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“The Lines Between Us”: Exploring the Identity of the Community Musician Through an Arts Practice Research Approach

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Abstract

This artist statement and video offer an extract from an auto-ethnographic performance of my learning journey as a doctoral student, titled *The Lines Between Us*. The video provides an example of how I used arts practice research in my doctoral thesis to bring together multiple aspects of my identity: those of singer, songwriter, community musician, and researcher. I utilised my skills as a singer and songwriter in order to better understand my practice as a community musician, to communicate my learning process to an audience, and to become a more empathetic and effective facilitator working in a field that is deeply connected to social justice. Since the video presented is a sample from a much larger work, this artist statement provides context for the reader / audience and guidance on how to engage meaningfully with the performance. In particular, this statement will consider the following: What is community music? Why arts practice research? What did this performance seek to achieve? The audience is invited to experience this performance and to further discuss its efficacy by engaging with a series of points to consider.

Keywords: *community music, autoethnography*

Video submission

["The Lines Between Us"](#)

Introduction

I am a singer, songwriter, community musician and researcher; consequently, my professional identity has multiple layers. This video provides an example of how I used arts practice research in my doctoral thesis to bring together these multiple aspects of identity. I utilised my skills as a singer and songwriter in order to better understand my practice as a community musician, to communicate my learning process to an audience, and to become a more empathetic and effective facilitator working in a field that is deeply connected to social justice. Since the video presented is a sample from a much larger work, this artist statement provides context for the reader / audience and guidance on how to engage meaningfully with the performance. In particular, this statement will consider the following:

- What is community music?
- Why arts practice research?
- What did this performance seek to achieve?
- What further implications does this research have?

What Is Community Music?

Community music is a fluid and often contested term (Higgins & Willingham, 2017) and can be understood from a variety of perspectives. My use of the term is influenced by the work of Higgins (2012) who defines community musicians as follows:

skilled music leaders, who facilitate group music-making in environments that do not have set curricula. Here, there is an emphasis on people, participation, context, equality of opportunity, and diversity. Musicians who work this way seek to create relevant and accessible music-making experiences that integrate activities such as listening, improvising, musical intervention, and performing. (p. 5)

Community music rests on the belief that everyone has the potential to contribute to a creative practice and on the conviction that everyone has the right to access opportunities to participate in music-making. With this in mind, community musicians are defined as much by our social and cultural intentions and beliefs as we are recognized by the content of our work. Sound Sense (the UK based community music organization) defines the integrity of a community music initiative, “there has to be active music creation, equality is central and the music making itself somehow tells the tale of the community that’s making it. This is about what the music does as well as what the music is” (Deane, in Harrison & Mullen, 2013, p. 41).

Therefore, if my doctoral research performance were to be successful, I would have to utilize my skills as singer songwriter to demonstrate my practice as a community musician and to better understand my commitment to “cultural democracy” (Higgins, 2012, p. 7).

Why Arts Practice Research?

Arts practice research can be challenging and deeply rewarding, pushing the artist to articulate how their art is a site of ‘knowledge production’ and, in doing so, bring artistic and academic identities together. This is a difficult line to navigate, meaning that this approach to research is still treated with some suspicion (Nelson, 2013). However, many artist-researchers have successfully established the validity of this approach, using art forms such as poetry, dance, and story as a means for producing and communicating research (Bagley & Cancienne, 2001; Quaye, 2007; Spry 2001). Arts practice research creates space for us to *feel* as well as to verbalise knowledge. As Ronald Pelias (2004) argues, “there is more than making a case, more than establishing criteria and authority, more than what is typically offered up. That ‘more’ has to with the heart, the body, the spirit” (p. 1).

As a community musician, I was seeking methods that allowed me to interrogate my work with children and effectively communicate and discuss the resulting knowledge with an audience of my peers. By ‘singing the data’ (Bagley & Cancienne, 2001) I sought to invite the audience into the aesthetic and emotive experience of the workshop, before asking them to consider its wider social impact.

What Did This Performance Seek to Achieve?

The video provided is one small extract from a larger auto-ethnographic performance mapping the learning process of the PhD. The overall performance maps my learning journey as a doctoral student in which I was exploring the role of the community musician in a process of social regeneration, focusing on a specific long-term community music project with children. From 2008 – 2016, I collaborated with the Irish Chamber Orchestra to develop a programme for children in two primary schools, titled *Sing*

Out with Strings. The programme works with 300 primary school children on an annual basis. As part of *Sing Out with Strings*, every child is provided with a weekly group workshop in singing and songwriting, two weekly workshops in instrumental tuition, optional after-school orchestra and choir, and multiple performance opportunities. The specific workshop I refer to in this video took place during my regular work as a community musician in this context.

