MUSICultures
The Journal of the Canadian Society for Traditional Music
La revue de la Société canadienne pour les traditions musicales

On Drumming and (Online) Facilitation

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Volume 50, 2023

URI: https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1110014ar
DOI: https://doi.org/10.7202/1110014ar

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Publisher(s)

Canadian Society for Traditional Music / La Société canadienne pour les traditions musicales

ISSN

1920-4213 (print)
1920-4221 (digital)

Explore this journal

Cite this document

Stadnicki, D. (2023). On Drumming and (Online) Facilitation. *MUSICultures*, *50*, 135–147. https://doi.org/10.7202/1110014ar

On Drumming and (Online) Facilitation

DANIEL AKIRA STADNICKI

"Hand drumming is easy."
Or so I have been told.

Accessible is probably what most folks actually mean when they share these thoughts about drumming (seasoned educators, included). There is definitely a sense of immediacy with percussion—a tangible and satisfying relationship between stroke and sound. Proper mechanics and technique can come later, but most anyone can beat a hand drum, join a drum circle, and express their inner beatmaker. "Rhythm is universal." "The Drum is the Primal Heartbeat." Or so I have heard. This short reflective paper will provide a glimpse into my experiences with drumming facilitation as both an ad hoc practitioner and drummer/scholar. While it will briefly outline some key pedagogical issues and historical contexts, it will also share practical advice for those who wish to embark on a similar journey (see the appendix in particular).

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My own opinion on drumming facilitation is … complicated. As an ethnomusicologist, I know that many of the above ideas are naive and problematic, likely tied to colonialist views of Western musicality, professionalism, and the hierarchy of tonality over rhythm. As a professional drummer, I find them overly simplistic, even mildly offensive. But in the gig economy, such concerns can be overlooked, as I did while freelancing as a "community drumming facilitator" — a somewhat vague title for "informal music educator" or "group music leader." I have avoided the added label of *drum circle* facilitator like the plague, due to my own experiences with (and prejudices about) them: the chaos of noise and excessively loud volumes, new age-y white folks in dashikis and

Stadnicki, Daniel Akira. 2023. On Drumming and (Online) Facilitation. *MUSICultures* 50: 135-147.

dreadlocks … Channeling my unchecked pessimism into scholarly critique, I began to seriously research drum circle pedagogy at the University of Alberta while taking a seminar with Dr. Marcia Ostashewski — a leading figure in reciprocal, community-based, and applied ethnomusicological projects. For her class, I interviewed Edmonton-area drum circle organizers, surveyed existing facilitation literature, and presented papers on major issues in the drum circle industry, including at the annual meeting of the Society for Ethnomusicology, among other venues. But, as a new father of two, I was eager (desperate?) to contribute to paying for our family's growing monthly bills and contacted local public libraries, schools, and music stores to host my own drum workshops, despite never having led one. There seemed to be a real appetite for drumming events across the city. Surely my own classes would be different, right?

I found the idea of facilitation appealing for its informality and general emphasis on *fun* — it was a less authoritative style of teaching, something like "shepherding" or "accompanying." In most cases, I was hired to deliver interactive drumming workshops; these ranged from events at daycares and preschools to larger seminars for adult staff at local businesses. The goal was to design and lead one-off participatory music experiences that taught a new (i.e., non-Western) style of drumming, all while building camaraderie and emphasizing cross-cultural exchange, the values of equity, diversity, multiculturalism, and so on. Pushing my own ethnomusicological dissonance (and cynicism) aside, I would gather a hodgepodge of drums and incorporate elements from my university lectures in world music, applied experience with Brazilian percussion, contemporary improv, jazz, and Ghanaian drumming. It was a confusing jumble of rhythms, traditions, and instruments, and even included some graphic notation. It was also a lot of fun.

