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# Musical Memos in Qualitative Inquiry: Creating Artful, Embodied and Salient Reflections

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## Musical Memos in Qualitative Inquiry: Creating Artful, Embodied and Salient Reflections

### Abstract

This article presents musical memoing as an arts-based reflective process and as a way to engage with and represent data in qualitative inquiry. Used in conjunction with more well-known approaches to data analysis (constant comparison and narrative analysis), musical memos serve to pull forth and highlight salient understandings emerging in the analyses. Moreover, musical memoing allows for the creation of concise yet holistic representations of the data, which can be performed in an embodied manner to enhance understanding of phenomena. The role of musical memoing is discussed within the context of a research study carried out at McGill University entitled, "Exploring a University Teacher's Approach to Incorporating Music in a Cognition Psychology Course." A brief overview of the research findings is presented, as well as the methodological implications musical memoing has for future research.

### Keywords

Musical Memos, Arts-Based Research, Qualitative Inquiry

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### Acknowledgements

We would like to acknowledge the participants for contributing their time and insights that informed the study, "Exploring a University Teacher's Approach to Incorporating Music in a Cognition Psychology Course."

## **Musical Memos in Qualitative Inquiry: Creating Artful, Embodied and Salient Reflections**

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The purpose of this paper is to describe the role that musical memoing played in a qualitative study that explored university teaching in an undergraduate cognition course. Musical memos came about as I, a singer, songwriter, and a PhD student at the time, worked closely with my supervisor, Lynn Butler-Kisber, a poetic inquirer. My supervisor and I are both arts-based qualitative researchers who embrace a social-constructivist perspective. It was during the supervisory process that musical memos became a natural and compelling way to move the reflective process deeper and further. In this study, musical memos were used in conjunction with other forms of analysis, which included a constant comparison or thematic analysis and a narrative analysis. The musical memos, which initially served as a form of reflective memoing put to music, proved to be an innovative analytic and representational approach for highlighting, expressing, and representing data in salient and artful ways. Ultimately, musical memoing facilitated moving from intuitive to concrete understandings and representations. Moreover, musical memos, when performed, enrich the embodiment by emphasizing certain salient words for the performer and the listener, and we argue that this serves to strengthen connections and understandings. In the following section, I present the theoretical underpinnings of this research and I discuss the power of memoing as a reflective practice and analytical tool. Specifically, in the case with this research, musical memoing facilitated discovering insights that were not evident using other data analysis approaches.

### **Theoretical Perspective**

Arts-based qualitative inquiry emerged in the last few decades as qualitative researchers “embraced new practices that redefined the roles of researchers and the research participants” (Finley, 2005, p. 682). The proximity and intensity of personal interactions in qualitative research precipitated closer attention to, and more of a focus on, ethical issues in the researcher-participant relationship. Participants were no longer viewed as subjects, but rather as

“collaborators, even co-researchers” (p. 682). Finlay has highlighted this turn to activist social science that led to arts-based inquiry:

Postmodern foundational shifts brought about new conceptualizations of how research works, how meanings are made, and what social purposes research might serve. Social scientists began to act on their realization that traditional techniques of research were not adequate to handle the many questions that needed to be asked when the frame was shifted to take on new and diverse populations. (p. 682)

