

## 6 Formal and Informal Pedagogies in the Old-Time and Shape-Note Communities of Practice

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When I first became involved with old-time music in 2015, I was astonished by the enthusiasm for learning demonstrated by the adult amateur instrumentalists who attended my local jam. Despite my 30 years of experience as a music student, performer and music educator, I had never seen anything like it. While some old-time musicians aspire to professional careers, the individuals who most impressed me were not highly skilled and had no prospect of becoming so. The only reason for them to learn was to enrich their enjoyment of the music-making activity itself. To this end, they dedicated extensive time and resources to the accumulation of skills and knowledge, driving great distances to jams and practice sessions, woodshedding on their own and spending their vacation time and money on weeklong music camps around the region. When I became heavily involved with shape-note singing five years later, I found the same thing: a community of adult amateur musicians whose only ambition was to enjoy singing with one another and who exhibited boundless energy for developing intellectual and practical mastery of the tradition's techniques, repertoires and histories. At the time, in-person group singing had been disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic—yet shape-note singers immediately found ways to convene online that supported their continued growth as musicians (Morgan-Ellis, 2021). They were not preparing for post-pandemic professional opportunities, for shape-note singers, unlike old-time musicians, have no path to professional status. While an old-time musician of moderate ability can make money busking or playing for dances, even the most dedicated shape-note singer will only ever spend money in support of their participation. This fundamental difference produces variations in teaching, learning and music-making practices, even as both communities remain focused on participatory engagement.

I am a scholar of teaching and learning and have completed research in both the old-time and shape-note communities, but this chapter will draw primarily on my personal experience as a student, teacher, facilitator and enthusiastic participant in these traditions. As a shape-note singer, I host our local singing and organize two annual “all-day” singings that bring visitors from surrounding states to my town. I regularly teach a short introductory lesson before singings and have also given workshops at festivals and folk

schools and taught classes at both Camp Fasola and Camp Doremi, where I simultaneously participate as a student. I travel to singing conventions throughout the United States and have accumulated many hours of experience at gatherings of all types and sizes. As an old-time fiddle and banjo player, I have enrolled in classes at the Swannanoa Gathering Old-Time Week, the Blue Ridge Old-Time Week, the Alabama Folk School Old-Time Weekend and the Stephen Foster Old-Time Weekend, and I have participated in workshops at the Bear on the Square Mountain Music Festival, the Florida Folk Festival, the Mt. Airy Fiddlers Convention, the Appalachian String Band Festival and the Frank Hamilton School. I have also taught fiddle classes at the Alabama Folk School, the John C. Campbell Folk School and the Georgia Pick & Bow Traditional Music School, and I teach the Old-Time String Band course at my institution. Locally, I help organize and host our weekly Pickin' Porch Jam and regularly participate in jams at music festivals around the region. I have traveled the path from novice to professional old-time musician and have experienced teaching and learning from both sides.

I believe that there is much for music educators to learn by examining these communities of practice, and I think that elements of the teaching and learning processes employed in these communities can be incorporated into music classrooms of all types to combat performance anxiety and burnout, empower students, encourage creativity and build adaptable skillsets. I am certainly not alone: interest among music educators in the learning techniques of old-time musicians has increased sharply over the past decade (Blanton, 2016; Blanton et al., 2014; Morgan-Ellis, 2019; Schaad, 2022), and the related practices of Irish traditional musicians have been studied for even longer (Doherty, 2021; Veblen, 1991; Waldron, 2008, 2016; Ward, 2023). Interest in these communities sometimes stems from the usefulness of their repertoire in the ensemble classroom, and it is usually through encounters with the repertoire that teachers and students in the musical mainstream become aware of old-time and Irish traditions (Olson, 2018). The same is true of shape-note music, although very few music educators have moved beyond the repertoire to engage with the community of practice and consider implications for classroom pedagogy (Conley-Holcom, 2017).

This chapter will not address repertoire at all. Indeed, as an old-time fiddler and shape-note singer myself, I am invariably frustrated with attempts to translate the participatory music I love into pedagogical settings that prioritize presentational performance, complex arrangements, fidelity to a notated score and standardization of execution in terms of intonation, sound production, blend, phrasing and other dimensions associated with “good” ensemble. Instead, it will interrogate the formal and informal teaching and learning practices of these two communities to reveal how they are rooted in the respective social and musical values of old-time and shape-note musicians, to understand why they are so successful and to consider how they might be transferred to other pedagogical contexts.

