

Teaching Through Music. Preliminary results of an exercise into using songs in the sociology classroom for enhancing student engagement and understanding of concepts.

Paper presented to the DBS Annual Research Day, Dublin Business School, June 2016

Annette Jorgensen, School of Arts, DBS College.

Introduction

This paper has grown out of several years of experiences I have had with using songs in the sociology classroom. Five years ago I was tasked with putting together a module on globalisation for students taking the final year of a Social Science degree. One of the topics I wanted to cover was migration, and as I studied and prepared this topic, a song I had been fond of during in my teenage years popped into my head. It seemed not only relevant, but an evocative way of understanding how migration actually *feels* – something the statistics in the textbooks were less suited for conveying. On a whim, I decided to play the song in class that semester, and I have done so ever since in classes related to issues of migration, diaspora, identity and Irishness. The song is *Thousands Are Sailing*, written by Philip Chevron and recorded by London-Irish ‘celtic punk’ band the Pogues in 1988. The song tells the story of a 1980s migrant who encounters the ghost of his ‘predecessor’ from the 1850s at Ellis Island, and goes on to reflect on his own experiences, the dreams and the tough realities of emigration. It evokes symbols of Irishness throughout the verses and ends on a bittersweet reflection on home - ‘the land that makes us refugees’. In terms of its musical style, *Thousands* draws heavily on traditional Irish music, yet is recorded using both traditional and contemporary instruments. To my delight I found that the song resonated with many of the students, and not just Irish ones. I was surprised to find that many students of a non-Irish background, who would not necessarily be familiar with the symbolic language of *Thousands are Sailing*, felt that it echoed some of their own experiences. Thus, what is a very Irish (or Irish diaspora) song appears to invoke some universal experiences of migrants, including my students who have come to live and study in Ireland from elsewhere.

It came naturally to me to play songs in class and discuss their meaning with my students. I have always had a passion for music, and lately this is developing into a more formal research interest. This means not just listening to, thinking and talking about music, but also considering how music can be understood from a sociological point of view. Of relevance to this project is the connection between music, culture and identity. As a sociologist of culture, I believe that music is a particularly relevant cultural form for understanding social life. Through practices such as performing, singing along and dancing to it, music is embodied culture. Whether we are aware of it or not, when we engage with music we also reinforce and affirm certain cultural norms and values. Furthermore, writing music and

lyrics, as well as listening to them, is an intellectual practice which reflects the social, cultural and political context, and which may – to a certain extent – influence and help shape contemporary culture. Music channels emotion, experience and memory, going beyond a purely linguistic narrative in a way few other cultural forms can. In other words, it can give meaning to human existence. From a sociological point of view, music serves as *identity marker*, along with associated subcultural forms (clothing, style, language). Choosing to play or listen to particular musical forms is one of the ways in which we tell the world – and ourselves – who we are and what we are about.

It therefore seems logical to use music in the classroom to encourage students to consider the connection between culture and identity. Identity is a key concept in contemporary social science. It is described by theorists as fluid, changing, negotiated and contested. Identity is represented by individual and collective actors in myriad ways, and it is constantly communicated and interpreted throughout social life (see for example Hall, Evans and Nixon 2013). The social construction of identity in a globalised world has many layers and students sometimes find this abstract idea quite challenging. They therefore benefit from engagement with concrete practical examples. To facilitate students' appreciation of the concept of identity, it helps to encourage them to consider different identity markers with which personal and national identities are symbolised. Music can be a particularly powerful way in which identity is constructed for and by people. It can evoke deep emotions, it can cross spatial boundaries, facilitate everyday rituals and give us a sense of self (Frith 1996). In other words, it can give meaning to human existence. The construction through music of Irish identity in particular has been the subject of some recent research. Historical contexts of colonialism, oppression and diaspora have all led to an extensive and rich legacy musical expression of Irishness, across the globe. Irish musicians and songwriters are also over represented in contemporary musical output. Research in this field has examined Irish songs as 'texts' containing messages about the meaning of Irishness (see for example Smyth 2009). This project assesses the usefulness of utilising music bring to life the concept of identity. It aims to make a theoretical concept exciting and relevant to students' own lives by examining historical and contemporary songs in the classroom.

