# Community Music: An Arts Practice Research Perspective

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## Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate the applicability of arts practice research within a community music context, drawing on my ongoing PhD Arts Practice research project, 'Lived Experiences in Community Arts in Ireland: an autoethnographic and ethnographic, practice-based study'. As this work demonstrates, practice-based research is highly relevant to community music contexts, although it has not been applied in a widespread way to date. Outputs from the PhD include performative elements as evidence of the research inquiry. The focus of reflection in this paper is on the development, analysis and performance of a musical ethnodrama entitled 'Connected'. This collaborative writing and performance project, with secondary school students aged 13-18 years, provided the data for part of my research. The performance took place at the Irish World Academy of Music and Dance, University of Limerick, in 2016.

Keywords: participatory arts   lived experiences   ethnodrama   community music  narrative inquiry

## Introduction

This paper focuses on the potential of Practice as Research, or PaR (Nelson, 2013), to be used as a research method within community music contexts, although this has not been applied in a widespread way to date. The focus is specifically on the experiences of musical theatre in a secondary school context, and on the methods used to capture and represent those experiences in a musical ethnodrama entitled 'Connected'. The broader aim of my PhD research is to foster a greater understanding of lived experiences of active musical engagement through the lens of my practice as a singer, songwriter, musician and community musician. Engaging in an arts practice mode of inquiry means placing my practice at the heart of the research process (Smith & Dean, 2009). I am addressing my research questions, which are outlined below, using a Practice as Research methodology (Nelson, 2013). This includes a

multi-mode approach to documentation of practice that includes autoethnography, ethnography and narrative inquiry. My central research questions throughout this project focus on aspects of personal experience in participatory arts projects in educational and community settings in Ireland.

My central research questions are:

- How do people experience community arts (music, drama, musical theatre) and associated visual arts in educational and community settings?

- What motivates people to actively engage with the arts?

- What are the intrinsic impacts (positive and negative) of participation, from both individual and community perspectives?

- How does the language of these lived arts experiences compare to the language in official policy literature on arts participation?

- Could this research inform arts and cultural policies in the future?

In this paper, I argue that arts practice research is highly relevant to community music contexts as this qualitative approach has the capacity to capture and communicate valuable knowledge on individual and collective arts experiences. Community music practice is directly concerned with active music-making, creativity and lifelong learning (Veblen et al., 2013, pp. 2-4), with emphasis on the value of the social interactions that take place within group contexts (Higgins, 2012; Willingham & Higgins, 2017). Arts practice research facilitates a deep and reflexive form of inquiry. The research method allows researchers to embed their own experiences of lifelong engagement in music as part of a broader investigation of the value of participation in the context of people's lives.

My combined experience as a practitioner, participant and researcher within community music contexts led to the adoption of a PaR framework within community music. From an early age, I had experiential knowledge of the role of community-based music initiatives in developing musical skills, a sense of community engagement, and feelings of individual and collective satisfaction and achievement. Building on this personal experience as a participant, my research now involves an in-depth exploration of self-experience interwoven with the reflections, stories and experiences of individuals and communities with whom I interact within my professional community music practice. As a practitioner and participant, I am keenly aware of the challenges involved in musical participation and sustaining musical groups, and this also informs my research engagement with the field. My professional experience in the performing arts includes singing, choral leadership, performance, creative writing, production and management. My research engages this extensive professional experience, and addresses a critical gap in existing literature and methodologies around evaluation and measurement in arts participation, particularly in terms of the limited availability of qualitative studies in Ireland and internationally (see Department of Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht, 2015; Belfiore & Bennett, 2010; Crossick & Kaszynska, 2016). In Ireland, as in the UK, there is a significant gap in research concerning the amateur and voluntary arts sector (Kenny, 2016; Finnegan, 1989; Pitts, 2016; Bonshor, 2018) and extra-curricular musical activity in schools (Kenny, 2016; Kenny, 2017; Finnegan, 1989; Pitts, 2007).

The project also facilitated a critical exploration of narrative inquiry as method, and ethnodrama as a representational form for the data or 'field texts' (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Clandinin, 2013). Leavy (2009) explains that a narrative perspective extends the traditional interview by introducing a collaborative method of telling stories, reflecting on

them, and writing and re-writing them (p. 27). An ethnodrama is the script written from the research data (Saldana, 2005). The 'Connected' project extended the concept of ethnodrama to include music. The core aim of the 'Connected' project was to (re)present the actual experiences of the students by privileging their voices in the performance piece.