### **Frameworks for Participatory Teaching and Learning**

It is useful to contextualize this consideration of old-time and shape-note musicians within the literature on teaching and learning in communities of practice, which have been defined as “groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly” (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015, p. 1). The community-of-practice model has been productively applied to the study of musical amateurs—who certainly “share a concern or a passion” for their musical practice—across age groups, geographies and genres (Brashier, 2016; Corso, 2006; Waldron, 2009). Indeed, “passion” is at the heart of amateurism. In his definition of *amateurism* in music, Regelski (2007) quotes Goldsmith, who uses the term while describing what it means to be an amateur: “at some point in her or his life, the amateur falls in love—not slowly, not gradually, but with that resounding whoosh that marks passion” (Goldsmith, 2001, p. 50). This perfectly describes musical amateurs in the old-time and shape-note communities of practice. Indeed, most participants have a story about the moment they “fell in love,” and sharing those stories in formal and informal pedagogical settings is common. When I attended the Ashokan Online Rollick in 2020, for example, instructors introduced themselves by describing how they had first encountered and become enamored with old-time music, while it is practically a cliché in the shape-note community that singers either fall in love with the sound immediately or never come back (Hammond et al., 2025).

In lamenting the failures of music education to prepare students for a lifetime of amateurism, Regelski (2016) describes “the ascendancy of presentational music over participatory musics” (p. 32) as key to the dismissal of praxial and social dimensions of music in favor of aesthetics. The call to integrate participatory music-making into mainstream music education is trumpeted by Thibeault (2015, 2020; Thibeault & Evoy, 2011), whose work centers on empirical assessment and practical suggestions. Old-time and shape-note are both participatory practices, defined by Turino (2008) as music-making activity in which “there are no artist-audience distinctions, only participants and potential participants,” and during which “one’s primary attention is on the activity, on the doing, and on the other participants, rather than on an end product that results from the activity” (p. 28). This framework is essential to understanding why and how these musicians do what they do. In the old-time and shape-note contexts described here, there are no rehearsals, performances, ensembles or evaluations of musical ability, and the only long-term goals are to continuously deepen one’s knowledge and ability and to keep gathering to make music in community. The participatory framework is also essential to the way teaching and learning work in these communities, which are markedly egalitarian and respect longevity over skill. Participants are highly autonomous and make their own decisions about what, when and how to learn.

The motivation for learning in these contexts is nearly always to reap the sociomusical rewards of deep involvement with the community. I want to be

quite clear: old-time players and shape-note singers love the music that they perform, and they would not otherwise be involved. However, they usually come to love the community as much or even more. The social and musical aspects of participation are inextricably woven together (Clawson, 2011; Richardson, 2019). Tunes and songs become associated with individuals who play and sing them, and love for a piece of music might stem directly from love for a specific musician. Likewise, the social and musical rewards for learning cannot be disentangled. The accumulation of skill and knowledge both increases the musician's enjoyment of their activity and raises their status in the community, granting them access to desirable experiences (e.g., being invited to join an elite old-time jam at a festival or asked to sit at the front of the tenor section during a shape-note convention). Whatever an amateur musician's motivation to study and practice in these contexts, it is always rooted in the desire to participate deeply and meaningfully in the community.

Scholars in the field of community music have also explored the potential for participatory frameworks to foster productive learning experiences. "Participation in shared learning," write Bartleet and Higgins (2018), "has the potential to work towards emancipation and empowerment; open-ended community music-making places ownership of the resultant musical outcomes in the hands of participants, at the same time encouraging their continued musical growth" (p. 10). While definitions of community music have usually emphasized intervention (Higgins, 2012), Schippers (2018) has proposed a three-pronged model that encompasses "community music as an 'organic' phenomenon," "community music as an intervention" and "institutionalized community music" (p. 24). Old-time and shape-note practices unfold across all three of these planes. Both trace their origins to "organic" music-making activities developed and cultivated by communities for their own benefit, and I argue that much present-day activity remains "organic" (that is to say, it remains under the cooperative control of non-professional community insiders). Some historical and present-day interventions have revitalized or redirected music-making in these contexts, such as the revival movements that brought old-time and shape-note to participants outside of the US South (Jabbour, 2014; Karlsberg, 2024). Finally, both practices are supported and influenced by institutions. Some of these—such as the Sacred Harp Musical Heritage Association, which publishes the annual book of singing minutes and runs Camp Fasola—have been established by the communities. In other cases, existing institutions—colleges and universities, folk schools, record labels—have expanded their purview to encompass old-time, shape-note and other participatory music-making practices.