Music as a teaching tool

Other sociologists have previously used various in-class exercises focusing on the cultural analysis of song lyrics, musical styles, and music videos in order to encourage students to engage with sociological theories and concepts. For example, Elterman (1983) played songs to students in order to illustrate the concept of social class. Walczak & Reuter (1994) gave their students 'song-lyric homework' in advance of class in order to facilitate discussion of class, religion, poverty and gender roles, whereas

Gerbrandt & Gilmore (2013) asked their students to select songs that reflected social structures which had influenced their lives. John Massaro, a lecturer at the State University of New York College at Potsdam, taught an entire module about Bruce Springsteen's lyrics, which he believed demonstrated 'how the personal and the political can melt into one' (Bartlett 2005), which would be a useful tool for developing students' sociological imagination (the awareness of how the individual and society are interconnected). Finally, Albers & Bach (2003) played songs that related to a range of different concepts in order to establish rapport and win the trust of first year students who were new to, and possibly daunted by, the college experience.

This current project involved playing music to students in class, providing lyrics sheets, and guiding them through an analysis of the lyrics and musical style. The songs were selected because it was felt they reflected various aspects of contemporary Irishness and related issues. Students were given questions to help them identify themes and tensions within the songs, and a class discussion was held about each piece of music. Finally, students were asked to reflect on the experience. Students at three different levels took part in the exercise. They were, firstly, a small group of 10 students, who were enrolled in the Diploma in Social Science (level 6) and taking a module called Introduction to Sociology. These students were completely new to sociology and in the class the exercise mostly served the purpose of icebreaker and encouraging student to begin think differently about culture and society. The second group were students in the final year of a three-year level 7 degree in Social Studies. For this group, the music exercise was part of a module I teach on Gender & Sexuality. There were 18 students in the class the day of the exercise. Finally, I used an expanded version of the exercise with the final year Social Science (level 8) students, both full time and part time (approx. 25 students in each group). For the Globalisation module I teach these students, I developed two separate sessions using music in class and I handed out feedback forms which allowed more extensive reflection on the part of the students. The discussion that follows is therefore based mostly on these students.

The songs were chosen because I felt they reflected issues relevant to each module that were also part of the complex ways in which we construct identities for ourselves and others in contemporary society. See table 1 for details. The only regret I had was that all the songs I ended up using were written and performed by male artists. Given time constraints and the fact that I had decided to use Irish artists only (to reflect issues of Irish identities) I was not able to find any songs with suitably rich lyrics by female artists. There are plenty of talented Irish female musicians whose songs would warrant sociological analysis in class, but for this exercise I wanted lyrics that would allow detailed interpretation and discussion of particular issues required for the modules into which the exercises were to be embedded. Whether my inability to find examples of suitable lyrics by female artists is a reflection of the different styles of expressions by male and female songwriters, the continued

dominance of men in the music industry, or whether it simply just happened by chance, is a matter for another investigation. For now, the songs I chose were suitable for the exercise on analysing identity and Irishness in the classroom, so I will move onto outlining the exercise itself.

Module	Songs used	Relevant issues
Introduction to Sociology	<i>Thousands Are Sailing</i> (Philip Chevron)	Emigration, diaspora, Irishness
Gender & Sexuality	<i>Chris and Stevie</i> (Damien Dempsey)	Masculinities, gender roles
	<i>Under Clery's Clock</i> (Philip Chevron)	Homophobia, heterosexual privilege
	<i>Take Me To Church</i> (Hozier)	Religion, secularisation, sexuality
Globalisation Session one: Urban Change	<i>Ghosts of Overdoses</i> (Damien Dempsey)	Gentrification, social class
	<i>Cold Old Fire</i> (Lynched)	Recession, place attachment
Globalisation Session two: Migration	<i>Thousands Are Sailing</i> (Philip Chevron)	Emigration, diaspora, Irishness
	<i>Nothing But the Same Old Story</i> (Paul Brady)	Emigration, diaspora, discrimination
	<i>Huguenot</i> (Philip Chevron)	Immigration, urban change, place identity

