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### **Locating Narratives in Postmodern Spaces: A Cyber Ethnographic Field Study of Informal Music Learning in Online Community**

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## Locating Narratives in Postmodern Spaces: A Cyber Ethnographic Field Study of Informal Music Learning in Online Community

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### Introduction

Once an area of debate, there is now general consensus among media and social science researchers that online communities represent community in the traditional sense of the term, albeit with some important epistemological differences. Because the Internet is a “cultural context in its own right,” Hine (2005) argues it can “be a place to carry out social research” (109). If one considers online communities as genuine functioning communities situated in a legitimate cultural context, it follows that they are also valid entities that can be explored and studied.

The most significant difference is the location of the study context; the researcher “goes” to carry out research in a virtually defined space instead of a geographically based physical setting and this carries with it further ramifications of appropriate research methodology and practice. But there are also some significant similarities, the most important being how to bound a study when conducting research; according to MacKay (2005), this issue is problematic in ethnographic research no matter where the field site is located:

The issue is not that the Internet is a challenge to ethnography because it transgresses spatial boundaries, but that the boundary of any study, will, to a degree, be defined arbitrarily. (134)

Postmodernist ideas of reality and identity in online communities are also interlaced with perceptions of location in virtual environments as boundaries between real and virtual worlds blur together, becoming a “third space” (James and Busher 2009).

Although online communities of adult amateur practitioners of diverse musics can easily be accessed on the Internet, these communities remain relatively unexplored by music education researchers. The purpose of this cyber ethnographic case study is to examine the informal music learning and teaching in the Banjo Hangout (BH) online music community of practice ([www.banjohangout.com](http://www.banjohangout.com)), focusing on two genres—Old Time and Bluegrass banjo music—found there. Established in 2000, the BH has 51,000 members, and, on a typical

afternoon, approximately 1100 to 1300 members are online surfing the site. The Hangout has many diverse features including a media and forum archive, chatroom, links to related sites, online store, member blogs and homepages, and reviews all posted and voluntarily maintained by site members. The site also features a large online learning and teaching library consisting of TAB (an alternate notation system<sup>1</sup>) archives of tunes, thousands of online videos on playing, building, and researching banjos, tune sites, links to online group lessons, member blogs, and personal YouTube banjo videos recorded and posted by members. The majority of these resources are free; others are available for a nominal fee.

For music education researchers familiar only with conducting research offline, cyber ethnography presents both enormous possibilities and unforeseen issues. Online ethnography is now an established research method in the qualitative paradigm, practiced by musicologists (Nguyen 2007, Bryant 1995, Dyck 2008, Font 2007, Harvey 2009, Kibby 2000, Lizie 2000, Lysloff 2003, Nieckarz 2005, Scully 2005, Silvers 2007), media researchers (Downs 2005, Hine 2000, 2005, Kibby 2000, Jones 1995, Levy 2001, Smith and Kollack 1999, Watson 1997), and social science researchers (Andrus 2006, Atay 2009, Coco 2008, Derecho 2008, Elliott 2004, Farrugia 2004, Gajjala 2006, 2002, Lee 2005, McNeil 2009, Williams 2006). To date, however—and with the exception of this present study—music education researchers have yet to employ cyber ethnography *per se* when examining online music communities, although they have begun to explore online music communities in other ways (Beckstead 1998, Hugill 2001, Salavuo 2006, Salavuo and Hakkinen 2005, Veblen and Waldron 2012, Waldron 2009, Waldron and Veblen 2008).

By examining the BH online music community through the words of its members—participant interviews via Skype, forum postings, blogs, chat room conversations, and open-ended e-mail questionnaires—this research raises a number of questions: What online resources—for example, YouTube videos—do participants use to engage and promote participatory informal music learning and teaching through discourse in online community? How does belonging to an online music community facilitate informal music learning and teaching for participants? How are the epistemological differences between off and online music community reflected in music education online qualitative research and research practice, including issues of agency and ethics?

### **Old Time and Bluegrass Musics: An Overview**

Old Time (OT) music is deeply rooted in Appalachia, where it materialized from a mélange of English, Scots, Irish and African musics in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries to become the first distinctly American music formed out of the musics of immigrant cultures. Traditionally, people learned OT orally at home in geographical proximity to family or community members. The forms of OT instrumental music are simple and familiar—reels, jigs, and waltzes—with the music played primarily on stringed instruments—fiddle, mandolin, guitar, and banjo (Hayes 2008). Bluegrass (BG) evolved out of OT, originating with the string band music of Bill Monroe and his Blue Grass Boys on the radio and at Nashville's Grand Ole Opry in the late 1930s and early '40s. BG music also features bass, guitar, banjo, fiddle, and mandolin, and, like OT, BG is grounded in an oral/aural learning tradition (Adler 1979).

### **Participatory Culture: Old Time, Bluegrass, and YouTube**

Bluegrass and Old Time musics are now played throughout North America and other parts of the world by revivalist learners—people who did not grow up with OT or BG but were instead introduced to it at some point in their adult lives through live exposure or media. Thomas Turino (2008) writes that, “contemporary old-time [music] is a well-developed participatory tradition,” and that the American “boomer” generation—people who grew up in suburban America in the 50s and 60s—in particular feels this lack of connection to community and what is considered ‘deeply and *alternately* [italics mine] American’” (159).<sup>2</sup> The folk revival, with its roots in the 60s, was a response to a spiritual need for participatory music and dance in community generally absent from middle-class American life.

According to Burgess and Green (2009), YouTube is another example of participatory culture, albeit in a different way than envisioned by Turino above. In their description of YouTube as a site of participatory culture, Burgess and Green explain that:

Participatory culture is a term that is often used to talk about the apparent link between more accessible digital technologies, user-created content, and some kind of shift in the power relations between media industries and their consumers. (10)

While an example of a global community of participatory culture itself, YouTube serves important participatory functions in online music communities like the Banjo Hangout. YouTube videos are of particular interest because they serve a dual purpose; their most apparent and pragmatic function being useful straightforward music teaching and learning aids. However, YouTube videos also act as vehicles of agency to promote and engage

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participatory culture through discourse in online community, thus also fulfilling a significant teaching role, albeit in a more nuanced manner than as a direct but informal music learning resource. According to Burgess and Green (2009):

[YouTube] creates spaces for engagement and community-formation. [One] model of participation that function[s] in this way [is] peer-to-peer guitar lessons. Videos such as these give material form and visibility to the identities of fans as members of a community of fellow enthusiasts. Uploading [YouTube videos] serves as a way for [online] groups to talk among themselves, and to the broader community, using the same media texts that bring them together. The discussions that take place there spill over into other sites of everyday culture, meaning, identity, and practice (80).

