Research Article

Etnomüzikoloji Dergisi
Ethnomusicology Journal
Year/Yıl 8 * Sayı/Issue 1
(2025)

SO YOU WANT TO BE AN APPLIED ETHNOMUSICOLOGIST? SEVEN THINGS THEY PROBABLY FORGOT TO TEACH YOU AT UNIVERSITY*

Huib SCHIPPERS**

Abstract

It has been more than 30 years since applied work in ethnomusicology has been recognized and become a substantial part of both theory and practice in ethnomusicology. Therefore, it may be time to consider whether current curricula and training of ethnomusicologists sufficiently prepare students for the skill set needed to be a successful applied ethnomusicologist. There is now a broad awareness that any ethnographic research has ethical and organizational implications for ethnomusicologists. In applied work, these implications multiply: researchers *aim* at making a difference in the lives of the communities they work with, which can change their circumstances for the better, but also hold the risk of making them worse. This

* *Article Received Date: June 5, 2025 - Article Accepted Date: July 19, 2025*

** Distinguished Changjiang Professor and Director of the International Centre for Cultural Sustainability at Zhaoqing University, Guangdong Province, China, huib@huibschippers.org ORCID: http:// 0000-0002-9333-2623

presupposes finely honed ethical awareness, considerable insight and intelligence. But it also requires well-developed practical skills in running projects with people and organizations. In this article, I argue for a dedicated one-semester course for (graduate) students on developing and running projects in communities.

Keywords: Applied Ethnomusicology, project management, graduate training, transferable skills

Uygulamalı Etnomüzikolog Olmak Mı İstiyorsunuz? Üniversitede Size Öğretmeyi Muhtemelen Unuttukları Yedi Şey

Etnomüzikolojide uygulamalı çalışmanın tanınması ve etnomüzikolojide hem teori hem de pratiğin önemli bir parçası haline gelmesinin üzerinden 30 yıldan fazla zaman geçti. Bu nedenle, mevcut müfredatın ve etnomüzikologların eğitiminin öğrencileri başarılı bir uygulamalı etnomüzikolog olmak için gereken beceri setine yeterince hazırlayıp hazırlamadığını düşünmenin zamanı gelmiş olabilir. Artık herhangi bir etnografik araştırmanın etnomüzikologlar için etik ve örgütsel çıkarımları olduğuna dair yaygın bir farkındalık var. Uygulamalı çalışmada, bu çıkarımlar çoğalır: araştırmacılar, birlikte çalıştıkları toplulukların yaşamlarında bir fark yaratmayı hedeflerler, bu da koşullarını daha iyiye doğru değiştirebilir, ancak aynı zamanda onları daha kötü hale getirme riski de taşır. Bu, incelikle bilenmiş etik farkındalık, önemli içgörü ve zekayı varsayar. Ancak aynı zamanda insanlarla ve kuruluşlarla projeler yürütmede iyi gelişmiş pratik beceriler de gerektirir. Bu makalede, (lisansüstü) öğrenciler için topluluklarda projeler geliştirme ve yürütme üzerine bir dönemlik özel bir ders verilmesini tartışıyorum.

Anahtar kelimeler: Uygulamalı Etnomüzikoloji, proje yönetimi, lisansüstü eğitim, aktarılabilir beceriler

Introduction

Over a period of more than three decades, there has been increasing interest, practice and research in the area of applied ethnomusicology (e.g. Sheehy, 1992; Harrison et al 2010; Pettan & Titon, 2015; Gunderson et al, 2019; García Corona & Wien, 2021; Schippers, Zhang & Lin, 2024). To some, this represents a minor revolution in a discipline that was built around what Deborah Wong -with her characteristic sense of insight and humor- compared to Star Trek's "Prime Directive of non-interference" (QCRC, 2008). As inheritors of 19th century European ideals -now more frequently considered as illusions- of the objective observer,

many of us have felt compelled to minimally affect the "subjects" of our research. For others, this shift in perspective was part of a natural development as a relatively young discipline matures.