I began this research endeavour by looking for proof of the changes that community music brought about in others – I ended by acknowledging the changes that our musical community had brought about in me. This shift in perspective was made possible by the insights achieved through the reflexive nature of arts practice research.

When my research began, I had a very clear sense of my identity as a community musician. It was separate and distinct from my role as a singer, songwriter, and performer. However, through engaging in the level of reflexive work that arts practice research requires, I began to realize that my work as a performing artist was central to the progress of my community music work and vice versa – rather than being mutually exclusive, they were in fact complementary, overlapping, and feeding into one another. The lines I had previously drawn to divide my personal and professional / facilitator and performer selves began to blur and fade. Instead, I began to explore lines that connected these selves and reached out to others, crossing back and forth, and forming an elaborate weave. The purpose of this process was not to disclose this new awareness to the community of children I work with. Instead, I hoped to develop a heightened level of reflexivity and a greater understanding of how my ‘private self’ impacted on how I conducted my community music work and research. Emotions, experiences, and lessons learned in my life outside of school began to walk into the workshop with me. Likewise, lessons learned with and from the children I work with were carried back out into my own compositional work and life beyond school. As Greene (1995) argues, “through preferring experiences of the arts or storytelling, teachers can keep seeking connection points among their personal histories and the histories of those they seek to teach” (p. 42).

As I have acknowledged in previous work (Turner 2016), the aims I had at the beginning of this research process gradually and significantly changed over time. When I began, I was searching for:

...evidence of improved school attendance, higher self-esteem, better concentration, greater social and academic engagement - proof that making music together added to children’s personal and social development and therefore contributed to a ‘regenerating’ community. That was, after all, the “grand narrative” I was operating within; the “professional knowledge landscape” where I facilitated the creative work of others, leading to an experience of gradual, transformative change (Clandinin & Connolly, 2000, p. 57). (Turner, 2016, p. 210)

Over time, I gradually relinquished the need for this ‘proof’. Through the use of narrative inquiry and the tools of autoethnography, including the exploration of personal memory and experience as data, I began “to interrogate that knowledge landscape, to examine the ‘grand narrative’ of my identity as a community musician with fresh eyes.” (Turner, 2016, p. 210).

What Further Implications Does This Research Have On My Practice?

I intended this performance as a way to share, and to understand who I am, who I have been, and who I am becoming (Huber et al., 2013, p. 214). I was actively seeking various entries into the storied experience, approaching the development of this research as “an acknowledgement of blurred, tentative, and multiple ways of knowing” (Pinnegar & Daynes, in Huber et al., 2013, p. 217). With that in mind, the implications of this research on my own practice were deep, wide, and varied. Perhaps most pertinent to this performance extract is my understanding of **reflexivity**. Reflexive practice is central to the people-centred work of a community musician. Etherington (2004) describes this as:

an ability to notice our responses to the world around us, other people and events, and to use that knowledge to inform our actions, communications and understandings. To be reflexive we need to *aware* of our personal responses and to be able to make choices and how to use them. We also need to be aware of the personal, social and cultural contexts in which we live and work and to understand how these impact on the ways we interpret our world. (p. 19)

When I engaged in this auto-ethnographic interrogation of my community music work and identity, I was pushed to engage in a more nuanced and honest level of reflexivity. This is perhaps best understood through Sparkes (2002) description of a successful auto-ethnography:

Auto-ethnographies can encourage acts of witnessing, empathy and connection that extend beyond the self of the author and thereby contribute to sociological understanding in ways that, among others, are self-knowing, self-respectful, self-sacrificing and self-luminous. (p. 223)

By exploring my community music work through story, song and personal memory I engaged in this process of witnessing, and sought out connections between experiences within and without the workshop that might not otherwise have been discovered. In short, I am more aware, alert and 'awake' in my community music practice as a direct outcome of this auto-ethnographic process.

The Performance

The extract provided here features two pieces of music from my auto-ethnographic performance. The first song presents a moment of 'zooming in' on a specific memory from a community music workshop (Clandinin & Connolly, 2000). The second song is an original composition written to provide a moment of 'zooming out,' considering the impact of this workshop memory within a wider social and political context. In order to let the musical performance speak for itself, no further explanation of the songs is given here. Rather, the reader is encouraged to move from this text to the performance.

Points to Consider

After watching the performance extract, readers are encouraged to consider the following points and engage in further discussion. These can be explored through dialogue with colleagues, or as part of a personal reflexive practice, such as a professional journal.

- How would you describe your role and the context you work in to others *outside* your field?
- Cast a critical eye on this description. What are the multiple selves contained within your role?
- What (if any) are the connecting points between these multiple selves?
- How might you use your artistic /performative practice to explore your professional identity?

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