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Learning about Music Fanzine Cultures: Making a Music Fanzine in the Classroom

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Learning about Music Fanzine Cultures Making a Music Fanzine in the Classroom

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Overview

The lesson plan I will be presenting in this article is taken from one of the sessions of an undergraduate module titled *Music, Technology and Everyday Life*. This is a compulsory first-year module for students of the BA (Hons) Music Business and Media, in the School of Art and Media, University of Brighton. It is offered in the second semester, starting at the beginning of February, and ending in late May. By this point of their university studies, students have engaged with key scholars and theories in Media studies, and with popular music histories and contexts. The module in question draws on media and cultural studies scholarship, and explores how people engage with music and associated technologies and, in the process of doing so, participate in the production of their own culture. The organization of this module follows a typical one-hour weekly lecture/ two-hour weekly seminar format, and is assessed by a single summative assignment in the form of a research diary, where students are asked to deploy an auto-ethnographic approach across three topics of the module to reflect on their everyday engagement with music. For one of these topics, students are welcome to reflect on their experience of putting together a music fanzine in the classroom.

The lesson plan is on Music Fanzines, which constitutes one of the module's topics. For this session, students are introduced to some key scholarly themes around zine-making, as well as examples of music fanzines, during the one-hour lecture. During the seminar, students are invited to work collaboratively with their seminar tutor to produce their own music fanzine. Through this process, students are encouraged to reflect on the practice of zine-making from the perspective of the participant, in close dialogue with scholarly literature. In the remainder of this article, I will present this approach in detail. Although this is a lesson plan tailored for students of popular music, it can also be adapted for a media course on topics such as *alternative media*, or *media and participatory culture*, simply by amending the reading materials accordingly.

Rationale

The module's learning outcomes are the following:

LO1: Demonstrate a broad understanding of the cultural study of music, technology, and everyday life.

LO2: Review relevant scholarly literature.

LO3: Use relevant theories and conceptual frameworks to formulate academically informed arguments on the cultural study of music, technology, and everyday life.

LO4: Apply academic knowledge to the empirical study of music, technology, and everyday life.



This approach of engaging in *media-making of our own* aims to contribute towards LO1 and LO3. In this week's session we familiarize ourselves with the cultural study of music, technology, and everyday life by looking at fanzine cultures, and how everyday domestic technologies are used to produce our own music culture (LO1). Students are expected to engage with scholarly literature on the histories and cultures of fanzines, and by participating in this liberating process of media-making, which is different to the contemporary forms of media-making through social media, students are encouraged to learn about this tradition by becoming part of it. Through questions posed during the seminar, students are guided to formulate academically informed arguments by drawing on their reading and their own lived experience (LO3).

The approach presented here is also aligned more broadly with the scholarly foundations of the module. Two of the foundational ideas with which the module engages are symbolic work (Willis 1990) and everyday resistance (De Certeau 1984). Associated concepts include poaching, bricolage, the art of making-do, tactics, and strategies (De Certeau 1984); a vocabulary for understanding everyday life as an arena of resistance and creativity. By participating in the production of a music fanzine, students actively engage in symbolic work, and, through adapting practices they've embodied through their everyday consumption of mainstream magazines and press to the process of their own media-making, they appreciate how symbolic work is not simply an instance of creativity, but also of casual everyday resistance, of appropriating the resources of the powerful to pursue their own desires. The theories of authors such as De Certeau (1984), Fiske (1989), McRobbie (1991), Gilroy (1991), Willis (1990), and Jenkins (2012), then, are rendered intelligible through practice.

Additionally, the zine itself becomes a learning resource that students, as well as future students of the module, can use to learn about music and everyday life. My role is central in this respect, as I ensure that the zine is explicitly situated within a specific scholarly tradition. In both issues of the zine, produced in May 2020 and April 2021, the theoretical underpinnings of the endeavour are mentioned in the editorial piece on the first page. In the first issue, a piece dedicated to the module can be found at the final page. What is more, one of the contributors produced a cultural studies word search, to which I provided the introduction.

Finally, this hands-on approach was deemed by the students as an interesting change from the usual seminar activities, and an opportunity for students to encounter different types of learning, as well as an opportunity for the tutor to evaluate this different approach from a pedagogical perspective. It is a step towards fostering an effective learning environment (Exley and Dennick 2004, 50), one which strives to take into account different students' styles of learning (see Rayner and Riding 1997). This lesson specifically favours collaborative learning. According to Jaques and Salmon (2007, 61), "good learning [...] is collaborative and social" as "[s]haring one's own ideas and responding to others' reactions improves thinking and deepens understanding."

General Timeline



The lesson is spread across a one-hour lecture and a two-hour seminar. Students are expected to continue working on their zine contributions after class, and the zine is completed outside of allocated teaching hours. Once it is finalised, a PDF version is made available through the course's blog, as part of a post on zine-making.

