**Module**: MD6072 Writing and Documentation of Arts Practice 2 (taken via MD6052 - Independent Study 2)

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Annotated Bibliography

## Phelan, H., and Nunan, M. (2018) ‘To write or not to write? The contested nature and role of writing in arts practice research’, *Journal of Research Practice*, 14(2), Article M3, available: <http://jrp.icaap.org/index.php/jrp/article/view/592/492> [accessed 28/01/2022]

* Creative practices are knowledge generating, though it might not be easy to articulate this knowledge through means other than the practice itself.
* Arts practice research does not necessarily need to include a written component, but it often does.
* The written component of the research can flow between a variety of modes, as dictated by the needs of the research itself.
* Writing can be used in a traditional academic mode to provide analysis, explanation and context for the arts practice research, or to document a practice using an autoethnographic approach, or in a generative mode integral to the arts practice itself.

### Quotes

Members of faculty at the IWAMD are

of the view that the appropriation of ethnographic methods has the capacity, if not handled very carefully, to “tilt” the written component of the research away from the practitioner’s account of their practice (and, as a result, subtly undermine their research).

(Phelan and Nunan 2018, p.10)

tidying up uncertain situations and unassociated ideas may be indicative of a failure to deal with the complexity of the world and a desire to assert the self, rather than reveal/discover it (Winnicott, cited by Evans, 2007).

(Phelan and Nunan 2018, p.12).

### Reflection

This article gives an overview of the place of writing in arts practice research, both internationally and at the IWAMD. A central point of the article is that the choice of how to use writing in arts practice research need not be dictated by ideology, and can be informed by the nature of the research itself. In light of this, that university regulations stipulate a written element of 40,000 words for doctoral arts practice research projects indicates that there is still room for a greater acknowledgement of the value of epistemic practices in and of themselves. From a practical point of view as student in the IWAMD it is very useful to see how the institution itself frames the question of writing for arts practice research, and to see examples of how other researchers have used the written word in their work. The article provides a great starting point for thinking about what place writing might take in my own future research, and shows the value of experimenting with different written modes to discover what is useful (or not) in allowing my artistic research to contextualised, understood and disseminated.

## Nelson, R. (2013) ‘From Practitioner to Practitioner-Researcher’ in *Practice As Research in the Arts: Principles, Protocols, Pedagogies, Resistances*, London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 23-47.

* Following the author’s multi-modal approach, a PaR project will include: a documented product (e.g. a performance captured on video), documentation of the artistic process, and a complementary written element.
* This multi-modal approach allows access to the different forms of knowledge, such as know-how (tacit embodied knowledge), know-what (heuristic, tacit knowledge made explicit through critical reflection) and know-that (propositional knowledge).
* Systematic critical reflection is a defining feature of PaR, and may differentiate it from arts practice outside the academy.

### Quotes

A good reason for artists to engage with ‘the academy’ is the richness of intellectual environment and defamiliariztion [sic] it affords. I do not subscribe to the romantic model of the lone artist in a garret inspired by his or her muse; in my experience, inspiration comes through working with, and sparking off, others. The research dimension also requires stepping outside the process to reflect on it.

(Nelson 2013, pp.28-29)

My use of ‘praxis’ is intended to denote the possibility of thought within both ‘theory’ and ‘practice’ in an iterative process of ‘doing-reflecting-reading-articulating-doing’.

(Nelson 2013, p.32)

it is a challenge to express ourselves fully and to articulate our thinking clearly in any mode of discourse (including arts praxis) and … we should take advantage of a range of modes of expression, particularly in respect of articulating a research inquiry.

(Nelson 2013, p.35)

Know-what, unlike know-how and know-that, is not an established mode but, as I construct it in the model, it covers what can be gleaned through an informed reflexivity about the processes of making and its modes of knowing. The key method used to develop know-what from know-how is that of critical reflection – pausing, standing back and thinking about what you are doing.

