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HIGHER EDUCATION

Academic setting, community music principles

COMMUNITY DRUMMING

A year in the life of a Derby group

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Higher education in the community



MAURICE GUNNING

Under-represented groups will only access higher education if we work with their complexities, says Sound Sense member **JULIE TIERNAN**. The Nomad project at the Irish World Academy is doing just that

At The Irish World Academy in The University of Limerick we have so-called ‘outreach’ programmes designed to increase access to and awareness of higher education opportunities for recognised under-represented groups: of these, the Nomad project aims to honour the music culture of the Traveller community.

Travellers have played a vital role in the oral music tradition of Ireland, credited with exchanging and sharing tunes from around the country and in many ways keeping certain styles alive. During a time when people did not travel, this was a wonderful education. Traveller musicians were considered to be expert fiddlers in Co. Donegal: Domhnait Nic Suibhne, in an unpublished MA thesis places travelling fiddlers at the top of the hierarchy, above local and house players.

This tradition is not as strong as it once was, and musical tastes and traditions have changed (see *What Irish Travellers like*, Sounding Board Winter 2005) mainly due to technology and much of the community ‘settling’ in houses. But in attempting to engage the worlds of higher education and The Traveller community, there are still plenty of complexities, challenges – and pride – to address.

In his study *Mapping The field: arts-based community development*, William Cleveland suggests that universities and other well-meaning groups do not understand the complexities of the

Rehearsing: Nomad student Selina O’Leary with tutor Antonio Garcia Lopez prepare for a performance in Cork, 2009

Community music in Ireland

Community music in the Republic of Ireland, although it shares the sentiments of community music as suggested by Sound Sense, has a different history to that of the UK. Rather than community musicians taking “their music-making outside formal institutes”, as Lee Higgins has described, in Ireland it could be said that community music is linked to community education.

Alastair Christie’s comprehensive history of social care and youth work in Ireland points out that the emergence of community education was in the late 19th century with groups such as the Girls’ Friendly Society and the Boys’ Brigade, which were church-led initiatives. Constance Markievicz, a republican activist, founded Na Fianna in 1909 in response to the setting up of the Scouts in the UK. Na Fianna provided after school and weekend activities for young people including scouting and classes on Irish history and culture including music. The development of youth groups did not emerge strongly until the late 1990s.

Another recent development was that of the establishment of the Irish World Academy, bringing with it an MA in community music. Having taught a community music component on the University of Limerick’s BA in Irish music and

dance I have witnessed, at times, strong connections between community music and Irish traditional arts. The tradition is based on sharing and exchanging tunes and takes place in a variety of settings; through competitions and festivals, mobile musical communities have developed and continue to grow.

And as with community music, Irish traditional music claims to have a certain ‘feeling’ that only those who ‘play’ can relate to. For example, even though I play some Irish traditional pieces on the guitar and accompany my husband, who plays the whistle, I am not a traditional musician, and do not fully understand that ‘feeling’. This is the same insider view that we as community musicians experience and often find difficult to explain to those who are not immersed in community arts.

The connection between community music and Irish traditional music is uncertain, but one that will become more defined with further research and the development of an Irish community music network. In my experience it has been the timing of government funded community education programmes coupled with an increase in arts council funding that has led to a consistency in the number of practising community musicians in Ireland.

communities that they attempt to connect with: “many ‘underserved’ communities have been subjected to a cycle of outreach and abandonment that has undermined local efforts and produced a legacy of bitterness.”

It is with these observations in mind that Nomad welcomes and visits those interested in the developed community music and education projects. In working with regional and local Traveller training centres Nomad has gained an invaluable cultural insight, aiding sustainable approaches to project design and delivery.

A big issue, for example, is the relatively low priority the Traveller community puts on education in their lives. Whereas an educator might take the view that a Traveller’s attendance at a performance or to sit an exam is a top priority, if a family member is in need, the Traveller will choose to be with their family. This can be a frustrating experience from an educator’s point of view but it should be understood that this attitude does not dismiss or undermine education; it simply does not take priority where family matters are concerned.

This sense of community is well described by Jane Helleniner who conducted a nine-month long ethnographic participant observation piece of fieldwork. Living on a halting site in Galway city on the west coast of Ireland, she observed and participated in the daily social

activities, giving the reader a rare insight into daily occurrences: “Before 9:00 in the morning some of the children who were going to school, and those who attended a training centre, would be picked up by their respective buses. Shortly afterward, some of the adult men would gather in one of the larger mobiles on the camp, where they would be often joined by others who had arrived from elsewhere in the city . . . After breakfast most of the men would drive off in their cars or vans to collect scrap metal and other

recyclable items, engage in door-to-door selling etc . . . They returned frequently throughout the day to eat meals, work on cars, etc . . . While some married women joined their husbands, many others spent much of their day engaged in cooking, cleaning and childcare inside their own dwellings. This work was often broken by short trips to other women’s trailers to borrow items or have a brief chat . . . none of the women in the camp drove a car or van.”

This paints a vibrant and busy picture that focuses on gatherings and coming together. Returning to the halting site throughout the day to eat and discuss their day highlights the value that is placed on family and community.

For an educational establishment, the numbers of Traveller children and young people in mainstream education is an important factor. By 2004, nearly all Traveller children were enrolled in primary school: a clear indicator that education is now valued within the community at an early age and a very positive step in the right direction. Post-primary education, however, raises concerns, with a dramatic drop in numbers attending – in 2004 just 16% (626 out of a possible 4,000) went onto post-primary education and only 15 engaged in post-leaving certificate courses. But numbers are better than they were at the

turn of the century, and the development of a certificate level course with an option of accessing Limerick university’s BA in Irish Music and Dance seemed appropriate; and so Nomad extended a warm ‘welcome’. (The course is not exclusive to the Traveller community and this has been reflected in the cross section of applicants.)