The "do not interfere" myth was dismantled by two developments or realizations: Firstly, we have come to acknowledge that the very presence of a researcher from outside influences virtually all situations we participate in, whether trying to "go native" in Indian *kurta pajama* or awkwardly towering two white feet over Indigenous people in the Ituri forest (cf Johnson, 1932). Whether we want to or not, we now all realize that we are players in our own ethnographies. Secondly, and more importantly, many ethnomusicologists (both before and after 1992), realized that they are in a privileged position in most communities they research: even if there isn't an evident power gap (which often there is), researchers tend to come from well-funded institutions, and have or have had more access to information and means than most of the communities they work with.

That has frequently generated a sense of ethical obligation -or simply human kindness- which inspires actively working on things that matter with the people who give to us. It is clear to most that this ideally transcends the minimum requirement of sending back recordings and findings. It can range from providing things that are difficult to access where our sources are to arranging performance and touring opportunities, from assisting with addressing minor administrative or legal challenges to supporting major concerns for the community, musical or otherwise. As a result, there now are hundreds of examples of ethnomusicologists who collaborate with the musicians and communities they work with on issues from social justice to cultural sustainability (cf Pettan & Titon, 2015).

This widespread practice brings with it two major new concerns: 1) ethical obligations escalate from those of researching responsibly to those of consciously influencing how things work and develop within the community; and 2) practical skills required to be a successful applied ethnomusicologist beyond gathering and processing data become more pronounced. The former has increasingly become a topic in ethnomusicology courses and publications (e.g.

Barz & Cooley, 2008; Stock & Diamond, 2022). Surprisingly, the latter is still rarely addressed in our field. Working for goals outside of the academy can be highly rewarding, but it is also daunting. In ethnomusicological training, practical project management skills are rarely taught at any depth, while they may be crucial for responsible and effective professional behavior in applied work. In this article, I will use a largely autoethnographic approach to make the case for a dedicated course on developing project skills for applied ethnomusicologists, so they can respond more adequately to the needs of communities.

The outline I suggest here is for a practical course to acquire skills in defining, developing and realizing music projects with impact beyond academia. It is based on four decades of initiating and leading dozens of small to large projects of this nature on five continents, pilot courses I have conducted with graduate students at UCLA (USA), Central Conservatory of Music (China), the University of Cape Coast (Ghana) and Griffith University (Australia), as well as numerous lectures, discussions and workshops on this topic at conferences and seminars around the world. This article builds on my chapter "The Meeting Room as Fieldwork Site: Towards an Ethnography of Power" (2021), in which I argue that the ethnographic skills we refine to understand complex societal structures in the field can work equally well in any boardroom. It is also informed by the practice and literature that is generally referred to as "community music," which has given more attention to training facilitators to work effectively and responsibly (e.g. Moser & MacKay, 2005; Van Buren & Shrag, 2018; Bartleet & Higgins, 2021).

While many different modalities for delivering this type of content are possible, I advocate here for the inclusion of a one-semester course dedicated to developing the required key skills in students (graduate and undergraduate) who are likely to do applied work. I see considerable potential for a practice-oriented three-hour workshop over 12 weeks (36 hours in total), during which a group of up to 12 students learns the principles of project management specifically for applied ethnomusicology contexts, and jointly develops a realistic project step by step. In suitable environments, a capstone in the form of an actual grant proposal or locally executed project may be added. The full workshop can also be

delivered in an intensive one-week program. I propose a focus on seven key elements, each of which can be dealt with in modules of one or two sessions.