Rudolph and Frankel (2009) have discussed the practical applications of YouTube in school music education but did not examine YouTube's function as discursive tool in participatory online music culture.

### **Situating and Conceptualizing Community**

Studies of virtual community have tended to focus exclusively on issues of connectivity in online life without delving into questions of connectivity with a corresponding offline community (Jones 1995, Wellman et al. 2001). However, Jones and Kucker (2001), argue that both on and offline contexts should be considered when studying online communities because, depending on the nature of the virtual community under scrutiny, often it is inexorably tied to a corresponding physical counterpart. The most important consideration then becomes not which context to focus on exclusively but which context to embed within the other based upon the goals of the research.

Coco (2008) also contends that "existing conceptualizations of community suffer from the historical emergence of the "virtual"/"real" distinction and are inadequate for characterizing sociability in the networked society," suggesting employing Wenger's communities of practice theory as a way to avoid this dichotomy when researching integrated on and offline communities (501). Both Jones and Kucker's (2001) and Coco's views share the idea that the researcher must grasp the contextually situated relationship of the online community to its offline counterpart.

In their discussion of digital habitats, Wenger et al. (2009) apply Wenger's (1998) earlier community of practice theory to online community, including ideas of participation, meaning, and identity with the everyday functions of life online within a virtual group.

## Co-Production in Online Research

There is an analytical advantage of publishing online research in an online journal with the ability to insert hyperlinks directly into text. Besides making the study richer because a good portion of data is visible online and accessible to anyone with a web connection, it adds a further interpretive dimension for the reader<sup>3</sup> (Forte 2005).

Research boundaries blur further through the use of hyperlinks to digital video and written textual narratives from the actual time stamped archives of websites—and this includes forum postings, blogs, and YouTube videos—embedded within the text of the research paper, which “distributes authorship in a manner resembling some postmodern writings on the decentralization of the author,” with elements of what Forte (2005) terms ‘co-production’ (97). He elaborates:

Co-production is a concept that has been utilized independently by a range of authors writing in different contexts. The basic definition of co-production is ‘to produce jointly,’ a process that in practice echoes work on the distributed nature of cognition. Hyperlinking, with or without active consent on the part of the linked-to, is as an expression of co-production as a process of multiple actors creating a cultural repertoire that can then be drawn upon by singular actors. (97)

Co-production through hyperlinks facilitates researcher, participant, and reader reflexivity as meaning is re-created depending on interaction in time, space, and point of view. Further, because participants, the researcher, and readers can add additional commentary on forum threads, it is conceivable that the study could be unending and constantly expanding if not delineated by the specific time frame of the study, as the roles of participant, reader, and researcher further blur and blend relative to the research landscape.<sup>4</sup>

## Methodology

### “CYBER” OR ONLINE ETHNOGRAPHY AND RESEARCHER AS “LURKER”

Online ethnography differs from offline ethnography in that it combines visual images of written texts—posts—with transcribed oral narratives (Hine 2005, 2000). It is also easier for researchers to remain hidden during cyber research, allowing for true naturalistic observation of the community under study. In Internet culture, the action of being a hidden observer is referred to as “lurking”—referencing persons who read messages on online discussion boards but do not contribute to them—and Hine also applies the term “lurker” to researchers who remain hidden participant-observers over the course of cyber ethnographic fieldwork. Despite the ethical issues it raises, “lurking” remains an “effective way of collecting data and

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conducting research in virtual environments” (Atay 2009, 113).

According to Bruckman (2002), lurking is ethically permissible “if the [online community] is perceived [as] public, researchers can freely quote and analyze online information if the following four criteria are met:

- 1) It is officially and publically archived
- 2) No password is required for archive access
- 3) No site policy prohibits it, and
- 4) The topic is not highly sensitive (cited in James and Busher 2009, 123)

This study falls under ethically approved guidelines for online research and researcher as “lurker” (see above), according to Bruckman (2002) and the REB board of my institution, which approved the study. Neither does it violate the BH’s forum guidelines, rules, or regulations (<http://www.banjohangout.org/forum/rules.asp> and <http://www.banjohangout.org/login/policy.asp>).

#### DATA COLLECTION

After Hine (2005, 2000), I employed cyber ethnography for this research, blending the online ethnographic technique of participant interview with hidden participant-observer—or “lurker”—in which I observed and gathered written texts in the form of forum postings, chat room conversations and e-mail—with case study in this multi-sited study. Participants were interviewed through Skype-to-Skype (S2S) and/or Skype-to-telephone (S2t), and/or via “semi” synchronous email open-ended questionnaires (definition below), therefore all data were collected via computer media communication (CMC).

I began lurking on the BH in March 2010. Prior to the study, I was completely unknown in the BH community—I had not posted on the site, nor was I aware of any members offline—and therefore I was completely “etic.” I initially thought this would be further complicated by the fact that the field sites were located online, thus making trust problematic, the latter being a major researcher concern in online ethnography (Hine 2005).

After receiving REB approval from my institution, I contacted the BH site owners receiving permission to post an advertisement on both the Old Time and the Bluegrass Banjo Hangout forums inviting interested volunteers to become participants. Recruitment ads were posted on June 6, 2010 on both forums, and I offered prospective participants the choice to be interviewed via Skype, telephone, email, or chat room (see <http://www.banjohangout.org/>

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[topic/180110/](#) and <http://www.banjohangout.org/topic/180109><sup>5</sup> to view my recruiting advertisements on the OT and BG BH forums).

I eventually ended up with 66 potential study participants, the majority of these coming from members of the OT forum on the Banjo Hangout. My original intention was to offer asynchronous email as a data collection mode to participants because I wanted to avoid the exclusion of any potential interviewees. This became one of the unforeseen problems with this study regarding data collection and analysis; of the 66 forum members who volunteered to become study participants, 57 requested that I interview them via email. However, organizing and maintaining asynchronous email interviews with 57 participants seemed a daunting prospect—as an alternative, I used an open ended questionnaire sent via “semi” synchronous email, which for the purposes of this study, I defined as all of the interview questions sent together in one email, as opposed to one question at a time. Study participants’ email replies to the interview questions served as rich textual narrative accounts, and, following Orgad (2005), I used them as straightforward data for analysis and triangulation.