In Nomad’s experience projects had to allow for an inconsistency in faces and numbers due to family and community commit-

Student centred, open-minded shared learning experiences are key elements in community music, and Nomad’s work provides a bridge between academia and community work

ments, which prompted those involved to devise an access course based on the needs of the Traveller community. A certificate in music and dance was developed in consultation with Nomad tutors and students; and pilot projects and bridging courses were delivered in order to gauge how best to deliver the academic and musical components of the course. The main aim in choosing delivery modes was that the course content would remain intact and not omit or gloss over the challenging elements of the certificate. It was decided that a “blended learning” delivery in partnership with regional Traveller training centres would satisfy the needs identified throughout the eight years that Nomad had been working with the community. This development offers new challenges to those interested in taking a step into an academic arena and to those of us offering the course.

In practical terms, a key element of the course is the student folder. This contains all course documents and materials needed for a semester. In five colour-coded sections, used throughout to promote an organised and clear approach to learning, students can find an introduction to the university and to the Irish World Academy; a learning portfolio, a guide on how best to use reflective practice; a guide to the practices of academic life; reflective practice diary, timetables, suggested study plans and so on. Most importantly, there are course documents and other important information and all lecture material in the shape of *Articulate* presentations.

Articulate is an e-learning device that allows learners to take lectures at their own pace. Tested online classrooms showed some students falling behind the pace; with *Articulate*, students can pause sessions and have a dictionary to hand. The software from a lecturer’s point of view is user-friendly and highly cost effective. The University’s virtual learning environment is used to create an online community discussion group based around questions at the end of each lecture, and also for exams and assignments submissions.

The course content for the first session includes two sets of

Links and web resources

Julie Tiernan E: julie.tiernan@ul.ie

Nomad W: www.ul.ie/~iwmc/nomad/index.html

Irish World Academy W: www.ul.ie/~iwmc/index.html

Alastair Christie Social work education in Ireland: histories and challenges *Portularia. 1 (1), 111-130.*

William Cleveland Mapping the field: arts-based community development W: www.communityarts.net/readingroom/archivefiles/2002/05/mapping_the_fie.php

Jane Helleiner Racism and the politics of culture: Irish Travellers *University of Toronto Press*

Lee Higgins Acts of hospitality: the community in community music. *Music Education Research 9 (2), 281-292*

Domhnait Nic Suibhne Repertoire in the Donegal fiddle tradition *unpublished MA thesis University College Cork*

Outreach and bealach

The community engagement programmes run at the Irish World Academy attempt to offer a shared experience and refer to outreach as “bealach” – the Irish word for path or direction, often used in the specific context of a lowered pass between mountains or hills.

Contrast that with the term “outreach”: Although used in this article because of its general understanding, there is a concern that outreach implies when engaging in such activity there is a “reaching out” to those receiving rather than a shared musical or educational experience.

practical work. For the student’s first performance interest, tutors are sourced locally rather than expecting the student to travel to the university. Where appropriate, Skype singing lessons are offered. For ensemble work students gather three times per semester at the university. In cases where students cannot attend, regional/in-centre ensembles are identified. There are *Articulate* lectures on traditional music and dance, popular music and dance, and audio-visual technology. The reflective practice portfolio allows the course director to gauge how students are getting on as well as allowing the student keep a clear map of their learning. Weekly Skype tutorials are devised around reflective practice entries: what worked? What didn’t? What is the way forward?

The course is still at early stages – with just one semester completed there is still much to learn. However, feedback to date has been positive and students have engaged well in the programme. As with all new ventures it is not perfect, but it is getting there. The blended delivery and student centred learning approach have proved popular with the students: “I have all the information I need with theory and examples. I like viewing lectures on CD-Rom as it gives me a chance to learn at my own pace and look for my own examples online while I learn.” “CD lectures are great.



Leading: Beverly Whyte of Open Arts leads a Nomad group in a series of gamelan workshops

The latest one on accompaniment was my favourite so far.” “I prefer the CD-Rom to the on-campus lectures I have attended as I can learn at my own pace and really absorb the information and understand it fully.” “Very good materials, really well explained.”

MR WILL/PLANET SOUND

Traveller Pride was the 2009 theme for Traveller Focus Week. The aim of the programme was to celebrate the contribution Travellers make both within their own communities and to Irish society as a whole, through their culture, enterprise, sporting excellence, professional expertise across every area and unique history and tradition. Irish president Mary McAleese said the event was a “valuable opportunity to celebrate the Traveller identity, highlight Travellers’ contribution to Irish society and raise awareness and understanding of the position of Travellers in Ireland.”

And pride shone out in the certificate in music and dance. Two of our students, Liz Connors and Selina O’Leary, based at Nomad’s sister centre in Carlow were nominated for an arts award. Liz was also nominated for an education award and both women were shortlisted for each category, competing against hundreds of other hopefuls.

To her delight Selina won the arts award and travelled to Dublin’s Liberty Hall to receive her prize, where she performed *Thousands are sailing*, a song she learned from Muireann Nic Amhlaoibh during her time at Blas in the summer of 2009. On hearing the news of her success Selina commented “I am very happy and honoured to take this award. I will take it with pride and hope that it will make me stronger and more confident.”

Innovative, student centred, open-minded educational and shared learning experiences are all key elements in community music practice and the results speak for themselves. Sustainability of outreach and access projects is imperative if they are to succeed in making notable impact socially, musically or educationally. Understanding the mechanisms and processes by which such projects succeed is crucial to ongoing effectiveness.

The need for a middle ground between academia and community work has been an ongoing theme in Nomad’s work – we recognise the importance of marrying theory and reality in a coherent, constructive and accessible manner.