In the analysis that follows of formal and informal teaching and learning, the reader might find it profitable to map the various processes onto Schippers's three-pronged model. I define "formal teaching and learning" as taking place when musicians convene for the explicit purpose of teaching and learning and when there are well-defined roles for teacher and student. "Informal teaching and learning," in contrast, occurs when musicians convene to make music and there are no defined pedagogical roles. Formal processes can be located on the

planes of intervention and institutionalization, which often function in combination. For example, a fiddler who conducts a workshop performs an intervention, while the music festival hosting that workshop is an institution. On the other hand, informal learning is essential to transmission in “organic” contexts but also takes place in the context of interventions and institutions—during a pickup jam at a music camp, for example. Indeed, it can be difficult to disentangle these threads. I have a hard time locating my own activities on Schippers’s planes. When I host our local shape-note singing, is it “organic” or an intervention? I never intended to intervene, and have not previously reflected critically on my activities or their outcomes. I identify as a member of the shape-note community, and I only started a local singing group because I wanted to be a part of one. However, it cannot be denied that I *have* intervened. Students and community members have entered the tradition because of my intervention, and they now participate in regional singings, which impacts the broader community. I host the singing in my institution’s Appalachian Studies Center. I chose the space because it is convenient and nice to sing in, but the decision highlights my institutional authority and brings the activity under institutional auspices. I never wanted to teach or institutionalize shape-note singing, but my desire to participate has resulted in both. All these factors are also at play when I host weekly old-time jams in the same space.

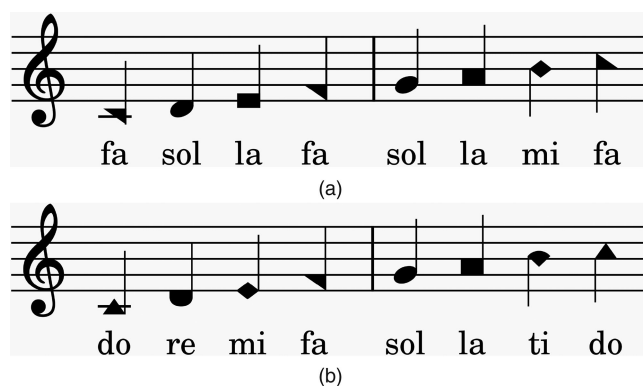
### **The Nuts and Bolts of Old-Time and Shape-Note Participation**

The old-time and shape-note<sup>1</sup> traditions are rooted in the US South, where I live and teach, but they have become global practices in recent decades. Old-time and shape-note scenes can be found throughout the United States and Canada, Europe, Eastern Asia and Oceania. They are naturally most prominent in English-speaking nations, but there are some surprising outliers. Germany, for example, has a strong shape-note community, while Japanese musicians have embraced old-time and the related practice of bluegrass (Lueck, 2017; Tachi, 2009; Thompson, 1992). While there is some overlap between old-time and shape-note participants, the communities are largely distinct.

Old-time constitutes a community of players who center their practice on the tunes and styles associated with pre-bluegrass string band music (Reish, 2017). They draw their repertoire from early hillbilly recordings, field recordings of tradition bearers made largely during the folk revival and new tunes composed in the old-time style (Decosimo, 2018). At an old-time jam, musicians playing fiddle, open-back banjo, mandolin, guitar, bass and perhaps mountain dulcimer will cycle through tunes, with all participants playing all the time. There are no solo breaks in old-time, and excessive improvisation is not welcome, although it is acceptable to ornament and perhaps “second” (play a harmony line). Each tune will be played on repeat until the person who called it decides that it has gone on for long enough, at which point the next musician will make their selection and the process starts again.

Shape-note singers gather to sing part-songs with Christian texts that are printed using shaped noteheads that correspond with solfège syllables (Figure 6.1). The singing is always unaccompanied, with starting pitches provided by a capable singer sitting in the front of the tenor (melody) section. These pitches are chosen to suit the group of singers and are often lower than notated. When a participant calls a song and steps into the center of the room to lead it, the “class” first sings on solfège before moving on to the words (Heider & Warner, 2010). While the texts express Christian beliefs, participants come from various faith (and non-faith) backgrounds. Many of the singers find meaning in the poetry without endorsing the specific beliefs represented therein, and they all value the music and the act of convening to sing (Clawson, 2011; Marini, 2003). Shape-note communities sing out of various tunebooks, some of which use the familiar seven-syllable solfège system and some an older four-syllable system. The most widely used tunebook is the Denson revision of *The Sacred Harp*, a four-shape collection first published in Georgia in 1844. The Cooper revision of *The Sacred Harp* is favored in parts of the US South and sometimes used in other regions (Cobb, 1978). Other nineteenth-century tunebooks with significant communities of adherents include *The Southern Harmony* (1835), *The Christian Harmony* (1866) and *The New Harp of Columbia* (1867), while recent compilations such as *An American Christmas Harp* (2009), *The Shenandoah Harmony* (2012), and *The Valley Pocket Harmonist* (2024) are also widely used. All the tunebooks that have been recently compiled or revised include new compositions in the distinctive “dispersed harmony” style established in the late eighteenth century and codified in collections like *The Sacred Harp* (Davis, 2016).