I interviewed four study participants via Skype-to-Skype (S2S) and five study participants through Skype-telephone (S2t) number. Because Skype is an inexpensive alternative to regular telephone interviewing, it allowed me the luxury of interviewing participants from across the continent and around the world, including California, Arizona, Kentucky, Toronto and Montreal, Mexico, Australia, and Japan. S2S and S2t interviews were approximately one hour long, recorded with Audio Hijack Pro software. Follow up interviews were also conducted via S2S and S2t several weeks after the first interviews for clarification.

#### PARTICIPANTS

Of the 57 open-ended questionnaires I sent via “semi” synchronous email, I received 17 responses, written in narrative form. Nine of the total 26 participants requested interviews via S2S or S2t. Of the 26, 23 were male and three female, ranging in age from 21–67, with the majority of the participants ( $n = 20$ ) in their 50s or 60s. Ten I classified as “newbies,” having played eight months to two years, while the remaining 16 were categorized as “old timers,” having played from eight to 42 years. Nine countries were represented—the majority of participants were from the United States ( $n = 17$ ), two from Canada, with one participant each from South Africa, The Netherlands, Sweden, Hong Kong, Japan, Australia, and the United Kingdom.<sup>6</sup>

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### TRIANGULATION

Triangulation of learning/teaching events was made possible through the comparison of participants' perspectives in the form of transcribed interviews and completed email questionnaires with researcher as participant-observer relative to the same. Archived forum threads and hyperlinks functioned as observation data obtained through researcher "lurking" and also served to triangulate data gathered from interviews and email questionnaires.<sup>7</sup>

Transcripts were also cross-checked with one other. Participants were given the option of using a pseudonym; all but two declined. Indeed, the vast majority of the participants insisted on using their real names; many of them, particularly in the case of the "old timers," use their real names on the BH when posting, and this in itself has other implications that I will discuss later.

### DATA ANALYSIS

Interviews were transcribed after exiting the field in August 2010. Data was descriptively coded because it is an appropriate coding method for cyber ethnographers dealing with a wide variety of data forms—interview transcripts, archived forum posts, field notes, journals, written Internet texts, e-mail, artifacts, and video (Saldana 2009). To assess visual data—digital video, Internet resources, and YouTube videos—my approach was to use a "holistic interpretive lens guided by the research questions" after Saldana (2009, 42). All of the transcripts and field notes (saved archived forum threads with typed observations) were transcribed, with codes and themes determined after many thorough examinations of transcripts, email questionnaires, and field notes. Analysis was thus interpretive and iterative.

For the purposes of this paper and for considerations of length, I will concentrate on data from the three "old timer study participants"<sup>8</sup> collected through verbal interviews via S2S or S2t only (for my definition of what defines an old timer see below). I did however, use data gathered from the six "newbies" via S2S and S2t interviews, as well as the asynchronous email accounts received from all other 17 participants to triangulate data gained through the old timers' verbal interviews.<sup>9</sup> Following Coco (2008, see above), I framed the study with Wenger's 1998 community of practice (CoP) theory, because, in addition to avoiding a "real/virtual" dichotomy in online research, Wenger's theory is useful in understanding how communities of practice are situated in overlapping multiple online

contexts such as the ones in this research, and which I will discuss later in this paper. I also followed Jones and Kucker's (2001) recommendation of embedding one context within another, deciding that for this study's purposes, it was preferential to place the online within the offline community.

As a researcher, I have already altered the research landscape by posting initial recruitment ads and replies, thus making BH forum members aware that their public transactions were being scrutinized for study purposes. Regardless, there were no negative comments regarding my exploration of the community for a research study—indeed, members' responses were overwhelmingly positive, with the odd sarcastic but funny comment tossed in a forum thread, for example, "I suddenly feel the need for a piece of cheese."

Of the nine participants I interviewed via S2S or S2t, I classified three—Murphy Henry, Cathy Moore, and Marc Nerenberg<sup>10</sup>—as old timers based on 1) their length of time playing and teaching along with their self-identified expertise level, both as a performer and a teacher, 2) how they were viewed by other forum members as to their perceived authority on different learning and teaching styles, 3) number and quality of questions asked about them and/or their playing and teaching styles asked by forum members,<sup>11</sup> and finally, 4) the number of stars/ designation automatically assigned to each based on the number of their posts to the BH (see footnote 2 above).

Serendipity played a large role in this research in that the three "old timers" who contacted me and requested Skype interviews were and remain known and respected members of the Banjo Hangout community, and I was already familiar with their names and reputations through researcher "lurking."

### **Old Timers: Teaching and Learning in Online Community**

In their Skype interviews, I asked the Old Timers a number of questions about their personal and musical backgrounds and motivations for playing OT and BG because this framed how participants perceived music learning and teaching. I will also focus on issues of informal music learning, teaching online in and outside the Banjo Hangout, along with other overlapping and intersecting virtual communities of practice devoted to learning and playing OT and BG musics. Themes that emerged from the "old timers'" data were:

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- 1) The influence of growing up in the 60s during the folk music revival intertwined with self-developed aural music learning strategies prior to Internet “invention”<sup>12</sup> and availability
- 2) The importance of chording in playing, learning, and teaching
- 3) The role of Internet blogs, YouTube videos, and hyperlinks in overlapping digital communities of practice

#### DUALITY: AURAL MUSIC LEARNING AND MUSIC LEARNING HISTORIES

##### —THE 60S FOLK REVIVAL.

The three old timers—Murphy Henry, Marc Nerenberg, and Cathy Moore—began playing OT or BG prior to the Internet, and each developed their own learning strategies informally based primarily on aural/oral learning but each also combined observational learning with limited written notation.<sup>13</sup> All mentioned the importance of the Pete Seeger book, *How to Play the Five String Banjo*, when they began playing, generally having used it more for advice on technique as opposed to learning tunes.<sup>14</sup> Murphy makes her living solely as a Bluegrass performing and teaching musician, Cathy plays and teaches Old Time but also has an online business teaching adults about online technology, and Marc is an international criminal trial lawyer based in Montreal, who plays Old Time and teaches on the side. Both Cathy and Marc are eclectic Old Time players—Marc described himself as an “outlier,” while Cathy referred to herself as a “weirdo” in terms of her unique playing style.