Table 1: Songs used in the exercise

Analysing musical texts

The purpose of the exercise was threefold: Firstly, it was designed to encourage student engagement in the class. Secondly, it was hoped the exercise would increase student understanding of different theoretical concepts and further their ability to apply those concepts to real-life cultural forms. Finally, I speculated that perhaps analysing songs in class would increase students general sociological imagination (the ability to go beyond common sense explanations and understand reflect on the relationship between individual and society) beyond the classroom. In order to do so, students were asked to analyse the songs as 'texts', which means interpreting both the lyrics and the musical style and arrangements from a sociological perspective. I explained to the students that they should try to go beyond the immediate 'surface' of the song by looking for key themes, symbols and ideas expressed. They were asked to go through the song lyrics line by line looking for clues, and then to

examine all the different elements to develop with a final interpretation. To aid this work, students were provided with handouts containing the lyrics for each song, as well as a list of questions (see below). I first played the song while the students read the lyrics. Next, they were given time to go through the words and consider the analysis question. Finally, when the students had carried out this individual interpretive work, we held a class discussion about each song and collectively arrived at a final analysis of how the song related to the theories and concepts from each module.

For each song consider:

- 1 Who is speaking? To whom?
- 2 When is the song set?
- 3 Where is the song set?
- 4 Why does the song begin and end the way it does?
- 5 What aspects of [concepts from each module, e.g. masculinities, urban change or migration] are communicated in the song?
- 6 What is the message in the song?
- 7 Can you relate to the story or message in the song? Why/not?
- 8 Does the song help you realise that private troubles are public issues? Why/not? ^{a)}
- 9 Could this song have been written by someone in a different country, or is it particular to Irish culture and society? Why? What is Irish about it?
- 10 Does it matter that it was written by an Irish person / to an Irish audience? (does it change the meaning of the song?)

a) The sociological imagination. All students taking sociology modules would be familiar with this, but it was also explained at the start of each session.

Table 2: Analytical questions used during exercise

Evaluation: student engagement and understanding

I was delighted with the level of student engagement with this exercise. Students in all groups actively took part in both the individual written components and the group discussions. In fact, during several sessions we ran out of time because students spent so much time analysing the songs first on their own, writing extensive answers to the questions asked (see fig 1 below), and again during the lively and exciting class discussions.