In both old-time and shape-note, there is a low bar for admission. If you are interested in participating, then you can navigate your entrance into the tradition. Turino (2008) notes that “participatory traditions usually include a

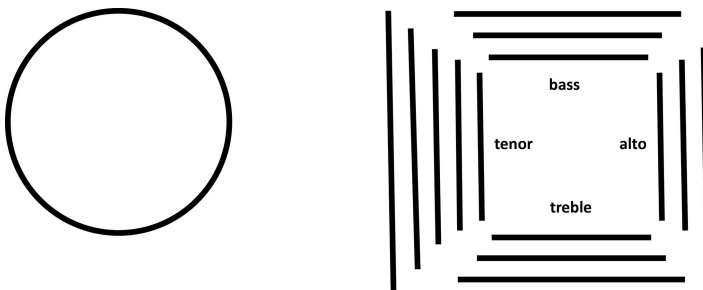


*Figure 6.1* Four-shape notation is standard across four-shape books. However, the additional three shapes employed in printing seven-shape books vary widely. The shapes represented here, known as the Aikin shapes, are the most used (Goff, 2002)

variety of roles demanding different degrees of specialization, so that people can join in at a level that offers the right balance of challenge and acquired skills” (p. 31). This is certainly true of the practices under consideration. In old-time, a novice can select an accessible instrument or take a simplified approach to playing. In shape-note, a newcomer can sit next to a strong singer and follow their lead. While all are invited to join, there are still rules. Certain instruments and repertoires are not welcome at an old-time jam; one should not arrive with a saxophone or electric guitar, and a request for a bluegrass tune or country song will elicit exasperation. Likewise, a new singer should not sit on the front bench at a large singing or attempt to lead a song beyond their ability, especially if it wastes time. In sum, everyone must respect community norms and the other musicians participating.

Just as these music-making practices are simple to adopt, they are impossible to master. An old-time musician always has more skills to develop, more instruments to learn and more tunes to acquire, while experienced shape-note singers tend to focus on memorizing songs and becoming familiar with additional books. Participants in both traditions value knowledge of the histories and people associated with the music they love, and a lifetime is not long enough to learn everything.

To understand how learning works in these communities, we must also consider how their approaches to participatory music-making differ. Old-time musicians and shape-note singers contrast sharply in their fundamental means of convening. Simply put, an “ideal” singing will include hundreds of participants making music together, while an “ideal” jam will include no more than a handful of players, with limited redundancy of instruments (Figure 6.2). This difference is the source of many others. One more person will usually make a singing better, but one more person can ruin a jam. While novice singers do not cause any harm at large singings, where their voices are



*Figure 6.2* Old-time players and shape-note singers both make music with all participants facing one another, relegating any auditors to the fringes. The fundamental structures, however, are quite different. Old-time players form a small circle with an ideal depth of one row, limiting the number of participants to about eight. Shape-note singers form a hollow square where each section can contain many rows, the tenor section (which sings the melody) always being the largest

lost in a sea of sound, a novice old-time player can spoil a high-level jam by playing out of time or in an incongruent style. As a result, while both communities welcome newcomers, the role of the newcomer in each looks quite different. A new singer can walk straight into the most prestigious singing and join in with experienced shape-note musicians on their first day. A new old-time player must find an open jam willing to play at their speed and support their development.

This contrast is easily observed at the major annual gatherings of each community. Most shape-note singers attend local “practice” or “regular” singings throughout the year, and travel to attend annual “all-day” singings and two-day conventions (Miller, 2008). Singers will travel worldwide to major conventions. No matter how many arrive, however, they always sing together in a single group—and the more, the better. Old-time musicians will also likely attend local weekly jams and travel to large annual festivals (Shearing, 2020; Woolf, 1990). At a festival, however, players sort themselves into hundreds of small jams based on skill levels and personal relationships. While novice players can usually find a place to play, they are not welcome to join any jam of their choosing. Indeed, most festival jams are closed to unknown musicians.

Why this difference? It can be put down to the relative difficulty of singing versus instrument playing, or the relative complexity of the musical textures, but I believe that it is primarily a matter of philosophy and professionalization. Shape-note singing, after all, can present enormous challenges. Some songs are complicated, and some communities prefer to sing at high speeds. It is trusted, however, that the strong singers will carry the weak, and the highly-accented pulse—reinforced by the time-beating gesture employed by many singers—can keep a large group together. Inclusion is a central value for shape-note singers, and, significantly, all singings are free (although a voluntary collection is taken) and open to everyone. Indeed, when a rare invitation-only singing is planned, it invariably creates conflict and bad feeling in the community. Old-time could function along these same lines, but it does not. Old-time also has a regular pulse, and the presence of a bass player can make it audible even in a large group. It is practical to host an enormous jam, and they are a regular feature at music camps. As a rule, however, players prefer a more intimate circle in which they can all hear every musician. There is also a more pronounced role for refined style and ornamentation, which is only audible in small groups.

