

Innovation at the speed of music: Reflections on introducing a new composing method over fifteen years



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Abstract: This paper explores the pedagogical and cultural lessons learned from implementing an innovative composing method over fifteen years. The author reviews his journals, published works, and personal reflections to arrive at these findings: success of an innovation depends on adaptability, adoption may be slowed by cultural resistance, and beneficiaries may differ from initial expectations. The paper highlights how a bottom-up, inductive approach to songwriting may foster creativity and personal connection, particularly among marginalized communities. These findings may prove helpful not only to other musicians and teachers, but also to anyone introducing new artistic or pedagogical methods.

Introduction

Fifteen years ago, in 2010, I changed the way that I wrote songs. I had been writing them for decades. I would pray for inspiration, put myself in various states of receptivity, and wait for a lyrical or musical idea to strike. Then I would expand on the idea, adding verses to support the idea and so on. That was my standard top-down approach to creativity, and it was also the approach used by every colleague I knew.

In short, I used *deductive reasoning* to write. Seek an overall idea that provides direction. Work top down, expanding from a starting point.

In 2010 I tried a new approach and have learned much since then. Here is a reflection that may help others who seek to introduce improvements or innovations.

Early Years - Does the method work?

In March of 2010, I was collaborating with a colleague, Hannah Batley of Orono, Maine, and she was stymied in writing on a song. She had a line she liked: “So hold me and sing to me songs of the sunflower with God in its seed,” but it was just a line that felt good to sing. Hannah did not know what the song would be about or what the verses would express.

I asked her to tell me more about why the line interested her. She recounted a series of vignettes about a neighbor who played a grandfatherly role in her life. For some reason, I asked her to tell me every vignette a second time, only this time I would type them all down.

From those spoken words, typed down on a computer laptop, Hannah and I gradually uncovered the theme of the song, as well as all the verses. Let me emphasize that: we *uncovered* a song within spoken words. You can listen to the song here: ([Sunflower on Spotify](#))

This new method of songwriting intrigued me. It seemed to me that if I could help people write songs without requiring inspiration, I might help them feel the release and calm that I often felt after writing a song. Plus, I might find that people wanted to sing about a greater number of topics than were expressed in contemporary music.

This bottom-up approach, this *inductive* way of songwriting, as opposed to a top-down *deductive* approach, became the subject of my doctoral research.

The method involved a two-person collaboration. There was the person, not necessarily a musician, who told a personal story and served as the arbitrator as to what to keep, delete, or change, in order to ensure authenticity. This person became known first as the starter, then orator, and most recently as the story source or storyteller. He or she would also respond to prompts to sing and offer suggestions throughout the process.

The second person provided the musical expertise and was first called the instructor. Like the story source, the name of the role evolved. Instructor became Sherpa, then facilitator, and most recently, teaching artist.

The number and order of steps were flexible, depending on circumstances. Sometimes steps were added to allow for additional exploration of melodies and chord choices. Sometimes they were shortened, such as when working with story sources steeped in the Rap style who spoke in rhythm and needed little distilling of their spoken story.

The name of the method evolved, too, from autoethnographic songwriting, to autoethnography-to-song, to story-to-song or STS, to documentary songwriting, which is the term that is most common today.

Yet the fundamental approach of the method remained constant: two people, story source and teaching artist, collaborating together, using bottom-up, inductive reasoning to make a song from spoken words.

I did not seek rhyme in the lyrics. I felt that poets had let go of rhyming requirements in the last century. Perhaps it was time for songwriters to do the same. If rhyming helps people remember words, then forsaking it suggests that the melody itself must be made extra memorable. And each word must be a pleasure to sing. Other non-rhyming songs could serve as models. For example,

Paul Simon's "America" (Simon, 1968) may be readily recalled without rhyme. [Spotify: Simon and Garfunkel - America](#). Here is one without rhyme by Sting (1993): [Spotify: Sting - Fields of Gold](#).

Freed from rhyme, the teaching artist could ask the story source to sing freely and make several versions of a melodic line. Then the two could choose the line that best fit the words and refine it if necessary. This sort of freedom was employed by Beethoven, who would generate several melodies for a text and select one to use (Cooper, 1990, p. 135).