- defining an idea;
- developing a project;
- networking and securing support;
- writing a strong proposal;
- planning and running a project;
- evaluating and reporting; and
- initiating next stages/new projects

I will present each of these modules descriptively rather than prescriptively, as the essence of each module lies in the students' work, and the flow of the three-hour sessions will depend heavily on the experience and style of the facilitator. To avoid vagueness, I have formulated a core exercise for each of the modules, the outcomes of which should constitute a convincing project plan and a firm basis for grant proposals. For much of the below, I will draw (anonymized) examples from working with a cohort of graduate students at UCLA in the Fall of 2022, while I was Regents' Professor at its iconic Ethnomusicology Department. Over a period of three months, we focused on mastering key elements of developing and delivering successful applied ethnomusicology projects, working from a call for proposals for a hypothetical grant (see below).

Module 1: Defining an idea (one session of three hours)

Any successful project begins with a carefully crafted idea. This idea can be the result of years of focused research, in-depth conversations with the communities we work with, of a single instant of inspiration while reading the news or doing exercise, or a combination of those. How does one recognize a great idea? That may be as hard to define as recognizing a great piece of music. But it usually fulfills a number of the following criteria: The best ideas are

clear but not too obvious. A great idea can usually be explained in a few sentences. It addresses a problem or hiatus most people readily recognize. A good idea is obviously relevant. It offers a preferably simple, realistic, effective and desirable answer or solution for a situation to be addressed. This leads to one of the most crucial skills for a successful applied ethnomusicologist:

Exercise: "Describe in one page (3-5 paragraphs) what the problem is, what has been done to address it so far, what has not been resolved, what you are going to do about it, and how what you can do will make things better."

The importance of doing this well cannot be overstated. Whether looking for co-researchers, partners, funders or other kinds of supporters for a project, this is where you present yourself at your best. From my extensive experience on both sides of the table in funding applications, I am convinced that this is the decisive factor in success or failure of most projects. Even after decades of doing this work, I still spend dozens of hours crafting, editing, seeking feedback, refining and reworking the opening of any project plan. It is an investment that pays off.

In my classes at UCLA, with the help of my colleagues, I created a hypothetical brief to guide the formulation and development of the project:

Charlotte, a mid-sized city in North Carolina, USA, has had some bad publicity in relation to intolerance and racism. They feel they need to do something in order to keep the city peaceful and attractive for tourists, new residents and especially businesses. The city council is making available five grants of $1 million each for cultural events or activities to support that goal. Their call for grants invites proposals for projects that are realistic and impactful, to be realized in 2026/2027. Can we come up with a strong and viable project proposal?

The graduate students started doing background research. They looked at the demographics and history of Charlotte, the physical lay-out of the city, landmarks and usable spaces, the businesses that are based there, the formulated ambitions of the City Council, the key players, recent news, so that the opening section of the proposal could reflect awareness of the challenges, and creative ways of addressing them.

Module 2: Developing your project (two sessions of three hours)

It is one thing to come up with cool ideas; but the art of being a successful applied ethnomusicologist lies in one's ability to turn ideas into actions. A great idea without a concrete plan will never be a successful project. Building from a well-formulated idea and rationale, there is a need to map out in detail a vision of what exactly will happen; an analysis of the resources needed; how it will be and communicated; and a credible budget to realize the plan. The best way to achieve that is working closely with the community and any other relevant stakeholder, put all thoughts and ideas on this together into a single document and see how it reads, pretending to be a critical outsider who has no prior understanding of your idea.

The UCLA team's initial response: "Music has often been used successfully to address and redress social wrongs. We propose a four-day festival that is exuberantly inclusive of the diverse communities in Charlotte, taking place in multiple sites, starting at the iconic town hall, and then finding people where they are, in their schools, museums, community centers, neighborhoods …, concluding with a grand finale in the park." The team started researching/discussing.

Exercise: "**Create a document that succinctly describes your key idea, the people and partners, the infrastructure and the funding you are going to need for it, the desired outcomes, and a realistic time path**."

This is as difficult as it seems. The paragraphs from Module 1 should be a good start. Begin to have formal meetings and brainstorming sessions with members of the community you want to work with, coffees, elevator conversations … whatever formats sparks ideas and enthusiasm. Talk with people who have more experience than you in any of the aspects of the project: logistics, finance, legal issues, public affairs … . Be visionary, but also humble and realistic. See if your ideas convince people who are not easily enthused. Make copious notes. Have the courage to radically change or even throw away ideas or approaches that are not likely to work, but stay true to the bigger picture.