Whether it stems from or causes these differences, the relative professionalization of these two practices also shapes each community. There is no equivalent sense of “amateurism” between old-time and shape-note musicians; for while it is possible to be a professional old-time musician, it is not possible to be a professional shape-note singer. I am defining “professional” here in terms of opportunities to earn money as a teacher, performer or recording artist. There is essentially no market for shape-note performances or recordings and a limited need for skilled teachers, who usually provide their services for no pay. Shape-note singers prefer their raucous sound over that of a modern choir of trained voices, and they typically deride stage presentations

of what should be a participatory practice. In old-time, on the other hand, it is common to get paid at least occasionally, and some musicians make a living as full-time professionals. Old-time musicians find work playing for contra and square dances, putting on stage shows (usually with more singing than is heard in most jams) and teaching in private and institutional settings. Regular contests both reward and standardize specific techniques and repertoires, determining for the community what constitutes “good” playing and launching professional careers for the “best” performers (Goertzen, 1996). Significantly, earning an undergraduate degree in old-time music is possible, but not in shape-note singing (Goad, 2015). This both reflects and determines the availability of professional opportunities within each practice.

Even the finest professional old-time musicians, however, remain “amateurs” to some extent. All will dedicate time and money to their participation simply because they love the music and community, and they do so without any expectation of benefiting their finances or careers. This phenomenon is most visible at music festivals, where musicians of all abilities gather to play music and build community. At the largest of these events, the Appalachian String Band Music Festival in Clifftop, WV, everyone pays the same admission and camping fees, and just a few yards can separate a world-class jam from a group of beginners. While some professionals might occupy formal roles as clinicians or contest judges, most come for the same reason as everyone else: to make music with friends. The best players have an opportunity to win money in the fiddle, banjo and band contests, but even those who place near the top are not likely to recuperate the cost of the trip. Competing is often an afterthought. As award-winning fiddler Jason Cade recently wrote on social media, “Clifftop is all about the magic that happens down in the woods, far from the stage” (Hog-eyed Man, 2025, August 10). While professionals like Cade can win money and raise their profiles at these events, that is not why they come.

The porous boundary between “professional” and “amateur” has also been documented in other participatory music-making communities. In his study of Northern Week at the Ashokan Center, for example, Dabczynski (1994) noted with surprise that musicians who were on the teaching staff one year might return as (paying) students the next. Membership in the Ashokan community was more important than money or status. Many professional old-time musicians attend workshops or enroll in summer camps for the purpose of learning from tradition bearers or making social connections. “Professional,” then, is a designation more meaningfully applied to roles or activities than to musicians.

### **Formal Teaching and Learning**

The old-time and shape-note communities are remarkably different when it comes to formal teaching and learning. While shape-note singers do not tend to pursue private vocal instruction, old-time musicians often take lessons in person or online. There is a thriving market for pre-recorded lessons in old-time music (e.g., through the website Peghead Nation), and many

professionals post instructional videos to YouTube or make such materials available by subscription through Patreon. Pre-recorded lessons are typically focused on repertoire but might also detail foundational skills for beginners or elements of style for advanced players. While there are quite a few YouTube videos concerning the *history* of shape-note singing, there are very few dedicated to the acquisition of singing skills, and those few are comparatively unsophisticated. Rather, new singers are usually encouraged to attend in-person events and learn by doing.

Adult music camps play an important role in both the old-time and shape-note scenes. However, the format and character of these camps are quite different. To begin with, old-time music camps are innumerable. At the beginning of this chapter, I mentioned the half-dozen with which I have experience, but there are many more across the United States and elsewhere. Some are associated with folk schools, some with universities and some with independent organizations. In contrast, there are precisely four shape-note camps: Camp Fasola in Alabama, Camp Doremi in North Carolina, Camp Fasola Europe in Poland (on hiatus since the pandemic) and Camp Doremi Europe in the United Kingdom.<sup>2</sup> They are modeled on the singing school tradition, pioneered by singing masters in the eighteenth century. Itinerant singing teachers, first in New England and later in the South, would hold one- or two-week singing schools in rural churches to teach the local populace to read music. They earned money from tuition fees and the sale of books (Cobb, 1978). At shape-note camps, instructors review the “rudiments” of music-reading and leading as detailed in the pedagogical essay that traditionally appears at the front of each tunebook, exhibiting keen awareness that they are enacting a pedagogical tradition. On the other hand, instructors at old-time camps have no such tradition with which to wrestle, since the tunes and techniques they teach were historically transmitted via informal oral/aural processes (Blanton et al., 2014; Morgan-Ellis, 2019).

