

What is 'quality' in music work with children in challenging circumstances?

If we want to embed inclusive music practices fully into music education and therefore throughout Hubs, we need to find ways to discuss quality. This blog post – an interview with Phil Mullen, community musician, community music trainer, and member of the Musical Inclusion Evaluation and Networking team – is the start of our two big debates for the remainder of the Musical Inclusion programme. The second, linked debate is about strategic working to embed inclusive music practices. In this interview Phil is sharing his own personal ideas which are not necessarily those of the whole evaluation team and not intended as anything more than a personal perspective.

We make no apologies for the article being long – we think it deserves the time! – but here are some highlights of what we covered:

- Every child should be offered a high quality music education that is relevant to their needs, capabilities and interests
- There's a need for clear and shared understandings of quality, but not other people's (i.e. those outside the field)
- Distance travelled should be the main measurement: agreed and judged by young people
- Engagement comes first
- Concrete skills are often at the service of creativity - so the sequence of learning them is unpredictable
- Young people deserve alert, responsive, leaders, sensitive to moments of musicality
- Coaching is part of the work – and includes handling mismatch between desires and abilities sensitively
- The relationship between leader and young person is crucial to modelling behaviour and building trust
- Music education work with children in challenging circumstances: drawing forth from within

What do you think about how Phil approaches musical quality, from the discussion below?

Can we, as a community of practice, find a way to discuss quality that will resonate with everyone, including formal and classroom based music educators?

Other professions talk in terms of quality standards – but that term can seem 'loaded'. Are there, instead, key areas or 'universals' that are common to you as practitioners?

Join the conversation by commenting below the blog, or adding your own blog or video response. Let us know, too if you're interested in joining an online video discussion (Google Chat) on the topic in the next few weeks.

Anita: I wanted to chat to you today about quality in music work with young people in challenging circumstances specifically, but also in musically inclusive practice generally. It's something that 'non-formal' or community musicians can struggle to articulate. Their 'formal' music education colleagues are usually more confident in talking about their pedagogy and how that makes them quality music educators.

So what do you think are the factors that make for a quality music session? And how is it different in non-formal and formal music education?

Phil: Well I feel that the terms non-formal and formal don't do anyone any service, they don't really have any meaning. Nowadays music educators are working formally and non-formally and there are lots of crossovers between the practices. The problem isn't that there are no commonalities, the problem is that there has been a dominant framework in the UK and it can unintentionally be exclusive.

In the UK and globally, for a very long time, the dominant force in school-based music education was Western European Classical (WEC). It's music taught in a particular way – transmission through learning the notes, in a sequential journey, following or paralleling grades.

It has within its own system a pedagogy, which is to a large extent notational. And it works extremely well if you're trying to learn that type of music, which is great, and it shouldn't be knocked, it's a good system to use.

Every child should be offered a high quality music education that is relevant to their needs, capabilities and interests

Anita: And it works with disadvantaged children too, according to El Sistema?

Phil: Well yes, but we have strong anecdotal evidence from El Sistema that when it comes to children in challenging circumstances, even those who enjoy and love WEC music, quite a number have memorised the music by ear and learned it by rote – they have not been able to, or perhaps not been motivated to, read music notation. Instead they've learned it through oral transmission. That is merely some children within that system, but it suggests that notation, while an excellent skill, is not always an essential skill.

Unfortunately a number of people who have a stake in formal sector music (and here I'm talking about school music, having said already that formal is not a useful term), have argued that *everybody* should learn using their methods and structures, whether it's appropriate to them or not. It just happens to be what they as music educators are good at, so they say 'this is the way we're going to do it' whether it's useful to the young people or not.

Personally I believe that every child should be offered a high quality music education that is relevant to their needs, capabilities and interests. I think we are a long way from that. It implies a diagnostic approach on three levels (1) what are their needs? 2) what are their capabilities? 3) what are the young people's interests – both musical and also their interests beyond music and it also implies a highly flexible workforce.

Anita: We should be clear how you're defining children in challenging circumstances ...

Phil: My interpretation is that challenging circumstances can be to do with 1) where you live (rural isolation or economically deprived areas for example), 2) life conditions (such as disabilities, or impairment or cognitive diversity as with children who have Asperger's and so forth) and how society copes with those

challenges, 3) life circumstances (examples could include bereavement to being a looked after child through being bullied or even to gang-life) to 4) your own challenging behaviour. And children with challenging behaviour or specifically BESD (behavioural, emotional and social difficulties tend in general to have the worst life outcomes because they often unknowingly sabotage their own potential progress.

I categorise CCC in this way because those groupings point towards specific approaches in terms of pedagogy with each of those categories. Of course I see subcategories within each one, with different pedagogical approaches again. And other people may categorise CCC in a different way for different purposes.

One thing to look at is whether the challenges are within the child (which is true to a point with children with BESD although again I don't want to oversimplify very complex issues) or outside the child. I think I want to acknowledge again that this is a complex area to work in.