Module 3: Securing support (two sessions of three hours)

The first form of support usually comes from the musicians, communities or arts organizations you work with. If you have deeply engaged them in the processes of modules 1 and 2, they should be on board already. But it is important to keep this communication ongoing: people refine or change their ideas as the project crystalizes. Some communities and organizations have transparent and fast ways of coming to decisions, others may be more opaque and time-consuming. Don't try to force such processes: learn to understand them and build them into your project timeline. True support from the people you work with directly is the most relevant, even if it tends to not be financial.

The next ambit of support is external partners and funding bodies, which may include public authorities at local, reginal, national or even international level. Most ethnomusicologists excel at doing ethnographic fieldwork and making convincing intellectual arguments; but few seem to have developed this into the transferable skill of convincing people in positions of power to support their work. This can be direct, as an actual pitch before a person responsible for a grant program, or -more frequently- in the form of a grant application. I have written about the former in considerable detail in the chapter mentioned before: "The meeting room as fieldwork site: Toward an ethnography of power" (Schippers, 2021), so I will limit my remarks here to emphasizing the importance of making sure that students learn to approach ANY group of people as individuals with a complex combination of cultural backgrounds, relationships, passions and disappointments. As ethnographers, they should be well equipped to deal with this challenge without being intimidated by titles, suits, or buildings that exude power.

The UCLA team were tasked to prepare a PowerPoint to present to the Charlotte City Council. This was not approached as an academic exercise, but as a real-world effort at persuasive writing and presenting, realizing that everything you put on a slide or say can make or break support for the project and its chances of happening. This was preceded by a phone call with an imaginary civil servant who reacted in unexpected ways to the team's ideas and suggestions: another crucial aspect of preparation.

Exercise: "Write a partnering proposal for the project you are developing, highlighting the motivations and advantages for the partner to work with *you* on *this* particular project. In the workshop, practice presenting this live to a critical official or committee. Then analyze and critique your own performance and keep practicing until you feel at ease with this."

Module 4: Writing a strong proposal (two sessions of three hours)

Most funding bodies publish clear formats for proposals and key criteria. Given the crucial role that grants play in work inside and outside the academy, it has always surprised me how few institutions of higher learning develop courses with this as a focus. In my 2021 article, I go into some strategies to dramatically increase the chance of success. This includes learning about research grants beyond the published call and criteria; seeking information on board/committee members; reading annual reports (which tell you what ACTUALLY got funded); and finding out about developments within the organization. Making personal contact with a board member or secretary of a program through a meeting or call can increase chances of success dramatically. The title and opening paragraphs of any proposal are crucial for success. Craft them very carefully, refining the words you formulated in Module 1 and hopefully refined in Module 2 and 3. Then make sure that the rest of the proposal supports the positive impression you made by careful planning, solid organization, a realistic budget, and never overclaiming outcomes.

The UCLA team carefully researched the city council and its recent discussions and decisions, the demographics of Charlotte, spaces and organisations that could be included, as well as specific artists and events. This turned into a draft program, with a moving stage on a truck as one of the key features. Next, the program was scrutinized for overall reach, logistical challenges, needs for financial and in-kind support, and potential for additional donors. This led to a budget/ask of around USD 900,000.

It is inevitable to see a grant proposal as the glorious presentation of a great idea. And in a way, it is. But the *purpose* of the grant proposal is to convince the people on the other side of

the table that your project connects perfectly to what *they* want to achieve with their organization. Present your idea in the terms that you have learned will persuade them to support you: make clear how it serves *their* goals, and show that you know what you are doing by presenting a strong and realistic organizational and financial plan. If you already have experience or a reputation in doing this type of projects, make sure they know it; if you don't, build a credible steering committee or advisory board around your project. Partners and funding bodies want to work together or give money, but *only* if they think it will make them look good and the risk of failure is minimal.

