contribute.

**Participation.** Even if students were present, however, there was no guarantee that they were willing to participate. It was very discouraging when certain students seemed indifferent to
the project. I was waiting for them to contribute to the discussion or even to contribute their wiki assignments. Just as it was so rewarding to observe members equally participating in their groups, it was incredibly frustrating when they just didn’t seem to care. Even with a scribe assigned, some groups suffered from no obvious leader taking charge. For other groups, putting them in small groups seemed to indicate a time to catch up with friends rather than a time to work.

I knew this indifference was also hindering small group dynamics. The students who were not contributing aggravated those who were sincerely trying to make the experience a success. For those productive members, being partnered with those who were disinterested was discouraging and caused them to feel that they had to make up for the others’ lack of participation. The grading system was set up so that students only received individual grades for posting on the wiki. Since there was no group grade, the disinterested participants didn’t pull down the grades of those who were engaged; however, the disinterest delayed momentum and productive discussion. I knew that the students who didn’t participate were holding the group back from experiencing success because there were some groups that experienced productivity even if there wasn’t full attendance. As long as the students present were participating, they could collaborate and make progress even with a partial group. A student shared this account of what occurred in one group: “…there [were] only two of us, the other three were gone. However just the two of us were really productive!” (Student 19, Week 7, Q2). When I looked around the room and saw groups in which everyone was present both physically and mentally, it seemed that students enjoyed the chance to work in small groups. “Today was my favorite day working in groups because the majority of our group was here and we were talkative” (Student 21, Week 7, Q2).
Selling the Project

Getting the students onboard with the project, particularly at the beginning of the semester, was constantly a concern. A few students—and I will even confidently speculate the minority—were never fully convinced that this project was worth their time. For example, comments such as this infuriated me: “I think that you should still have the students look things up, but emphasize the things that you believe to be the most important about each piece and what you want the students to take away from them” (Student 10, Final, Q8). It indicated to me that the student who wrote it was completely unaware of what we were trying accomplish. Somehow this student missed the point that I wanted them discover what they found valuable. I wanted to encourage them to have critical thoughts and opinions rather than being spoon-fed the information that I alone deemed worthy.

I desired that they recognized the potential and excitement for this project, but in order to do so it seemed that some degree of handholding was required for many students. Three students suggested sending out reminder emails to help make discussion more efficient: “Well, my grade is at stake, and that's encouragement enough. Perhaps emails to remind us that we have research to do for this course. It is difficult to remember since we only meet once a week” (Student 20, Week 4, Q5).

I was frustrated with these comments because the students expected me to remind them of what seemed to be a simple addition to their week. The expectation of weekly email reminders seemed at the collegiate level seemed excessive. This choir wanted to be coddled. They were resistant to change. More than that, I think that some students did not want to be required to do more than what was previously normal. I don’t know how much of it was because this was a
choir, how much it was because it was Monday night, how much was because it was because they were undergraduate students, or how much this was a characteristic of the generation.

Maybe the nature of the project is what caused this lack of enthusiasm and persistence in some. By altering a traditional rehearsal process, it seemed I was required to give more direction and lay more structure in order for the students to understand the concept. Most students were not used to being asked to do anything outside the classroom for a choir class. If they were, it was in regard to learning notes. Homework where they were required to go look up information? Staggering. I was altering a long history of choral tradition. I felt desperate to keep positive energy, to keep up momentum, and to empower my students.

Ultimately there were students who refused to buy into the process, those who refused to cooperate or try. As in most classes there were those who just were not convinced that my self-declared “worthy” curriculum had any merit: “I think I would learn more from being told information rather than finding it myself because that's just my personal learning style” (Student 28, Week 4, Q6). Their doubt caused me frequently to doubt myself. Maybe this wasn’t such a great idea after all. Perhaps collaborative learning is too intense for undergraduates, I thought; maybe I overshot and should have expected this to work with graduate students instead.

I was grateful for those who reminded me that trying to get a group of people or even a person to buy into a new idea takes time and will depend on the person who is receiving it because many did buy in: “The other members are just young honestly and don't realize that when you put your heart into a project or music overall the outcome is magical. They will learn eventually, I wish I had earlier” (Student 24, Week 4, Q5).

I think this comment touches on the reality of many frustrations I experienced. It seemed that I did not communicate well or the students did not fully grasp the artistic freedom available
to them. They were either not convinced or did not understand the role I was asking them to play in our artistic product. One student said, “I felt like I had some ideas for my piece that could have been implemented, but I wasn't sure if would step on your toes” (Student 6, Final, Q11).

They were accustomed to many past experiences of choral rehearsals and so it was understandably a new involvement in choral music performance. This disconnect between my hope and their understanding limited this student’s potential for contributing:

Sometimes it was difficult to come up with ideas for posts, because it was such a different style of learning, I felt as though we didn't realize how much freedom we had to research literally ANY aspect of the song, era, composer, culture, style, lyrics, genre, etc. (Student 13, Final, Q7)

This was a new process for them. They were required to adjust not only their workload, but also their expectations of where the boundaries had been placed. In reality, my job as a teacher went beyond imparting knowledge; I was to walk students through the challenges of this new initiative and to keep us all focused during the process.