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**"What constitutes competent professional practice within Community Music East?"**

**Author's note**

Community Music East Ltd. (CME) is an independent organisation with charitable status working in community education through the medium of music. Users of the project include schoolchildren, both able-bodied and disabled, youth, the general public, young offenders, prisoners, adults with mental and/or physical disabilities and young people with mental health problems. The organisation provides in-service training to a range of professionals from the care, education and arts sectors as well initial teacher training for B. Ed students and as part of post-graduate music teacher training courses in university.

The following paper was written, in part at least, as an internal and formative research exercise examining the nature and implications of evaluation in the work of CME: an exercise in trying to set a context in which colleagues might be encouraged to examine their work confidently, accurately and critically. It achieved its objective in that it started something that will never be finished, a conclusion that all of us at CME are only just beginning to fully understand.

## INTRODUCTION

Here we are on the rack of identity, purpose and function again! Perhaps this seems a rather extreme reaction to what appears to be a fairly straightforward question. Organisation implies structure, structure implies hierarchy (or at least a demarcation of functions/roles), roles imply an identification of a mix of skills and abilities necessary to perform satisfactorily and if they are in place the functionaries are, presumably, competent and professional and so, by definition, is the organisation.

However, the cause of this initial and angst-ridden response is that my organisation, Community Music East (CME), and the profession of which it is part, is relatively new, perceives itself as radical and unofficial in its objectives and approach, and is, in many cases, perceived and valued as radical and unofficial by its establishment users. However, we are often valued because we can and are free to do what official professionals can't or won't do and, as such, are, apparently, not constrained by what might be termed the proper limits of a profession; the need to be officially qualified or even the need - possibly - to have a "proper job".

Consequently a tension exists between how we are appreciated as competent and professional artists and how we are assessed as competent and professional tutors/providers/(teachers), the latter being a role that is often closer to, more sacred to and more rigidly possessed by the beholder. Though this tension can, on rare occasions, be useful to exploit, it means that we often have to prove ourselves to be more than competent and more than professional in order both to get the work and to do it. CME tutors are highly skilled musicians who do not pass on packages of information but use their knowledge and skills to support a learning process that encourages critical cognitive development in participants and students. Klemp (1977, pp. 2-4) describes what he calls "process skills" as "factors in the success equation" when outlining the value of intuitive approaches to professional endeavour based on knowledge, understanding and experience. These process skills are:

- a) *linked cognitive/conceptual faculties,*
- b) *interpersonal skills and*
- c) *a high degree of motivation.*

Klemp's identification and descriptions of these skills not only recognises necessary abilities for a community music tutor but also the fundamental and developmental objectives that underpin his/her work. He emphasises,

***the conceptual skills that enable us to bring order to the informational chaos that constantly surround us."***

And on Interpersonal Skills,

***Fluency and precision in verbal communication is important, of course, but often it is the nonverbal component of communication, both in the sending and receiving of information, that is far more eloquent and effective.***

The tutor's participation, within the group, in the interchange of perceptions (the informational chaos) in a workshop and the sharing (sending and receiving) of information, verbal, non-verbal and musical, is essential to both the process and objective. The activity is concerned with dialogue, the objective is clear but the outcome is unknown. In some contexts as we have been brought in, or have negotiated entry, we are there out of understanding and goodwill at best and on sufferance at worst. As outsiders we can negotiate with groups and often become very intimate because we carry fewer institutional trappings (i.e. authority, status, power) than official staff. This relationship can be identified as positive by an enlightened teacher, for instance, if they see they can build on the experience with their students. But our practice can be, and sometimes is, damned by criteria for competence and professionalism that are not our own (most frequently for not controlling environments by using authority, status and power and for not achieving behavioral and educational objectives that have been assumed by staff for the project. This raises whole new issues of expectation and negotiation that require a whole new paper). However, if we attempted what was sometimes expected of us we could, and certainly would, be rightly accused of claiming a professional status which was not due to us.