While a week at an old-time camp will cost between USD 800 and 2000, a week at a shape-note camp costs between USD 250 and 350. This has to do with the instructional component. The teachers at old-time camps are professional musicians who make a living from their teaching and performing, so they must be compensated sufficiently to entice them to give up a week of their time. They typically lead classes for three hours a day and perform in evening showcases. Students are likely to enroll in a particular camp because certain professional musicians will be there, and they register for specific classes appropriate to their instrument and level. On the other hand, the teachers at shape-note camps are non-professionals (although still experts) who might teach three hours or less during the entire week. They are simultaneously students and participants in all the camp activities. They do not perform and are paid only a nominal sum, and students do not register in advance for classes, which are typically offered as independent hour-long units within a diversified schedule.

Old-time and shape-note camps attract quite different populations of musicians. With their emphasis on structured learning, old-time camps tend to

enroll beginning and intermediate students who seek to acquire skills on their instruments. Advanced players are more likely to attend festivals, where they can secure the social benefits of a week amidst their old-time community without the steep cost. Shape-note camps, on the other hand, enroll more experienced singers than beginners. Singers come from around the world to spend time with friends and build new relationships. In a rudiments class, it is common for half of those present to match the instructor in knowledge and skill. However, everyone participates as a show of support for the community and its newcomers and as a means of ritual reenactment of tradition. There is a sense that the rudiments can never be mastered and are always worth revisiting. The main event at shape-note camp is the evening singing, at which students (and it is worth reiterating that most “students” are highly experienced singers) assume the full range of leadership roles. At old-time camps, in contrast, evenings are reserved for instructor performances. After the concert, musicians distribute themselves between instructor-led slow jams and smaller, student-led pickup jams that are typically open to all, while formal classes remain the week’s focus.

Formal learning related to both practices also takes place at folklife events, including music festivals and fiddle contests. Workshops in old-time typically involve teaching a tune or technique, while shape-note workshops constitute an introduction to the mechanics of shape-note singing and might culminate in the performance of a few songs. Weekly or monthly educational opportunities are also available anywhere these practices thrive. Regular singings often begin with a brief introduction for newcomers, while a local folk music organization might host old-time workshops throughout the year. In terms of objective, however, these periodic educational offerings differ in one key respect: old-time workshops typically serve current community members who want to increase their skills, whereas shape-note workshops are always intended to entice newcomers to start attending regular or annual singings. If current singers attend such a workshop, which is common, they do so to support the evangelizing effort.

Why these differences? One has to do with the relative difficulty of singing versus playing a string instrument. You do not need lessons to sing hymns, but you might if you want to learn the fiddle as an adult. Another has to do with the potential for increasing difficulty. Once you can read music, you can sing any song in a shape-note book. Singers challenge themselves by learning to sing new parts or lead new songs, but there is no need for additional training. Conversely, a fiddler might want to tackle high-level techniques, such as shifting or double-stopping, acquire nuanced regional styles or develop alternative approaches to bowing, all of which can be facilitated by a teacher. Players might be motivated to increase their skill to gain access to paid work or elite jams, for there is an identifiable hierarchy in old-time music and players must invest time and effort to climb the ladder. While it is also possible to identify hierarchies in shape-note, no effort is required to gain access to the most “elite” music-making experiences. One simply shows up.

### **Informal Teaching and Learning**

While formal teaching and learning processes differ sharply between old-time and shape-note, informal processes are similar. Here, I will center my remarks on the two primary sites for informal learning in these communities: the open old-time jam and the regular singing. Both occur at a fixed location weekly, biweekly or monthly. Both are open to anyone who wants to participate. Both are likely to be organized and hosted by a local musician, but that person does not assume a position of authority. They do not decide how the music-making unfolds, and while they are likely to possess expertise, they are not regarded as a “teacher.” Rather, they are responsible for ensuring that all participants feel welcome and have a good time (and perhaps also for setting up and clearing the space).

At both jams and singings, it is typical for each participant to select a tune or song. At a jam, the player will be invited to start the tune at their tempo or ask someone else to start it. It is common for fiddle players to take responsibility for starting most of the tunes, but banjo or mandolin can also fill this role. My local jam not only attracts advanced players who want to play challenging and unusual tunes but also welcomes newcomers who regularly call familiar tunes, and we are happy to play at a slower tempo for someone who is learning. It would be rude to complain or sneer at a call; everyone plays every tune, whether they like it or not. At a singing, the person who calls the song is invited to stand in the center of the square, start the song and beat time throughout. The leader also indicates which verses they want to sing. While at an annual singing each participant is called to lead by an arranger, who considers the order carefully, at a regular singing it is typical simply to go around the room.