The problem was that there was very little connection between the participants and the drumming traditions that were presented in the workshops — there was no real rationale for learning these patterns, never mind a culturally specific drumming tradition. No one asked me, "why Brazilian drumming?" — however, I also didn't have any opportunities to continue working with any particular group, nor did we have enough time in a workshop to engage with the material in a meaningful way (workshops were typically a maximum of one and a half hours long). This was especially difficult when I started volunteering as a teaching artist for USchool, an outreach program at the University of Alberta that provided rural and marginalized youth with diverse educational programming on campus. Right when I started to connect with a class and establish a rapport with the students, they would move on to another campus activity. Dissatisfied, I took a break from drumming facilitation and focused more on gigging, recording, lecturing, and yes, finishing the dissertation.

Fortunately, in 2018, I took on a teaching position at the Sarah McLachlan School of Music, an after-school program focused on popular music for economically disadvantaged and at-risk youth. Programming was delivered at a local high school, and I was finally able to give regular and consistent hand drum lessons. Every week we used cajons, djembes, shakers, snare drums, darbukas, you name it. The point was to gain general rhythmic skills and participate in a large warmup activity before breaking out into separate groups. Combined with rock band lessons, private instruction, free healthy lunches, and games, this class made me far less cynical about the idea that drumming could help build community. We were able to progress in our group drum exercises, maintain connections with students, and delve more deeply into specific musical traditions and rhythmic concepts. Facilitation no longer seemed like an ambiguous role, but rather a critical pedagogical approach to music outreach and informal music education. However, as is often the case for precarious work in the cultural industries (including academia), the opportunity was short-lived; I accepted a remote two-year postdoctoral fellowship and stepped back from my role at the Sarah School, still hoping one day to combine my interests in drumming facilitation, youth outreach, and ethnomusicology.

But What Exactly Is Facilitation?

Facilitation is the preferred term for teaching and group leadership in the drum circle industry. However, training in drum facilitation varies widely and the different styles of teaching often coincide with branded books and courses from charismatic drum circle leaders or large drum manufacturers. The language around facilitation often separates it from more mainstream forms of music education and pedagogy (regarded as rigid, formal, and overly serious), and most descriptions are premised on a horizontal leadership structure, the values of musical inclusion, accessibility, and variations of guiding participants' innate "universal rhythm." According to drum circle educator Christine Stevens (2003), a facilitator

> is not a teacher. The facilitator is more like a coach, serving to inspire, conduct, and lead a group of people through the discovery of rhythm that has been waiting inside them all along. There's no need to "teach" what everyone already "knows." Rhythm is innate. Does a baby need someone to teach them to walk? Absolutely not. But they do need support as they gradually stand on their feet and begin to take their first steps. (29)

In recent years, scholars in the fields of popular music education and community music studies have critically examined the topic of facilitation and unpacked its many practices. As Radio Cremata (2017) writes, "Facilitators create safe contexts for learning and conditions optimized for self-guided, self-directed, discovery-orientated, experiential education" (64); they are educators of musical approximation, as a facilitator may "try to help students get close to but not necessarily up to a precise, perfect or idealized musical standard" (66). For Gillian Howell, Lee Higgins, and Brydie-Leigh Bartleet (2017), facilitation involves a complex blend of musicianship, teaching, community development, youth outreach, social work, and leadership skills (612–13); it is "concerned with encouraging open dialogue among different individuals with differing perspectives," placing emphasis on the "personal and social growth of participants [being] as important as their musical growth" (610). Here, notions of musical excellence refer "to the quality of the social experience — the bonds formed, meaning and enjoyment derived, sense of agency that emerges for individuals and the group" (614). Accordingly, Lee Higgins broadly maps out three groupings of community music activity where facilitation is involved: "as *the music of a particular (cultural, ethnic) community*, emphasizing the musical content and the relationship between the music makers and the music; as *communal music making* (where the emphasis is on people and place, and the shared music making experience); and *community music as an active intervention* with a group of participants led by a skilled facilitator" (602). The third and more contentious "interventionist" category would best describe my own experience as a drumming facilitator thus far — an approach that is premised on a more formalized relationship between a professional teaching musician and a specific group (though I have not received additional training or professionalization in facilitation).