## **THE COMPETENT AND PROFESSIONAL PRACTITIONER**

**"It's like deja vu all over again!" - Attributed to Yogi Bera.**

The terms "professional" and "competent" have values attached to them by practitioners at different levels of intimacy to each individual concerned. All these levels are further confused because they impinge on each other. However, I believe that every practitioner - in any profession - should address these personal value issues constantly and that this is a positive and valuable process, a point that I will return to later. Five relatively distinct and identifiable levels at which competence and professionalism ought to be, and probably are either consciously or subconsciously, considered by practitioners are:

- 1. Confidence in their own knowledge, understanding, ability and practice in order to identify the objectives they set themselves.*
- 2. Confidence in their own knowledge, understanding, ability and practice in order to deliver the objectives they set themselves.*
- 3. The degree to which their knowledge, understanding, ability, behaviour, working objectives and practices are valued and understood by those they work with (i.e. students or participants).*
- 4. The way and degree to which their work is valued and understood by other practitioners in the same profession (i.e. colleagues).*
- 5. The way and degree to which other professionals and professions understand and value their work.*

So these, I would suggest, are likely areas of reflection by the practitioner on their competence and professionalism. The definition (pre-research) of these attributes from the point of view of CME and its expectations of practice I would propose are:

**Competence - an expression of knowledge, understanding, experience and method.** The ability to;

- a) identify and recognise the educational environment,*
- b) make judgements about individual and group needs,*
- c) relate such judgements to considered aims,*
- d) consider appropriate processes to achieve aims,*
- e) implement processes and stimulate dialogue,*
- f) reflect on and assess progress,*
- g) reconsider all decisions and actions if necessary,*
- h) seek advice, support and help if appropriate.*

**Professionalism - an expression of attitude. The ability and versatility to behave in appropriate ways with all interested and involved parties in order to achieve aims and objectives and secure maximum levels of engagement, participation, understanding and support.**

In the context of CME the essence of competence is an awareness of the limits of knowledge and experience and the intent to extend both (for participants and tutor) through appropriate methods in any situation. The essence of professionalism is to behave in any and all ways appropriate to achieve the essence of competence.

This view of competence equates with the "generic construct of competence" outlined by Norris (1991, p. 332) and is based on "broad clusters of abilities which are conceptually linked" (Elliott, 1989, p.98) and "an aggregate of skills, information and motivation" (MacDonald et al, 1987, p. 192). Competence and professionalism are not static states; they are developmental ones. The refusal of any individual to recognise that they should experience ongoing growth of knowledge and understanding would negate any claimed status as a competent professional.

## **WHAT DOES THE PROFESSION THINK?**

As yet there is no nationally, let alone internationally, accepted qualification for a community musician. This is, in part at least, the case because there is, as yet, no nationally accepted definition of this vocation. At the International Society for Music Education (ISME), 1990 Seminar in Oslo, Norway entitled "The Community Musician - training a new professional" a week was spent

discussing experience and practice from all over the world. These deliberations were summed up in a concluding statement that said:

***Community music activity is taking place in many countries. The forms it takes vary from place to place, and the methods by means of which community music workers are equipped - or equip themselves - to undertake their task are also many and varied.....Community music is characterised by the following principles: decentralisation, accessibility, equal opportunity, and active participation in music-making. These principles are social and political ones, and there can be no doubt that community music activity is more than a purely musical one." (Olseng, 1991, pp. 83-84)***

The Statement then pointed to "four areas of necessary competence". These were: communication, facilitation and animation, musical skills, administration and concludes;

***...community music work is a specialised musical activity, which requires its own education and training programmes.....Training programmes must... be centred in the community (and) must be adapted to local needs..." (Olseng, 1991, pp. 85)***

Comprehensive, and yet indeterminate, as this all may sound it is interesting and comforting to a degree in that it appears to reconcile two fundamentally different approaches. One, which I believe ISME originally started from, is that there are many highly trained musicians being produced by conservatoires who are not going to work in their chosen careers and who need to be equipped for other vocations that will use their skills and provide employment. It is fair to say that the development of community music skills in this context has now been generally recognised and recommended (by Commission members at least) as an essential, independent and parallel part of higher education programmes rather than an optional add-on.