Detailed Lesson Plan

The lecture

The aim of the lecture is to introduce the tradition of fanzines in the context of alternative media (Zobl 2009; Comstock 2001; Atton 2002) and to discuss it in terms of a subcultural practice: a practice of resistance against mainstream media and broader dominant discourses (Stinson 2012; Worley 2015), and to reflect on the practice in the era of social media. Links are established with discussions that have taken place in earlier sessions of the module, namely bedroom cultures (week 5), and cultural studies - key concepts (week 3). Specifically, regarding bedroom cultures, the practice of zine-making is discussed in relation to the teenage practice of reading magazines in one's bedroom, and the practice of cutting and pasting using magazines as primary materials of creativity and of resistance against the oppressiveness of domestic space. The students are encouraged to think of fanzines as cultural artifacts with different meanings depending on historical context, to reflect on media power and the role of fanzines as forms of resistance, to think of fanzines in terms of everyday cultural production, and so forth.

The lecture starts with an introduction to the concept of alternative media and their main characteristics, a concept that constitutes a valuable starting point for a discussion on zine-making.

Alternative media

What does it mean, what does it look like?

- What we mean by "alternative media" changes with time.
- **Organisation:** more horizontal than mainstream media.
- **Goals:** giving voice to marginalised groups, opposed to profit, producing counter-discourses
- **Practices:** participation and reciprocal communication (Lievrouw 2011).



The discussion moves on to the reasons why people might be engaging with the practice of producing their own media, by introducing the concept of media power, and linking it to the shortcomings of mainstream media.

BECOMING THE MEDIA!

Why let others represent you, if you can represent yourself?

- Under conditions of media power concentration and subjection of media to the logic of profit-making, marginalised voices go unheard or misrepresented.
- "Organisational and professional routines of mainstream media produce a media system [...] within which the representation of radical voices is largely predictable" (Atton 2002: 492).
- **Becoming the media:** people engaging in media-making of their own (Deuze 2006: 273).

NON-MASS media

- Vast and varied cultural realm of production based on citizen participation.
- Grown exponentially since the late 20th century.
- Why? Globalisation, migration and the need for representation, Global market forces and niche audiences, News media's credibility crisis, Media convergence.

(Deuze 2006; Downey and Fenton 2003)

The next stop in the lecture is histories of zine-making, with particular emphasis on challenging discourses that underplay the role of marginalized communities and cultures in this tradition.

Zines

- From a white Anglo-american view-point **three peaks of zine publishing** (Zobl 2009: 2).
- Homemade magazines made by science fiction fans in the US and Britain in the 1930s (Worley 2015).
- But also, "birthed out of the 'self-publication methods used by Chicana, Latina, Black, Indigenous and APA artists, poets and writers during the '60s and '70s'" (Zobl 2009: 3).
- Zines involve "mixing genres, strategically combining personal stories, fiction, rants, poetry, and essays [...] practices facilitated by photocopiers and cut-and-paste desktop publishing programs" (Comstock 2001: 385).



The discussion then moves on to music fanzines, the punk subculture, and the riot grrrl movement. At this point, links are established between zines as a feminist practice and the topic of bedroom cultures, introduced in an earlier session of the module.


Music Fanzines

For music fans by music fans

- Central motto of zine publishing
- No guidelines or rules on how to make a zine
- Non-hierarchical action
- Plurality of expression
- Zinesters lay open and document their everyday life experiences, thoughts and concerns
- Most zines are black-and-white, photocopied, cut-and-paste efforts
- Different motivations...

(Zobl 2009: 4-5)

- Music fanzines and the Punk subculture in the late 1970s (Zobl 2009: 2).
- The **Riot grrrl** movement in alternative and punk scenes in the US (Zobl 2009: 2-3; Comstock 2001).
- Since the late 1990s, the zine culture has also migrated to the internet, taking on the form of music blogs and websites.



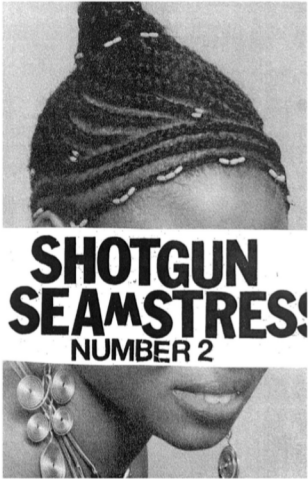
Across the next two slides, the DIY approach is introduced in the discussion, and zine-making is conceptualized as a tactic of resistance against the conventions of mainstream music press.

- **Central motto of zine publishing: Do-it-Yourself**
- **No guidelines or rules on how to make a zine**
- **Non-hierarchical action**
- **Plurality of expression**
- **Zinesters lay open and document their everyday life experiences, thoughts and concerns**
- **Most zines are black-and-white, photocopied, cut-and-paste efforts.**
- **Different motivations...**

(Zobl 2009: 4-5)



The lecture ends with a case study of *Shotgun Seamstress*, a zine on Black culture and Black feminism. The ideas of Michel De Certeau are mobilized to reflect on the practices of this zine.