(Nelson 2013, p.44)

### Reflection

The author outlines adjustments that have had to be made on the part of practitioners and institutions to enable Practice as Research (PaR) to find its place as a recognised form of doctoral research in the UK. Practitioners must be aware that all arts practice is not necessarily research (as it is understood in the context of a university) and, to enable arts practice research, universities must recognise arts practice as a mode of knowledge production. The author’s own approach to PaR balances these considerations. His model of PaR is not necessarily what might arise if one gave full acknowledgement to epistemological practice as a means of knowledge production. It attempts to find a way of doing PaR that can work within the institutional traditions of the university, while also being acceptable to practitioners. This pragmatic approach allows PaR to benefit from the institutional structures of universities, which allow access to funding for research, provide accreditation and enable knowledge to be disseminated. The author’s multi-modal approach to PaR (which includes many forms of documentation and written components to complement the artistic output) aligns with the mission of academia to share knowledge. The author also shows how this multi-modality may well reflect the complex of activities that form the artistic practice at the heart of the research, while also supporting the authors conception of ‘praxis’ as cycle of ‘doing-reflecting-reading-articulating-doing' (Nelson 2013, pp.32). I find that well-established ethnomusicological practice of thick description give further credibility to this multi-modal approach.

## Nelson, R. (2013) ‘Conceptual Frameworks for PaR and Related Pedagogy: From ‘Hard Facts’ to ‘Liquid Knowing’’ in *Practice As Research in the Arts: Principles, Protocols, Pedagogies, Resistances*, London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 48-70.

* The primacy of objective, positivist knowledge has been called into question throughout the last century, not least of all in the scientific disciplines from which that concept of knowledge initially emerged. This opens the door to other forms of knowledge being accepted as valid in academic research.
* In place of objective truth we should strive to present knowledge in a situated, contextualised way, and reflexively expose the processes we use as researchers in constituting new knowledge.
* Effective arts practice research rigorously relates the different forms of knowing (know-how, know-what, and know-that) to each other; each form of knowledge contextualises the others, aiding understanding and dissemination.

Quotes

In place of hard facts, Geertz ultimately produced ‘thick description’.

(Nelson 2013, p.49)

If there is no secure, neutral basis for establishing objective knowledge in any discipline, and if there is no firm ground from which to make a ‘truth language’ claim of superiority for science, history or philosophy among competing micronarratives, it is incumbent upon all disciplines, including the sciences, to offer a reflexive account of their methodology and the rigour of its internal methods.

(Nelson 2013, p.55)

[Gilbert Ryle] also marks an important distinction between habitual (or formulaic) practices and those in which intelligence and innovation are manifest and I take this as the basis of a distinction between arts practices which may be research and those which are not.

(Nelson 2013, p.61)

Theory ... is not prior to practice, functioning to inform it, but theory and practice are rather ‘imbricated within each other’ in praxis.

(Nelson 2013, p.62)

Reflection

An aim of the author is “confirming PaR as a valid arts research methodology with a distinctive approach to rigour” (Nelson 2013, p.48), and rigour is repeatedly emphasised as fundamental to PaR. Ironically, the author is not so rigorous in explaining why rigour is so essential to his conception of PaR; it is instead presented as a self-evident truth: “Research in the arts needs, however, to demonstrate a rigour equivalent to that of the sciences” (Nelson 2013, Chapter 3, p.39). His point that it is the responsibility of each discipline to account for “the rigour of its internal methods” (Nelson 2013, p.55) does at least show that rigour is most properly defined in relation to a particular research discipline. Nonetheless, perhaps critical reflection by Nelson on the concept of rigour itself is warranted here.

I can see how, in most arts practice research contexts, rigour is beneficial and desirable. However I think it would be especially useful for arts practice research to consider values and yardsticks not borrowed from traditional academic practices. Instead of **requiring** arts practice research to be rigorous, should it not be allowed to explore other ways of fruitfully navigating the unending sea of knowledge? I find it hard to disagree with Nelson’s pragmatic approach to PaR, and I can see how it enables research practitioners to productively engage with academic institutions. However, I feel that his desire to make PaR “fit” with current institutional imperatives precludes more radical forms of arts practice research, as he acknowledges:

I would find it difficult to advise, or even engage with, somebody who insisted that everything was intuitive (in the sense of inspired by a muse) since it would seem to place everything beyond pedagogy, indeed beyond analysis.