Today, drumming facilitation is an immensely popular and lucrative global industry with wide-ranging applications, including large-scale corporate team-building events that can cost upward of thirty thousand dollars (Grode 2005). It intersects with commercial and educational sectors, but all too often perpetuates harmful attitudes and systemic inequities related to race, Indigeneity, and colonialism. In youth (Onishi 2014; Snow and D'Amico 2010) and immigrant outreach (Pravaz 2009), trauma counselling (Ascenso et. al 2018; Bensimon, Amir, and Wolf 2008; Winkelman 2003), among other therapeutic contexts (Pavlicevic 1997), drums are often used as vehicles for community engagement. Companies like Rhythm2Recovery, HealthRHYTHMS, and Drum Café provide services to universities, school boards, Fortune 500 companies, and non-profits in the hopes of stimulating creativity in the workplace, as well as boosting productivity and profits — a trend that economists attribute to a

holistic "creative class" (Florida 2012). Remarkably, drum facilitation is almost exclusively delivered using West African instrumentation, musical narratives, and aesthetics (i.e., facilitator clothing, company branding, etc.). This legacy can be attributed to the success of figures like Nigerian drummer Babatunde Olantuji (1927–2003), Mickey Hart, and leading exponent of African "rhythmaculture" Arthur Hull. Most drum circle literature tends to be published by those with private facilitation businesses (Faulkner 2021; Hull 2014; Stevens 2003) and, while some texts praise culturally specific drumming traditions, many downplay the risk of cultural appropriation, claiming to teach only "universal" and "community-based" patterns (Rhythm2Recovery 2016; Hull 2007: 24–25).

Scholars have only recently engaged with the legacy of drum circles, which problematically appeal to a "mystical universal consciousness" that was "based on the partial appropriation and transformation (indeed, simplification) of African-based drumming, to the point of obscuring cultural or racial origins" (Charry 2005: 16–17). For Quintana Carter-Ényì, Aaron Carter-Ényì, and Kevin Nathaniel Hylton (2019), drum circles often reinforce an "African rhythm" trope, "which claims that African music is all about rhythm, and . . . that African music has no structure or complexity, so anyone can play it" (77). This is precisely how many facilitation companies market their products, including Drum Café, which claims that "drumming requires no talent, aptitude or physical ability — just a sense of fun!" (Drum Café India, n.d.).

The PEG-COVID Whitney Pier Project

Between April and December 2021, I had the good fortune of working as a remote project manager for the DIALOGUES Project, an international research initiative led by Tan Sooi Beng and Marcia Ostashewski on strategies for decolonizing music, sound, and dance studies. During this time, an additional opportunity arose to serve as a consultant for a special SSHRC-funded research project (Partnership Engage Grant, COVID-19; PEG-COVID) at the Boys' and Girls' Club (BGC) in Whitney Pier, Nova Scotia. The project sought to deliver engaging music workshops for youth at the BGC during this period of uncertainty and disruption in children's education. The project, in which Ostashewski worked with Memorial University PhD candidate Eric Escudero and Folkways curriculum developer Ty-Juana Taylor, featured online workshops with Grammy–award winning Malian musician and long-time Cape Breton University collaborator Lassana Diabaté. Much of my work on the project was to demonstrate some of the drum patterns in Lassana's videos using homemade instruments and found materials. I made a series of short videos for BGC

program facilitators and youth showing how to play on plastic buckets, pots/pans, homemade shakers and utilized a colourful graphic notation guide (see Fig. 1). In my early years of teaching private lessons with young drummers, I began integrating graphic notation due to its similarities with a popular video game at the time, *Guitar Hero*. I found that new drummers who were unfamiliar with Western musical notation quickly latched on to the grid-like structure, performing more complex syncopations in a shorter period and transitioning well to more formal drum kit notation. I tested this approach in my work at Uschool, where I had to teach polyrhythms in a group Brazilian samba lesson to new, young musicians in a short time frame. For the Whitney Pier Project, I developed a document that included a form of graphic notation as well as guided prompts for the BGC counsellors to use when delivering the class to their students, on topics ranging from establishing group expectations and etiquette ("no playing on the instruments when facilitators are giving instructions") to key things to listen for in the group exercise (i.e., using the shaker as the foundational rhythm that intersects with the other instruments). These teaching prompts drew from some of the games and strategies we employed at the Sarah McLachlan School of Music.

