

# Vaguely Artistic: Disabled Musicians as Experts in an Inclusive Community Music Project in Higher Education, From a Social Confluence Perspective

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Photographs by Paul Stewart-Davies and Beth Pickard



This poster presents a project developed as part of a music module on a Creative and Therapeutic Arts degree, seeking to recognise the expertise of disabled musicians in preparing community musicians for professional practice (Lerner and Straus, 2006; Lubet, 2011; Lubet, 2014a), communicated through an experiential learning project design (Elflein, 2009; Mortimer, 2017). The existing members of inclusive punk rock band, *Vaguely Artistic*, were consulted by the artistic director to consider whether they were interested in engaging in a pedagogical collaboration. With the band's investment in the project, an organic framework emerged for a music student to become immersed in the work of the band and to become an honorary member for a semester. This pedagogical design draws from Lubet's (2014a) theory of social confluence, where the disabled musicians are recognised as authorities rather than service users through their specialism and insight in this particular domain, and this transforms their social role.

The university brief was broad and encouraged the student to develop her understanding of inclusive music practice through her lived experience of being a member of *Vaguely Artistic*. She was encouraged to explore a composition-based and arrangement-based activity with the group, in a collaborative and participatory context, as well as writing a critical reflection on this experience. The student's engagement in the rehearsal and creative process as well as her final performance was assessed. To accompany and contextualise the practical project experience, a series of theoretical seminars were taught where rich discussion was facilitated around contemporary theories of disability and popular music and the student was encouraged to critically consider how her lived experience related to these existing theoretical frameworks (Lerner and Straus, 2006; Waltz and James, 2009; Straus, 2011; Lubet, 2011; McKay, 2013; Howe *et al.*, 2016). The student, Tanya Dower's, perspectives are presented and explored below.

Essentially, I think, what working with *Vaguely Artistic* did as far as learning from the members of the group as the experts is concerned, was to **allow me to let go of any preconceived ideas about what an 'inclusive' music group should be**. It can be anything it wants to be. It can be music focussed, it can be disability focused, it can be activist, it can be socially cohesive...it can be fun!

“insider / outsider”

“disability / ability”

“amateur / professional”



Coming into the group with my own 'agenda' of achieving a grade and was mindful that there may be a structure of roles that each member had. I was eager to make a **positive impact and build relationships of trust**, while looking out for opportunities to join the creative process without being intrusive. I observed the loose, nonlinear style of contemporary popular music group practice (no scales or theory, no standardised way of learning) and subsequently could contribute to the **organic process of developing ideas in a free form improvisational way**.

Listening to sounds made, suggestions from members for the structure and arrangements of a piece of music and absorbing how different members learned, retained and played their parts; **the experiential process allowed me to move through a series of dichotomies where I became more insider than outsider, more social/musician group member than academic, less negatively focussed on barriers and more positively focussed on empowerment**.

Learning became a convergent two-way process, where we had the opportunity to negotiate those perceived dichotomies or opposing identities through musical and creative interaction.



Through these creative encounters, I really did feel a **shift in understanding and direction of identity**, not only my own but of my perception of those around me; a transference and countertransference of energy.

“Through teaching *with*, and *by*, rather than *about*, we in music education may move beyond normalizing understandings and practices of inclusion, towards an expanded notion of professionalism.”  
(Laes and Westerlund, 2018, p. 34)

The outcomes of the project were multi-faceted. There was significant learning from a pedagogical perspective about developing innovative assessment designs which enable authentic learning in context, but also the challenges of aligning this with university policies and expectations (Jung, 2011; Piacitelli *et al.*, 2013). The student remained as a permanent member of *Vaguely Artistic* and has since been performing locally and internationally with the group at a range of mainstream, inclusive arts and disability arts events. The student's critical reflection shared a wealth of valuable insights regarding her lived experience of working with *Vaguely Artistic*; namely of multiple dualities and dichotomies in her experiences. Dower (2016) insightfully discusses the duality of being disabled/non-disabled, outsider/insider, academic/social group member, and the negotiation of process/product and articulates with passion and insight the impact of learning from experts in their field.

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