All three have interesting learning histories; being “boomers” growing up in the 60s during the folk revival influenced their choices of instruments, music genres, and, by extension, music learning styles, and is consistent with what Turino (2008) says above regarding Old Time music, the 60s, and participatory culture. For example, Marc Nerenberg grew up in Montreal in the 50s and 60s and his parents were active members of the Canadian Labour-Progressive Party (or LPP, the legal political organization of the Communist Party of Canada<sup>15</sup>). It was through the LPP that Pete Seeger became a family friend, visiting Marc’s home during the period Seeger was blacklisted in the United States, and it was Seeger who inspired Marc to learn the banjo. Although Marc reads written notation—he took Conservatory piano and theory lessons as a child for a time—his preferred way of learning music is by ear.

Cathy Moore grew up in Chicago in the 60s and had the opportunity to take lessons at Chicago's well-known Old Town School of Folk Music. She described the experience as "disappointing," because of the formal way the classes were run and taught (with written TAB used to teach tunes as opposed to aural/oral learning), but it did expose her to other musics and genres. She began learning banjo when she was 15, using Pete Seeger's and others' books. One of the books she found came with an old style vinyl floppy record, and she says, "that's when I started learning by ear, [because] the tablature in the book was horrific." While still in Chicago, she became part of the "terrific Balkan scene" there, playing recorder, transverse flute, zurna [Turkish oboe], gaida [Bulgarian bagpipes], "everything you could blow into, including tin whistles. I played sackpipa too, which I really enjoyed."

Upon moving to Madison, Wisconsin in the late 70s, Cathy quickly found the active and inclusive folk music scene there, which included a wide variety of ethnic musics; during this period she added Scandinavian musics and a number of ethnic percussion instruments to her already diverse repertoire of musical instruments and styles. Having played Old Time in the early 90s, she returned to the style after leaving Madison and re-locating to Indiana in 2001, at that point really delving into and becoming a serious Old Time player. Because of her background in Balkan and Middle Eastern musics, her approach to Old Time music blends elements from those cultures, and makes for an interesting take on Old Time music (see link below). Cathy's approach to re-entering the Old Time music genre was that "I will develop a [unique] style."

As a Southerner raised in the Baptist Church in the 50s, Murphy Henry has a more "traditional" background than Marc and Cathy. Murphy described her early music learning:

I was always a participant in music in the church, just singing, Sunday school practice, the choirs, and this, that, and the other. So that is a really strong part of my background, and I was just one of those people that easily memorized words to songs. I mean, that's just what I do, without even thinking, just like a gift.

She noted wryly that, because she was a "middle class white person in the United States in the fifties, I also took the requisite piano lessons, where I did learn to read, but I played music [mainly] by ear." Murphy got a ukelele in the fourth grade—in her words, "catching the pale end of the folk moon"—and it was with the uke that she really started picking up folk songs by ear, later learning the guitar prior to beginning the banjo at 21. Although she grew up in Georgia, Murphy was not really familiar with Bluegrass, saying that when she started playing, the tunes "all sounded the same to her:"

I mean I didn't know the tunes, I didn't know Cripple Creek, Liberty and Soldier's Joy [all standard Bluegrass repertoire]. So I was really in the same lot as my students, never having heard this music before.

#### THE IMPORTANCE OF CHORDING IN LEARNING

All of the old timers stressed the importance of chording for learning and teaching, and Marc and Murphy both stressed the importance of singing and chording when learning and playing Old Time and Bluegrass music respectively. Murphy and Cathy, both of whom are more active teachers than Marc, discussed the importance of teaching learners how to chord, and I will discuss chording from their perspectives as teachers later in this section.

Marc's self-teaching method is particularly intriguing; he uses composition as the primary way to learn new chords, intentionally figuring out ways how to insert newly learned "cool" sounding chords into his next composition or arrangement of a known tune in the repertoire. Marc described how he learns:

I learn [ed] to play by writing songs. That is, I figure [ed] out a chord progression [and] then wrote words. I figure out a chord progression without ever caring what the chords are—I play the chords but I don't know what they are. Sometimes I want to write them and tell somebody else what they are, and [then] I'll have to sit there and painstakingly figure them out. But most of the time I don't know what they are. I just play a bunch of chords that sound good together and I experiment . . . it's like building—like putting together a puzzle with pieces and then when it's all together it sounds inevitable; like it couldn't be any other chord. The names [of the chords and notes] are generally unimportant to me. And I always deliberately went out of my way to incorporate things in the next song that I wrote that I didn't know how to do. So it was like ok, I learned chords but ok, I know these chords and now I'm going to add one and I'm going to write a song with this other chord.

What follows is an example of Marc sharing his version of "Little Sadie" on the BH "tune of the week" feature via an embedded YouTube link on the BH, and it was serendipitous that Marc posted this the day after our interview.<sup>16</sup> In addition to being an example of his playing, Marc's post and YouTube video serve as narrative as to how Marc came up with this unique arrangement and triangulates how he learns as described in his words above. Here is Marc's "Little Sadie" video followed with a thread discussion about the tune: <http://www.banjohangout.org/topic/181773>.

I will discuss other implications of this YouTube video along with its accompanying thread later in the paper.

## THE IMPORTANCE OF TEACHING LEARNERS CHORDING:

## EXAMPLES FROM YOUTUBE

Murphy and Cathy also stressed the importance of chording and chord shapes in their teaching. Cathy stresses chording in her YouTube video, “D chords” ([http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j\\_bmRpSIK-o&feature=related](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j_bmRpSIK-o&feature=related)), explaining why it is important to know chords in aural/oral learning while she demonstrates how to play them. This link is also embedded in her teaching YouTube video of “*Toads in the Woodpile*” (see below, and which is also embedded in the “D Chords” video at the end of the clip).

Part of Murphy’s journey as a Bluegrass banjo player involved a realization that most of her students did not have the chordal background that she has, saying that it took her “years to figure this out, and that I’m still learning that [how to teach chording].”

