

## Teaching the Grateful Dead Phenomenon and Cultural Communication

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### **ABSTRACT**

Communication studies is particularly well-situated for teaching a course about the Grateful Dead phenomenon and using the phenomenon to teach discipline-specific content. This combination, teaching “the” Grateful Dead and teaching “with” the Grateful Dead, rather than one or the other, is what produces such an engaging course for students, guests, and instructor. I argue that musical speech communities warrant rigorous study and discuss the role of academic publications, professional organizations, and library archives in this process. Developing a pedagogy grounded in cultural communication and treating the course as a communication event allowed for collaboration with students and guest scholars, and illustrates that a multidisciplinary perspective is necessary to understand the significance and complexity of the Grateful Dead phenomenon. Through reflexive analysis of fieldnotes, personal communication with students, and course materials I located the following themes as important to student learning. First, allowing students to choose their topic of study provided familiarity based on personal interests, enhanced comprehension, provided the space for student voice fostering student agency, and increased motivation to prepare and attend class. Second, for students, guest presentations demonstrated new ways of thinking and helped them understand how their personal interests could be academically researched. Third, teaching the Grateful Dead phenomenon with a cultural communication-informed pedagogy necessarily includes teaching methodology and students report improved understanding of the relationship between theory and research. The most common feedback from students was that the level of engagement with the topic facilitated motivation to attend, participate, and increased their learning. Students identified course organization, guest speakers and the multidisciplinary nature of the course as significant to their motivation and success.

**Keywords:** communication studies discipline, Grateful Dead phenomenon, cultural communication, speech community, Grateful Dead studies, cultural communication pedagogy, student agency, student motivation, student preparation

Why would someone want to enroll in a university course about the Grateful Dead phenomenon? Why would a faculty member want to teach a course on this phenomenon? While these are intriguing questions, answering them elicits additional questions, such as, why is the Grateful Dead phenomenon such a compelling topic for students and scholars in 2022, almost twenty-seven years after Jerry Garcia's death? Why do young people continue to discover the Grateful Dead (GD), declare themselves "Deadheads" (DHs), and passionately embrace the Grateful Dead phenomenon (GDP)? Answers are evident in the contributions made from studying the Grateful Dead phenomenon as a topic of inquiry in and of itself, what this special issue refers to as teaching "the" Grateful Dead. Consider Grateful Dead music—what genres it includes, what constitutes a "jam," how improvisation informs its performance, and how the innovative sound technologies being used are just a few of the areas GD studies has contributed to the discipline of music (Flory, 2019). In communication studies the GDP is studied as a dispersed speech community with much to teach us about sustaining, negotiating, and growing a community without a physical place members call "home" (Dollar, 2010). More common, though, is what has been learned from teaching "with" the Grateful Dead, using the phenomenon as a means of teaching disciplinary-specific content, such as presidential politics, brain psychology, leadership styles, and statistics, to name a few. My contribution to this special issue "Teaching the Grateful Dead" is to demonstrate how communication studies is particularly well-situated as a discipline to create a pedagogy focused on teaching the GD with the GD, not one or the other.

#### **A "THICK DESCRIPTION"<sup>1</sup>: THE GRATEFUL DEAD AND CULTURAL COMMUNICATION**

I have taught three courses on the GDP in the past seventeen years<sup>2</sup>. The course has evolved in response to student feedback, its place in the curriculum, and the growth of Grateful Dead studies. The most recent version, taught spring 2020, serves as an elective for our social science degree with an option in community development and leadership. It is also an elective in the communication minor and both American studies and liberal studies majors. The syllabus course description follows:

In this course we'll explore the Grateful Dead phenomenon within the context of American culture beginning with an introduction to the band through clips from [The Grateful Dead Movie](#), followed by a discussion of why one would want to study the Grateful Dead phenomenon. We'll survey the social science literature and consider a developing model of jam band community identity. Then we'll move into the study of the Grateful Dead—historically and musically—before studying the band and fan base (Deadheads) relationship (the Grateful Dead phenomenon), looking into fan archival work, tape trading, and liveness. We'll read, listen to, and discuss journalistic accounts including books, radio, and streaming, then turn to a consideration of cultural communication as a means of creating and nourishing a dispersed identity. Finally, we'll ponder the sociological and musical theory dimensions of this phenomenon before wrapping up our course in the context of communicating American culture (Dollar, 2020).