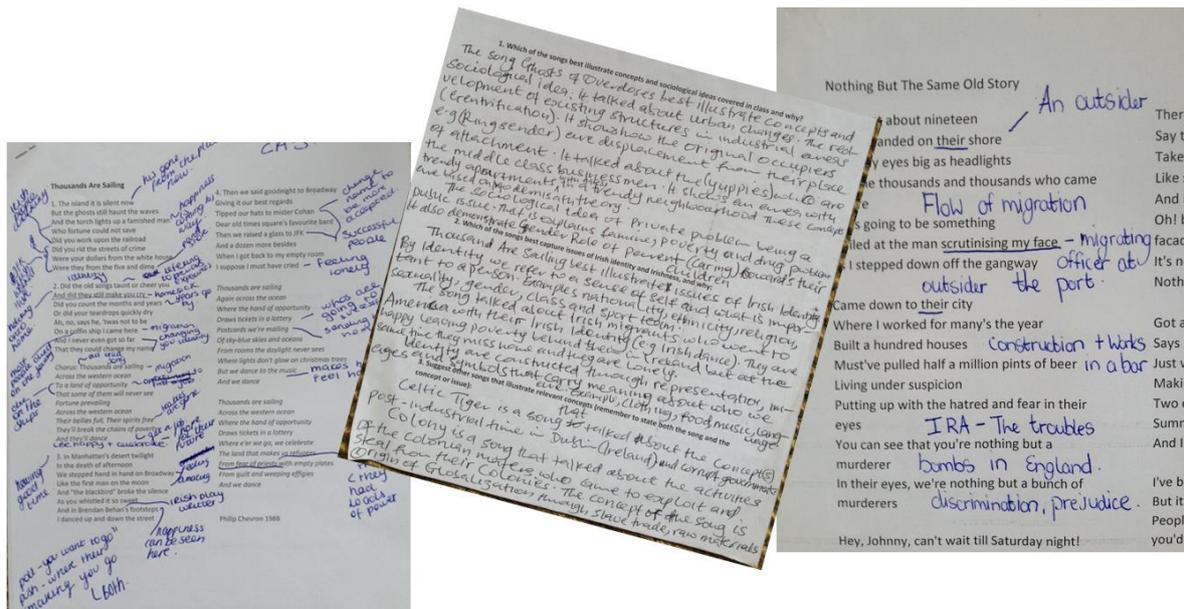


Fig 1: Evidence of student engagement

There was also considerable evidence to suggest that the exercise helped students understand, relate to, and apply relevant sociological concepts. In both class discussions and in their written answers, most students evoked theoretical concepts to interpret the meanings of the songs. For example,

Thousands Are Sailing tackles concepts of globalisation and change in society, cultural identity and continuity. In addition to troubles in society, like the issues of religion and immigration, the songs begins to describe the issues then with its climax then the reach for solutions, refuge and adapting to changes, and then reflecting on the outcomes. The song undergoes the process of effects from consequences people pay as a result of events such as poverty/famine.

From an Irish perspective anyway, it is clear that music plays a big part in shaping our identity. It links us to times and places and brings us together when we are abroad. We identify with people we don't know through hearing the same songs. Irish bars abroad playing Irish music definitely adds to a sense of identity.

Has the exercise increased their general ability to think sociologically about the world and our culture? In some ways this is more difficult to measure. Whether analysing songs in class increases the students' general ability to see the connections between individual lives and wider social circumstances is a more long term issue. However, in their feedback at the end of the exercises, many of the social science students certainly showed evidence of critical thinking:

Nothing but the Same Old Story really gets across the concept of identity and perceived identity. The guy in the song is just a hopeful young Irish man who wants to make the best of his life in England but because of the troubles back home he is perceived as dangerous. His identity is being chosen / constructed for him. So yes, this song helped reinforce things I learnt in class.

External factors affect everyone. The song (*Ghosts of Overdoses*) created awareness about how external factors from multinational corporations had affected the people locally. Trying to solve one problem by creating jobs had eventually created inequality and marginalisation.

It (*Thousands are Sailing*) demonstrated what it means to be an immigrant, to be marginalised in a different country. The messages were very powerful both in content and the way it was presented.

Student reflection and feedback

In a neoliberal age where the student has become consumer, it is important not to confuse student satisfaction with evidence of meeting learning outcomes. However, an exercise that was deliberately designed to encourage student participant and engagement will fail unless the students feel it is worthwhile and enjoyable or interesting. Furthermore, Gerbrandt and Gilmore (2013) stress the importance of student reflection in evaluating the success of using music to teach sociological theory. After the class exercises, students were therefore asked to fill in reflection sheets and submit them (see table 3).

Almost every single student responded very positively in the feedback and reflection. Generally, they gave two reasons for enjoying the exercises:

1) They enjoy music generally:

I would analyse songs every week if I could, because I love listening to music and I find it really interesting to take the time to listen to, and interpret, the lyrics, the music itself, and the meanings

- 1 Which of the songs best illustrate concepts and sociological ideas covered in class? Why?
- 2 Which of the songs best capture issues of Irish identity and Irishness? Why?
3. Suggest other songs that illustrate relevant concepts?
- 4 Do you think analysing and discussing songs in class is helpful for understanding the following (please also state why):
 - a [Identity construction/gender and sexuality/globalisation and its impact]
 - b The sociological imagination (that private troubles are public issues)
 - c That music and the media contain messages about our culture
 - d Anything else related to your studies
- 5 Would you prefer not to use songs in class, and why?
- 6 Any other comments and suggestions

Table 3: Student feedback sheet

2) They enjoy doing varied types of activities in class:

I think it is a good idea as it was something different. Rather than always reading books and articles it was a nice change

In particular, however, the cultural form of contemporary music – and its ability to inspire emotional responses - seems to have provoked thinking in some students:

It tells a story of how the people really feel.

(Songs) help you reflect on concerns, sorrows and people's experiences that could be private stories or collective experiences like migration. It helps grasp a better understanding of what type of dilemmas we're faced with, especially in historic times like the Famine, where it is difficult to imagine what it was like.