Additionally, Denzin and Lincoln (2005, 2018) have discussed a crisis of representation that prompted questions about how research can be reported, written up, and what forms the research can take. These issues created a space for arts-based inquiry (Finlay, 2002). Within the research reform, theorists such as Eisner (1991) encouraged exploring the arts in research, and in this study, music was the art form that informed my understandings. The products were musical memos which built upon memoing: a practice of logging thoughts regularly so that the researcher documents his or her impressions, reflections, questions, and ideas as they evolve throughout the study. A reflective memo is defined as the “theorizing write-up of ideas about codes and their relationships as they strike the analyst while coding” (Glaser, 1978, p. 83). Memos document the flow of ideas and reflective notes to oneself as the data analysis progresses. These help the researcher to discover relationships among the data and tease out a more conceptual understanding of the “raw” data. Memos also “tie together different pieces of data into a recognizable cluster, often to show that those data are instances of a general concept” (Miles & Huberman 1994, p. 72). When memoing, an “intense relationship is established with the data, enabling the researcher to feel a heightened sensitivity to the meanings contained within” (Birks, Chapman, & Francis, 2008, p. 69). There is no definitive way to write memos. Rather, the researcher has the freedom to develop his or her own creative and personalized approach. Ultimately, the approach to memo writing is to “do what works for you” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 80). What worked for me as a singer/songwriter was to create musical memos, which involved using found words from transcripts and adding words of my own to create rhyme and rhythm as I shaped the data into a musical form. These musical memos were written at pivotal moments throughout the study, and this process helped me to monitor my thoughts and ideas as they occurred and helped to flesh out and highlight the essences of what was emerging from the data.

### **Data Collection Analysis**

The primary data in my study consisted of three types: 1) interview transcripts collected from interviews with the participants at three different points in the study; 2) interview transcripts collected in two interviews with the professor of the cognition course; and 3) field notes taken when I observed the classroom each week of the three-month course. The data analysis consisted of constant comparison analysis (Butler-Kisber, 2018) as well as a narrative analysis which resulted in a series of vignettes or aggregated, “short hypothetical scenarios that are intended to elicit people’s perceptions, beliefs and attitudes” (Torres, 2009, p. 94). Musical memoing served as a reflective documentation process that helped me to explore further the patterns and themes that emerged from the analysis. The constant comparison analysis which elicited themes, a narrative analysis which produced the vignettes, and the role of musical memos are discussed below.

### **Constant Comparison Analysis**

Constant comparison inquiry is a “multi-faceted approach” that involves “systematic data collection, coding, and analysis” (Conrad, 2001, p. 256). The use of the constant comparison approach in data analysis is inductive, in other words, “What becomes important to analyse emerges from the data itself” (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994, p. 127). The advantage of constant comparison analysis is that it allows the researcher to gradually reduce data to a number of broad themes that represent commonalities across participant experiences. The disadvantage is that it strips the data from its context and, in doing so, precludes a more holistic and contextualized understanding of what is transpiring for each participant in the study (Maxwell & Miller, 2008).

### **Narrative Analysis**

In this study a narrative analysis was used to contextualize the themes that emerged from the constant comparison analysis. I used a narrative approach that involved writing vignettes to reflect the patterns of activity that were emblematic of what occurred during class time in this cognition course. Vignettes are chronological descriptions, usually of a short duration, that are representative of typical events (Miles & Huberman, 1994). In addition to providing a vivid representation of a natural sequence of events, vignettes reflect the “sights and sounds” of the typical occurrences (Erickson, 1986).

### **Musical Memos**

Musical memos were inspired and informed by two particular types of arts-based inquiry: found poetry and ghostwriting. Found poetry resonated with me because I discovered that it is closely linked to music, at least on a lyrical level. Found poetry “takes the words of others and transforms them into poetic form” (Butler-Kisber, 2002, p. 233). It is a means of “representing holistically what otherwise might go unnoticed,” and a way to “yield new and important insights” (pp. 234-235). The non-linear process of creating found poetry involves first establishing the storyline then “playing with the number of words, the word sequence, line breaks, pauses, breath-points, and emphasis to get at the essence of what is being recounted” from the data (Butler-Kisber, 2005, p. 97). Although found poetry allows for the voice of the researcher to be present in his/her interpretation and presentation of the poem, the voice of the original speaker is retained. Thus, “poetic representation, when combined with more conventional techniques of qualitative research, may enrich and deepen understanding for the writer as well as the reader” (Feldman, 2004, p. 11).