Topics for our 10-week term included, in the following order: the Grateful Dead as an American band; the GD, Deadheads, and jam-band identities; a historical perspective of the GD in American culture; documenting the GD and taping "shows"; the GDP and writing American culture; cultural geography, the GDP, and DH

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1 Thick description was promoted by Geertz (1973) as a methodology focusing on the rigorous observation and reporting of the cultural context and social processes in detail, including participant's meanings.

2 As this article goes to print I am teaching my fourth course on the GDP in the past eighteen years. Students have requested the course be taught more often. I am working on a proposal to convert from special topics to a permanent course offered every other year.

cultural communication; musical histories and the GD; a sociological perspective to explain the continual growth of GDP; and situating the GD in musical theory and American culture.

Twenty-one students registered, and eighteen completed the course. Prior to the course students had limited exposure to the GD phenomenon; one self-identified as “kind of a Deadhead” and a few had family members who listened to the music. Three students played instruments; none were involved with a musical project at the time. Most reported enjoying music as a part of their daily lived experiences.

Initially planned as an in-person course meeting twice a week for three hours and 50 minutes for ten weeks, I transformed the course to be delivered via Zoom due to the COVID pandemic. We spent our class time live on Zoom; there were no recorded lectures for students to view in place of meeting as a class with an instructor. Students stressed that live class meetings were one of the most valuable aspects of the class, allowing them to get comfortable with their peers and interact with guests (fieldnotes, May 29, 2020). In our second class meeting of the third week, students and I were joined by our first guest. In subsequent classes, we would welcome eight more guests. Students reported this to be equally important to using Zoom live because it allowed them to interact with the authors of required class readings and meet scholars for the first time (fieldnotes, June 5, 2020).

I played GD music as I admitted students from the Zoom waiting room, introducing the music chronologically across the term. Students came to expect me to share the “show” date, venue, and any tidbits about what makes this a show worth listening to, asking for this information when I forgot to share. During these opening moments, we casually discussed what we were listening to—students sharing if it was what they expected the band to sound like, what they liked, what they had questions about, and how it related to our ongoing readings, guests, and their course research about a fan community.<sup>3</sup> These experiences provided me with an opportunity to introduce GD music, for students to get “warmed up” for class, and to segue into the daily topic and guest. There was a palpable air of excitement, engagement,

and interest during what became our class introductory ritual. I introduced a second ritual for each class, presenting a GD or related sticker to one or two students who participated in a meaningful way. At the end of the term, each student received a class sticker (Figure 1) as the final enactment of the sticker ritual.

Our course was part of an informal theme across social science and American studies—American culture in the 1960s and 1970s—that included fall term courses in American studies and in communication focusing on the Vietnam War era, and two spring courses, a literature course on the American novel post-WWII and our communication course on the GDP. Of the eighteen students who completed our GD course, five also completed at least one of these theme courses. The fall courses included segments on music and American culture as well as a joint listening session of Marvin Gaye and the Flying Burrito Brothers hosted by myself and a colleague teaching the American studies course. This provided students from two courses an



Figure 1

3 Students chose the following musician/fan communities to study as the topic of their assignments: ABBA, Beatles, Bob Marley, Broadway musicals, Bruce Springsteen, Dolly Parton, Electronic Dance music, Insane Clown Posse, K-Pop, Lady Gaga, Luke Combs, Paul Simon's Graceland, Queen, Red Hot Chili Peppers, REM, Taylor Swift, and Zeal & Ardor. Two students chose different forms of popular culture fan communities, namely the Chicago Cubs baseball and “Steven's Universe” television show fans.

opportunity to come together in person, discuss a common topic—music and war—and to make connections across the two courses, facilitating their ability to draw on concepts from multiple disciplines to explore a common text. Students today are used to listening to digitally downloaded music, often targeting individual songs of their own choosing, thereby missing the artistic quality of an album where songs were painstakingly sequenced by the artist. My colleague and I wanted students to grasp how people used to listen to music, often as a group activity in which we listened to entire albums rather than to digital song lists composed of individually selected singles.

