

# Learning From Collective Memory: Stories From a Singing Class for Returning Adult Learners

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**Abstract:** The learning sciences have seen an increased focus on attempts to understand learning as constantly in-process and situated across multiple sites. In this study, we take up multisitedness both spatially and temporally, as memories evoke both *other places* and *past times*. Applying this viewpoint to a community of diaspora learners, we look to understand the ways in which collective memories negotiate learning in sites dislocated from the cultural and geographical center of the practice. We present the case of an advanced Carnatic singing class in an East Coast North American city. The participants of interest in the class are learners returning to the practice after a break, having learnt the art form growing up in South or Southeast Asia. Adopting a multisited lens on videos of class sessions and participant interviews, we explore how collective memory realizes specific forms of the practice and hybridizes it in the process.

## Introduction

In recent years, the learning sciences have seen an increased focus on attempts to understand learning as in-process and situated across multiple sites (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Ma & Munter, 2014; Rogoff, 2003; Vossoughi & Gutiérrez, 2014). This approach has been viewed as essential to understanding learning in marginalized groups (Leander, 2001; Rogoff, 2014; Vossoughi & Gutiérrez, 2014). Research into the practices of cultural communities is often situated in a single spatial context over the course of a continuous period of time (e.g. Lave & Wenger, 1991; Rogoff, 2003). The affordances of this approach to the field have substantiated the idea that learning is relational, emergent, and agentic. The goal of this paper is to make further contributions to this field, by looking specifically at the learning-related practices of a diaspora group of singers engaged in a traditional practice at a site dislocated from the cultural and geographical center of the practice.

## A cultural, spatial, and temporal setting of the practice

Carnatic Music is a several centuries old art form, dating to the early 12th century. It is one of two (now) classical music forms in India, the other being Hindustani Music. The principles of both center *swara* (or the notes), *talam* (the rhythm), and *ragam* (a specific melody). Before the colonization of India by the British, the way the practice was reproduced was through a teacher-student tradition known as *gurukulavasam*, which Amanda Weidman (2008) describes as “... a method of teaching and learning in which the shishya, or disciple, lives with the guru, learning by a process of slow absorption and serving the guru as a member of his household” (p. 226). An important feature of this approach is a tradition of listening, in which one listens to the guru embody the music. There was no separation of teacher and performer within this tradition; being a part of the life of the guru is how you learn.

Colonialism brought particular ideas of music and teaching from the west and institutionalized the teaching and learning of the music. Carnatic music was separated from other forms and deemed classical; *gurukulavasam* was shunned because of its non-scalable nature; the practice was co-opted by the upper-castes in order to regiment its teaching. Through these processes, *gurukulavasam* was dismissed and replaced with a much western pedagogical approach. It is structured very similarly to modern schooling; your teacher sings, you repeat. Thus, the tradition of listening continues, but is transformed so that listening and signing are more explicitly separated.

Throughout this training, students are asked to improvise within *ragams*. The word for improvisation, *manodharmam*, translates roughly as a disciplined expression of the soul. It is through improvising that students find a voice within the genre that distinguishes them from other performers. The modern regimenting of teaching is notable for its rigidity, especially when contrasted with the centrality of improvisation in the practice.

A newer trend in the 21st century has seen South Asian diaspora learners returning to the practice as a hobby in places outside India. I seek to examine the practice of these returning learners as distributed across space (in India and in the US) as well as time (in childhood and in adulthood). My research question is framed by this context: In what ways do the collective memories of the practice of Carnatic music hybridize the current learning of the art form?

## Theoretical framework

The theoretical lens blends scholarship from perspectives that account for learning within a community of practice, the spatial and temporal multisitedness of learners, and on the nature of migrant and diaspora global communities. From a social practice theory perspective, we adopt Lave & Wenger's (1991) framework for viewing learning as legitimate peripheral participation in a community of practice. Participants in this study are adults returning to singing within the classical tradition and therefore framed as legitimate peripheral participants in the practice. Svetlana Boym (2001) argues that diaspora memories serve as a practical resource for relocating oneself in a new context. To account for this dispersed location of memory, we adopt a multi-sited approach (Vossoughi & Gutiérrez, 2014) in this study, through which I consider learners' activity as constituted by engagement across a variety of spatial and temporal "sites". Finally, the paper adopts Leander's (2001) view of learning as produced by a lamination of experiences distributed across space-times. Blending these lenses together, we consider practice and membership into the community as hybridized by the lamination of several years' memories of learning.

## Data, methods, preliminary findings, and future explorations

The study reported in this paper is being conducted at IMS, a performing arts institution in a major East Coast city in North America. 10-12 weekly hour-long class sessions were audio and video recorded; filed notes were taken. Participants include Mita, the teacher, and 2-6 South Asian diaspora adult students. All students learned the art form for 10-15 years as children outside the United States. I, too, am a student in the class.

Two vignettes illustrate the manifestation of memory in the learning at IMS. The first vignette is an exchange between students Hema and Neha (all names are pseudonyms) that takes place after Mita proposes a new song. As Mita begins to sing the *ragam*, Hema says: "I remember this *ragam*...not the song but the *ragam*." Hema then hums a song from memory, in which they recall a familiar tune they both happened to have learned as children. Neha then starts to sing along: "I learned this too!" Excited, Hema asks her: "Yes! Did you learn it in Hyderabad?" This vignette demonstrates how students' memories of having learned a concept or *ragam* in a different place and at a different time is projected into the classroom environment of IMS. Hema and Neha were able to connect with each other through a memory tied to their individual pasts and in a specific place, Hyderabad. As in Ma & Munter's (2014) study of skaters making edits to the physical space to generate learning opportunities for themselves, participants in the singing class invoked memories of past learning as a means of editing the course of their learning and building community in the present moment.

The second vignette gets into Mita's memories. Mita learned in a Chennai, another South Indian city. Mita did not learn in the gurukulavasam tradition, but her learning was still far more immersive than any of her students'. Mita's practice at IMS regularly includes references to having learnt from her guru, or the contexts in which she sang *ragams*: "This is an exercise my guru taught me; it helped me really get into the mood of the *ragam*, especially in third speed." Her teaching is not merely technical, it is also personal: "I would sing *keeravani* at the end of a tough day or tough week; it helps you sing through things you cannot talk about" Thus, quite like her students' learning, Mita's pedagogy is also emergent, building from memories of past practice.

Among frames that are emerging from a deeper analysis of the data, two are salient: first, is the need to complicate the idea of memory and emphasize generational memory as the medium through which musical knowledge is embodied. A second thread seeks to understand how caste-based power is implicated in South Asian cultural reproduction.

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