In the first year and a half after I began using the method, from 2010 through 2011, I tested it 18 times. Success! I live in Maine, and I had the help of Monica Kelly, who was then the executive director of Bay Chamber Concerts and Music School in Rockport. She arranged for students of the school to take classes with me and write songs together. The classes were straightforward: I demonstrated the steps of the method with one student and the other young musicians caught on.

I also explored using the method with oral histories. Pauleena MacDougal, professor at the University of Maine, arranged access to autobiographical interviews in the archives of the Maine Folklife Center. With my colleague Hannah, who had been the very first one to pioneer "autoethnographic songwriting" as I initially referred to it, I used the method with oral histories.

This collection of "documentary songs," as I later called them, written with students and through archived oral histories, brought out an astonishing breadth of topics. The method seemed to open the windows wide to human experience. Here are the topics that arose:

1. Yearning for the reassuring wisdom of a grandfather figure ([Spotify: Sunflower](#))
2. Feeling lost in one's twenties but then feeling guided in mystical ways ([Spotify: Star or an Angel](#))
3. A young wife's happy anticipation of dancing privately with her husband at home after his return from lengthy travel ([Spotify: Dancing at Home](#))
4. A boy's reminiscing about the delicious raspberries that proliferated after of a tragic fire that had raged through his Maine village ([Spotify: Raspberries](#))
5. A surveyor's acceptance of the finality of life and that one might be visiting favorite places for the last time ([Spotify: Francis Dowling](#))
6. A young girl's relationship with her "new dad," the man whom her single mother had recently married
7. A boy's bafflement when he had a persistent bloody nose that bled and stopped seemingly randomly
8. A boy's wishing he did not have to go fishing with his dad, though there was one moment when the phosphorescent ocean did seem beautiful to him
9. The thrill of sledding

10. A man's effort to reconcile a lifelong troubled relationship with his father
11. A boy's pleasant memories of high school, from the simple smell of a burnt grilled cheese sandwich to the writing a song with his musical friends
12. A girl's witnessing the joyful freedom that her dog must have felt when he escaped off leash
13. A teenager feeling invisible to someone of interest, yet having a chance through piano playing to be like the more accomplished kids
14. A boy's being bullied, hung upside down, and forced to open his mouth to have a foot stuck in it
15. A dream about a stranger in the house who turned out not to be so dangerous after all
16. A girl walking home with her cousin, both little children, and getting lost at night.
17. A girl's upset when one friend nearly injured another
18. Getting a new dog that grew almost twice as big as expected

Early Obstacle: Innovation may need expertise

The majority of these volunteers, or “starters,” as I called them at that time, were young but well trained musicians who studied at a classically oriented music school. They grasped the steps of the method with ease and enthusiasm. But I wondered about talented people who were less experienced in performing, composing and songwriting. How to introduce the method to them so that they could use it, too?

At the end of 2011, I had a chance to find out with a fellow doctoral student, Marieke Slovin. In my eyes, she had musical talent but limited composing and performing experience. Plus, I already had worked with her once. The year before, she had served as a volunteer or “starter” when I had presented the method to my professors and fellow students.

She asked to study the method with me as part of her goal to help realize her identity as an artist (Slovin 2013, p. 61). I welcomed her proposal. As she later wrote in her own dissertation, she “began working intensively with Malcolm Brooks to learn the autoethnographic songwriting method he had devised” (Slovin, 2013, p. 128).

Marieke and I formed a research partnership and proposed a semester-long practicum. I now had a chance to teach the method to someone who had yet to commit to music as a serious study. We used dialogue to “reduce hierarchical differences between expert and novice” (Ellis, 1997, as cited in Slovin, Brooks, 2013).

The research was an eye opener. I had been composing for so long that established composing strategies, such as refining a melody by testing variations, were second nature. Marieke drew out techniques I had used for years but had not articulated (Brooks, 2013, p. 120). While our

dialogues did not alter the method's process or its inductive approach, they did reveal how much prior musical knowledge an innovative composing method might demand. This method was not for beginners.

To other musicians, this fact was obvious. Cellist Nora Willauer, who served as executive director of the Documentary Songwriters non-profit and who established an intensive training program to teach the method, said that much of what needs to be taught are techniques of all songwriting, as well as in-depth, practical music theory. Nora, like Marieke, asked me to make my second-nature strategies explicit and helped turn a "private process into a public method" (Brooks, 2013, p.120). To write in the way I proposed, a musician has to know a body of composing and songwriting skills (N. Willauer, personal communication, 2020).

