

## Music Without Borders: Engaging with International Stories Through a Class Concert

### ABSTRACT:

In the “Music without Borders” project, students covered international stories by interviewing local, mainly immigrant musicians who practice forms of music that originated in their home countries. Some of the musicians were then invited to perform in an informal concert in our classroom. Viewing immigrants as cultural assets counters the negative representations of them often seen in the news media and also helps students frame international stories through a cultural lens. Student stories were posted to individual Medium pages, which we then viewed in class in order to select musicians to invite to perform in our classroom (#TinyClassConcert). A Brazilian singer, a Brazilian *pandeiro* player, an Armenian *duduk* player, a Mexican drummer and a Peruvian guitarist each performed and talked about the music’s meaning in their home countries before jamming together. The event was open to anyone including audience members who happened to hear the music, came to investigate and stayed for impromptu samba lessons.

### Description:

Students interviewed primarily immigrant musicians and produced stories posted to Medium that included short video or audio segments of the musicians performing. The professor worked with an ethnomusicologist to create a list of world musicians in the area for students to draw from. The interview subjects included a Latin Grammy winner and a musician who performed on the soundtrack for the “Black Panther” movie. Some students found musicians from within their own networks. All musicians were professionals; this was not a requirement but a result of the large number of musicians in the city where our university is located.

Stories posted to Medium were presented by the students to the class. From these presentations, a group of musicians was selected by a class vote for our concert. (Some were not considered because their instruments were too large to transport.) Students brought in food from around the world for the event, which was promoted through social media and word-of-mouth.

Each musician performed on their own with the exception of the singer who was accompanied by the drummer. After their first song, each talked about the significance of their music in their home country and about their personal backgrounds. They took questions and then, although they did not know each other, jammed together as a group. The following week, students wrote reflection papers about the assignment.

### Learning Objectives

- Produce reporting that focuses on a non-conflict international topic.
- Produce reporting that contributes to greater understanding of immigrants/migrants.
- Create a live, off-line source-reporter-audience engagement event or activity.

### Rationale

Modeled on NPR’s Tiny Desk Concerts and aiming to increase cultural understanding, this project was driven by three key goals:

- 1) To produce stories with an international angle that are not about conflict topics. Most international news is conflict-driven, which research shows tends to appeal to men/older/wealthier news consumers. Traditional international news is generally not created for younger, more diverse audiences. Outlets that are said to appeal to more youthful audiences – such as Vice – are accused of being sensational and often perpetuating gender and racial stereotypes.

Our university is one of the country’s most diverse and enrolls what is believed to be the second largest number of Dreamers among US universities. While our students cover hard-hitting international topics, they also want to tell other types of stories that provide a fuller image of other countries and immigrants from them, particularly those from their own communities.

- 2) To be able to identify international stories located here. Most of our students cannot afford to participate in an international reporting trip (such initiatives tend to privilege better off students.) This assignment is meant to allow any student the opportunity to gain experience reporting on international topics.
- 3) To gain experience in producing an in-person engagement project that brings together sources and audiences. Increasingly, journalism outlets are hosting events and activities for and with audiences, yet creating such projects is a skill journalism students often are not taught. While students used social media to interact with audiences, the in-person event helped them develop additional engagement skills.

## Learning Outcomes

Students produced multimedia stories about primarily immigrant musicians who played an instrument or style of music from a country other than the US. Their stories focused on the cultural aspects of the music, which showed students a new, non-conflict lens for international reporting. Here is an example of a story on a Filipina musician who performs music from the Southern Philippines (video embedded): <https://medium.com/@darleenprincipe/kulintang-a-musical-tradition-of-the-philippines-6780a7d4f623>

Sample comments from student reflection papers:

After carrying out their reporting, one student noted that reporting on the duduk player “gave me insight into the Armenian culture.”

A student who interviewed a Venezuelan musician noted that she learned how people there “are deeply affected by the political and economic struggles of Venezuela yet still have this culture that allows them to come together over things such as music, food.”

Overall, another commented: “It is a good exercise in teaching potential international reporters to look beyond the obvious story,” while another said that the cultural angle was a new way to get at foreign affairs as “musicians talk about political affairs in their music.”

Students organized and hosted the event, “Music Without Borders”, a #TinyClassConcert that allowed them to invite the university community to directly engage with the students’ sources. Scenes from the event below:



In their reflection papers, student noted that bringing their sources to campus to interact with other students “can give the audience more of an understanding” of the story they have reported. Another said that the musicians “appreciated seeing where their shared information was going.”