Amateurs in the old-time and shape-note communities assume ownership of their practices. This ownership is distributed with remarkable egalitarianism between all participants, with minimal regard for experience and ability. Novices are immediately given authority over communal music-making. In an old-time jam, a newcomer will be invited to call a tune, and to start it if they want to. If they do not know any tunes, it might be suggested that they choose something from a list in order to participate fully. At a singing, a first-timer will be encouraged to call a song and to enter the square and lead it, perhaps with assistance. Leading can seem intimidating, but the row of singers seated before the leader is expected to help by beating time correctly (Morgan-Ellis et al., 2025). A more experienced singer might also join the newcomer in the square. At both jams and singings, all participants are equal when choosing repertoire and leading performances.

Leadership, in general, is broadly distributed throughout the community. While a scheduled local jam might be organized by one person and supported by a few anchor players, it is not likely to be dominated by an authority figure, and any teaching that takes place is strictly informal and peer-to-peer. It is common for participants to share knowledge about the music they are playing.

A player might remark on the origins of a tune (“this version comes from Marcus Martin of North Carolina”), suggest a recording for later listening and practice (“there’s a great version on the Rocky Creek Ramblers album”), reflect on their learning or playing strategy (“it helps to notice that this tune doesn’t use the second finger on the D or A strings”) or pass on information learned in a formal setting (“when Rachel Eddy taught this tune at Mars Hill she bowed it like this”). Players often engage with jamming as if it *were* a formal learning experience. They take notes on tunes and sources, make recordings for later study and set goals for learning new tunes as a community. While participants will not give unsolicited advice to one another, jams are a site where newcomers might ask for technical guidance from advanced players. Large open jams are also a good place to try new instruments or experiment with new playing styles.

Regular singings operate according to the same dynamic, but the details differ. Recordings play a smaller role in learning because the music is notated and the repertoire is fixed; if a participant wants to refer to a recording in their practice, it is easy to find one online, and the notes of songs do not vary from region to region. Singers will also share knowledge between songs, although only at an informal gathering—it is rude to make remarks at an annual singing, unless one has a *very* good reason. At a regular singing, however, participants might recall prominent community members (“this was Hugh McGraw’s favorite song”), comment on regional differences in performance (“they take this fast in Alabama”), remark on shape-note history (“Billings was the first American composer to publish a collection containing only his music”) or connect a song with the larger singing community (“this was the most-called song last year”). It is also acceptable to give advice on leading to newcomers, especially concerning the norms for beating time and methods of indicating when repeats are to be taken or ignored. It is not appropriate, however, to comment on a participant’s singing voice or promote any particular vocal technique (Morgan-Ellis, 2024). All voices are welcome as they are. If a singer wants to improve their accuracy, they can choose to sit next to someone strong, but no one will criticize their missed notes.

The enormous value that old-time and shape-note musicians place on these periodic, informal gatherings was thrown into stark relief during the COVID-19 pandemic. Within weeks of lockdown being imposed, participatory musicians gathered online to continue jamming and singing (Morgan-Ellis, 2022b). While they used various platforms, Zoom emerged as the most common in both communities, although it was used in different ways. Old-time jams were most often anchored by a pair of skilled musicians who invited participants to play along on mute, although “round robin” jams, in which participants took turns unmuting to lead tunes, were not uncommon (Morgan-Ellis, 2022a). Shape-note singers often sang along with a recording broadcast by a DJ, but also employed a “live leading” approach in which individual participants would unmute to sing the tenor part of a song (Morgan-Ellis, 2021). Across these activities, amateur musicians took advantage of opportunities to

develop new skills. Old-time players learned new instruments and shape-note singers practiced keying their songs and holding the melody as a solo singer—both advanced skills unfamiliar to many participants. It was evident that amateurs in both communities were highly motivated to grow as musicians despite unfavorable circumstances.

Many old-time players and shape-note singers learn solely in these informal settings, and it is possible to acquire extensive expertise simply by showing up at participatory music-making events, developing skills through communal practice and absorbing knowledge from peers. The joy of participatory music-making and the absence of judgment inspire many amateur musicians to commit deeply to their practice and quickly develop an expansive knowledge base.

### **Conclusion: What Can We Learn from Old-Time and Shape-Note Amateurs?**

Many practices that support productive learning among amateurs in the old-time and shape-note communities can be imported into other teaching and learning contexts. Here, I will enumerate what I see as the key attributes of old-time and shape-note music learning. I hope educators will see these characteristics in their learning communities or be inspired to cultivate them.