The other form of arts-based inquiry that influenced my writing of musical memos is ghostwriting, a “practice where a researcher engages with a research participant and, as a result, creates a new text that tells a story of the participant and implies the involvement of the researcher” (Rhodes, 2000, p. 514). As described later, when composing musical memos, at times, I used ghostwriting to represent the participants’ perspectives in my own words. Ghostwriting primarily served as a means for me to modify the text to establish a musical flow and rhyme scheme. By engaging with and reflecting on the data as a ghostwriter, my interpretations and impressions were naturally reflected in the memos. Therefore, ghostwriting allowed me to simultaneously represent the participants’ views while acknowledging my role in the production of the text.

Together, ghostwriting and found poetry worked in tandem to help me create musical memos, and because music represents emotions with a “power that goes beyond that of the written word” (Neilson, 2001, p. 89), as will be illustrated later, the musical memos helped me

represent my data differently. As a result, musical memos gave me a deeper understanding of what was occurring in the study. By writing musical memos I was able to work creatively, reflectively, and more intuitively. This in turn provided new ways of thinking about the data and of discovering nuances that did not emerge in the more linear processes involved in the constant comparison analysis and the creation of vignettes.

### **Research Findings**

Using constant comparison to analyse the participant interview data, I pulled forth three major themes, each comprised of patterns that ran across the data. Under the theme “Connecting with Students,” the patterns were: establishing a personable atmosphere, showing empathy to students, facilitating student involvement, and tapping into student culture with music. The patterns under the “Optimizing Learning” theme were enticing students with passion, reducing exam tension, and clarifying concepts dynamically. The “Creating Salient Moments” theme contained two patterns: holding attention (with music and humour) and triggering memory (with music and humour). Whereas constant comparison analysis highlighted themes and patterns that ran across the data, and vignettes helped to give a more holistic understanding of events that were typical in this course, musical memos served to: (1) Make the intuitive concrete and (2) Enrich the embodiment.

#### **Making Intuitive Understandings Concrete**

When writing my musical memos, I drew upon my skills and experience as a songwriter, and this served to highlight the essence of a pattern and ultimately make my intuitive understandings concrete. As my song-writing skills have evolved, I have become very economical. I have come to understand that for my writing, the message in a song is enhanced if it is delivered with a minimal number of words. This minimalist, lyrical approach carried into my musical memo writing, and I intuitively narrowed in on and selected phrases and lines that best reflected the essence of a particular pattern. It has been suggested that “music-based methods can help researchers access, illuminate, describe, and explain that which is often rendered invisible by traditional research practices” (Leavy, 2009, p. 101). This was the case for me as writing musical memos allowed me to reflect on what was salient in the patterns and to identify nuances that I might not have detected otherwise. Ultimately, by writing musical memos I was able to gain a stronger sense of what transpired during this study, and we would suggest representing these important dimensions in artful and compelling ways.

Additionally, the process I developed to write musical memos allowed me to pull together my impressions, the words of my participants, and the words of the professor into a succinct yet holistic representation of the data. In a sense, musical memos served as a means to create a dialogue among the data sources. As will be discussed later in this paper, the process of turning the data into musical memos enabled me to represent my intuitive understandings in a concrete manner.

#### **Enriching the Embodiment of Representation**

The creating and performing of musical memos allowed me to enrich the embodiment of representation beyond the written word: The tone of my voice, the cadence of the words, the pauses, the pitch of the notes, the chords I played on the guitar, and the tempo are all aspects of music that I use in my work as a songwriter and performer in order to embody and convey both a message and a particular feeling. Similarly, by drawing upon these musical aspects in my memo writing, I was able to create a very embodied representation of the data, and as

illustrated in the example below, this provided the listener and me with a nuanced understanding of the data.

### **A Musical Memo Illustration: It's a Tough Course**

As mentioned above, the data analysis revealed the four patterns contained within the "Connecting with Students" theme. However, there remained portions of data with which I grappled extensively. They did not fit within the theme and remained as outliers for some time, coded as "difficult course" in my analysis. Later through the memoing process, I realized that these outliers represented the outcome of connecting with students. More specifically, it was because the professor was able to establish a personal atmosphere, show empathy, facilitate involvement, and tap into student culture through music, he was able to promote student engagement with difficult material.