The Grateful Dead and Cultural Communication is both a course about the Grateful Dead phenomenon and a means of teaching about “cultural communication” and American culture. Many instructors using popular culture as a pedagogical strategy use it to teach discipline-specific course content, such as economic trending, statistical calculations, and politics. This is an aspect of our course, too. Specifically, as a communication studies course in cultural communication, our content focuses on how members of speech communities<sup>4</sup> use communication to create, enact, and negotiate their shared identity; how cultural codes of communication can and do conflict; the diversity and multiplicity of cultural codes within a given speech community; and comparison with localized communication codes. However, the GDP is not just a pedagogical strategy for teaching about cultural communication. It is a rich example of what a speech community is, how these communities develop and refine their communication codes, and a source of comparison with other musical speech communities. It is this combination—teaching “the” GD and teaching “with” the GD—that produces such an engaging course for the students, guests, and instructor.

Students were actively involved in shaping the flow of discussion from the first week of class. For their first assignment, an ungraded assignment, they watched “The Grateful Dead and American Culture” (Dollar, 2011) and identified at least five reasons to study the Grateful Dead phenomenon. Their lists directed our introductory discussions. For the second assignment, students selected a musical fan community of personal interest, located a relevant peer-reviewed article, summarized the article, and concluded with a discussion of how the fan community is similar to and/or different from Deadheads. The assignment provided the foundation for achieving SLO 1: explaining and discussing the uniqueness of the GDP, and was followed by an assignment to write the musician and fan community history including the social and political contexts in which the band/artist and their fan community emerged and is currently situated. This assignment allowed students to progress in their display of SLO 1 and to begin working on SLO 2: applying multiple social scientific perspectives to situate the GDP in American culture. Their fourth assignment focused on identifying and examining community artifacts, primary sources such as liner notes, online websites, and LP reviews, using the Hymesian (1972) SPEAKING framework.<sup>5</sup> The assignment was a culmination of the second and third assignments as students analyzed their artifacts as understood by the fans and compared them to the GDP. This assignment provided students with the opportunity to display their progress on all three SLOs, a topic I return to in the “So What Did We Learn” section below.

Having formulated a thick description of the course, I turn now to setting forth my argument that communication studies is particularly well-suited for teaching a course about the Grateful Dead phenomenon, as well as using the GDP to teach discipline-specific concepts and theories. I begin with a review of popular culture, music, and pedagogy, then comment on my pedagogical approach in this course. I follow with a reflexive account of how I make sense of both student success and a communication studies pedagogy for teaching the GDP including the challenges encountered. I conclude with students’ observations about the course.

4 A speech community is organized by a code of communication that includes a historically transmitted system of symbols and their meanings and rules for interpreting and enacting this code (Philipsen & Coutu, 2005).

5 The SPEAKING framework is a heuristic for discovering “cultural communication” which is deeply felt, mutually intelligible, and widely accessible communication within a community such as the fan communities students are studying.

## POPULAR CULTURE, MUSIC AND PEDAGOGY

Pedagogical scholarship makes a convincing case for using popular culture to teach disciplinary content across interpretive, social science, and objective fields of study. Scholars teaching science have taken seriously the relationship between memory and musical texts, specifically that they aid one another in recall, and discovered additional benefits, such as summarizing information, consolidating information, increased attention in class, and higher attendance (Calvert & Tart, 1993; Ginsborg & Sloboda, 2007; McLachlin, 2009). For example, Pye (2004) combines traditional lectures with music in his engineer's general chemistry course, using chemical lyrics to facilitate students' ability to summarize and consolidate information. Students recorded higher attendance and reported increased attention than when this novel approach was not used. Test scores for these students were slightly higher from "pre-song" semesters to "post-song" semesters. Kevin Ahern (n.d.) uses songs and limericks to teach university microbiology, and students report his songs help them learn and recall the content. McLachlin (2009) has adopted this technique of writing his own songs after learning of Ahern's success using music as part of his pedagogy. Each of these are examples of teaching discipline-specific content "with" popular culture music.

Social scientists, too, are using music to teach disciplinary content, albeit differently than scientists. Instead of using popular culture as a means of memory and recall, these faculty members are using actual instances of popular culture, often music, to provide examples of disciplinary concepts and theories. For example, Wilson (2020) employs TV/Film, music, meme and cartoons to teach government in political science courses. Wendland (2020) calls upon television shows to facilitate student's understanding of the 25th Amendment and presidential succession. And, Rousu (2018) uses "show tunes" to teach the principles of free markets in undergraduate economic course,s illustrating how show tune examples resonate with students in ways that textbook examples do not.