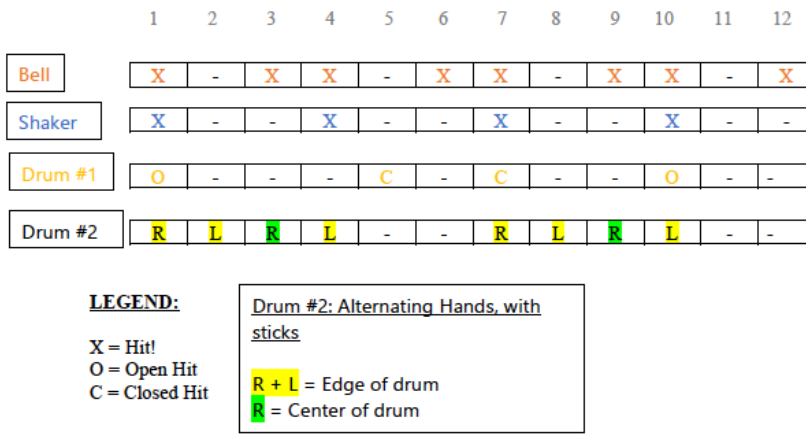

Fig. 1. Graphic notation for the Lassana Diabaté workshop at the Boys and Girls' Club (Whitney Pier in Sydney, Nova Scotia).

However, the PEG-COVID project differed greatly from any of my previous facilitation experiences. It included an international team of educational specialists with deep engagements in critical pedagogy, decolonization, and anti-racist music education. Ostashewski's work in the Whitney Pier area — including with the Boys and Girls' Club and Smithsonian Folkways Recordings

— indicated a history of relations and ongoing institutional partnerships that sought to build upon and improve the workshop in its future iterations. The project's connection with the community in Sydney and with Diabaté's music was also deliberate, bridging indigenous Malian music with local populations, including the Membertou First Nation and the African Nova Scotian diaspora. Moreover, the project reflected the value of honouring knowledge-holders in the classroom by nurturing ongoing professional relationships between scholars, traditional musicians, and guest artists, rather than designing a series of one-off events. Ostashewski's work with Diabaté spanned many years and included multiple artist residencies at Cape Breton University, a recent album release (which was recorded at CBU and included in the Smithsonian Folkways Recordings catalogue), among collaborative research activities.

After the first workshop we conducted, Escudero and I realized how important it was to provide facilitation support to those who were on the ground and delivering the content to the students. In collaboration with Taylor and Escudero, we delivered guided instructions and strategies to help BGC facilitators lead the workshops with students. In hindsight, we could have created videos that outlined additional facilitation skills necessary for the drum workshop, perhaps even holding one or two separate meetings online with the BGC facilitators. This would have alleviated anxieties or ambiguities for the facilitators, one of whom was quite nervous. These kinds of meetings could have included finding out what computer and AV equipment was available in the club on a specific day, tutorials for using PowerPoint, and reviewing the goals and teaching guide together. In some respects, we shared these resources with the BGC and anticipated that they knew how to use the AV equipment. Instead, our model likely needs virtual or (better yet) in-person training sessions that can break down all of these tasks and strategies, including ways of delivering the workshop without access to in-class computers and technical equipment.

At the same time, the experience laid bare a number of practices I have adopted and used without really considering their ethical implications. It opened a critical space between my applied experience as a so-called expert facilitator and ethnomusicologist, raising important questions about my role. For instance, in what way did my strategies add to, or support Diabaté's material? Did the project require simplification of the drum patterns on household instruments? More problematically, did my contributions overshadow Diabaté's original video content by suggesting we needed to make Malian music more accessible for nonspecialists (tantamount to a kind of ethnomusicological mansplaining)? These kinds of praxis-bas reflections are critical for any decolonial or anti-racist pedagogy to emerge. Given our field's growing interests in equity, diversity, inclusion, and reconciliation (EDIR) initiatives, ethnomusicologists need