The other approach is characterised by the community up response; the identification of needs and the skills to tackle the needs within the community itself. As the result of the experience of actually doing the work so far many practitioners from this camp feel that they have identified training needs, albeit in an adhoc way, and that the skills they have developed are more relevant as they are rooted in practical work. However, the potential identification of qualifications and access to higher education to confirm and extend their skills, abilities and professional identity is attractive to many. If the conservatoires represent the formal sector and these community workers, often self-trained, the informal sector there are, rooted in the informal but growing out of it, organisations such as CME who have always seen structured training as essential to the development of the professional, the profession and the work. If we bear all these sector snapshots in mind as well as the "professional performing artists" (orchestral musicians) he was writing of when we look at Kushner's (1991) summing up, he describes the professional community music identity crisis very well.

*The point is that the work of performing artists in community institutions will eventually pass from the "flirtation" stage ..to a more demanding and sophisticated one where many musicians will be asked to stick around for long enough to explore the complexities faced by the community professionals they collaborate with. Already there are signs of pressure for greater sophistication.....and..of competition among performing arts traditions for a leading position in setting standards for these interactions. The accountability machine is on the move. The more performing artists know of the real nature and implications of their work in these unfamiliar settings, the more control they will have over its direction and the better able they may be to defend it.*  
(Kushner, 1991, p.24)

The references to standards, accountability and defence are significant particularly as Kushner is writing about prestigious orchestras and opera companies here; organisations that are high profile; cultural flagships. I think this is a view we have to take very seriously for, though some providers from all sectors have got to grips with training, an awareness of the social context and the implications of accountability, and I would count CME amongst these, a public perception of adhocery and impermanence prevails that could allow "the profession" to be swept away on the political winds of change.

## **THE CASE STUDY**

This June Monday morning is overcast, not so much cold as dank, the kind of weather that might get a lot better or might just get sticky. The Vauxhall Centre is a sprawling pre-fabricated building that is clad with wood on the outside. The workshop takes place, every week, in the artroom which is on the front corner of the building, slightly isolated from the main body of the centre which is a hive of other activities.

The Vauxhall is a day centre for people with physical disabilities, many of whom also have a learning difficulty of some sort. It used to operate under the credo of providing productive work experience for its users, selling its cheap, labour-intensive services to local businesses. The ideology has now fundamentally changed and the centre is very much "owned" by its users and boasts a very impressive programme of creative activities in which users can opt to take part.

So we are in the artroom. Two sides of the room are all windows over-looking the car park, the access road to the centre and one of the two tower blocks in Norwich. In one corner there is a kiln which has a cage built round it, next to that is a potters wheel and, in the corner where the window walls meet, a large and ancient electric typewriter. There are lumps of tree trunk and piles of newspapers on the floor, raw materials, and, on one wall, a display of collages made from pictures of flowers. The large, solid wooden tables have been pulled to the side and a circle of assorted chairs is set out.

I arrive at the same time as Jon, the workshop tutor, and we carry the equipment and instrument cases into the room. The group, who are already there as always, greet both of us as we come in. Jon has been running this workshop on his own for about fifteen months now, prior to that he was part of the regular team during his training with CME. The group also know me as I have covered for Jon and other tutors several times in the past, most recently two weeks before. After the "hellos" I am engaged in various, simultaneous conversations to do with girlfriends, boyfriends and motorbikes while Jon sets up the keyboard/synthesiser on one of the tables.

Seated in the circle are Helen, Rachel, who is new to the group this week, Dawn, Rachel's helper and also new, Kevin, Dominic, Jean, Jon, Steven, Anne and myself. Most of the group are (at a guess) in their twenties except Jean, Anne and myself who are older. Two regulars are missing; Maurice and Clifford, and we wonder if we should wait for them and if they are alright for it is rare for them to miss a session.