Communication scholars are also employing music to teach humanistic/interpretive and social scientific theories and concepts. Cruz (2020), for instance, uses rap and hip-hop to teach the Johari Window, an interpersonal model that seeks to explain how sharing and hiding information influences relationships between people. Hall (2020) has students analyze songs to identify and explain attachment styles and family communication patterns, two foundational concepts in interpersonal and family communication courses. In this way, students work with tangible examples of these concepts in song lyrics, learn how complex communication is, and grasp how much investment is required to analyze communication processes. Sciullo (2014) uses hip-hop to teach Aristotle's three proofs—ethos, pathos, and logos—in argumentation, rhetorical theory, public speaking, and persuasion. Undergraduate students report these courses to be some of their most challenging and responded favorably to using hip-hop and other forms of popular music to facilitate understanding and relevance of rhetorical concepts (Sciullo) and as an analogy for powerful speech as an approach to teaching public speaking (Cohen & Wei, 2010).

Other studies have extended an understanding of the nuances of using popular culture as a teaching strategy, specifically in terms of how music is selected. Student agency is difficult to achieve in most college and university classrooms, especially those prioritizing an expert (instructor)/student relationship through traditional lectures. Combining lectures with discussions of popular culture situates teacher/student relationships differently by acknowledging something ubiquitous in most students' lives—music—while course content is abstract and more remote from students' lives. Allowing students to choose the popular culture texts for class assignments and discussions creates an opportunity for student voice in their learning process and facilitates student agency. For example, instructors who explain and model how they expect students to use selected learning materials observe an increase in student agency that then produces additional positive outcomes, such as increased comprehension and ability to apply concepts and theories (Soper, 2010; Uhrmacher, 2013; Zoffel, 2010). As recall is part of the comprehension and application, I surmise that using familiar music potentially enhances these processes as well.

Using music also provides a structured environment for class discussions, both small and large groups that is often missing from lecture-based and more traditional classroom pedagogy. Tinari and Khandke (2000) explain how they use music in their economics courses for small group discussions in conjunction with their lectures. These small groups provide students with well-defined opportunities to apply course concepts and theories to their lived experiences, thus increasing student understanding of content that at times seem abstract and/or irrelevant.

Clearly music is an effective pedagogy being used across scientific, social scientific, and humanities disciplines. Whether using music to enhance memory and recall, translate and understand discipline-specific theory, increase student agency, or provide structure for discussions, these university faculty understand the importance of music in student's lives, domestically and abroad (Fanari et al., 2022). Growing internet accessibility, online platforms and social media have resulted in the highest global music consumption to date with Latin American and Asia-Pacific regions currently experiencing the most growth (Market Research, 2022). In their review of music consumption research, Montoro-Pons et al. (2021) explain that “no other cultural manifestation has a wider appeal [than music]” (p. 3) and this ubiquity is not limited by age, race, ethnicity. As such, I argue that music and the speech communities that emerge around the music warrant rigorous studies on their own. My academic home, communication studies, has embraced the study of popular culture and fan communities. Some examples include sports (Aden et al., 2009; Haridakis, 2010; Haugh & Watkins, 2016); literature (Booth, 2013; Tian & Adorjan, 2016); celebrities (Darling-Wolf, 2004; Soukup, 2006); film and television (Hutchison, 2018; Oh, 2013); and music fans (Baker, 2012; Blau, 2010; Dollar, 1999a, 2007; Erdely & Breede, 2017; Lull, 1987; Theberge, 2005).