You don't really hear a lot of chord sounds [in Bluegrass banjo], so it makes it difficult to teach. Some people who have a chord background kind of get it intuitively, or by osmosis, but for adults who come to me with no musical background, [chording] is the hardest thing I have to teach them. Teach them how to play the songs, no problem. Teach them how to play the chords that go along with the songs? Huge problem. So I developed a whole method of hearing chord changes from the ground up, which starts with strumming the banjo, just with the g chord and the d7 chord. And then going back to kids’ songs like “*Polly Wolly Doodle*,” “*Skip to My Lou*,” and “*Go Tell Aunt Rhodie*,” and just having the students strum along and listen to the chord changes. And then I move them onto three chord songs. That's really hard for them.

What follows is a YouTube video of Murphy teaching the tune “Salty Dog” with the chord shapes embedded and featured in the video: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L2qCCMUQTNY&feature=related>.

## BLOGS AS OVERLAPPING COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE:

## YOUTUBE, HYPERLINKS, AND AURAL MUSIC LEARNING AND TEACHING

According to Wenger, White and Smith (2009), “conversations around blogs can generate emergent communities whose boundaries are dynamically defined by participants as the conversation evolves” (191). This ongoing process is evident in the blogs of all three old timers both inside and outside of the BH. Cathy, Murphy, and Marc all have their own blogs contained within the BH site (Cathy and Marc are friends on each other’s respective BH blogs). These embedded “blogs in a website” stand as communities of practice in their own right but are also connected to the BH through hyperlinks. Cathy and Murphy also have blogs outside of but linked to the BH.

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All of the participants' blogs are examples of overlapping integrated online communities of practice. Their blogs also act as agency to share narratives, views on learning, free online teaching lessons, and posts of upcoming appearances in the offline banjo community, all of which are facilitated through the use of hyperlinks, YouTube videos and other technologies associated with the emergence of Web 2.0. Further, after Wenger, White and Smith (2009) posted YouTube videos and hyperlinks in the participants' blogs and forums function as digital artifacts<sup>17</sup> in overlapping communities of practice.

#### MARC'S BLOG: YOUTUBE AND HYPERLINKS AS DIGITAL ARTIFACTS

Marc's BH blog (<http://www.banjohangout.org/myhangout/home.asp?id=47457>) introduces him to readers through a short but colorful biography along with descriptive accounts of his playing.<sup>18</sup> The blog also contains storied histories of some of his banjos, contact information, a list of his many instruments, and this self-description of his occupation:

“singer/songwriter/banjo/harmonica player/and OK, I'm also a lawyer,” itself an interesting window into Marc's identity. There are hyperlinks to his latest BH forum posts, friend and group links, links to photos, his own YouTube and MP3 recordings past and present and links to other favorite recordings by other BH members, one of whom, Ric Hollander, was also a participant in this study.

One of the many digital artifacts contained in Marc's blog is his YouTube version of “Little Sadie,” mentioned earlier, which is also hyperlinked to the main BH forum; video and hyperlink both function as artifact in the two communities of practice. The BH thread that follows “Little Sadie” also demonstrates the significance of discourse for music learning regarding the role of YouTube in forging online communities of practice discussed by Burgess and Green (2009).

In his hyperlinked BH “Little Sadie” post,<sup>19</sup> Marc also includes hyperlinks to other versions—some historical—of the tune by other musicians from other websites, and he also notes how Internet sources factored into developing his arrangement, relating sources and other items of interest discussed above. He also responds to posters' remarks, their various posted YouTube video hyperlinks, and questions in the thread.

Further in the thread BH members discuss how they will use Marc's video for learning and there is considerable discourse on the tune itself among posters, including issues

of style, other versions of the tune, and the inspirational aspects of Marc's playing. Forum member Bill posts that:

Extrodinary rendition, Marc. I discovered it on YouTube before you posted it here, and was moved to learn to play it. This posting just added to my knowledge and enjoyment. Thanks! (<http://www.banjohangout.org/topic/181773>).

Some members mention that they play the tune in a different style than Marc, but that his version has made them reconsider how "Little Sadie" can be played. Poster g-hog shares a post with a hyperlink to her version of the tune:

Great tune! I love it on banjo, but haven't gotten around to trying it. Been playing it this way, or similar, on guitar for the past 35 years or so. . . ([youtube.com/watch?v=DwG3N4B\\_PwE](http://youtube.com/watch?v=DwG3N4B_PwE)), not that great, but just the way I play into doing it (<http://www.banjohangout.org/topic/181773>).<sup>20</sup>

Marc's blog and this BH thread are also examples of the significance of hyperlinks and hyperconnectivity in online community formation discussed by Forte (2005). Each link posted by members in the thread flows outward, building shared and constructed knowledge among forum members, and overlapping with other on and offline OT banjo communities of practice. For example, later in this same thread, Mojo Monk posts a link to an MP3 of his local offline Old Time jam session community playing their version of "Little Sadie," leading to further discussion about the origins of the tune and different playing styles and versions. This is also consistent with Wenger, White and Smith regarding the significant role that hyperlinks play in connecting overlapping online communities of practice (2009).

#### CATHY MOORE'S BLOG: YOUTUBE AND TEACHING

<http://banjomeetsworld.wordpress.com>

Besides standard blog content—personal narratives, useful information, and links to other sites—the site features embeds of Cathy's teaching videos in different banjo tunings, along with a search feature to find specific tunes.

One of the first examples of Cathy teaching via YouTube is of her tune, "*Toads in the Woodpile*." I viewed this video before I interviewed Cathy, and I assumed, from its pedagogical clarity, that she was a full time music teacher. I was surprised when she told me no, that she had kind of "made up" this video on the fly, getting the idea to make it based on her "day gig," which is teaching adults how to use technology in distance learning. She said:

For [my] business I had to record a video, I was being interviewed by someone in the UK, so I got a video camera and I thought—I need to make a practice video—hey,

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I'll play the banjo. So I went out in the garden and those first videos on Youtube are me playing the banjo [*this included Toads in the Woodpile*]. And then I thought, hey, this is kind of fun, maybe I'll show some things I do and it sort of went from there.

She elaborated:

My business is e-learning, developing online training for adults in the corporate world. [I] can't really divorce my approach to learning banjo instruction from that, because I spend all my working hours telling people how to break stuff down, how to present it online, how to teach people. So a lot of my approaches to the banjo videos are very short, teaching a handful of things, then have them go and do it.