to identify and rectify mistakes, as well as share our experiences when we try (and fail) to put EDIR into practice. As my own experience with facilitation has shown, terms like *inclusion* and *accessibility* are not merely metaphors for community-based and applied work, as doing so risks enclosing them and domesticating their critical potential (Tuck and Yang 2012: 2–3). What may have been appropriate in a previous teaching scenario can be harmful if simply copied and pasted elsewhere; reiterating how any notion of musical access, inclusion, diversity, or equity must include ongoing, place-based, and reflexive contextualization. I have a long way to go before I can provide my own method for teaching a more informed, decolonial, and anti-racist model of drumming facilitation, but I fully intend to work toward this goal.

Appendix: A Quick and Dirty Guide to Drum Facilitation

Below is a brief overview of some initial topics and questions to consider if you're thinking about designing your own drum facilitation activities. Far from being an in-depth guide, it represents what I have found to be crucial questions and starting points. If anything, it is simply stating that *yes, you are capable of doing it, too*. Of course, there are several books, courses, and online resources on drum circle strategies and facilitation techniques with detailed exercises (for instance, through the Montreal-based KOSA organization, or videos on the World Drum Club YouTube page by music therapist Kalani Das). However, mainstream drumming facilitation resources tend to lack any reflexive critique or evaluation of standard practices, never mind infusing their materials with anti-racist or decolonial perspectives. Instead, I recommend using ethnomusicological models as primary sources, such as Patricia Shehan Campbell's work on World Music Pedagogy (Campbell and Lum 2019; Coppola, Herbert, and Campbell 2020), the multifaceted projects of Maya Cunningham's *Ethnomusicology in Action* (a non-profit project that designs arts curricula and teaching resources for Afro-descendent youth), or the wide-ranging community music scholarship and applied practice of Lee Willingham and Lee Higgins (2017). These scholars and their insights provide much-needed critical lenses to drum circle facilitation and practice, which can productively lead to more reciprocal and ethical models of percussive engagement.

1. Begin with what you know.

What musical traditions, genres, instrumentation, and styles are you most familiar with? If you already know the answer to this question, how would the

drumming be presented in the workshop: as entertainment, or "infotainment" (like a public-facing, applied version of a topic you have lectured on in the past)? What instruments will you be using? Will the drum workshops be for a specific audience (perhaps a group associated with your area of study)? Are the patterns going to be traditional and culturally accurate or an unambiguous fusion of multiple styles? Are terms like *Indigenous*, *youth*, *marginalized*, or *outreach* important keywords in your overall vision? Each of these questions will significantly shape how you will proceed and structure the content of the drumming activity. If the drumming tradition or instrumentation is new to you (perhaps it is a workshop you inherited from another educator, or simply a collection of various "world drums"), do you have any mentors or contacts that you can speak with, hire for consultation, provide a guest talks, zoom chat, or performance/demonstration? This isn't a requirement, by any means. But, if you do have these connections, strongly consider how these relationships can be nurtured, healthily supported, including with adequate financing, and maintained over several weeks or months. Valuing the skills, labour, and time of knowledge-holders provides a straightforward example of your commitment to learning their craft and initiating a more equitable, anti-racist, decolonial, and reconciliatory drum teaching practice. As an ally, you can help create new opportunities for your contacts, as well as initiate meaningful interactions with workshop participants.

2. Instruments: use what you have … or build it.

Before acting upon the impulse to purchase any new percussion instruments, first consider if there are materials or resources available to you right now: hand drums owned by friends or colleagues, random pieces of a drum kit, bells, shakers, broken cymbals, coffee tins, pots and pans? If so-called real musical instruments are in short supply, a shift in perspective may be in order. Any object can become a percussion instrument if it is approached through the lens of *timbre*, potentially opening new possibilities for repertoire, games, ensembles, broader discussion points, and group crafting exercises. Woody, metallic, scratchy, sandy, big, low, high, and dry: these are all useful adjectives for crafting instruments.

