



# Transform

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## **Critique, not criticism: Why we ask the questions we ask** Kathleen Turner

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## Critique, not criticism: why we ask the questions we ask

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### Setting the Scene

In November 2019, I was delighted to be invited to deliver the keynote presentation for the International Centre for Community Music's 5<sup>th</sup> annual student research symposium. It was an opportunity that I relished, in part, because the completion of my own PhD journey was so recent and I hoped I could offer encouragement to fellow Community Music researchers on a similar path. I was also inspired by the topic: *Critique, not criticism: Why we ask the questions we ask*. As a PhD student, critical questions had pushed me to delve more deeply into my Community Music practice, to face some uncomfortable truths and, crucially, to learn. I now articulate that practice and my role within it in a richer, more nuanced way as a direct consequence of asking the hard questions. I looked forward to sharing this process, and to engaging with more hard questions from the symposium delegates.

It is now June 2020 and, as I try to capture this keynote in text I face a complex challenge, because I *performed* the original address. I am an arts practice researcher, combining my artist-self with my researcher-self, to “sculpt engaged, holistic, passionate research” (Leavy, 2009, p. 2). I am a Community Musician, songwriter and storyteller, and my approach to research incorporates story and song. I use these tools to investigate my experiences further and to communicate my findings. Just as Bagley and Cancienne (2001) dance and Saldaña (2003) dramatizes, I sing the data. Through the text of this paper I will try to communicate the central themes of my address – critical questions and critical answers - but it is important to note that the text only works when accompanied by the songs. This address was never intended to be read, but rather to be *heard*. As Leavy proposes, “music is able to *connect* people through emotional evocation that in certain contexts may transcend language” (Leavy, 2009,



p.123). With that in mind, the narrative of this keynote is not only related to but *dependent* upon two songs. They are provided as a way into the embodied experience of my work as a Community Musician. With that in mind, I invite you, the reader, to take time to listen to each song by clicking in the appropriate link, reading the enclosed lyrics and engaging with the attached reflections and stories. Let's begin.

### **Where are we heading?**

Thank you so much for having me today. I'm delighted to be here to engage with you in this important conversation on the role of critique, not criticism. Positive critical engagement has been central to my own development, both as a Community Musician and as a researcher and I'm so looking forward to sharing that with you. I like to think of researching as a process of navigation – Carole Conle refers to it as a “quest” (Conle, 2000, p. 193). So where are we heading on today's quest? My aims are to explain who I am as a Community Musician, to give a small taste of my doctoral research, to offer some poignant critical questions from my favourite authors that might be useful to you as practitioners/researchers, and to offer an invitation to consider your own critical questions as Community Musicians.

### **Who am I?**

From 2008 – 2015 I was the Community Engagement Manager for the Irish Chamber Orchestra in Limerick, in the South West of Ireland. During that time, a central part of my job was the design and management of a Community Music programme called *Sing Out with Strings*. It is a singing, songwriting and instrumental programme that works with around 300 children annually living in areas of urban regeneration. Initially, *Sing Out* was intended to engage in a process of social regeneration through Community Music. Consequently, my doctoral research was an arts practice investigation of the role of the Community Musician within a process of social regeneration. In the early stages of my PhD, my sole focus was on proof. I was seeking proof of the value of Community Music for the children I worked with – evidence such as improved school attendance, increased confidence, and better communication skills. However, very quickly, I began to encounter critical questions



that shifted the trajectory of my research and forced me to turn the critical lens back towards my practice.

### **Critical Questions**

Whilst trying to articulate precisely what I meant by ‘community’ I encountered the work of Anthony P Cohen, and was forced to ask myself; was I suffering from “well-intentioned arrogance”? (Cohen, 1985, p. 75). Had I assumed the value of Community Music as a tool for social change, without stopping to consider *what* changes were occurring, question *who* was changing or *how* that change was being articulated? Who was the author of this narrative of Community Music that I carried?

This conviction was deepened when I encountered the work of autoethnographer, Andrew Sparkes (2002). Sparkes offers this powerful challenge:

Our roles as change agents need to be considered with great intentionality and sincerity; we have to be open to change; we have to tell others about our experiences and perspectives; we have to listen to the interpretation of other witnesses; and finally, we have to explore multiple meanings of equity and care and act to promote our understandings of these concepts.

(Sparkes, 2002, p. 222)

This encounter provoked a deluge of critical questions: in my Community Music practice, had I asked the children I worked with how they would describe our work? Had I invited them into the process of meaning-making, as well as music-making? Most importantly, in seeking this process of ‘social change’ had I ever considered the possibility that I may need to be the recipient rather than the agent?