Exercise: "Using elements you have developed before, write a full grant proposal with a rationale (why are you doing this); your target groups (who are you doing this for); an inspiring description of the initiative or event (what are you doing); a solid description of an organisational structure, fit for purpose and sensitive to context, with a clear and comprehensive budget that fully aligns with your rhetoric (how are you doing this); and a realistic time path (when are you doing this)."

Module 5: Running a project (two sessions of three hours)

There is a saying that there is only one thing that is worse than not getting a grant; that is getting a grant. Running projects is hard. How hard is not primarily correlated with how big the project is, but more about how well it is thought through: whether the planning is robust, and the infrastructure and the people are a good fit for the tasks to be completed, including running social media and carefully documenting the project. In virtually EVERY project, unexpected things happen. Some of those are opportunities, but most are challenges. It is crucial to build in the capacity and flexibility to deal with such occurrences.

While we never got to the stage of carrying out the hypothetical program, the UCLA Team took great care to run through numerous scenarios, allocated members to specific tasks, defined the profiles and level of payment of external professionals to be hired for specific tasks, and made sure there was capacity to deal with inevitable unexpected emergencies, and for documenting and evaluating the project.

Exercise: "Based on your own project plan and grant proposal, work out in detail who you need where for what at each stage of your project/event, delegating major responsibilities to people who have the capacity and sense of responsibility/salaried position. For bigger projects, create clear reporting lines. At busy times, see if you can use volunteers (and have someone to recruit, train and coordinate them). Do *not* end up having everybody come to you for everything: make sure you are free to deal with unexpected opportunities and emergencies."

Module 6: Evaluating and reporting (one session of three hours)

It is easy to get consumed by the urgent demands of the present in any complicated project: an artist that can't get a visa, a bus that is late, a microphone that does not work. All of these are real and need attention. That is why it is essential that you build room for two aspects into your project before it starts, as you will bitterly regret not doing it afterwards:

1) Documentation. If your project goes well, you also want people who were not part of it to be able to witness it. Make sure you have attractive images and sound of what you do, use them on social media to engage more people as things happen, but also think of more solid documentation (including numbers) for reports to partners and supporters.
2) Evaluation. An evaluation serves two purposes: a) surveys and interviews with stakeholders can be an important part of the acquittal of any grants you have; and b) an honest evaluation of what went well *and* what went wrong will make your work and the next project stronger.

While reporting and evaluating may seem like an unattractive chore, carefully and truthfully communicating what you have done and achieved builds relationships and reputations, making future projects much more likely to be supported.

Exercise: Develop a framework for carefully documenting and evaluating your project, including the forms, funding and personnel needed. Make sure the way you organize

this invites honest feedback: it is more useful and credible if there is a range of reactions.

Module 7: Upscaling and developing new projects (two sessions of three hours)

If your first project has run well, and you have the documentation and evaluations to prove it, you are in a good position to ask for repeat or new funding. There are two major ways of doing this: 1) Applying to do a next edition of roughly the same event (many recurring festivals work like this); or 2) Developing and applying for a different initiative building on the experience and goodwill you have built up with your first event. This is an important element of long-term success in running applied ethnomusicology projects. Very few people without a track record get a million-dollar grant for anything. You are more likely to get the 5,000 or 10,000 dollar grant, then you go for a project of 25,000, then 50,000, 100,000, 250,000, until people think they can trust you with a million dollars.

In that process, you also expand your network of advisors, supporters, people in places of influence. Ideally, this can become a self-perpetuating mechanism for developing and vetting new ideas, finding the right people to work for and with you, the right sources of support. After a few years, any idea you think of developing will automatically trigger a list of people and organizations you want to contact to see if it has potential or not. Acting on that is likely to make you a happy and fulfilled applied ethnomusicologist.