**The performance and process of development**

'Connected' can be described as a collaborative writing and performance project incorporating a dramatic script, original songs, visual narratives, and elements of dramaturgy. My aim was to extend the concept of ethnodrama (Saldana, 2005) to include music, specifically singing and songwriting. These are the core elements of my community music and performance practice. In addition, the students were already familiar with performing on stage through music and drama. This means that we were skilled collaborators in the development of a new piece that reflected our combined experiences of engaging in multiple musical theatre at the school. The musical aspect of the performance included six original songs, three of which were individually written and performed by senior female students. In addition, solo performances of songs from previous musicals were presented against a backdrop of visual narratives aimed to provide the audience with an insight into the high production standards achieved at the school. These projects are largely supported by the voluntary efforts of a core group of teachers.

The key points to be communicated in the ethnodrama were the intensity of a five or six week rehearsal period, the subsequent challenges and rewards, and the value that the students attribute to their personal and collective musical journeys. In order to effectively communicate the varied aspects of the experience, we used a number of theatrical and musical devices within the drama. For example, the rehearsal journey towards the school

musical was represented as a race to the finish line with a slow motion running segment and a tug-of-war signifying the last minute struggles and ultimate 'pulling together', typical of the period when anxieties come to the fore as rehearsal time runs out. The lived stories (Clandinin, 2013) of the school musicals were framed within a folk tale depicting a dark and dreary world, devoid of imagination and light. The protagonist, Rose, escaped to the 'outside world' where she embarked on a transformational school musical journey that (re)presented the students' actual experiences.

The preparations for the 'Connected' performance began in the week following the annual school musical in October, 2015. The fieldwork, creative work and rehearsals, involved 37 (after school) hours of contact time with participants between late October, 2015 and early April, 2016. A series of focus group discussions and in-depth interviews developed into creative workshops and rehearsals in preparation for the performance in April, 2016. A core group, varying in number from time to time, attended twice weekly workshops and discussions. Thirteen students (6 female and 7 male) ultimately performed in 'Connected'. An additional 12 students (8 female and 4 male) participated in the data gathering phase of the project. This represented a significant commitment on the part of the students who juggled study and sporting commitments in order to participate in the project.

**Accessing and coding the data**

This section outlines the methodological approach used in the data gathering process, performance and post-performance phases of the project. In the pre-performance phase, the data was accessed primarily through narrative inquiry (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000), and included elements of autoethnography and ethnography. Autoethnography included documentation through self-reflective journaling and audio-recording. Examples include

journal entries relating to the previous musical theatre production and audio recordings of my own songwriting contributions to the 'Connected' performance. Ethnography included documentation through audio-recording, photography, individual and group interviews and questionnaires. The over-arching methodological focus on narrative inquiry meant that in-depth interviews and focus group discussions facilitated a space where the students were free to share their stories in their own time and in their own way (Kim, 2016, p. 165). Although I had been observing, conversing and listening with these and similar students within my professional practice over the previous five years, I did not take anything for granted and embarked on the project with an open mind, ensuring that my preconceptions about their experience did not direct or influence the narrative inquiry process.

Post-performance data was accessed through a question and answer session with Irish World Academy faculty and audience members immediately following the performance. I also circulated a questionnaire on this performance in early 2018, and several of the participants in the project returned rich and insightful responses. Further data was accessed through post-performance interviews with audience members and teachers in the school. In my engagement with PaR and its other supporting methods, thematic analysis can be used as an active, ongoing collaborative coding process. In the core group sessions, the thematic coding process took place through open dialogue. I personally coded interview transcripts from sixth year students who participated in individual interviews and focus group discussions, outside of the core group. Specifically coded words such as 'horrible', for example, were purposely included in the script to reflect the depth of meaning attached to the context of non-participation (pseudonyms replace real names):

Sorcha: 'Sixth year, really, it's a lot. There's so much work in it…Oh I missed it,

I watched it anyway, definitely I really wish I did it […] It was horrible not to do

it' (Individual interview October, 2015).

Gina: '*Horrible, horrible*. I hate not being in the musical. It's like the worst

feeling ever' (Individual interview October, 2015).