There's a need for clear and shared understandings of quality, but not other people's (i.e. those outside the field)

Anita: So quality in non-formal education for want of a better term, comes about because the pedagogy or type of practice is flexible enough to develop around what works for the young people in question? Tailoring the work around young people's interests and needs is central to quality?

Phil: Yes, that's certainly a part of it, because there's isn't sufficient evidence to say this or that particular pedagogy works for all children. And we have evidence that for children in challenging circumstances (CCC), a range of approaches works - including leaving room for creative expression.

But some musicians outside of WEC music education haven't fully engaged with concepts around quality and standards because they don't want the standards associated with WEC imposed on them. You're comparing two systems that don't completely overlap. But putting your head in the sand doesn't help. To me it's like dentists saying they don't like what surgeons do so they won't look at quality standards for dentistry!

If you're in the position of employing musicians to work with CCC and you're involved in music development, the people you work with should be improving, and you should know how to improve them, and know ways to examine your practice to help you to do this.

Anita: So, how do non-formal music educators ensure they're delivering quality work, and demonstrate to others that they're doing this? Youth Music's Do, review and improve has listed 23 criteria - and that was taken from their own experience, and various research findings, as well as consultations with academics, project managers and music leaders. There's also Artworks' extensive work on quality in participatory arts. And then there's Osted's various pieces of advice on quality.

The [Music Education code of practice](#) developed by Sound Sense and Music Leader¹ is a useful starting point and as far as actual pedagogy is concerned [Youth Music's Do, Review, Improve](#) takes this further. There are other useful quality frameworks around: [Arts Council England is developing work around quality and young people](#) and [Artworks has been investigating this for the wider community arts workforce](#).

But I'm not sure there's enough about the actual music itself. I'm a great believer in relational working/facilitation and so forth, but I also need to know what musical / compositional tools to employ when. This may be just in terms of offering information, because I know many people working with CCC are wary of a didactic approach.

¹ Music Leader was a previous Youth Music initiative involving CPD and networking for music leaders

Community musicians' understandings around quality are in part based on the [International Society for Music Education \(ISME\) Community Music Activity Commission](#) which has been going since 1982 – that's 32 years of discussing, learning, documenting in books, conference papers and an international journal with published research. We're not coming without stuff!

Ultimately, we must recognise that musical quality with CCC is a sensitive issue in theory and in practice, and needs to be approached with sensitivity. It has to start with recognition that all the work done with CCC is tied into a particular context, it is context specific, you can't have one size fits all.

Distance travelled should be the main measurement: agreed and judged by young people

Anita: So is there any way to make this simpler for musicians and those who employ them?

Phil: The main basis for measurement in the work, the one most practitioners are happy about, is distance travelled by young people, rather than an outside imposed standard. That's what a number of musicians told us at the most recent national gathering of organisations funded by Youth Music's Musical Inclusion programme.

Ultimately that will need to be a young person's view: what do you want to do over the next few months, how are we going to do that, here's how I'll help you get there. Goal setting, and then looking back, did you do your best, if not was something more important at that time (and was it validly more important or not?). In this way you can prime young people for excellence.

A challenge working with CCC is how to produce a good quality musical outcomes with limited time and resources. To be a good musician takes time and not everything will be achieved at once. Sometimes if we drop in to a session and see things without knowing the context, it can be difficult to see the quality, which may be in small steps of improvement over a long time. That's why it's important to document this within its own terms and not a framework for a different approach to music education.

Engagement comes first

Anita: Are you saying that the quality of the music the young person is making can be less important at times than other factors?

Phil: Yes as long as the phrase 'at times' is noted, but this should not be confused with quality delivery – that should always be there. And of course this is my view and not shared by everyone in the sector. This area is complex: quality delivery doesn't always make for quality outcomes for example. But the quality issue can be secondary at times to a concept of the 'non-fail curriculum'. This is a curriculum where you get involved in making music in which you can't get anything wrong.

So for example if you're free improvising, it's hard to get that wrong unless you play a tune! I do a lot of non-fail curriculum work, as it helps to build confidence – and some of the children I work with don't have much capacity to progress beyond that. I say which note would you like to play? As they've chosen it, you can't say it's the wrong choice, and if they play when they want to play, there's no failure. That's not to say I won't work with them to move them forward beyond that. But in my work, engagement is the first principle.

Concrete skills are often at the service of creativity - so the sequence of learning them is unpredictable

Anita: So initially to a WEC-trained outsider, early stage music work with CCC may look as though it lacks quality, when actually you're working really hard as a music leader giving a young person confidence so you can draw out their musicality?

Phil: I think what I am saying about this is that from the off the leader is analysing the situation and putting into place what is needed to enable the young person to become the best musician they can be, but that this often, especially in the early stages, can be about things such as confidence building, creating a safe and open environment, developing trust and focus – things that are difficult to always quantify in terms of immediate sonic or technical development. So our tools for observing, analyzing and indeed quantifying progress need to be broad enough and sophisticated enough to take this into account. I'm doing music coaching from session one but (and this is the most important point of this whole conversation), what I do is decided by my interpretation of what the young person is presenting/giving, filtered through my experience and intentions. It is absolutely tied to context and also highly musical. It just doesn't come directly from someone else's curriculum.