While viewing Cathy's YouTube video of "*Toads in the Woodpile*," notice how Cathy embeds chord shapes into the video, stopping to explain, offering encouragement, and adding an overlaid visual message reassuring learners that "don't get worried if you didn't get it, we'll play it a bunch of times at the end of the video." All of her teaching is done aurally and kinesthetically but combined with observational learning of her hands and fingers along with a picture of the chord shapes, and an embedded YouTube video link to D chord tunings. She constantly reminds learners to look at her fingers and the chord shapes while she is playing. Additionally, there is commentary with thanks to Cathy from learners listed under comments on the YouTube page itself. Now the link to "*Toads in the Woodpile*:" <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8QOQ1x9nrQM>.

Another example follows of Cathy's embedded YouTube videos follows, in which she demonstrates how to meld Arabic styles with Old Time on banjo, playing with inserted verbal instruction: [http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player\\_embedded&v=CHL7Aha4668](http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=CHL7Aha4668). Note the respondent who thanks Cathy for "learning so much from [Cathy's] "great website."

Last, when triangulating data from Cathy's interview with the BH forum archives, a quick search of her name on the site brought up some interesting threads on syncopation. In the following thread on questions regarding syncopation from BH member dewbanjo, she responds and offers a handwritten scanned TAB of her own with instructions on how to accent and syncopate certain notes. What follows is the thread link: <http://www.banjohangout.org/archive/134494>. Here is yet another discussion related to learning from Cathy's videos: <https://www.banjohangout.org/archive/150966>.

After Burgess and Green (2009), both of the above threads are examples of how YouTube videos generate discourse in the BH community. Like Marc's video of "Little Sadie," Cathy's YouTube videos function as digital artifact in the various overlapping Old

Time banjo communities of practice; further, the videos act as vehicles generate to conversations latent with meaning, identity, and practice among group members. In the course of doing so, the bonds that made the BH a community of practice in the first place are further strengthened.

MURPHY HENRY'S BLOG: ON AND OFFLINE TEACHING AND  
THE EVOLUTION OF TECHNOLOGY IN AURAL LEARNING.

Like Marc's and Cathy's blogs, Murphy's blog, <http://blog.murphymethod.com>, represents a community of practice, overlapping with the BH, other banjo related sites, and the offline banjo community. Indeed, she mentions and directs people to the BH for more information on banjo heads in one of her latest blog posts on the topic. Murphy is a Bluegrass banjo player (Marc and Cathy are Old Time players) and has been teaching Bluegrass banjo since 1974. She is esteemed within the BH community both as an admired performer and a master Bluegrass banjo teacher. Besides having developed her own unique Bluegrass banjo teaching style, she is an established writer with a Masters' degree in Women's Studies.<sup>21</sup>

Murphy spoke of how she has incorporated technology to grow an on and offline community of practice based on learning Bluegrass through her self-developed teaching method; her blog functions as a "hub" for learners in both virtual and physical environments. Murphy explained the development and expansion of her blog:

The way the Internet has affected the community is that we're now in the process of really trying to really establish a Murphy Method community. I think the Banjo Hangout's got it—a wonderful community. My daughter, who is also a banjo player and teacher like I am (you'll see her in the slow jam DVD). She's the next generation and she got us to blog, so now we're blogging, five days a week at our Murphy Methods site, create[ing]our Murphy Methods community.

From her account, it was obvious that Murphy is always looking for ways to update and improve her teaching, and in her interview, it was clear the pride in which she takes in teaching adults how to play Bluegrass. In addition to discussing how she developed her teaching method, Murphy's account as a Bluegrass banjo teacher is both a reflexive pedagogical journey and an account of the evolution of technology usage in aural/oral teaching. She began teaching Bluegrass in 1974, and like other conventional Bluegrass teachers at the time, she taught beginning adult students from the Earl Scruggs banjo book, which involved teaching straight from written tablature (or TAB, see definition, above) but

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no aural/oral learning. As she describes it, her students could get through the three or four easiest tunes in the Scruggs book, but in her words:

The students were able to tab out something simple [*in other words, learn tunes from the notation*], [but] I could tell that the students weren't getting it. I can't tell you how long I taught this way—I don't think it was a year—maybe six months—and I just ran out of things. It was driving me crazy that people weren't learning and it was really difficult to listen to [them], because they would like leave out whole sections of the song and not know it; their timing was execrable. They wouldn't really learn a song, but yet they would be bored and unhappy with it, and so we'd have to move on. Everything was bad.

She developed her teaching method out of “sheer desperation.” She said:

So one day, I taught a song through recording it onto a cassette. It was Old Joe Clark [*a Bluegrass and Old Time standard*] and I didn't write anything down, I just taught every note of it into the tape recorder, and because I didn't know exactly how I played the tune, I didn't have a particular set arrangement.

She continued:

I had to figure out what I was doing, and it was very halting and not very good, because there was a lot of backtracking, and “let me see what I'm doing here, and, oh that's not right, and over again.”

But it was not long after that she achieved a “eureka!” teaching moment:

But one woman that I taught it to came back in and it was the best thing she'd ever played. The best thing she had ever played! So I just started giving that same song that I was teaching by cassette to other students and they all had the same experience. They all were learning it like that. It was so easy to see that people were getting it, and so I just put the books and tabs away and never ever taught any differently. Because why? Because the students were learning better! It's like a no-brainer!

Murphy then began marketing her cassettes as a teaching method, transitioning to DVDs, and finally to the Internet with the advent of her blog. Many of her teaching DVDs have been posted to YouTube, and she has a devoted following of students on the Banjo Hangout. Here is a BH thread in which posters describe her teaching DVDs and her method, and which triangulates some of what she described in her interview: <http://www.banjo-hangout.org/archive/141975>.

Murphy then discussed how she teaches improvisation to adults, most of who have no music learning background in improvisation, but which is an important element in becoming a proficient Bluegrass musician. Unlike Old Time music, where improvising does not play as significant a role, Bluegrass players trade “leads” and “licks;” going back and forth while all the other participating players vamp. Murphy elaborated:

[Learning to improvise] is the biggest problem for people who learn from written paper: it's almost impossible—I would say it IS impossible for them to improvise—they don't have the skills. So what I found is that learning by ear, and learning the chords—if you have those two things in place, it is possible for me to teach adults to actually improvise on the banjo.