The inclusion of the word 'horrible' in the script, and consideration for the context from

which it emerged, provided a means to give voice to the senior students who could not

participate in the performance:

Leo: It's all over. It's such a buzz but *horrible* at the same time. We've come so far. After all

the work, you just have to leave it there [He picks up a programme and turns the pages].

**Analysis of the data**

Analysis of the data was undertaken before and after the performance using a

grounded theory approach (Saldana, 2009; Charmaz, 2014). Kim (2016) explains that the

purpose of analysis of narrative data is 'to develop an understanding of the meanings our

participants give to themselves, to their surroundings, to their lives, and to their lived

experiences through stories' (p. 190). Throughout the pre-performance phase, various themes

emerged organically and were transformed into creative work on an ongoing basis. From the

outset, the young people enthusiastically embraced the idea of communicating emergent

themes creatively. There were many emotional moments as the students and I engaged in

critical reflection on our shared experiences. Saldana (2009) argues that the

acknowledgement of emotions in research 'provides deep insight into the participants' perspectives, worldviews, and life conditions. Virtually everything we do has an accompanying emotion(s)' (p. 86). This is an important point when considering the question of personal meaning and value in collaborative musical engagement. A key aim was to capture the emotional engagement and the deep meaning we collectively attributed to our individual and collective musical experiences at the school. This key aim underpinned our collaborative analysis of the data, although it was not specifically referred to as analysis at any time. Three of the female students were inspired to write their own songs. These songs encapsulated themes of family support and friendship, the audition experience, and the reality of returning to everyday school life after the show. Positive themes related to the value of friendships; support networks; performance skills; increased confidence and feelings of pride and achievement. Negative themes included a sense of loss at the end of the performance run; anxiety and nervousness; peer pressure; exam stress; and difficulties balancing sporting activities and/or catching up with schoolwork.

**Findings, interpretation of the data and ethical considerations**

The students made several choices about what they wanted to include in the performance. Significantly, they wanted to focus more on resilience, as opposed to focusing on negative themes. They were keen to show that engagement in the musical theatre projects ultimately helped them to overcome personal and collective challenges. The students wanted the audience to understand their experiences by incorporating the following themes into the performance:

• the courage it takes to step out on the stage

• the nerves that they experience at audition time and during the performance run

- the close friendships they experience by participating in the musical

- the depth of emotion that they experience and share

- a perceived lack of understanding about the hard work it takes to put on a show

- the feelings of elation and excitement they experience when the audience comes in, and the confidence they gain from that

- how they support each other during rehearsals and show time

- their sense of being like a family

- their feelings of pride, and the sense of achievement that stems from audience appreciation

- they experience a terrible sense of loss when the musical comes to an end

- in all of this, they learn to 'take the knocks'

The data were extrapolated from interview transcripts and field notes. The following is an extract from the script, illustrating the interpretation of the data in the performance. This extract was drawn from multiple perspectives in the narrative inquiry and evidences themes of anxiety, peer pressure, support, encouragement and resilience:

Rose: What if I mess up? What if people laugh at me? How will I know if they are laughing at me or my character? What if they think I am that character? I'm not anything like her.

Loyola: You don't know, but all your friends are doing it so you just say to yourself 'if they can do it, so can I' and you just go for it. Besides, don't you think it's interesting to be someone that you're not?

Charlotte: If your friends are coming to support you, they're coming to see you as your character or maybe they like the songs. They're all coming for their own reasons.

Dale: Look, before you go on you get really nervous. You can hear the scene before yours going on and you know you're going to be out there in a few seconds. But then, once you walk out onto the stage, the nerves go and you just go with the flow. It's like a kind of schedule that you follow.

Eric: Once you get that first scene over you can just relax into the role. We've done it so many times in rehearsals, it will feel natural to come on and off the stage. Your character takes you over and you're in the story. You're not yourself any more.

Bella: the audience gives you confidence. When you get that first clap, it really lifts you because you've worked so hard and when you get that positive feedback you say: 'yes, it worked.'

The project and methods had been approved by the University of Limerick ethics committee, but it is important to note that working in this way required attention to specific elements of ethical research. The specific ethics of working like this in a research context is especially valuable in terms of impact on practice.