The emergence and growth of Grateful Dead studies—academic publications, areas/caucuses, and associations—is another sort of evidence that the GD warrants careful study of its musical, communication, social, and historical aspects. The 1972 Gay, Elsenbaumer, & Newmeyer study comparing emergency medical tent staff experiences at Grateful Dead and Led Zeppelin Kezar Stadium concerts was the first of three academic articles that analyzed psychedelic experiences at GD concerts. In 1987, Pearson published a phenomenological study of the youth dimension of the “Deadhead subculture,” marking a shift in research to include the study of Deadheads as a musical taste culture (Dollar, 1988), a speech community (Dollar, 1999a, b), and a sociological phenomenon (Adams, 1998). Dodd and Weiner (1997) collected the growing body of Grateful Dead research, recordings and reviews, band newsletters, and fan magazines in an annotated bibliography as part of Greenwood Press’ *Music Reference Collection*. Their publication marks a significant point in the growth of Grateful Dead studies and becomes a valued reference for Grateful Dead scholarship. Weiner (1999) followed with a collection of essays exploring the “rich musical and cultural legacy of the Grateful Dead” (xxii). Dodd and Spaulding’s (2000) *The Grateful Dead Reader* was published as part of Oxford’s Readers on American Musicians series the same year Adams and Sardiello (2000) published *Deadhead Social Science: “You Ain’t Gonna Learn What You Don’t Want to Know,”* the first collection of social scientific GD scholarship. Meriwether’s (2007) *All Graceful Instruments: The Contexts of the Grateful Dead Phenomenon*, constitutes another significant place in Grateful Dead studies focusing our attention on the music, musicians, Deadheads, and American culture—the Grateful Dead phenomenon.

The Grateful Dead area has been part of the Southwest Popular/American Culture Association since 1998, providing GD scholars an affiliation with a professional association. However, there was no research archive where scholars could examine and study primary data sources illustrating the significance of Pymm’s (1993) argument for more institutional commitment within research libraries to cultivating musical archives and holdings as both the means for teaching and as the object of study. Over ten years later, in 2008, the GD donated their archives to the University of Santa Cruz McHenry Library. Unfortunately, the band did not donate the funds to curate the archive or digitize artifacts, such as papers, decorated envelopes, backstage

passes, correspondence, and posters. Nevertheless, the archive has grown, now including an online version (Grateful Dead Archive Online), and has become an important resource for researching the GDP. Deadheads have and continue to contribute to documenting the Grateful Dead phenomenon, providing students and scholars with a vast array of archival data. Wallace's (2009) detailed analysis of Deadhead's tape trading and technology history exemplifies how archives can be used to understand community values as they relate to legal concerns, such as "non-commercialized sharing and cooperation and the reconfiguring of traditional intellectual property configurations" (p. 187). Interest in these archives stretches beyond the university campus as demonstrated by the success of Huntington Beach Art Center's 1996 exhibit "Dead on the Wall: Grateful Dead and Deadhead Iconography from Thirty Years on the Bus" and the 2010 Grateful Dead exhibit at the New York Historical Museum. Clearly, the GDP is a topic worthy of academic study including research and university classes devoted to the topic.

### **A CULTURAL COMMUNICATION PEDAGOGY: TEACHING THE GRATEFUL DEAD**

My pedagogy has been strongly influenced by studying cultural communication (Carbaugh, 1993; Philipsen, 1992), a field that requires close examination of localized communication using ethnography of communication (Hymes, 1972; Philipsen & Coutu, 2005), interviews (Briggs, 1993), "thick description" (Geertz, 1973), and additional methods prioritizing participants' meaning. The use of a framework to guide data collection and analysis is essential to this enterprise. Hymes' SPEAKING heuristic (Daas & McBride, 2014; Hymes, 1972) and fantasy theme analysis (Waite, 2008) are prominent communication research methods tapped as teaching frameworks. I utilize these, both in teaching and researching the Grateful Dead phenomenon, providing a model for students to understand and apply concepts and theories in their own fan community research. In this article, I treat the course as a speech event and applied the SPEAKING framework to inform my thick description above, as well as to interpret and organize my discussion of student learning outcomes below.

Collaboration with students and guest scholars is another important component of my pedagogy. I share the course syllabus and assignments with guests at least three months before our class, we discuss how their expertise fits into the course, and we create a pre-course plan with the agreement that the plan will be revisited a few weeks prior to teaching and adjusted for where the course is "at this moment." For instance, changing assigned readings, changing the order of our guests, and fine-tuning the topic were part of this in the moment planning. Our guests included an oral historian; a long-time GD show taper and trader; a co-author/researcher of DeadBase and poster artist; a journalist who published books about three musical groups as well as magazine articles and liner notes; an American studies and English professor who published critically acclaimed books about the Grateful Dead and *Ramparts* magazine, a sociologist who took students on "tour," published a book of their studies, and has made a convincing argument for how experiential preferences during GD shows explain part of the uniqueness of the GDP; and two music theorists and a musicologist all of whom study the Grateful Dead phenomenon. As the official instructor I designed and implemented the course, collaborated with guest speakers, and taught three specific topics—Deadheads' cultural communication, liveness and cultural geography—lines of research I draw on in my cultural communication landscape studies of jam bands (Dollar, 1999a, 2007, 2010; Dollar et al., 2019).