She continued describing how she teaches improvisation:

I usually begin teaching improvising after they have learned ten songs by ear. The first song they learn by ear will be new to them, but the second song they learn will incorporate some of the elements [like] the licks, from the first song. So when those come up again, I'll re-explain those, say [ing], it sounds like this; “you learned it in *Cripple Creek* so just plug it in here.” Step by step, by step, so they are getting ear training without their knowing it. So when it comes time to improvise, they have some knowledge in their head, and I'll say on the very first song that we try to improvise, “I'll play the song on the guitar and sing the music”—usually it's not a song they've heard before, but it'll be a very simple bluegrass song—and I'll say “do any lick that comes to mind, it's all the things you already do.”

She concluded that:

That's what I can't really explain, other than they just heard a lot of songs that start on a G chord, and something clicks. And everybody'll do it differently and I have learned over the years to stay out of the way as much as possible. And anything that they do out of their own heads is good, is great, even if it's not what I would have done, even if it's not, quote, “the best way to do it.” Doesn't matter.

Finally, Murphy puts it all together in “context” for her students through facilitating beginner jams, teaching her students how to play and respond in genuine participatory music making and using the appropriate etiquette in Bluegrass jam sessions:

The next stage is to learn how to jam, or to play with other people. This is another hard thing—even though the students have a bit of learning by ear, even though they can kind of hear the chord changes—putting them together in a room with three or four other people and asking them to trade breaks—each starts and takes a turn playing the lead, while everybody else vamps—wow—that's hard and it's real—it's the hardest thing that they have to do. It's harder than learning by ear, it's harder than hearing chord changes, just hearing other people play, being distracted by the sounds, understanding the etiquette, the form, how do you make jam sessions happen? How you know whose turn is next? [How do you] hear the timing when you come in for your break at the appropriate time? But the beauty of my method is that I can teach people to do that, I can teach an adult who's never played before to do that.

Murphy finished with these inspirational words about teaching, aural music learning, and community:

Teaching means everything to me. I just feel like I'm on a mission here [because] I think we're teaching wrong—and—this is what makes me sad and mad: the way we're teaching Bluegrass excludes so many people. Because they're faced with notation [in the form of tablature], they struggle with it for years, they can't play, and they think they don't have any musical talent. And they put the banjo away, or the guitar or fiddle or whatever, and they think they can't be part of the Bluegrass community as a player and that makes me sad, and makes me mad because music means so much to

me; I think Bluegrass can be learned by just about anybody. I don't really run into too many people that I can't teach to play one tune on the banjo.

She concluded:

And it's just so much fun. Talk about community—I see this all the time in my students—they start to play, and then they start looking for other people who are playing. My students have got a jam session going on now, and it's cross-cultural; they're all middle-class or working class, but they're people with a Ph.D. in music working with somebody who is a blue-collar worker, and they play music together. And I see how much music means to people in their lives, and that makes me happy, that I can make other people happy in that way.

## Conclusion

What is interesting in two of the participants' accounts is what they did not discuss. Neither Marc nor Murphy mentioned taking music in school; yet they are both accomplished and passionate musicians in their respective genres.<sup>22</sup> Cathy mentioned that she started playing clarinet in the fifth grade but soon quit. Her story is, unfortunately, a familiar one (I cringed reading the first part of her narrative, because her description of her band director could have easily been me ten years ago). She said:

I had played clarinet in 5<sup>th</sup> grade and I rebelled against the way the band instructor wanted me to learn. I wanted to be Benny Goodman, and I knew that you had to go through the boring stuff to get there, so I was willing to do that, but the lessons in this concrete cell with me and the instructor and this piece of paper in front of me and I'm supposed to be tapping my foot in a certain way and reading these notes. The clearest memory I have is, I was tapping my heel instead of my toe, and he said "no you have to tap your toe" and I thought "why the heck should it matter as long as I'm keeping the beat?" I learned clarinet quickly enough that my first experience in band they put in 2<sup>nd</sup> chair. And I was over my head, and I wasn't reading music well enough then to be able to sight read when there was all this other stuff going on at the same time. So I played by listening to the guy sitting next me to, and I tried to play what he was playing. I was tuning out the written, playing by ear. It was not satisfying, so I quit.

Although one cannot generalize based on one narrative, considering the depth and breadth of Cathy's devotion, skill, and passion as a lifelong musician and teacher, her story of a failed public school music experience, particularly in light of where she is now as a musician, is a sad commentary.

Regardless of their lack of discussion about school music education, it is clear that all three participants are lifelong music learners, devoted to both their craft and to sharing their musical knowledge freely with new learners in the Old Time and Bluegrass banjo communities. They take their roles as "old timers," inducting new learners into their musics, seriously; however, the disconnect between their narratives of music learning and school

music education from when all three were growing up in the 60s is quite clear. Despite their ages as “boomers,” all three are proficient users and adapters of technology for musical purposes and are Internet savvy.

The number of members and the fast paced volume of activity on the Banjo Hangout forums, video uploads, library, and lesson repository indicates the need that members have to be active music makers in their everyday lives as opposed to being strictly passive consumers of music, and that “if you (along with everyone else in your community) build it, they will come.” In other words, the Banjo Hangout is a stellar example of an online community built with “social capital” from the ground up—it fills a niche, a void, an “obsession,” in members’ lives—and displays traits similar to those found in successful online community as lauded by Wenger, White, and Smith below:

The spirit of sharing and support is so interconnected with experimentation and the use of technology in community that it’s difficult to tell which is the cause and which is the effect. Either way, [community members] both find new ways to use technology and new ways of helping each other use that technology (2009, 53)

Founded in 2000, BH members take full advantage of implementing, incorporating, and embedding new technologies in order to share and learn music with one another in on and offline community. More impressively, it is maintained solely by members volunteering their time. Further, it overlaps with other musical communities of practice based around the same musical genres. The integration of on and offline community is evident everywhere on and around the site in the form of forum posts, hyperlinks to YouTube videos, other related websites, and blogs. The community continues to grow and expand on and offline, and there is overwhelming evidence of a successful integrated community of practice as a whole entity.