After a few minutes wait and chat we decide to start anyway. Jon holds up a pale blue, plastic, egg-shaped shaker. In contrast to its size and appearance this instrument makes a very dynamic sound. Jon explains what we are going to do. The egg travels around the group, each one of us plays it for a while before passing it on. Most of the group find this easy and free, the two most awkward players are Dawn (Rachel's helper) and myself. Interesting that I find participating, rather than leading, quite intimidating. We try the same idea with a tambourine; most find this a bit harder but I and, I think, Dawn find it easier than the egg as it is a more "official" instrument. Jon then produces an orchestral triangle which looks very impressive as it is spring mounted in a smart handle. Jon points out that this instrument only sounds one note and plays it. He then passes it on to Steven who immediately gets at least two different notes out of the instrument. This new possibility is then explored by each in turn; Rachel (who only uses one hand) is helped by Steven who crosses the room to hold the triangle for her. When the instrument returns to Jon he accepts it with a wry smile and, announcing that he had made a mistake, plays as many different sounds as he can.

The activity then develops into a musical "pass the parcel", a description that causes a brief discussion about Christmas. One participant gets up and plays the keyboard whilst a percussion instrument is passed around the group. The egg, which is first, is passed on only when the keyboard player stops. The piece is designed to explore interactions and dynamics between the players with particular responsibility falling on the keyboard player as they are invested with a lot of authority. Every time the keyboard player is changed (after a circuit of the group) an extra percussion instrument is added. By the end everyone in the group has a different instrument after each pause. Each "controller" at the keyboard has the opportunity to create different feels in the music by using tempo and volume and rhythmic and arhythmic approaches to influence the collaborations. At first the keyboard is set to the drumkit which accesses a huge range of drum and other percussion sounds. As a result most of the contributions are lively and mostly rhythmic, often causing spontaneous foot-stamping and shouting amongst the group. The exception was Anne who took an exploratory approach, intrigued by the different sounds that could be produced. At first the rest found this a bit disconcerting and then they began to interact with greater freedom and confidence which inspired and pleased Anne who has very little speech and therefore limited possibilities for communication.

Jon then announced that it was break time. Most of the group stayed in the room whilst Steven, Dawn, Jon and myself went to get the drinks. The break gets extended as, just as we are about to restart, Jean and Rachel (both in wheelchairs) need to be taken to the toilet. Jon is getting a bit anxious about the time as the rest of the group have yet to have a turn at the keyboard. While we are waiting Jon

sets a piano sound on the keyboard. He is asked if he can play the "Sound of Music" (by Dominic) or "Edelweiss" by Steven) and he pleads the need to have practiced them first!

Rachel is next at the keyboard and inspires a delicate and sparse improvisation which is all the more impressive given the quantity and nature of percussion played by the group; bongoes, tambourine, shaker, triangle, rhythm blocks, tongue drums, agogo bells and maraccas. Then it is Dawn's turn; she looks awkward and starts to play "chopsticks" and then plays another tune - we all know it but can't remember the name - taught to her by her mother, who is a piano teacher. She asks if she can change the sound and Jon says "yes". Immediately the sound is changed from the "piano" she begins to explore and improvise with an obvious sense of new found freedom and adventure.

We are getting very short of time and Kevin, Dominic and Jean have to share two rounds between them. Kevin is playing enthusiastically when Jon calls to him that he hasn't got his hearing aid on; he music and Jon's comment are clearly heard by Kevin who smiles. Dominic plays rapidly and skillfully, totally absorbed in this opportunity. (Jon described Dominic as "very dexterous" when we spoke afterwards.) After Jean has had a turn it is 12.30 and the group quickly departs, returning instruments to the case on the way out, shouting "goodbye" and "see you next week".