(Nelson 2013, pp.63-64)

For me, a desire to be rigorous could steer the researcher towards a way of searching for knowledge that is at odds with their arts practice. Rigour might emphasise quantitative approaches over qualitative ones. Again, I do accept that rigour is likely to be very important to the vast majority of arts practice research; at the same time it would be nice to leave the door open to other approaches, and accommodate the most unruly of artists.

## Kinney, J. (1979) ‘Classifying Heuristics’, *College Composition and Communication*, 30(4), pp.351-356, available: <https://doi.org/10.2307/356710>.

* A heuristic is a process used to search for a solution to a problem, in this case to write creatively. A heuristic need not necessarily be systematic.
* The author identifies three styles of heuristic process: rational, empirical, and intuitive. Each of these relate respectively to different ways of knowing: through reasoning, through experience of the world, or through “non-linear immediate understanding” (Kinney 1979, p.353, quoting Robert Ornstein).
* Examples of intuitive heuristics are brainstorming, writing of free-association lists, concrete analogy, transcendental meditation, keeping a dream diary, and freewriting with a summing up.
* The process of freewriting with summing up allows the creative person to alternate between states of “immersion” and “perspective”, allowing an engagement with subconscious intuitive thinking to be used productively.

Quotes

“True empiricism is learning by doing, by action, by participation and sensation.” (Kinney 1979, p.353)

On Rohman and Welcke’s concept of concrete analogy: “an organizing, concrete metaphor is used to probe an abstract subject” (Kinney 1979, p.354).

On the intuitive heuristic of “freewriting with a summing up” (Kinney 1979, p.355):

Once those flashes, those felt somethings, those holistic, intuitive perceptions are allowed to leap out through the de-automatizing effect of freewriting and take linear form, the writer can step back to a rationalist perspective, analyze, reorganize, and develop as much as necessary to make these newly discovered thoughts available to a reader.

(Kinney 1979, p.355)

### Reflection

Although a bit dated, this article provides a good starting point for me to think about different types of heuristics and their uses in creative practice. I had come across the concept of heuristics when studying computer science, where it was described as a rule-of-thumb that could narrow a large field of search. In the context of my own research, where in some way I want to explore the space of all possible rhythms, I felt the need for some method to narrow this (possibly infinite) conceptual space. This would allow me to zone in on those rhythms that were humanly possible and musically useful. The heuristic I hit upon was “movement”: instead of trying to think about abstract, one-dimensional rhythm patterns and their articulation, I would think about what musically useful movements were possible with that complex system made up of my body, a stick, and a bodhrán. Using this heuristic of “musical movements afforded by my body and instrument” I would follow the embodied, extended logic of my body and instrument to find useful rhythms. Kinney’s division of heuristics into rational, empirical and intuitive seems a bit brittle to me; the heuristic I have just described seems to me to be rational, empirical and intuitive all at once. I did find that the various examples of heuristics given by him resonated well with my own experience, and the connection he makes between empiricism on one hand, and doing, action, participation and sensation on the other, is insightful.

McCaw, D. (2007) ‘Taking Clive Seriously for a Moment’, *New Theatre Quarterly*, 23(4), 337–351.

* Theatre games (as described in his 1977 book Theatre Games) were central to how Clive Barker helped actors learn to access body movement in a way that was conducive to his conception of physical theatre.
* Theatre games allow actors to engage with a certain form of consciousness that allows performed movement to be responsive in a theatrical context, rather than being rehearsed, thought out or habitualised. Barker held that this approach to movement was essential to engage and communicate with an audience.
* Although not always theoretically sound, Barker’s methodology is largely in agreement more rigorous studies of the body, brain and movement (such the work done by Moshe Feldenkrais, and contemporary scientific study of the brain and body).
* Barker’s ideas could be developed if more consideration is given to recent work on the interdependence of body and mind, such as by Feldenkrais, Thomas Hanna and Antonio Damasio.

Quotes

If there isn’t a constant flow of movement, then, he would argue, that performance is dead. Clive’s training was geared to sensitize the actor to this feeling for interaction.