Clandinin (2013) suggests that narrative inquiry spaces should be understood 'as spaces of belonging for both researchers and participants—spaces that are marked always by

ethics and attitudes of openness, mutual vulnerability, reciprocity, and care' (p. 146). I found

that there were similarities between ethical considerations in narrative inquiry and the

facilitation of a safe, and an accepting environment, for creative work in community music

and music education contexts (Higgins & Shehan Campbell, 2010). I felt that my community

music experience in the facilitation of creative work enabled a natural transition to accessing

rich and engaging experiential data. The students and I cared for each other's stories by

agreeing that nothing would be discussed outside of the core group. I also reassured the

students that all audio recordings were for documentation purposes only and would not be

shared with anyone at the school. The sixth year students, and teachers, were assured of

anonymity from the outset. The data collected from the sixth year students interviews were

merged into the performance without breaking any confidences. Particular experiences,

relevant to an illustration of the rehearsal journey were based on some of my journal entries

and an interview with the music teacher/producer. These were openly discussed, and we

performed them by appearing briefly, as ourselves, in the performance. Johnny Saldana, an

eminent expert in the field of ethnodrama, suggests that collaboration is the best way to

ensure that you are representing your participants 'fairly and ethically' (2016, p. 36). As

outlined already, this was a priority throughout the project. 'Connected' ultimately prioritized

the voices of the students themselves, through the script, songs and movements. The students

felt a strong sense of ownership of the project, reflected in post-performance feedback.


**Conclusion**

This collaborative performance project enabled me to experience and critically reflect

on the connections between narrative inquiry and performative aspects of my practice-based

research methodology. The main advantages were that the narrative inquiry, incorporating

autoethnography and ethnography, yielded an abundance of rich experiential data. In

addition, the collaborative nature of the project facilitated a strong sense of ownership of the project for the students, reflected in post-performance feedback. The downside of the methodological approach was that the narrative inquiry resulted in a large amount of transcription, journal entries, field notes and post-performance reflections that required detailed scrutiny, critical reflection and analysis. However, I feel that the advantages far outweighed the disadvantages. The most important point, for me, from a community music perspective, was that it was a collaborative research and writing project that gave a voice to the students and their lived experiences through creative expression. I consider that my identity as a community musician acted as a stepping stone to rich and engaging conversations and creative work. I feel that it was mutual trust that facilitated this. I placed great trust in the students' creative ability, and the students trusted me with their stories, in my new role as a researcher. Post-performance reflections from the young people revealed that some students felt uncomfortable at the start but became more comfortable as others began to share their stories. A trusting environment was mentioned as an important factor. This highlights the importance of facilitating that environment—understanding that it may take time to facilitate the inclusion of all voices—and above all, gathering and articulating participant perspectives on these important issues. Later written feedback, revealed that the students felt supported and encouraged throughout the narrative inquiry/creative process and the performance phase of the project. For example: 'there was always the feeling of assurance that no idea was a "terrible idea" or "wrong" … our opinions, ideas or views weren't judged' (Email correspondence January, 2018). From a practical point of view, these articulations provide important insights into how concepts such as facilitation, listening, encouragement, trust and ownership are viewed from a participant perspective, and how they might be applied in future practice. A later reflection from a faculty member at the Irish World Academy provides an insight into an audience perspective on the performance and its resonance with

her own life. In an interview (May 2018), when I asked how the performance made her feel, she replied:

> Loved it. Because the young people were so empowered I felt privileged to be there. It was afterwards…how I have related that to my own son. I feel very grateful. It gave me an insight into his experiences. If I was reading about it, it wouldn't be the same. Reading something, you don't experience it in the same way. It was much more real and live through the performance. It gave a deeper expression to what they were saying. It gave it weight.

In terms of the implications of the findings, this knowledge is particularly valuable in terms of providing multiple insider perspectives on what it actually feels like to participate in collaborative musical theatre projects in schools. In terms of method, I found that the narrative inquiry research method shares common ground with principles and ethical considerations associated with the facilitation of creative work in participatory arts contexts. Pitts (2007) has particularly highlighted the need to prioritize the voices of students in studies of extra-curricular musical theatre projects (p. 162). The 'Connected' project provides insights into the application of arts practice research as a means of articulating the voices of both practitioners and participants through collaborative creative work. This work has the capacity to build a knowledge base for the development of arts and cultural policy of the future, as well as facilitating greater reflective work and capturing the value of participation.

**Definition of terms:**

**Autoethnography:** is an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyze personal experience in order to understand cultural experience (Ellis, Adams and Bochner, 2011).

**Ethnography:** is the systematic study of people and cultures.

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