## **FIRST THOUGHTS**

Jon is conscious of the respect and trust he has from the group and sometimes feels some pressure as a result - concerned that he doesn't let them down - anxious to make sure that they all get their turn, for instance. Before the workshop began he had said that he wanted to try something and then go on to another piece that we had not, in the end, looked at. Discussing it afterwards he said that this session had been more "group led", that it looked at individuals exploring and exercising control of the rest of the group and that it contrasted with the "more skills-based approach and more formal pieces that are still fun" of the usual sessions. The session had developed naturally into this extended piece (pass the parcel) and it seemed right to carry on with it.

I had not been overly aware of Jon during the workshop tending to focus more on the activities and experiences of the participants. I see this as positive, nothing had concerned or distracted me from the process taking place within the workshop and the enthusiastic engagement of the participants. The group, given a structure to work with and able to rely on Jon, felt able to actively explore the space they had been given. They demonstrated considerable self-discipline, confidence and mutual respect during the workshop, even the new members, and an ability to consider and interact that was impressive. This reflects a situation in which the individuals were both comfortable enough and enthused enough to experience and learn.

Whilst I feel that the workshop was competently and professionally run, at the very least, I also sensed that Jon was applying an internal critique (a bit beyond reflection in action [Schon, 1983]) that may have been related to changed workshop plans, the frustrations of delays (the start and break) leading to shortened "turns" at the end and the pressures of the evaluation process.



## THE OVERVIEW AND OTHER VIEWS

This case study is a good example of what constitutes competent professional practice in my organisation. It demonstrates an educational event that was achieved through identification (situational understanding derived from considered experience), judgement, consideration, the stimulation of dialogue, reflection in action, assessment and a keen awareness of, and sensitivity to, the manipulative potential of the tutor's role. Summary evaluation within the workshop process is reflected by the nature of the group's participation; who they are and what they do.

The meanings of the terms competent and professional are agonised over by practitioners and there are schools of thought that favour an emphasis on the individual or the task or the situational context. Essentially I believe that for CME the meaning of these terms is defined through all these views in continuous concert. The nature of this holistic approach is best tackled in the process of training and continuing professional development stemming from reflection on practical experience. The fundamental principles of this approach are well expressed in Elliott's (1993, pp. 66-68) "key premises underlying the practical science perspective". All these premises underpin the abilities needed by a CME tutor and the training CME provides. Essential references are:

*(ii) The practical situations public service professionals confront in relation to their "clients" are increasingly experienced as problematic inasmuch as their particularity, complexity and fluidity makes them difficult to predict, laden with value issues and dilemmas, impossible to stereotype and resistant to clear cut and fixed solutions.*

*(vi) Professional knowledge consists of repertoires of experienced cases which are stored in a practitioner's long term memory and represent his or her stock of "situational understandings".*

*(iv) Wise professional judgements and decisions rest on the quality of the situational understandings they manifest.*

*(vii) Professional judgements and decisions are ethical and not simply technical in character.*

*(viii) Systematic reflection by practitioners in their practical situations plays a central role in improving professional judgements and decisions.*

The paradigm of competent and professional (CME) practice underpinned by Elliott's premises would compare favourably with Dreyfuss's (1981, p. 25) example of the "expert" in his table of skill/mental development in that the "component recognition" is "situational", the "salience recognition" is "present", the "whole situation recognition" is "holistic" and the "decision", and by definition the practice, is "intuitive".

<b>SKILL LEVEL</b> <i>Mental Capacity</i>	NOVICE	ADVANCED BEGINNER	COMPETENT	PROFICIENT	EXPERT
component recognition	nonsituational	situational	situational	situational	situational
saliency recognition	none	none	present	present	present
whole situation recognition	analytical	analytical	analytical	holistic	holistic
decision	rational	rational	rational	rational	intuitive

Other important perspectives on these issues are:

- a) *how CME's competent professional practice is seen by others and the values they attach to these terms,*
- b) *the way these values and the judgements they inform are influenced by recognising individual qualities as well as competence levels in practitioners and*
- c) *the issue of standards and who defines them.*