Exercise: Create the outlines of an imaginary follow-up project roughly twice the size of the one you have just developed, highlighting how your experience, credibility, and network can support you in realizing it over the next five years.

Conclusion

Applied work is increasingly part of the working lives of ethnomusicologists; partly because the number of (tenure track) positions is limited, and partly because graduates increasingly feel it is (more) worthwhile to make a tangible difference in a turbulent world. Some even manage to combine the two. In principle, undergraduate and especially graduate degrees in ethnomusicology can offer an excellent basis to work with communities and organisations on improving their work or circumstances. There are numerous examples of that (cf García

Corona & Wien, 2021). However, if applied work is considered an important part of the future for emerging ethnomusicologists, it is important to ensure they are trained in the specific skills this requires.

A 36-hour course on practical skills for applied ethnomusicologists may be a bare minimum to at least raise awareness of the requirements and responsibility that comes with working on outcomes beyond the academy with individuals, communities, organizations, or public authorities. But it is a start, and equips the beginning applied ethnomusicologist with a basis of "real-life" skills that can be developed over decades to make a real difference for people who are passionate about making their lives better through engaging with music.

This article is an elaboration of a workshop at the 2025 ICTMD World Conference in Wellington, New Zealand. It is based on four decades of applied work across five continents in music performance, festivals, education, training, criticism, recording industry and cultural sustainability featuring music and communities from a dozen different cultures. It can be seen as a sequel to "The Meeting Room as Fieldwork Site: Toward an Ethnography of Power" in Voices of the Field: Pathways in Public Ethnomusicology *(2021): part of an ongoing series of introductions to key aspects of applied work in ethnomusicology.*

References

Bartleet, B. and Higgins, L. (Eds). (2021). *The Oxford Handbook of Community Music*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Barz, G.F & Cooley, T.J. (2008). *Shadows in the Field: New Perspectives for Fieldwork in Ethnomusicology*. New York: Oxford University Press.

García Corona, L.F. & Wien, K. (Eds). (2021). *Voices of the Field: Pathways in Public Ethnomusicology*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Gunderson, F., Lancefield, R.C., and Woods, B. (Eds). (2019). *The Oxford Handbook of Musical Repatriation*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Harrison, Klisala., Mackinlay, E., & Pettan, S., (Eds). (2010). *Historical and Emerging Approaches to Applied Ethnomusicology*. Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.

Harrison, Klisala. (2012). Epistemologies of Applied Ethnomusicology. In *Ethnomusicology*, Vol 56, No 3, 505-529.

Johnson, M. and O. (1932). *Congorilla* (documentary film).

Moser, P. and McKay, G. (Eds). (2005). *Community Music: A Handbook*. Lyme Regis: Russell House.

Pettan, S. and Titon J.T. (Eds). (2015). *The Oxford Handbook of Applied Ethnomusicology*. New York: Oxford University Press.

QCRC (Queensland Conservatorium Research Centre). (2008). *Twelve Voices on Sustainable Futures* [video]. Brisbane: Griffith University.

Schippers, H., Lin, W. Zhang, B. (Eds.). (2024). *Applied Ethnomusicology: Practices, Policies and Challenges*. Vienna/Beijing: Hollitzer/Central Conservatory of Music Press.

Schippers, H. (2021). The Meeting Room as Fieldwork Site: Toward an Ethnography of Power. In: García Corona, L.F. & Wien, K, (Eds.), *Voices of the Field: Pathways in Public Ethnomusicology*, pp. 33-45. New York: Oxford University Press.

Sheehy, Dan. (1992). A Few Notions about Philosophy and Strategy in Applied Ethnomusicology. In *Ethnomusicology*, Vol. 36, No. 3, 3-7.

Stock, J.P.J. & Diamond, B. (Eds). (2022). *The Routledge Companion to Ethics and Research in Ethnomusicology*. Oxon: Routledge.

Van Buren, K. & Shrag, B. (2018). *Make Arts for a Better Life: A Guide for Working with Communities*. New York: Oxford University Press.