Participants’ accounts are tales of people who need to play music and to share playing music with others, be it on or offline. The activity on the Banjo Hangout is also indicative of what Burgess and Green (2009) discuss regarding the importance of YouTube in participatory music making in online community. Participants post YouTube videos of themselves to initiate discussion, freely adding further to the knowledge base of the community via shared and constructed experiences on the discussion forums. Through hyperlinks and posts, community members co-produce and create meaning and identity through practice in community. Further, the Hangout is also an example of a large integrated on and offline community of adults “out there” who practice participatory music making independently of a school music culture or one based on it (for example, New Horizons

programs).

As music educators, we have much to learn by examining successful music communities of practice that lie outside of our “regular” scope of school music and school music genres, and this includes teaching musical skills necessary to be active participants in other genres besides those perpetuated by school music. Neither have we fully understood or utilized the power of the Internet in facilitating informal music learning in online communities. As a profession, we have a lot of catching up to do. But we also have shining examples available to emulate that are literally at our fingertips.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Tablature (or tabulature, or tab for short) is a form of musical notation indicating instrument fingering instead of musical pitch (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tablature>, in Waldron 2009, retrieved August 15, 2009).

<sup>2</sup> Thomas Turino is also a member of the Banjo Hangout, although he was not a participant in this study.

<sup>3</sup> This is to be expected in offline qualitative research, but is even more likely to happen in online contexts due to easy accessibility to “chunks” of the data.

<sup>4</sup> Due to the time stamped BH archives, I still receive the occasional request from forum members asking to be study participants.

<sup>5</sup> Note that, in the OT recruitment thread, two interviewees posted that they had had their interviews in the thread; I also replied to posters on both threads.

<sup>6</sup> The BJH is particularly intriguing from an —old timer — newbie dichotomy, because embedded in each posters’ signature is an automatic message that signals how long members have been active forum members. Automatic designations (accompanied by one to five stars) begin with —forum newbie, continues through —rollin’ forward, —forum regular, —senior member, and culminates with —forum fixture.

<sup>7</sup> In order to maintain open-ended conversations within an online community, discussion boards are automatically archived. Thus “communities often want to hold on to old discussions” (Wenger, White, and Smith, 2009, 77), and the Banjo Hangout is one example of an online community that practices this. All forum posts since the Banjo Hangout’s inception in 2000 are time stamped and remain archived and, for that reason, links and hyperlinks within the site do not expire or go out of date. Indeed, members are strongly and frequently reminded to search archived threads before asking any new questions regarding music learning in a new post.

<sup>8</sup> I also interviewed a fourth well known and respected “old timer” – Dan Levenson – but did not include data from his interview in this paper, as his interview took place after I had already completed data collection for this paper. Data from Dan’s interview will however be included in a future paper.

<sup>9</sup> This being an example of what Hine (2005) describes above as “problematic” in cyber ethnographic research: that is, the researcher must decide how to frame a large quantity of data while still remaining within the qualitative paradigm.

<sup>10</sup> These are the Old Timers’ real names.

<sup>11</sup> I did not officially quantify this data using content analysis, but a quick perusal/search of time stamped archives turns up many examples of this. So this is a researcher approximation

on my part.

<sup>12</sup> With apologies to Al Gore.

<sup>13</sup> The ratio was different for each participant, but all are first and foremost aural learners, and stressed the importance of learning and teaching “by ear.”

<sup>14</sup> Murphy Henry is a Bluegrass musician, thus her experiences differ somewhat from Marc’s and Cathy’s; she used the Earl Scruggs book when she began, but Murphy did mention the significance of the Seeger book.

<sup>15</sup> The [Communist Party of Canada](#) was “banned in 1940, and it refounded itself as the Labour-Progressive Party (LPP) in 1943 after the release of Communist Party leaders from internment. Only one LPP [Member of Parliament](#) (MP) was elected under that banner, [Fred Rose](#), who was elected in a 1943 by-election in [Montreal](#) and sat in the [House of Commons](#)” (accessed February 5, 2010 [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Labour-Progressive\\_Party](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Labour-Progressive_Party)).

<sup>16</sup> The “tune of the week” is a BH feature to help members learn and also showcases new tunes through a YouTube video of the BH poster playing the tune with links to other useful tune learning resources including TAB (an alternate notation discussed above), mp3 recordings, related forum discussions, and other YouTube videos.

<sup>17</sup> “Meaning, the first of the four components of ‘learning as social process,’ is negotiated in community through the dual interactions of participation and reification (Wenger 1998, 63). “Artifacts play a primary role in this negotiation because they function as signifiers to specific groups of people and in the process become reified; thus, reification is both ‘process and product’ (Waldron 2009, 102). Disparate examples of artifacts include ‘a fleeting smoke signal or an age old pyramid, an abstract formula or a concrete truck, a small logo or a huge information-processing system, a simple word jotted on a page or a complex argument developed in a whole book, a telling glance or a long silence (Wenger 1998, 60).’ “Had YouTube videos existed in 1998—the year Wenger’s book was first published—he most likely would have included them in the above list” (Waldron 2009, 102).

<sup>18</sup> Marc shared these personal stories with me in his interviews—thus information in his BH blog also served to triangulate interview data.

<sup>19</sup> Although this thread lies outside of Marc’s blog in the BH site, it merits discussion as an example of hyperlinking across overlapping communities of practice and the significance of discourse for music learning in the BH.

<sup>20</sup> As part of their design, web sites—including the BH—store threads and posts as time stamped archives, making them accessible to forum members/learners at any time (Dillon and Brown 2010).

<sup>21</sup> Murphy has a forthcoming book entitled “Pioneer Women in Bluegrass,” with the University of Illinois Press.

<sup>22</sup> Both Marc and Murphy had school music experiences, but, from their accounts, it did not figure prominently in their subsequent music learning.

### **About the Author**

Janice Waldron holds a Ph.D. in Music Education. While her research interests focus on informal music learning and formal music teaching in convergent on and offline communities of practice, her investigations also integrate issues of cyber ethnography, technology, ethnography, narrative inquiry, sociology, music education philosophy, vernacular music practices and gender studies. Dr. Waldron’s most recent work employs cyber ethnographic method of interview and observation, narrative inquiry, and case study conducted entirely through computer-mediated communication in examination of online music communities as “communities of practice,” and includes the epistemological implications of music learning and teaching in online music communities.