

This special section on Arts and Geography includes a range of articles that look at what the arts can teach us about physical and cultural geography. The inspiration for this section was a multi-campus Artsbridge Americaⁱ project entitled “Mapping the Beat.” Readers who are not yet familiar with this approach may find a brief explanation helpful.

We have books for political history... But music is one of the most intimate expressions. Through music you become knowledgeable of the intimate aspects of life that aren't told in books. The people themselves tell you their stories—it's not an interpretation. (Yurchenco, from Handwerk, 2003)

Mapping the Beat is an innovative curriculum that uses inquiry learning to teach geography through units of instruction that integrate music, history, and geography. At the heart of this program are three concepts—environment, identity, and movement—taken from the national geography standards. These themes were selected for their significance to the study of both music and geography. Elementary and secondary students consider how the physical character of a region shapes the music, and how, in turn, the music shapes the cultural character of that same region. They investigate the origins of various musical genres and place them in a larger cultural context. Visual and performing arts are viewed as a record of cultural migration, a product of the geographic environment and a cornerstone of personal and group identity.

A multiple-state project funded by National Geographic, *Mapping the Beat*ⁱⁱ builds on students' interest in popular music to initiate a process of discovery. Through studying music history and ethnomusicology, young people gain a sense of connection to the global cultural traditions upon which American popular music has drawn. Students investigate both the material (tangible/visible) and nonmaterial (oral/experiential) elements of human culture by looking at how these cultural elements are manifested within specific musical traditions.

By recreating the musical “soundtrack” of American history, the *Mapping the Beat* lessons help students to make meaningful connections with (and within) the United States history curriculum. One example is the story of how African-American musical traditions grew and spread—from sorrow songs sung in the fields to rappers at the top of the popular music charts. Students' enjoyment of rap, rock, blues, gospel and jazz enhances their understanding of the contribution that citizens of African heritage have made to the culture of the United States.

In the process, students discover that much of what now seems uniquely “American” about popular music in the United States is actually a product of the merging of European and African musical traditions. The *Mapping the Beat* curriculum helps students in fifth and eighth grade discover the human geography of the United States through looking at the story behind specific genres of popular music. By tracing the spread of musical forms (the rhythms of the African Diaspora, Celtic tunes brought to the Appalachians by Scots-Irish immigrants, the Latin beat driving the fingers of German accordion players in Texas), students explore the diverse ways American culture is linked to a wider world.

In their article, “Implementing Mapping the Beat in the 8th Grade,” Richardson, Feder, and Yep describe how a middle school successfully adapted the *Mapping the Beat* curriculum (originally written for 5th grade) for use at the 8th grade level, when comparable time periods of American history are studied by California students. Through their detailed description of implementation, the reader is brought into the classroom to experience the excitement of students making a connection, for the first time, between familiar songs and tumultuous historical events.

Ethnomusicologist Alex Khalil, in his article “Gaining Insight into Cultural Geography through the Study of Musical Instruments,” takes us along on the journey of a 6th grade class that gains an experiential understanding of Balinese culture through the study of musical instruments shaped by that culture’s aesthetics and made of locally available materials and technologies. As Khalil points out, instrumental music is unfettered by the practical, semantic, or representational constraints of other traditional art forms. Therefore, it can be considered one of the most direct forms of cultural expression, reflecting primarily the collective imagination of the culture that developed it and the environment in which it developed.

In “A Constructivist Study of Middle School Students’ Narratives and Ecological Illustrations,” Stokrocki, Flatt, and York write about a project that was not part of *Mapping the Beat*, but had a related theme. They show how narrative writing and illustration provided a lens through which students could explore life cycles in the desert, as well as essential issues such as survival, their place in the preservation of this delicate and quickly disappearing wilderness, and the reasons why they should take care of the desert and its animals.

Wilcox, Bridges, and Montgomery describe another innovative approach in “The Role of Coaching by Teaching Artists for Arts-Infused Social Studies.” They discuss the role that curriculum coaches played as they worked with teachers, arts educators, and community artists to infuse the arts into 5th grade social studies lessons. Using data from interviews, artifacts, field notes, and observations, they recount changes in school culture over a seven-year period.

Katerina Tsetsura shares her experience of using performance, specifically folk dancing and singing, to provide university students with a face-to-face introduction to her Russian cultural heritage. In “Performing Thyself: Sparking Imagination and Exploring Ethnic Identity Through Singing and Dancing,” she argues that the immediacy of classroom performance serves as a starting point for a “novel, fresh conversation” about the meaning of cultural identity.

In “Helping Children Cross Cultural Boundaries in the Borderlands.” Brouillette and Jennings recount the story of Freese Elementary School, where *Mapping the Beat* was first implemented. In a neighborly island of safety in a violence-prone neighborhood, Freese has developed methods of teaching cultural understanding through the arts at all grade levels. The founding of *Mapping the Beat* at Freese was described in the first issue of *Journal of Learning through the Arts* (Scholl, 2005). This article focuses on arts-based programs, such as puppetry, which Freese has developed to promote cultural understanding among younger children.

References

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- Scholl, Jennifer. (2005). The Evolution of Mapping the Beat: A History and Geography through Music Curriculum. *Journal for Learning through the Arts*, 1(1). Retrieved from: <http://escholarship.org/uc/item/3sr4449j>

ⁱ Information on ArtsBridge America is available at: <http://www.clat.uci.edu/artsbridge/about>

ⁱⁱ Mapping the Beat lessons can be accessed at: <http://www.clta.uci.edu/geo/hist>