If I were starting over, I would ask myself: How much do people need to know before using something new? A new musical approach may require knowledge and a command of common melodic and chord structures that many musicians, even conservatory trained musicians who have focused on performance, may not have at the ready. I would remind myself that Grammy award winner Jimmy Webb presented melodic strategies and other fundamentals of songwriting in his guide. Those sections alone run over 200 pages (Webb, 1998).

Middle years - Collaboration and Adoption

It turned out that I was not alone in this effort to use inductive reasoning in songwriting. In 2013, when I was invited to participate in the Lullaby Project, a partnership with Carnegie Hall and Bay Chamber Concerts, I met composer Tom Cabaniss, who used a similar method to help young mothers compose lullabies for their babies. He, too, had developed a program to help musicians learn to serve as co-composers with non-musicians. I was in good company. Here is one of the lullabies: [Soundcloud: I Want You to Know](#).

The method spread gradually. It was used in a conflict zone in Cyprus and was featured in a TedX talk by Turkish documentary songwriter Melodi Var Öngel ([YouTube: TedX–Songs Across Boundaries](#)). It was explored in Spain by Will Foote, Nora Willauer, and Alex Wilder ([YouTube: Soy Yo y El Silencio](#)). Songwriters in much of the United States, as well as Europe and the mideast, used it and varied the steps, modifying them as time and setting required, always maintaining the inductive principle of discovering a song in a person's spoken words.

A second obstacle: Preconceptions of how to create

With such promising progress, one would expect, after fifteen years, that the method would be adopted widely as a means of expanding creativity and drawing out broad topics. Yet the image

of the lone composer seems to be the most common one. The composer is struck by inspiration and then adds to an idea: seek inspiration and then expand.

We can find examples as far back as the 1700s. Bach's "Little Fugue in G minor" shows an initial theme that Bach expanded and echoed in other voices ([YouTube: Bach - Little Fugue in G minor](#)).

The opening of Beethoven's fifth symphony also suggests this process. A rhythmic theme of only four notes expands into an entire orchestral movement ([YouTube: Beethoven - Fifth Symphony](#)).

So it is with more contemporary composers. Songwriter Jimmy Webb writes in *Tunesmith* that once you have an idea and a song title, "You will have announced a destination and all your efforts from that point will be dedicated to arriving at that destination" (Webb, 1998, p. 4).

The method I introduced, however, did not ask a composer to supply an initial idea. Instead, the start was with zero ideas, with only a transcription of a lived experience in the source's own words. Such an approach requires trust that a theme will emerge. Perhaps that trust is similar to that of an archaeologist on a dig who sorts through bones and finds that some of them form a mammoth or a dinosaur. Instead of bones, a documentary songwriter sifts through spoken phrases and finds an underlying message.

For a contemporary musician accustomed to working top-down, the archaeological bottom-up method may seem too foreign. I have observed how some singer-songwriters who have taken a documentary song training course embraced it during the course, but then returned to the top-down approach with which they were familiar.

Author Malcolm Gladwell calls an overarching belief or custom an "overstory," as if a culture were a forest with a tree canopy of customs. He suggests that overstories can be powerful hidden motivators or deterrents (Gladwell, 2024, p. 46).

Yet there are precedents for using a bottom-up approach to creativity. One example is the film *Annie Hall*. Director Woody Allen and editor Ralph Rosenblum discovered the theme of the film as they worked through the footage. Rosenblum writes, "The special job of editing this picture was finding the plot amid all the brilliant skits" (Rosenblum & Karen, 1986, p. 290). Rosenblum adds, "Out of the vast amount of material that Woody thought was going to comprise his first personal commentary film, we found a love story about two very different, perhaps incompatible people. (Rosenblum & Karen, 1986, p. 290).

Additionally, this bottom-up method asks a lone composer to collaborate with someone else from the very start. That someone else is the person who provides the story from which the song will be uncovered. Working with another person when you are used to working alone may be a challenge. Indeed, two documentary songwriters in this past year have told me that they are ready for a break, ready to seek to create something of their own, without collaborating with someone else. (H. Delehey, W. Foote, personal communications, February, 2025). Perhaps this sentiment is widespread among musicians.