Once I began looking for critical questions, productive provocations in my research followed. I was deeply inspired by the work of Maxine Greene (2000), who challenged me to cast a critical lens over the language I used to describe my Community Music work. I had been so enmeshed in the language of valuing



Community Music, of proving its worth. She reminded me that there were other ways into the practice. Had I considered the words ‘empathy’ and ‘imagination’?

Imagination is what, above all, makes empathy possible. It is what enables us to cross the empty spaces between ourselves and those we teachers have called ‘other’ over the years. If those ‘others’ are willing to give us clues, we can look in some manner through strangers’ eyes and hear through their ears.

(Greene, 2000, p. 3)

If I could reframe my understanding of Community Music as a place for social imagination, could I move away from a discourse of what *should* be to a collective imagining of what *could* be? This might help our community in *Sing Out with Strings* to be a truer “expression of cultural democracy” (Higgins , 2012, p. 7).

### **Erin**

I can pinpoint the precise moment when the impact of these critical questions became manifest in my work as a Community Musician. I was facilitating my first workshop in school since the loss of my father. The children and teachers were aware of our family bereavement and had been very supportive. I sat at the front of the school assembly hall, guitar in hand, and I remember very little about the workshop itself. Two small but crucial details remain in my memory – how the workshop began and how it ended. It began when I was handed a note from the classroom teacher. It simply read “we’re glad you’re back” and was signed by every child. That note remains in my office. When the workshop ended, the children and teachers filed out at the back of the assembly hall, but one child lingered at the end of the row. At the last moment, she ran back up to my chair, put her hand on my shoulder and said, “I’m sorry for your trouble, Kathleen.”

### **Erin**

Erin has a prayer.  
She says it every morning.  
She whispers to the air,  
And oh, she believes it.  
Oh, she believes it.



She raises a banner, unfurled in the sun.  
Beats out a future on a lambeg drum.  
Oh World, leave her alone.  
She stands before thousands and sings with  
her heart.  
Hand on her chest and her feet set apart.  
Oh World, leave her alone.  
Oh World, leave her alone.

Ian goes to school.  
He listens if you ask him.  
He questions every rule,  
So you will see him.  
So you will see him.

He chooses the words he allows you to hear,  
Carefully teaching your untrained ear.  
Oh World, leave him alone.  
He throws out his arms and embraces you whole,  
Bravely revealing his blazing soul.  
Oh World, leave him alone.  
Oh World, leave him alone.  
Erin has a prayer.  
She says it every morning.

This song was the culmination of a long period of reflection, considering how the lessons learned from grief and vulnerability could be carried back into the workshop with me in a productive rather than a confessional way. Now that I considered ‘noticing’, ‘alertness’, ‘being in the midst’ as priorities for my work, new observations began to appear in my workshop reflections. I noticed the reciprocity of the Welcome, in practice rather than theory. I became increasingly aware of the school’s hospitality, the renewal of their invitation to come back week after week. I began to practice inclusive reflexivity, not only observing what occurred (or seemed to occur) for the children I make music with, but also observing what occurred for me, within me.



Erin and Ian are representative of the Sing Out community and what I am learning from them. <sup>1</sup>In these lyrics I attempted to convey their identity as creative artists, express my hope that they retain their passion for music, and communicate my sense of privilege for being part of the musical community. I also aimed to capture the character of gratitude I felt for the welcome and care I received from the children when I returned to school after the loss of my father.

### Critical Answers

By engaging with critical questions, I arrived at some critical answers for my practice as a Community Musician, an artist and a researcher. As a direct consequence, I developed some guiding principles for my approach to both Community Music and the research process. **Reflexive practice** is central to our work as Community Musicians but this was the first time I became truly alert to the necessity of reflexivity; “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...” (Etherington, 2004, p. 19). I began to cast a critical eye on my work, asking myself why I noticed some details in workshops and not others. What stories were *not* being told? Of the stories being told about workshops, how did my perspective shape their content and character? How could we collectively decide as a community how to “interpret our world” (Etherington, 2004, p. 19)? I realized the importance of establishing **boundaries**; whilst my involvement in the community meant that this was a very personal research process, I needed to choose what to include and what to omit at the service of the research question and at the service of our collective well-being. In deciding how to proceed as a Community Music researcher, I returned to Sparkes’ questions; “Does it promote dialogue and show potential for social action? Does the account work for the reader, and is it useful?” (Sparkes, 2002, p. 211). I emphasized the significance of **context**, casting a critical eye over how my Community Music research is not separate from my community or ‘impartial’; it is messy, person-centred and intertwined with emotion,