When musicians attract a following that transcends historical, social, and generational boundaries, multidisciplinary approaches are essential to understanding the complexity of the phenomenon, a lesson I learned when I embarked on my initial study of the GDP (Dollar, 1988). Combining musical taste cultures with fantasy theme analysis, I argued that spiritual and communal themes, both products and outcomes of communication, provide motivation for belonging to musical taste cultures in contrast to the status

quo demographic explanations. My studies have become more focused on cultural communication and dispersed communities to understand how communication is essential to the maintenance and growth of the GDP speech community (Dollar 1999a,b, 2007, 2010; Dollar et al. 2019). Multidisciplinary inquiries often “constitute synergistic momentum, creating new forms of knowledge discovery that may appear to consecrated disciplines as amorphous, if not decentered epistemically” (Hérubel, 2020, p. 24). This is certainly the case with the GDP as a topic of research and the subject of university courses across the curriculum and continues to be strengthened through this multidisciplinary approach, including but not limited to sociology (Adams, 1998, Adams & Sardiello, 2000), literature (Richards, 2014), rhetoric (Carroll, 2007), history (Meriwether, 2007, 2012, 2013), philosophy (Gimbel, 2007; Tueido & Spector, 2010), legal issues (Balter-Reitz, 2015/2016), music (Wood, 2020), and business (Barnes, 2011).

### **SO WHAT DID WE LEARN?**

Student learning outcomes (SLO) facilitate instructor’s understanding of students’ experiences as well as about their own teaching practices. There are many assessment options along the quantitative/qualitative research continuum, SLOs are but one of these. Common quantitative methods include student evaluations of teachers and courses and statistical analyses of assignment scores. Qualitative assessments include students’ written comments within student assessments of courses, instructors’ written assessment of assignments, and focus groups with students conducted by someone other than the instructor. As with all methodologies, each has their strengths and weaknesses, which is beyond the scope of this article. I am concerned here with making sense of this pedagogical experience through the frame of reflective analysis rather than a scientific analysis of student evaluations and assignments as assessment tools. I organize my observations with regard to course student learning outcomes.

### **Situating the GDP in Communication Fan Studies**

Within the discipline of communication studies, fan community studies tend to investigate literature, sports, and film/television communities more than music fan communities. Much of this research prioritizes cultural and critical studies approaches. A review of communication studies professional organizations publications illustrates this trend: *Communication & Sport* (International Communication Association), *Critical Studies in Media Communication* (National Communication Association), *Text and Performance Studies* (National Communication Association), and *Feminist Media Studies* (Taylor & Francis). This was not lost on students as they struggled to locate music fan community studies published in communication studies. At first frustrated, students came to see this as an advantage for demonstrating their proficiency with SLO 1: explaining and discussing the uniqueness of the GDP.

Across assignments students discussed the depth and complexity of the Grateful Dead, Deadheads, and their shared community as a significant difference with the fan communities they were studying. Instead of overstating claims of similarity and differences, the student’s discussions demonstrated the rigorous demands of a cultural communication perspective and resulted in thick descriptions. Using their thick descriptions students were able to better understand how communication fan studies differ in methodology and theoretical framing yet have commonalities in what is being studied, such as fan-fan communication, fan-artist/musician/celebrity/sports stars communication, and fan archiving.

### **Situating the Grateful Dead Phenomenon in American Culture**

Two sources of data, weekly quizzes and written assignments, inform my comments regarding SLO 2: applying multiple disciplinary perspectives to situate the GDP in American culture. Weekly quizzes were completed online using Canvas. Each quiz concentrated on the materials and perspectives covered that week in class and included multiple choice, true/false, short answers, and essay questions. Quizzes focused on



comprehension and application. Students averaged the following scores for our eight weekly quizzes: one A, five Bs and two Cs. These preliminary data suggest that students were able to apply multidisciplinary approaches to understanding the GDP.