Zines and resistance

- Osa Atoe's zine *Shotgun Seamstress* was about punk culture and black feminism.
- Osa Atoe: "My approach is to take what I need from an ideology or a movement and leave the rest behind" (Stinson 2012: 267).
- An example of a **tactic of resistance** (De Certeau 1984)?
- Osa Atoe: "I found punks who were black and queer and radical [...] it was my way of not letting white folks define what punk is for me" (Stinson 2012: 267).
- So, the zine was a way to "become the media" to voice her opinion, as well as to facilitate the production of discourses that were not heard in mainstream music media.
- Osa Atoe: "The way that racism is incorporated into punk narratives and history is through omission" (Stinson 2012: 267).

The seminar

The seminar starts with an outline of the task ahead. When this lesson was conceived, the idea was to create the zine in the classroom, with students using paper, glue, markers, the school's printers, and their personal computers to create collages and generally experiment with the visuality of the zine. Sadly, the session ended up taking place during the first COVID-19 pandemic lockdown, early May of 2020, so I had to adapt the plan to be delivered online via Microsoft Teams. This imposed limitations to what could be done. Firstly, to make the process as inclusive as possible, students were asked to produce their contributions using basic tools of Microsoft Office. Therefore, there was a trade-off between inclusivity and adherence to traditional zine aesthetics. Secondly, despite efforts to encourage collaborative work through the creation of channels on Microsoft Teams (*i.e.* breaking the classroom in smaller groups), students are generally reluctant to engage, so although collaboration took place during the planning phase, each student ended up preparing their contribution individually. Finally, although online teaching might prove more challenging for students with dyslexia (see Mortimore and Crozier 2006), it also offers opportunities for participation to students who find social situations challenging.

At the beginning of the seminar, we spent approximately 25-30 minutes discussing some of the key points of the key reading and linking those with themes from previous sessions (namely, Michel De Certeau's and Henry Jenkins's ideas). This discussion was organized around the following three questions, which students addressed individually. Approximately 10 minutes were allocated to each question:

Seminar question 1: What are the motivations behind zine-making, specifically feminist zines but also more broadly?

Seminar question 2: What do we mean by DIY with regard to zines?

Seminar question 3: Use the concepts of "poaching" and "symbolic work" to say something pertinent about zine-making.

Following this, I made sure to ground the practice in the ideas presented in the lecture; making a zine is not merely a fun activity, but a form of alternative media-making, a practice that both resists mainstream commercial media, but at the same time is inextricably linked to the latter. An important element of this task is to continually reflect, throughout this process, on how our cultural competencies as zine-makers (*i.e.* our knowledge about how to compose an article, what a headline looks like, what the relationship is between images and words, etc.), have been shaped by a life-long engagement with mainstream commercial media. Through this engagement, we all inadvertently embody media traditions, generic conventions, cultures of media production. The fourth seminar question is aimed at encouraging students to reflect on the above. Students were given five minutes to discuss among themselves and five minutes were allocated to discussion with the whole classroom.

Seminar question 4: Discuss in groups what magazines/zines you read/have read and what type of content you enjoy more. Report back to the classroom.

The last 10 minutes of the first half of the two-hour seminar were reserved for allocating roles. We started by thinking aloud about what roles one would find in music fanzines and magazines, what types of articles can be found, and so on. Then students chose their role, based entirely on their interests and/or passions. Students took on roles such as photographer, writer, designer, and artist.

Once we agreed on the different roles and the contents of the zine, we started working, online in the virtual presence of one another. This process took place during the second half of the two-hour seminar. Participants would often ask questions, pitch ideas, or seek help with their task. The appearance and contents of the zine were determined through this process. Near the end of the seminar session, I invited everyone involved to update me on their progress, and gave them instructions on how to proceed with their task at their own time, and ask them to send me the final version once they are done. I took on the role of editor, so I wrote the editorial, and ordered the contents.

Homework and the course blog

Students and I continued working on our individual contributions in our own time. Students were given a deadline to return their work to me. Once all the contributions were received, I



put everything together using Word, and finally exported as PDF. I then wrote a blog-post about the endeavour on the *Music Business and Media* course blog, where I also included a link for downloading the zine.

The course blog itself is another learning resource available to students. Initially, I published the blog and posted a series of short posts where various topics around popular music culture are discussed using central media studies concepts such as “textual poachers”, “intertextuality”, “representation”, “audience commodity”, and so on. The aim of the blog is to offer intelligible examples of the deployment of scholarly concepts to talk about popular music. Students are encouraged to consult these examples alongside their formal readings. Tackling complex scholarly discourse is one of the biggest challenges faced by my students, who very often come from underprivileged backgrounds. According to Crozier et al. (2008, 172), “working class students are faced with middle-class worlds” at the university, so the blog constitutes an attempt to render academic ideas more intelligible. Eventually, students were invited to contribute their own blog-posts, which are a mix of excellent work submitted for assessment in music-related modules, and original pieces. I serve as the blog editor, in which capacity I proofread submissions before they appear on the blog.

Teaching materials

Lecture slides: <https://prezi.com/view/vTurhsdwllLrISW1Syna/>

Course Blog: <https://bdns3.home.blog/>

Key seminar reading: Zobl, Elke. 2009. “Cultural production, transnational networking, and critical reflection in feminist zines.” *Signs* 35, no. 1: 1-12.

Scholarly literature on fanzine culture (see bibliography below)

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