Found it helpful as you could feel the struggle people were going through for example, *Cold Old Fire*, I felt sorry for these men who had it tough during the recession. I didn't experience it first hand, so it opened up my mind to see how other people handled it, and how they got through it.

A couple of students suggested that songs should be only one type of cultural analysis done in the classroom. For example, they suggested relevant movies to watch, and one student requested that the music videos were played instead of audio of the songs. Others felt the restricting the songs to Irish ones was limiting, something which I had already observed myself. However, when the students were asked to suggest other songs for use in class, almost all of them suggested traditional Irish songs. This highlights the relationship between (traditional) Irish music and Irish identity. In the end, only one student gave actual negative feedback:

I would prefer not to use songs in class because you can't really understand the message the song is saying.

However on the next page, under other comments, the same student continued:

I feel there should be more time allowed to listen to music in class.

This student was of a non-Irish background, and an unfamiliarity with Irish culture and/or language issues may have made the exercise more challenging for them.

A second student, also of a non-Irish background, suggested something similar:

Might be better to have the songs before as homework so that we are familiar especially for non Irish to help understand it (...) I needed more time for reading the songs and listen to them – non Irish not so easy to understand at once, needs more time.

It is worth noting that both these students did well in their analyses of the songs and seem to have understood their messages as well as students of Irish backgrounds. The unfamiliarity with the cultural form in question may therefore lead to insecurity or students feeling uncomfortable, rather than actually impact their learning and understanding. A third student from a non-Irish background originally voiced concern when the exercise was introduced. However, afterwards, in their written feedback, the same person explained:

I was initially sceptical about the songs but I think the songs actually opened my inner mind to reason and see the power of music in communicating/conveying messages across to audiences (...) I would suggest that this idea of using songs to analyse and discuss one's understanding of concepts should be retained as part of this module. Many students like myself may find it strange at first but they would soon realise how much it broadens our ability to reason in a very different but educative way.

Conclusion: culture, identity and music in the classroom

Reflecting on this exercise reinforced my beliefs that songs do indeed carry cultural meaning if we can place them in the social, historical, cultural and geographical context in which they were written. As my students experienced, the work of an individual artist may help us understand something of their

times and place, reveal insight into cultural contexts, even if this may not have been the original intention of the writer. Songs in particular are often drawn from the writer's own life experiences, from their place in the world, or inspired by the times they have lived through. Songs and their messages can therefore be a useful tool for allowing students engage with different theoretical concepts. In order to facilitate learning in a multicultural classroom, students should be offered to opportunity to familiarise themselves with the songs in their own time, prior to class discussion. A wider variety of musical styles and songs from different cultures might also be useful. But overall, I strongly recommend using music in the classroom. Based on my experiences and on the student feedback, it is clear that songs allow students a more genuine and emotional 'way in' than facts and figures from textbooks. As one student rather eloquently put it in their feedback:

Music and the context in which a songs was written or produced can be a gateway to understanding specific cultures.

This is one of the main aims sociological teaching and learning.

References

Albers, B. & R. Bach (2003) Rockin' Soc: Using Popular Music to Introduce Sociological Concepts. *Teaching Sociology*, 31, 237-245.

Bartlett, Thomas (2005) A Course Examines the Political Themes of Bruce Springsteen's Songs. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 51 (24)

Elterman, H. (1983). Using Popular Music to Teach Sociology. *Teaching Sociology*, 11 (4) 529-538.

Frith, S. (1996). Music and Identity. In Hall, S. and P. du Gay (eds.), *Questions of Cultural Identity*. (pp 108-127). London: Sage.

Gerbrandt, R. and Gilmore, P. (2013). Hearing Social Structure: A Musical Exercise in Teaching Introduction to Sociology. *Great Plains Sociologist*, 5-32.

Hall, S., Evans, J. and Nixon, S. (2013). *Representation*, 2nd ed. Milton Keynes: The Open University

Smyth, G. (2009). *Music in Irish Cultural History*. Dublin: Irish Academic Press.

Walczak, D and M Reuter (1994) Using Popular Music to Teach Sociology: An Evaluation by Students. *Teaching Sociology*, 22, 266-269