I conducted four "paper interviews" (note 1) with interested parties which were Gill and Ann, Creative Activity Coordinators at the Vauxhall Centre, Nicky, CME Board Member and an arts administrator and Steve, CME tutor and musician. In response to a requested definition of competent professional practice Nicky and Steve provided a list of "thoughts...in no particular order" (Steve) and "acceptable skill levels" (Nicky) which included:

*..content...presentation (i.e. the ability to communicate with clarity and precision, ability to adapt to a situation, etc.)....preparation (i.e. consideration of needs of group, planning of available time, use of resource material, etc.)...reliability... administration...humanity.. - Nicky,*

and

*1. Recognition and acceptance of each successive job brief... 2. Planning and continuous assessment of work... 4. Gathering and assimilating information/criticism from interested parties... 6. Recognising and respecting the resources of the project... 7. Maintaining client group identity..'' - Steve*

These responses are very much prompted by a task-oriented perspective of the whole and reflect a managers's expectations and a tutor's view of similar areas of concern and ability. Gill and Ann saw the question in a situational context from a client organisation's point of view,

*...(provider) organisations and trainers go through a planning process with client organisations and/or groups. ...they, together, set aims and objectives for the work and undertake and evaluate it in such a way as to promote "best practice". This assumes that we all know what "best practice" is....Being professional means that they (CME tutors) should know their field well and, where appropriate, be trained. They should be able to impart their knowledge in such a way which is appropriate to the group and to individuals. - Gill.*

Ann's approach was more philosophical:

*Since CME works with people, I would define "competent professional practice" to be primarily consideration and respect for those people." - Ann*

The trouble with competence, and professionalism for that matter, is that they are, from the practitioner's perspective, statements about establishing generalisable norms and standards; they are about security and status; they are de-personalised; "everybody is for standards and everyone is against incompetence" (Norris, 1991, p.331 - my emphasis). The individual only enters the frame when their performance is being assessed or evaluated and this, sadly, can tend to be a negative or, at least, defensive experience for the practitioner who suddenly finds him/herself to be exposed and on their own.

In answer to the question "Can the term "competence" be value-free?" the answers were a consistent "no" reflecting the perspectives of the interviewees already described.

*The term implies judgement of either past or projected performance - Steve*

*Even where criteria and evaluations are standard, i.e. democratically agreed, there will always be dissent from some groups and individuals. Therefore (competence) cannot be value-free. - Gill*

*The skills involved in achieving "competence" must be measurable, although they would need to be measured within a number of situations. If they can be measured they must have a value. However these values may well reflect the attitudes and expectations of those involved in the evaluation...rather than being scientific and purely objective measurements. - Nicky*

*"Competence" like ability cannot be value-free in a society which places achievement on the same level as wealth and*

*power... We can all be competent at something but I doubt if we can just be competent, it must relate to a specific skill. Certain skills are more valued in our society than others.*  
- Ann

These descriptions appear to echo the experience and expectancy of quantitative rather than qualitative judgement of individual endeavour; assessment of the comparable function rather than evaluation of the individual practice. In its holistic approach CME strives to achieve what Gill called "best practice", something, I think, beyond the norms and standards of competence and professionalism, through a philosophy of "people first". This marries the individuals (tutors and participants), the task (provision of workshops, projects, training courses, etc.), the situational context (work environments) and personal and professional development (individual and collective knowledge, experience, awareness, reflection and skills development) in a form that secures the practice by consensus through flexibility and dialogue.

*(Competence) is loaded with assumptions of efficiency and productiveness which, in turn, (are) dictated by values that our society places on individuals to achieve wealth, power and status and, therefore, belittling human achievements, i.e. motherhood, disability politics, etc."* - Ann

So, it is back to the beginning and, to misquote Monty Python, "Everybody expects the Spanish Inquisition!"

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Note 1. - paper interviews - written answers to written questions that were negotiated with the interviewees to be considered in sequence. The responses are presumed to have been approached in this way.