

Conference report

The 2018 BAMT Doctoral Research Symposium

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As the music therapy profession becomes ever-more collaborative with complimentary disciplines, it is increasingly important that practitioners and researchers from all fields have common platforms through which to communicate and thus inform our evolving practice. MacDonald, Kreutz and Mitchell (2012: 3-4) highlighted that the growing interdisciplinary field of music and health “necessitates novel approaches from right across the academic spectrum, including arts and humanities as well as the social and natural sciences”.

It seems timely, then, that on February 16th, 2018, the British Association of Music Therapy Conference (see Warner, Tsiris & Watson 2018) commenced with a Doctoral research symposium at London’s Guildhall School of Music and Drama. This pre-conference event, open to past, present and prospective PhD students, integrated music

therapy research and interdisciplinary perspectives on the arts in health, while offering space for dialogue between fledgling theorists, current researchers and venerable experts.

DOCTORAL DIALOGUES

Rachel Darnley-Smith, a PhD supervisor, trainer and writer at Roehampton University, and Donald Wetherick, a professor and PhD student at Guildhall School of Music, opened the morning with a session entitled *Speed Data*. Over the course of an hour, participants met in a series of six-minute, one-to-one interactions, with a piano melody from Wetherick signifying the time to wrap up and move on.

The format proved hugely effective at throwing people together whilst avoiding any academic hierarchy. As a practising music therapist at the

beginning of their PhD journey, the chance to hold such in-depth and personal conversations with a series of more experienced researchers proved invaluable. Consequently, the first panel of the day began with a sociable and inclusive atmosphere, rather than the delegates simply being an audience for the elite.

THE MUSIC THERAPY DOCTORAL JOURNEY

Chaired by Wetherick, the first panel of the day, *The Music Therapy PhD Journey*, consisted of members spanning the full spectrum of experience, from early PhD students to experienced researchers and PhD supervisors. The full line up was: Luke Annesley (researcher, music therapist and potential PhD student), Dr Rachel Darnley-Smith (PhD supervisor, trainer and writer from Roehampton University), Alexandra Giorgaki (Music therapist and current PhD student at Anglia Ruskin University), Irene Pujol Torras (Music therapist and current PhD student at Guildhall School) and Dr Stuart Wood (Researcher, writer and PhD supervisor at Guildhall School). After brief introductions, Luke Annesley posed questions to the panel while integrating comments and further questions from the audience.

Answers to the first line of enquiry – ‘What routes do we have in the PhD journey?’ – initially touched upon funding. While some panel members mentioned funding themselves through the process, they also advised people to research different programmes, charities and the NIHR, as funding is available from a variety of sources.

The discussion then moved towards a more subjective dialogue on the importance of autonomy in developing individual PhD approaches and values. In particular, Stuart Wood stressed the extended learning process of a doctorate and suggested one must be aware of who they are as a learner before deciding their route as a researcher. The rest of the panel echoed this sentiment and encouraged everyone to be full participants in decisions that lead towards their PhD. They encouraged asking a number of questions, including: What do you want out of your programme? Do you want to be in an environment of mostly music therapists or amongst an interdisciplinary team? Who will you be speaking to in the end and What do you want in a supervisor?

The discussion closed after considering ‘the data thread’, which links a researcher’s journey, whether at the beginning or final stages of their doctoral studies. In determining where to start,

where to go or what to do when it is all over, we were encouraged to consider the story that our own experiences with data may present to us as a key to navigating the ‘next step’ dilemma.

THE FUTURE OF MUSIC THERAPY RESEARCH

The second panel of the day, *The Future of Music Therapy Research*, was chaired by Rachel Darnley-Smith and featured: Professor Leslie Bunt (writer, trainer and PhD supervisor at University of the West of England), Dr Sarah Hoskyns (trainer, researcher and PhD supervisor at Victoria University, Wellington), Dr Julie Sutton (music therapist, writer and PhD supervisor at Belfast HSC Trust; Sutton sent her contributions as she could not attend) and Dr Giorgos Tsirir (editor, trainer and researcher at Nordoff Robbins Scotland and Queen Margaret University). After introductions, they shared their hopes for the future of music therapy research. There was a clear consensus on the need for sustainable social and cultural research seeking to connect with other disciplines. As music therapists continue to strengthen their legitimacy as health care professionals, it is important to note how many prominent researchers are emphasising that our studies must acknowledge the ever-changing definition of health within society.

Subsequently, the members were asked which areas of research and methods they feel are the best fit for music therapy practice and, additionally, which approaches are applicable and why. Although the breadth of this topic could merit its own conference, it was interesting to hear recurring themes that should be looked at with more scrutiny in the future. These themes included: the link between methodology and research questions; the development of underlying philosophical paradigms; and the search for ‘hard evidence’ within a ‘soft practice’. The last point in particular encouraged the delegates to consider whether our continual struggle to produce objective evidence is warranted in a profession where the basis of our work, music, is a subjective art form. Lastly, the panel called for methods and approaches that produce humanitarian applications and, in particular, ones that serve to benefit the client.

CONCLUSION

As the final session wrapped-up, it was clear that all delegates were incredibly enthusiastic for the continuation of doctoral dialogues. Benefits cited

included the provision of clear pathways to those embarking on the PhD journey, the enhancement of learning for those already engaged in studies and the direction of post-doctoral researchers who have the means to influence a developing field.

It was abundantly clear that by connecting our research community, we can further explore the intersection of a variety of philosophies and practices in order to develop our understanding of music's therapeutic values. With so many of our profession's burning issues pushed front and centre during the symposium, it will be fascinating to see the advances made by delegates between now and what will be a highly anticipated subsequent PhD seminar.

REFERENCES

- MacDonald, R., Kreutz, G., & Mitchell, L. (Eds.). (2012). *Music, Health, and Wellbeing*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
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