It's very difficult to develop quality musical outcomes in a sequential way if you're working with what the children bring. It is not like you do in WEC music grades, because they're two very different pedagogies.

Community music is often happening in those moments of creation – you don't know what elements of musical skills are going to be required because you haven't created the piece, they're writing the piece, they're in control. That's probably the biggest difference to the WEC model. The development of the young person's musicality is not easily sequential in this model.

That doesn't mean we shouldn't be alert to the skills they're picking up ... we need to have a broad musical understanding and look for opportunities that are relevant to help them with their skills. That makes more demands on the music leader, because they're not doing things in a preset order.

Young people deserve alert, responsive, leaders, sensitive to moments of musicality

Anita: So this pedagogy not only involves being bespoke around the needs of young people and putting engagement first, but then being really alert and sensitive to moments of musicality and how to develop them – rather than working on a step-by-step progression as you'd have in WEC.

Phil: It's all tied in to the reflexive nature of the practice – you're responding to the young person, and the feedback you give, and what you share with them should enable them to raise the quality.

You're developing all sorts of aspects of a young person: their inner musicality so a person can hear the music in their head; a sense of ensemble; the ability to adapt and reflect; self-reflective capability that will allow the young person to critique their own work; the ability to be expressive in different ways - to understand an idea and develop it, and be helped to develop it.

It's a diagnostic approach – that's the centre of the relationship ... the leader reads the group and the individuals in the group, and works out from their own knowledge which skill areas most need to be developed. You want agreement and consensus from the young people ideally, but often they will have to do it on trust.

Coaching is part of the work – and includes handling mismatch between desires and abilities sensitively

For example, young people might not know that they're out of tune ... but to just tell them could ruin their confidence. So instead you develop ways of helping them getting more in tune ... showing them breathing, listening, matching tones, asking them to think about which tones are higher and lower ... to solve the diagnostic issue but yet without deflating the young person.

Much of the musical quality work will be done with 'oblique coaching'. You do the diagnosis, you hear they're singing out of tune, for example, and so you introduce a new concept or idea that helps them to move towards singing in tune. That's how you build confidence. You are working towards that musical goal. So you have to keep some of that back to yourself, it is tricky, it seems to go against community music concepts about openness. I don't have a simple answer on that one. Leaders have to wrestle with these issues context by context and we will have different answers to the tricky ones.

The relationship between leader and young person is crucial to modelling behaviour and building trust

Anita: The relationship between music leader and young person seems even more important than in other types of practice ie being a school or private music teacher or choir leader. Because they're CCC, part of the practice is about modelling a range of positive behaviours.

Phil: There's a very specific pedagogy in working with CCC in my point of view, and it's based on the developing relationship between leader and group, based on a whole series of things. It's not just about if you do the right music, they will respond. By the way, I would have the same relational pedagogy with a mainstream group. It's a common enough approach and links heavily into the term student-centred as coined by Carl Rogers – although there are now some other aspects to working with CCC as well, in my opinion. To explain, I said earlier that the approach should be relevant to the students' needs as well as their interests. This implies a diagnosis of their needs, which will involve not just the young person but also the music leader and perhaps others depending again on context. It is complex, it is difficult. One thing is for sure, in this field music leaders deal with the practice, informed by, but not fettered by, the theory. Some theoreticians want all the practice to be always congruent with these overarching theories. It isn't.

You have to be musically present, engaged with the music internally and externally, thinking about making it better all the time, and looking for ways to communicate that to young people so that they can improve their ability and their understanding of musical concepts.

Anita: What about developing young people's own abilities to judge their musical progress, that must be important if as you say, distance travelled is the most important criteria?

Phil: Quality musical outcomes in community music need to correspond with young people's needs and abilities. They might be similar in terms of the musical habits and practices they're learning, the way they're developing as musicians and they may coincide with external standards sometimes – you could have a group of young people at Grade 5 standard, but reaching that standard musn't dictate the musical journey.

So quality musical outcomes can have two meanings – what music is produced, or improvements in the ability and understanding of the musicians – both are desirable.

Music education work with children in challenging circumstances: drawing forth from within

Anita: So summing up, this 'pedagogy' is very much about finding ways to draw out young people's musicality. And 'to draw forth from within' is apparently what the latin word 'educo' means.

Phil: It's needs-based, about emotions and creativity. Why would you do music teaching in any other way? No-one would run an art class where people just copy the great masters. And it is possible to work very creatively in mainstream schools also, with large groups of kids. I developed a wider opportunities programme for 87 schools and the basic rule was, no young person plays someone else's music. They created their own music. But there aren't enough music leaders who are prepared to adopt that type of approach.