(McCaw, 2007, p.338)

‘The keynote to all the work is that it is a process of exploration and discovery, not the direct acquisition of practical skills which the actor does not possess. The acquisition of skills is a by-product of the work.’

(McCaw, 2007, p.338. Quoting Clive Barker in Theatre Games, 1977)

This was a really important principle for Clive: first you play the game ‘for its own sake’ – for the pure fun of playing it – then you explore ‘what can be expressed through it’. At first the game is a way of releasing surplus energy ... and only then do you move on to the heuristic or investigative stage.

(McCaw, 2007, p.340)

Clive’s whole theory of vitality, spontaneity, and truth in performance comes from his understanding of this principle, which involves letting go of conscious control so that ‘reflective nervous activity’ can take over.

(McCaw, 2007, p.344)

[Phelim McDermott] meant that the actor should open him or herself up to what is happening around them; they should draw ideas from what is actually out there, rather than ‘having ideas’ about themselves (and which result from them having withdrawn themselves from their surroundings into their own thoughts and imaginings).

(McCaw, 2007, p.344)

As Grotowski repeated throughout Towards a Poor Theatre, theatre is an event that happens here and now, and not a repetition of a series of remembered gestures and postures.

(McCaw, 2007, p.345)

[Thomas Hanna’s linking of movement and sensory impressions] lends weight to Clive’s ideal of acting – a state of being moved on to your next movement by the ripples that were created by your last movement.

(McCaw, 2007, p.348)

Reflection

When I read this article I was struck by how Barker’s approach to movement in theatrical performance resonated with my own idealised conception of musical movement and interactivity in the context of Irish traditional music. This idealised conception is not the only way of thinking about movement and interactivity in the performance of Irish traditional music, but I believe it is appropriate and useful. As a thought experiment I began substituting “musician” for “actor”, “tune” for “game” and so on, when these terms arose in the article, allowing me to imagine the ideas expressed in the context of my musical practice. What emerged was an overarching goal of performing in an interactive state of flow with one's collaborators and audience. Barker’s use of theatre games provided a structure for actors to explore this sort of responsive, improvised, interactive movement in a way that could subsequently be “carried over from playing the game into the rehearsal of the play” (McCaw, 2007, p.341), and presumably on to actual performance. I am especially interested in this aspect of the practice, that it enables learning, rehearsal and performance all to flow into one another. I wonder if there are parts of my practice that I could conceive of as analogous to Barker’s theatre games, and if I could develop such “bodhrán games” with reference to the work of Barker, Feldenkrais, Hanna, Damasio and others.

## Keil, C. (1995) ‘The Theory of Participatory Discrepancies: A Progress Report’, *Ethnomusicology*, 39(1), 1–19, available: <https://doi-org.proxy.lib.ul.ie/10.2307/852198>.

* Keil’s theory of Participatory Discrepancies was motivated by a desire to emphasise those processes of a shared musical performance, such as groove and texture, which are not well-accounted for in structural views of music, such as those common in the study of Western Art Music.
* Participatory Discrepancies (referred to as “PDs”) are perceptible, albeit minute, differences in execution between performing musicians, across any musical parameters such as rhythm, timbre, and pitch.
* Embodying and apprehending PDs accounts for a large part of the appeal of music subcultures such rock, jazz, polka and many other traditions globally; they are central to creating the “vital drive” (Keil, 1995, p.1) of a participatory performance.
* The author contends that PDs are learned, patterned, and measurable by objective electronic means.

### Quotes

There is no essential groove, no abstract time, no "metronome sense" in the strict sense of metronome, no feeling qua feeling, just constant relativity, constant relating, constant negotiation of a groove between players in a particular time and place with a complex variety of variables intersecting millisecond by millisecond. Abstract time is a nice Platonic idea, a perfect essence, but real time, natural time, human time, is always variable.

(Keil, 1995, p.3)

[Steven] Feld's idea that many processual PDs may be "in synch but out of phase" is borne out.

(Keil 1995, p.7)

Getting your hands on the discrepancies, developing wrights or PD controlling skills, putting your whole self into the discrepancies, getting the muses incorporated in your own body, is liberating.