Short answer and essay questions allowed students to demonstrate their comprehension and application with more detail than close-ended questions. Consider this essay question from our Week 3 quiz: *According to this week's guest, the Grateful Dead phenomenon differs from that of other musical fan communities in multiple ways that explain the phenomenon's continuing relevance. Identify, explain and discuss 1 of these. Make sure you draw on concepts/terms our guest brought to our awareness through assigned readings and/or presentation and interaction with your peers.* Responses included discussions of the international history of bohemian movements, how the GD took very seriously the role of art and music in society, and democratic bohemianism. Others commented on their piqued interest in happening theory as a way of explaining the GD's willingness to make mistakes on stage, lack of fear of losing fans over imperfect musicianship, and their eschewing the music industry norm for making money from studio albums instead of tours, especially those that did not promote a studio release. The theme of amateur historians, a role that Deadheads took on and the GD embraced, was yet another conceptual idea that students found meaningful. These students clearly comprehended how a historical perspective facilitated their understanding of GDP and its longevity. Similar levels of comprehension and application were evidenced across the range of disciplinary approaches presented by our other guests throughout the course.

### **Situating Student Research as Unique**

Students explicitly demonstrated their use of primary and secondary sources to research and write a unique study, SLO 3, in Assignment 4. This assignment required students to select a text or an artifact of significance among their chosen fan community and to use Hymes' (1972) SPEAKING framework to describe, discuss, and explain these primary sources. A prominent theme in our class discussion about this assignment was that frameworks and heuristics are secondary sources. Additional secondary sources were called up to situate student's studies in academic perspectives. For example, students treated song lyrics as their primary source, and fan's responses to, interpretation of, and blogging about the lyrics as secondary sources. Others studied posters and promotional artifacts (primary) and the social, historical, and political climate of the time as presented in news publications (secondary).

Allowing students to choose their research topic provided a familiarity and personal interest in this and previous assignments. This combination proved beneficial as is clear when we consider the following unsolicited comment:

I loved taking this class. Having a focus on a community that was familiar to me helped me grasp the concepts and relate them to my own life and the communities I was in. I especially loved our final assignment, which allowed me to focus on a fan community of my choice and analyze the way the community members communicated with each other (student, personal correspondence, fall 2020).

Familiarity enhanced interest that facilitated applying concepts and theories to this student's lived experiences and in their communication analysis of one fan community. Without using academic-speak, the student explains student agency, which Zoffel (2010) defines as "the action a student takes to adopt our field's concepts as their own and then uses those concepts to accomplish the learning objectives" ( p. 193).

Guests who shared a primary source, such as multiple live versions of the same GD song, and relevant secondary sources, social and cultural histories of the times, demonstrated how to use differing levels of sources in a manner accessible to students. Students shared that guest presentations allowed them to play with concepts in new ways, think critically, understand how their personal interests were part of academic

scholarship, and grasp how the GDP was so much more complex than imagined at the beginning of the course (fieldnotes, June 5, 2020). These comments illustrate students' ability to use primary and secondary sources.

### **Teaching the Grateful Dead Phenomenon as Communication Studies**

The Grateful Dead phenomenon, clearly a multi-perspective topic, provides a rich body of experiences suitable for teaching communication studies courses. As an academic discipline, communication studies' history is highly multidisciplinary, just as is the history of the GDP. The classical period of Aristotle, Plato, Quintilian, and others provides the foundation for current rhetorical studies of public speaking and communication. The early modern period, 1800-1990, was clearly grounded in English departments characterized by a focus on presentation and elocution. The focus was on the individual as a communicator. Early 20th century brought World War I and World War II, and speech communication began to take even more shape in response to such events. Drawing from psychology and rhetoric, communication studies shifted toward objective research into mass media effects, individual traits, and propaganda culminating in modern critical and rhetorical theories. Soon after, communication studies built on sociology and psychology in studying relationships, groups, attitudes, and socialization. Moving into the 1970s, communication studies manifested in distinct fields of study, including but not limited to mass communication, persuasion, intercultural, group, organization, gender, and critical communication. Today, the fields of study are even more expansive, and the Grateful Dead phenomenon can be understood from many of these.