Initially, it was very apparent that the participants found the course challenging. In particular, they felt that the number of course readings and the denseness of the readings made these requirements very demanding. The following excerpt from the interview data illustrate this. (Note: The reference in brackets following this excerpt indicates the name (pseudonym) of the participant; and if the document was from an in-person comment (I), e-mail (EM), or phone (P) interview; the page number of the document; and the month the interview was conducted.)

It is a lot of reading, and definitely you have to keep up to date with it. It's like 80 pages a week, sometimes, and it's really intense stuff (Sylvie/I/2-3/March).

This is just one example of what the participants shared with me, but I was most struck and puzzled by what was not reflected in data. While the participants were forthcoming with their criticism about the amount of course readings, I was surprised that they did not criticize the professor for assigning such a heavy reading workload. At first, I considered that the participants had been reluctant to share criticism of their professor with me, yet they demonstrated an openness to share constructive criticism on other topics. As I analyzed the data further it seemed that by connecting and relating to students, the professor promoted student engagement with difficult material. In other words, the data suggested that the participants viewed their professor as a friendly, approachable teacher who was in tune with their experiences and perspectives, and this in turn appears to have had an impact on how the participants engaged with and accepted the difficult course requirements.

A cheerful attitude with a class always makes a huge difference when it comes to hitting the books. I was motivated to read for the class because I had a positive association with the class/material (Anne/E/3/April).

The analysis helped to highlight key points in the data that were not initially apparent. As discussed above, one of the patterns that was particularly noteworthy was how the professor who established a personal atmosphere and connection with students, made the students more accepting of the heavy workload. This pattern piqued my interest, and I was inspired to write a musical memo, which served to make my intuitive understandings concrete. The following memo, "It's a Tough Course," includes quotes and paraphrased lines from interviews with the professor as well as with the participants (Visit <http://daleboyle.weebly.com/musical-memo.html> to hear the audio recording of "It's a Tough Course").

It's a Tough Course  
*It's a tough course*  
*You have to stay on top*  
*I tell ya, it's like 80 pages a week*  
*And it really is intense stuff*  
*And at times you can say it's rough*  
*But in the end, it makes me think*  
*About categories, techniques, and studies*  
*There's more to know and that ain't funny*  
*You really have to be on the ball*  
*There's a lot more reading than I expected*  
*Don't drag your heels. Don't neglect it*  
*You'll find yourself back here come next fall*  
*Don't be overconfident*  
*Read it twice, time well spent*  
*I don't get more money for giving bad grades*  
*I'll find us some common ground*  
*That we can learn upon*  
*Ain't no need for anyone to be afraid*  
*If they don't think that I am out of touch*  
*Maybe this won't seem like too much*  
*And I know it can feel like a lot*  
*It's a tough course, you have to stay on top*

The creation of musical memos helped make intuitive understandings concrete and increased the embodiment of the message. We believe that this memo illustrates this. Intuitively, I wrote “It’s a Tough Course” with a very fast and lively tempo. In particular, the rushed vocal delivery produced a feeling of movement and excitement. In hindsight, the tempo and delivery of this memo reflects musically the busy pace of students working through the course requirements. The memo has a light playful delivery, reminiscent of Johnny Cash’s song, “A Boy Named Sue.” And like in “A Boy Named Sue,” I used only major chords to produce a brighter feeling, which is emphasized particularly when combined with a lively tempo. The first half of the memo contains lines and phrases pulled directly from the participant data, and beginning at the line, “don’t be overconfident,” I switch to the professor’s perspective by drawing from my field notes as well as my interview data with him. In writing the musical memo “It’s a Tough Course,” I was able to pull together the different data sources, create a dialogue, and highlight the fundamental ways of how the professor helped promote student engagement with difficult material. As I engaged with the transcripts, occasionally I wrote lines in my own words as a way to create a musical flow, rhythm, and rhyme. For example, the professor stated in an interview that that he consciously worked to establish a “common ground” with students, and I wanted to reflect this in the “It’s a Tough Course” musical memo. The “common ground” phrase inspired the following lines which I wrote in my own words:

I'll find us some common ground  
 That we can learn upon

Generally, I drew upon direct quotes to write musical memos, and ghostwriting served to give me some additional freedom to ensure that the memo worked musically. In either case, it is important to note that although the written words of “It’s a Tough Course” reflect the busy lives of students, it is an embodied representation of their lives that occurs in the music and



performance that shows how the musical memo “feels” to both the performer and listener. In the case of “It’s a Tough Course,” in an intuitive and unconscious way, I represented musically the feeling of being busy by using an upbeat tempo and a rushed delivery of the lyrics. When I perform “It’s a Tough Course,” I do not just sing about being busy, I try to show how this feels by delivering them in a rushed and vigorous manner that suggests busyness. Fundamentally, we believe that the methodological strength of musical memoing is rooted in the embodied and performative aspects of it.

Writing musical memos produced insights about the research. For example, in “It’s a Tough Course” I acquired a heightened appreciation of how hard it was for students to sustain their extremely busy schedules and keep up with the course requirements. Although the heavy course workload was present in the interview excerpts, the process of turning the “raw” data into a musical memo served as a “methodological spotlight,” a means for me to intuitively zero in on, highlight, and musically represent salient points in the data. Prior to writing “It’s a Tough Course,” I was aware that the data pointed out that the course was difficult. Initially, this did not seem particularly noteworthy. This musical memoing process, however, moved me beyond a superficial grasp of what the data were suggesting, connected me more fully with the data, and helped me to have a more empathetic understanding of what the students were experiencing. And we believe, it is through an embodied musical performance that this feeling can be conveyed to others. Essentially, writing “It’s a Tough Course” served to pull forth and accentuate important aspects of the data that otherwise might have been glossed over in my analysis. This work suggests that musical memoing process can function as a methodological spotlight which deepens understanding and reveals unconscious nuances or emphases that might not have emerged in the more linear forms of analyses.

### **Methodological Implications for Researchers**

When creating memos, the researcher works closely with the data (Birks, Chapman, & Francis, 2008), tying together pieces of data and ultimately discovering relationships (Miles & Huberman, 1994). What has not been highlighted in the literature is how the mode used to represent a memo can have a powerful impact on what emerges. Attention needs to be paid to the communicative propensity of the researcher, and how a researcher can draw on an artful strength, in this case music, to enhance the memoing process. Others can potentially draw from other arts-based forms of inquiry (e.g., dance, visual arts) to personalize their memos in embodied ways that enhance the analytic process. Researchers should be encouraged to explore and establish a personalized approach to memoing using their natural proclivities (Gardner, 1993a, 1993b) and find ways that work for them (Charmaz, 2006). We would argue that whatever artful form is used, memoing can help researchers discover relationships in data, provide an embodied experience with the data for both the researcher and audience, and deepen understanding by representing data in artful, salient ways.

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Dale Boyle (PhD, McGill) is a singer-songwriter, researcher, educator, and freelance writer. His research at McGill University explored the role that music can play in teaching across academic disciplines and it introduced musical memoing, an arts-based musical approach to analyzing and representing qualitative data. As a course lecturer at McGill, Dale teaches graduate and undergraduate courses, including research methods, educational theory, communication, and music-based courses. Dale regularly writes for *Canadian Musician* magazine on topics related to the art of songwriting. As a songwriter, Dale has been named a winner of various awards including: Unsigned Only Music Competition (2017); International Songwriting Competition (2012); and Narrative Songwriting Competition (2007). For more information visit [www.daleboyle.com](http://www.daleboyle.com). Correspondence regarding this article can be addressed directly to: [dale.boyle@mcgill.ca](mailto:dale.boyle@mcgill.ca).

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