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<sup>1</sup> These guiding principles and the wider conversation regarding my learning with / from the Sing Out community are explored more deeply in the following pending publication: Willingham, L. (Ed). (2021). *Community Music at the Boundaries*. Waterloo, Ontario, Canada: Wilfrid Laurier University Press.

experience, and personal history. As Clandinin and Connolly (2000) warn us, “we are complicit in the world we study” (p. 61). Finally, engaging in critical questions led me back to a sense of my own **artistry**. Whilst previously, I had separated my ‘Community Music Self’ from my ‘Artist Self’ I now recognized that they were one and the same. I created space to interrogate my understanding of Community Music through the music itself, investigating and articulating through text and through song. The research identity I arrived at was a sense of wholeness, combining researcher with artist and facilitator, bringing together analytical, verbal and visceral, and engaging in a “rich and honest dialogue” (Saldaña, 2003, p. 190).

### **Living Well**

Before listening to the second, and final song, I’d like to consider three images. ‘Living Well’ is about the importance of memory, and leads us into this complex, person-centred practice of Community Music. These are three specific memories that made an impact on my whole self.

Firstly, I invite you to imagine my father, dressed proudly in a three-piece suit and Stetson cowboy hat. He navigated the world with fearlessness, filling the space his body occupied without apology.

Next, imagine a teacher named Olive. On the morning of my first PhD performance, I went to drop off the children’s choir uniforms at school. Olive was waiting for me beside the lollipop lady, with a packed lunch. She noticed that I was busy, and worried that I wouldn’t have time to eat. She navigates the world with kindness and consideration.

Finally, consider the image of children singing. I am standing at the front of the room leading the song, and at the back of the classroom I see one boy in particular, eyes closed, chin lifted, tears on his cheeks, singing with commitment and enthusiasm.





## Living Well

Look at that man's head.  
Look at how he wears a big hat with pride, And a pocket-watch dangling by his side.  
Four teeth missing in his smile. Stands out by a country mile.

Write it down before you let it go.  
Write it down before it gets erased.  
Write it down before it gets replaced by all the things you think you need to do today.  
All the books to read, all the words to say.

There is a secret.  
There is a secret to living well.  
There is a secret.  
There is a secret to living well.

Look at that woman's hands.  
Look at the food that she made to make sure you eat on a busy day.  
She took time to mind a grown woman with a mother far away.

Write it down before you let it go.  
Write it down before it gets erased.  
Write it down before it gets replaced  
by all the things you think you need to do today.  
All the books to read, all the words to say.

There is a secret.  
There is a secret to living well.  
There is a secret.  
There is a secret to living well.

Look at that boy's face.  
Look at how he closes his eyes to sing, He lifts his chin and both hands on his chest.  
There's so much in his wild world to  
express.

Write it down before you let it go.  
Write it down before it gets erased.  
Write it down before it gets replaced by all the things you think you need to do today.  
All the books to read, all the words to say.

There is a secret.  
There is a secret to living well.  
There is a secret.  
There is a secret to living well.



## Conclusion

Good critical questions, when asked carefully, with compassion and without judgement, can lead to richer understanding. This is demonstrated by the evolution of my doctoral research title. Initially my primary topic was ‘Exploring the role of Community Music in a process of social regeneration.’ As a student, I was seeking the ‘right’ answers. I was looking for evidence of engagement, school attendance, teamwork – the classic checklist of outcomes required in a funding application for a Community Music project.

Critical questions lead me to a deeper, more nuanced research topic and, as a result, I gained a more inquisitive, elemental understanding of our practice. My topic became ‘Singing Our Way;’ An interrogation of the role of the Community Musician in a process of social regeneration.’ I moved from ‘exploring’ to ‘interrogating.’ I questioned my assumptions about the value of music-making and I investigated my motivations for working in community. I asked the children and teachers I worked with how *they* defined our work, and I took my lead from them. This shift deeply impacted my ethos as a facilitator, a researcher, and an artist. I have tried to let go of the need for ‘right’ answers – it is a work in progress. As Bartleet and Higgins (2018) remind us, perhaps the key critical question is not what Community Music *is*, but rather what it *does* (p. 14). As a result of critical questions, I now look for evidence of fearlessness, kindness, consideration, commitment, enthusiasm and joy. I seek out agency, reflexivity, solidarity, shared spaces and experiences, empathy, imagination, vulnerability and gratitude. These words and these songs are a message to myself – to hold onto these lessons in my Community Music practice, and in the way I navigate the wider world.

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