Recent Years - A third Obstacle: Finding who benefits

I had thought that everyone would be fascinated by the breadth of topics in these documentary songs. Fellow teaching artists and I introduced the method at grade schools, middle schools, high schools, community centers, centers for sufferers of domestic abuse, addiction recovery centers, refugee centers, prisons, as well as on local radio and television. A band formed to perform documentary songs ([YouTube: Push Farther – Live on New Year's Day](#)).

Over twenty of the songs were published on YouTube and Spotify. Yet they tended to attract fewer than a hundred listeners. Were documentary songs substandard? Where would they find their audience?

A hint to solve this mystery lay in one song produced by Alex Wilder, now of Nashville, Tennessee. Throughout 2017 and 2018, he recorded a series of documentary songs. Only one of them garnered more than 500 streams. In its appeal was a clue: the song expressed the desire and anguish of two friends in high school, one of whom was facing the fact that he was gay and would have to leave his hometown. The song found its greatest number of listeners in graduates from that very high school. [Spotify: Chloë Isis - My Wish for You](#)

Perhaps documentary songs were, by very nature, miniature musical works, whose meaning was found within the communities from which they arose.

Where were these communities? Where were teaching artists most often invited to return and conduct more sessions?

In 2020, cellist Nora Willauer collaborated with Patrisha McLean on a song “You’re Just a Bully” ([YouTube: You're Just a Bully](#)). Patrisha had founded Finding Our Voices, an organization to help bring domestic abuse into the open. The two of them went on to arrange for women with experiences of abuse to co-write documentary songs with musicians enrolled in Nora’s training program. That arrangement continues to this day.

In 2021, professor Jody Kerchner of Oberlin College and Conservatory, arranged for the method to be used in a prison in Ohio. Using the method in prisons has also taken root, with choir director Mimi Bornstein continuing the work ([YouTube: Whopahlay](#)).

In 2022, cellist Rebecca Shasberger and violinist Lalia Mangione of Renovare began leading documentary songwriting programs in Cleveland, Ohio. The programs allowed members of communities, sometimes in unsafe environments, to share experiences and build relationships through songwriting ([YouTube: Journey through the Jordan](#)).

Sufferers of domestic abuse, incarcerated men and women, and neighbors in difficult urban settings: what do these people have in common? The common experience may be that of feeling silenced or marginalized. Maybe an inductive songwriting method is less about discovering fresh topics to sing about and more about listening to people and honoring them by expressing their experiences through music.

Recent work, thanks to documentary songwriter and choral director Khalid Taylor, with people who are gay, lesbian, queer, or trans suggests that this demographic may also be another marginalized population interested in documentary songwriting (K. Taylor, personal communication, January, 2025).

Unlike these wise pioneers of the method, I had been gripped overall by the anthropological appeal of the method. I was ever eager to find what the next song would be about. Yet it turns out that connecting and sharing among people of a community may be the method's greatest benefit to the world (C. Rex-Waller, personal communication, February 7, 2025).

Why did it take me fifteen years to see that? Perhaps I was caught in my own overstory, or mindset, of scholarship mattering more than sharing words and music. Ironically, twelve years ago, my own dissertation had explored the cathartic benefit of composing and releasing emotions (Brooks, 2013, p. ii).

Conclusion

If there were a slow learners' club, I would be president. The reflections in this paper reveal insights that arose gradually over fifteen years. Nevertheless, empirical research, or learning through experience in this case, does serve to cement lessons learned. I offer a summary to you:

If you have an innovation, be flexible and patient.

Is your innovation easy to adopt? Perhaps it is second nature to you, because you already have the prerequisite knowledge. Others may not adopt it so readily.

Does it require abandoning a common belief?

You may be Columbus, asking people to sail with him to India when most people believed the world was flat. Your innovation may challenge a predominant mindset.

Whom does it benefit?

You may think the idea fits in one realm, but it turns out to fit in another. Perhaps you are like that scientist at 3M who discovered post-it notes. What good is a semi-adhesive? Its first application turned out to be marking one's place in a church hymnal (3M Company, 2025).

But give yourself fifteen years. Anything can happen.

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