- 1 *Emphasis on social connection:* While music-making is the reason for entering one of these communities, participants greatly value the social dimension and often ultimately care even more about the people than the music. Both old-time jams and shape-note singings include time for socializing. In a jam, informal chatting often occurs between tunes, while establishing friendships is a major feature of festivals and camps. At an all-day singing, it would be quite inappropriate to chat between songs, but a full hour for socializing is always built into the schedule at noon, and breaks between sessions also facilitate the creation and renewal of relationships. Singers particularly focus on community with the memorial lesson, a regular feature of annual singings. In this lesson, which is one of the most important parts of the tradition, singers remember those who are infirm or deceased (Miller, 2010). How can community building and relationship development be similarly centered in other amateur music-making contexts?
- 2 *Distributed leadership:* In old-time jams and shape-note singings, a central authority figure is never responsible for guiding the experience. Instead, every participant can select repertoire and set their desired tempo. The role of a facilitator is not to make decisions but to ensure that everyone can participate fully and has an enjoyable time. Often, participants must challenge themselves to assume their share of leadership responsibility. It takes skill to kick off a fiddle tune or lead a shape-note song. Meeting these challenges is rewarding, and the community supports developing musicians. How can participants at all skill levels take ownership of other amateur music-making activities?

- 3 *Full membership from day one:* The leadership roles described above are available to all participants from the very beginning. If a new musician shows up at a jam or singing, they are immediately encouraged to contribute by selecting repertoire, dictating their preferred tempo and otherwise leading the music-making as appropriate to their skill level. How can newcomers to other amateur music-making communities be granted authority?
- 4 *Adherence to tradition:* The fact that community norms are clearly established and universally respected in old-time and shape-note serves many ends. Ritual aspects of music-making enhance community and shared experience (Phelan, 2008). Established patterns of behavior and expectation make it possible for musicians to join a jam or singing anywhere in the world and immediately feel at home. Adherence to tradition therefore increases access and amplifies meaning. While it might seem that old-time and shape-note have an advantage when it comes to “tradition,” the rituals that characterize both practices are quite recent. The current approach to rotating leaders at a singing emerged in the mid-twentieth century, while jams were an invention of folk revivalists several decades later. Any music-making practice can develop traditions that quickly accrue meaning. How can ritual enhance learning in other communities?
- 5 *Inclusivity with rules:* All are welcome to participate in old-time and shape-note music-making, but they must respect the identity and practices of the community. You cannot bring a trombone to an old-time jam or suggest that participants improvise solos over a 12-bar blues. Elaborate choral conducting technique and operatic singing evoke grimaces at a shape-note gathering, and while it is fine to bring a new composition in the shape-note style (and printed in shapes), it is not acceptable to bring a round-note gospel song. Participants can establish a concrete community identity because of these boundaries around the respective practices. It *means* something to be involved in old-time or shape-note, and musicians know what to expect. How can boundaries be established in other participatory practices while maintaining as open a welcome as possible?
- 6 *Valuing of historical knowledge:* Old-time and shape-note musicians know that they are carrying on a tradition with deep roots and are eager to learn as much as they can about their practices. In old-time, this usually means knowledge of historical musicians, familiarity with famous bands and recordings and awareness of important historical sites. In shape-note, this means knowledge of composers and poets, familiarity with tunebook lines and revisions and awareness of prominent singing families and conventions. While other practices might value different types of knowledge, there is always much to know about how we got here and why we make music the way we do. How can serious engagement with historical knowledge increase the investment of amateur musicians in various practices?
- 7 *Opportunities for creative contribution:* While both of these practices value history and tradition, they also welcome new music in the appropriate style. Fiddle and banjo tunes written by active old-time musicians regularly enter

the repertoire, and every newly compiled or revised shape-note tunebook includes new compositions by singers (Hammond et al., 2025). Musicians in these communities do not just reenact the past. They actively shape the future. How can participants in other amateur music-making communities leave their creative mark?

The seven attributes considered here do not pertain to teaching technique. Indeed, the first three require that any “teachers” concede authority to amateur participants, while all seven are most productive when community members take the lead. Pedagogical practices in participatory communities soften the division between professionals and amateurs—when those roles exist at all—and invite everyone to contribute to the collective learning experience. The role of anyone who wishes to promote learning in these contexts is to inspire investment and ownership among participants—to step aside and allow amateur musicians to build knowledge and structure music-making for themselves.

## Notes

- 1 The term “shape-note” is not entirely satisfactory. While the musicians I am describing often refer to themselves as “shape-note singers,” there are other communities of singers who also use shaped notation but do not adhere to the practices outlined here. These include adherents to the Church of Christ, “red-back” hymnal singers, Southern Gospel convention singers and Mennonites who sing out of *Harmonia Sacra* (1832).
- 2 One additional camp, the Sacred Harp Singing Camp, is only open to singers who profess specific Christian beliefs, and therefore lies outside the purview of this analysis.

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