Equally significant are the possibilities afforded by teaching methodology when studying the Grateful Dead phenomenon. In our class, we studied writing culture, documenting and archiving culture, ethnography of communication, and discourse analysis. Student-selected research topics facilitated interest, and guests had a tangible influence on students' understanding of and sense of efficacy conducting their research. Using cultural artifacts of particular interest to students helped them understand the relevance and rigor required to conduct academic research as illustrated in this student comment: "the last thing I wanted to do was a crappy job analyzing my fan materials, I got to choose what I studied and so I wanted to do my best" (student, personal communication, June 6, 2020). Further, the connection between theory and methods guided our guests' presentations and modeled a relationship students often find incomprehensible. It was common to have students report to me that they finally understand theory and research as part of the same process, have learned not to be intimidated by theory and research, and that some are now considering a career that involves research (fieldnotes, April 24, May 15, and May 29, 2020).

There are limitations to the pedagogical approach set forth here with time consumption being the greatest challenge. Selecting and collaborating with appropriate guest speakers; working with individual students in the selection of their fan community, conducting their research, and completing their assignments; and assessing and providing constructive feedback for weekly quizzes and four written research assignments are time-intensive tasks. Offering the class as an upper-division course and limiting enrollment to thirty are a few ways to mitigate these challenges.

### **THE LAST WORD: STUDENT OBSERVATIONS**

I close by giving the final word to the students in *The Grateful Dead and Cultural Communication* course. Student-shared challenges coalesced around two themes, prioritizing classes and attending live music. Some students expressed a personal struggle with wanting to prioritize this course and recognizing that their other courses were also important even if they were less interested in and motivated to attend these classes (fieldnotes, June 5, 2020). The second challenge was that this was the first term our campus switched to remote learning due to the COVID pandemic and local venues canceled all live performances (fieldnotes, June 5, 2020). Given the relevance of "live" music in the course, not being able to attend such performances inhibited student's opportunity to experience and feel the live scene in the context of course discussion.

The most common feedback I received from students addressed engagement and motivation as part of their learning process. What surprised me most were those students who discussed the relationship between preparation, engagement, and learning. Students reported feeling more engaged in this course than any other course they have taken. Many of these students stated that the potential for learning increases with class preparation. Of course, instructor preparation is critical to a positive learning environment, and students tell us so in their teacher evaluations. Significantly less frequent is students' acknowledgement that *their* class preparation is just as important as the instructors:

When instructors and students are prepared for class, there is room for much more learning. When one or the other is unprepared, it undermines our learning. In this class, we were consistently prepared and it paid off (student, personal communication, June 9, 2020).

Preparation is enhanced through motivation, and students cited course organization, guest speakers, and the multidisciplinary nature of the course as key to their motivation to both prepare and attend class. It is the multidisciplinary aspect that rendered the most interest and feedback from students. Some commented on not wanting to miss a class because they were meeting and learning things from people they would otherwise not have an opportunity to meet, much less discuss their scholarship with (fieldnotes, May 29, 2020). Others noted how the diversity of guests led them to feel they learned something completely different each time, and that the guests opened them to new facets and sides to the Grateful Dead experience and culture each time we met (fieldnotes, May 29, 2020). One student reported to me months after the term,

Our assignments were so engaging, and I personally really enjoyed applying what we were learning in class about the Grateful Dead and cultural communication to different bands with completely different experiences. I got to apply so many other interests to the analysis: history, politics, music, pop culture, subcultures, etc. (personal communication, August 2020).

That students noticed the integration of a multidisciplinary focus in their written assignments was music to my ears, one sweet source of evidence that the Grateful Dead phenomenon is worthy of study, and that communication studies is particularly well-situated as a discipline in which to offer the study.

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## SUGGESTED REFERENCE CITATION

### MLA

Dollar, Natalie J. "Teaching the Grateful Dead Phenomenon and Cultural Communication". *Dialogue: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Popular Culture and Pedagogy*, vol. 9, no. 1 & 2, 2022. <http://journaldialogue.org/issues/v9-issue-1-and-2/teaching-the-grateful-dead-phenomenon-and-cultural-communication/>

### APA

Dollar, N.J. (2022). Teaching the Grateful Dead phenomenon and cultural communication. *Dialogue: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Popular Culture and Pedagogy*, 9(1 & 2). <http://journaldialogue.org/issues/v9-issue-1-and-2/teaching-the-grateful-dead-phenomenon-and-cultural-communication/>



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