(Keil 1995, p.11)

… what I have been calling the participatory discrepancies in musical time-processes and tone-textures are both essentially micro-rhythmic phenomena: the slightly different initiations of sound waves in time rubbing against each other, and the slightly different sustained sound waves through time rubbing or "beating" against each other.

(Keil, 1995, p.12)

… I think we have to assume that the split-second and subliminal, out-of-awareness timing that generates the "in synch but out of phase" plucks and taps of swing, is learned, "tacit knowing" (Polanyi 1962) at some level and that negotiation, give-and-take, imperfection, are constant.

(Keil 1995, p.12)

The PDs and the swingwrights who control them are probably the foundation of all human rites and are certainly the core of trance-dances and ecstatic communions in cultures all over the globe.

(Keil 1995, p.13)

### Reflection

Keil’s style of writing is interesting to me, somewhat atypical of what is found in much academic discourse. He is not afraid to express his passion and zeal for a topic, and this paper in some respects feels like a call to arms:

Music is about process, not product; it's not seriousness and practice in deferring gratification but play and pleasure (French 1985) that we humans need from it ...

(Keil 1995, p.1)

He seems to eschew direct definitions, instead giving a thick description of his theory of participatory discrepancies in the form of anecdotes, concrete example and impressionistic description. I found his ideas hard to get a handle on at first, but ultimately I found this approach to be nuanced and thought-provoking.

This theory seems to me to be a very powerful way of describing and reasoning about the ephemeral processual structures that make social musical performance so compelling for all participants, not least of all with regard to Irish traditional music. The enlivening, complex sound experience involved when musicians play with set dancers in a traditional Irish context is particularly well-accounted for in the theory of PD. It also relates directly to the current focus of my bodhrán practice, where I am very literally getting my “hands on the discrepancies, developing wrights or PD controlling skills” (Keil 1995, p.11). And I do feel liberated!

Motor Structure as a Heuristic for the Development of Bodhrán Expressivity

# Introduction

I began learning the bodhrán at about the age of twelve, over the summer holidays in 1990. I was bought a bodhrán and stick, along with Mícheál Ó Súilleabháin’s tutor book (Ó Súilleabháin 1984); at that time bodhrán wasn't taught formally, and so I learned myself. I played at home with family, and later we went to sessions and played with others. In 1993 I was placed first on bodhrán at Fleadh Cheoil na hÉireann. Now, almost thirty years later, I still play regularly in solitary practice, with family and friends in pub and house sessions, and occasionally on stage. I teach bodhrán and guitar, and over the years I have played guitar and sung in rock, metal and folk bands in the Irish underground scene, as well as professionally in wedding bands. I returned to third-level education in 2016, studying bodhrán under Colm Murphy (of De Danann) at UCC. More recently I have studied bodhrán with Jim Higgins at the Irish World Academy of Music and Dance.

This arts practice research project attempts to evaluate the exploration of motor structure (Baily and Driver 1992, p.63) as a means of developing musical expression in my bodhrán playing. In this written component of the research, I will contextualise my own playing within current bodhrán performance practices, with reference to relevant academic literature and online video resources. I will describe the methods of my research, the data generated by the various research modes, and discuss findings related to the research question that emerged from analysis of that data. Hyperlinks to footage exemplifying certain bodhrán performance practices are used throughout the text (and collected in Appendices A and B), and the reader is encouraged to engage with these.

# Bodhrán Performance Practices

Little is known about bodhrán performance practices prior to the instrument’s popularisation in the 1960s (Cunningham 1999, p.21). Furthermore, Cunningham’s research found that “there remains a significant lack of published and unpublished academic work that deals specifically with the performance styles of bodhrán playing” (Cunningham 1999, p.21), and over twenty years later, Harte similarly finds that “despite a number of introductory pedagogical texts, the bodhrán has not been fully explored in an ethnographic sense” (Harte 2020, p.2). Harte highlights a shift from hand playing styles to the now more common use of a stick as a beater (Harte 2020, p.23), but his text provides only high-level descriptions of common playing practices on the instrument, with no detailed analysis of the embodied rhythmic structures of bodhrán playing.