3. DIY is valuable, even in higher ed.

While using homemade/DIY percussion might seem like a cheap, less impactful version of a global music lesson, there are multiple benefits:

- The *sound* of an object becomes paramount, whether or not it is a bucket or a mass-produced hand drum. The challenge is

finding and adapting objects so that they actually sound good! In my experience, bassier — not necessarily louder — homemade instruments are critical for facilitating meaningful group lessons. This is because group drumming is an affective, embodied performance practice that generates tactile sensory experiences beyond sound alone. Some drumming groups are quite successful with using upcycled objects. For instance, Edmonton-based Booming Tree Taiko regularly use thick plastic garbage bins for their group workshops. Flipped upside down and heavily taped on the bottom, these bins are performed using the same traditional *bachi* sticks and produce a powerful bassy sound. Booming Tree participants contribute to the ensemble and play along with real taiko drums, generating their own big and rather convincing drum sound. I enjoy the creative challenges of using homemade percussion and exploring how these instruments can be delivered within an ethnomusicological perspective. A simple soda can suddenly transform into a Brazilian caxixi, a guiro (when partially crushed), Ghanaian *gankogui* (using both a tall and regular can), or even a cimbalom, hammered to a board and fitted with guitar strings.

- When taught in conjunction with high-quality media resources — like the Smithsonian Folkways Canada Series videos, recordings, and slides used in the Whitney Pier project — any percussion activity will become more engaging and facilitate greater participation. When using such material, I still recommend limiting nonperformance time. That is, don't watch too many videos or presentations, or frequently require sitting quietly to listen to a lecture; instead, focus on group play as the primary vehicle for teaching with these materials. If available, a speaker system/PA would help students play along with recordings. Also, using software like *Moises* can isolate, delete, or boost certain instruments in the mix, allowing for students to hear themselves more clearly in the overall group performance.
- Relatedly, close-miking can be a very useful strategy if a sound system is available for the facilitation session. This can help amplify smaller sounds or emphasize lower bass frequencies (like the sounds of suitcases, cardboard boxes for appliances, or empty water cooler bottles — all of which can be freely sourced from public schools or offices).

4. The Allure of New: Two Suggestions

If purchasing new instruments remains high on the priority list, I recommend starting with finding used introductory drum kits. These drums are plentiful online and are often sold at a far cheaper price point than a set of used hand drums, plus they can be broken down into multiple instruments for group play (e.g., four or five separate drums, plus stands and cymbals). I have often used drums in this way for my community samba batucada workshops, but nothing is stopping you from using them to teach other performance traditions such as Ghanaian multi-part patterns using the bass drum as a dundun, Afro-Cuban patterns (for example, playing the son "melody" on the open snare and tom-toms, as heard on the congas), or Bhangra dhol drumming (tuning one side very high, the other low and heavily taped). Plus, you would still have a full drum kit to use in any pop, jazz, or stage band context.

Another option is to purchase mass-produced frame drums in multiple sizes. Not only are these drums cheaper than most other forms of hand percussion, especially when purchased in sets, but they are also extremely versatile — capable of being played on the lap, in between legs, held upright such as a Persian *daf*, Egyptian *riq*, Italian tamburello, or South Indian kanjira, using fingers, brushes, or sticks. Widely available online and in brick-and-mortar shops, frame drums can help decentre the ubiquitous role of West African djembes in most "world music" contexts; their cross-cultural *instrumentality* (to follow Jonathan Sterne and Emily Dolan [2020]) can help open a global music discourse on percussion from around the world. They can, for instance, introduce instruments as diverse as tambourines and frame drums found across the Mediterranean, Middle East, North Africa, the Arabian Peninsula, and even First Nations frame drums across North America by emulating, though not duplicating, their sounds. In the last instance, lessons can include discussion about drum protocol within a specific First Nation's tradition, methods of teaching and learning Indigenous drum songs, rationale behind key instrumental practices, such as the use of mallets instead of hands, or even emulating the sound of a specific drum, such as an Inuit *kelyaut* drum by spinning it in the air after striking. Of course, you could always just mount them on drumming hardware, add cymbals, bells, bongos, and build your own multi-percussion drum kit. Just for fun.

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