Cunningham references five stick-playing styles identified by professional player Tommy Hayes: ‘Kerry Style’, ‘West Limerick Style’, ‘Waterford Style’, ‘Tambour Technique’, and ‘a style peculiar to Tommy Hayes’ (Cunningham 1999, p.22). Beyond identifying these playing styles and describing the basic hand postures that differentiate them, detailed description of their usage is given only in the case of ‘Kerry Style’ (Cunnigham’s thesis centers on detailed analysis of the playing of John Joe Kelly, whose hand posture conforms to this style). Here and in his later work, Cunningham acknowledges that

Bodhrán performance cannot easily be categorised into different regional styles; it is more easily defined by referring to the manner of performance peculiar to an individual, or to a group of players.

(Cunningham 2011, p.72)

As suggested above by Cunningham, using regional styles to characterise bodhrán playing technique is problematic; players from the same geographical region often use different techniques, and same techniques are shared across geographical regions. Here in Table 1, I offer a translation of the five stick-playing styles mentioned, to concretely reference well-known players who exemplify them.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Hayes’ Categorisation** (via Cunningham) | **Categorisation by Exemplar** | **Examples of Technique** |
| Kerry Style | Peadar Mercier (and the majority of players) | <https://youtu.be/5VN-sWGKO3s?t=30> |
| West Limerick Style | Seamus Donoghue (rare) | <https://youtu.be/pOLIJUq9Lg0?t=65> |
| Waterford Style | Mel Mercier (rare, but very similar to Peadar Mercier style, but with use of a loop to attach stick to the middle finger) | <https://youtu.be/qzN5zivcwYE?t=27> |
| Tambour Technique | Sean Ó Riada (rare) | <https://celtic-music.ru/wp-content/uploads/2012/06/Sean-O-Riada-croped.jpg> |
| a style peculiar to Tommy Hayes | Tommy Hayes (rare) | <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Xtfl_2jvfD8&t=95s> |

**Table 1: Categorisation of bodhrán performance styles**

As described by Cunningham (1999, pp.21-23) the different playing styles identified in Table 1 are differentiated by the particular way a player grips the stick: what I term the ‘grip posture’. My research explores the particular movements of the stick in striking the bodhrán skin afforded (Gibson 1977) by different grip postures, to evaluate a grip posture’s potential for unique musical expression.

My research approach is supported by the concept of “motor structure” as developed by Baily and Driver:

The way of playing a particular genre of music is characterised by certain patterns of movement that are specific to that style. These motor patterns, which in a sense "lie behind" the music, may be said to constitute the motor structure of that style. The motor structure consists of certain overlearned patterns of movement which are established by learning structurally related pieces that embody these patterns. (Baily 1977:329). **Fundamental to the motor structure of a style are certain basic postures and hand positions.** A given spatial layout may suggest quite different lines of musical development, each spatially logical in its own way. **Basic postures and hand positions may set the parameters of what will develop as a motor grammar**.

(Baily and Driver, 1992, p.63, my **emphasis**)

This research has resonances with other arts practice research which directly consider the importance of movement in the context of creative practice, such as Diane Daly’s investigation into the effect of Dalcroze Eurhythmics on her classical violin practice (Daly 2022), and Brendán de Gallaí’s work in the closely related field of Irish step dancing which explored "potential expressive possibilities in Irish step dancing and address these possibilities through … choreographic work” (de Gallai 2013, p.6).

# Research Method

This project uses an arts practice research methodology to investigate the effect of using motor structure as a “heuristic” (Kinney, 1979) for developing the expressive possibilities of the bodhrán. Arts practice research (sometimes termed practice-as-research) is an academic research discipline that “positions artistic practices at the centre of the research endeavour” (Phelan and Nunan 2018, p.2). Arts practice research acknowledges that “epistemic” (Phelan and Nunan 2018, p.10) creative practice is itself knowledge-producing, and that this knowledge can be communicated as research through a variety of modalities, including through the arts practice itself, any appropriate documentation of that arts practice, and in writing, as described in Robin Nelson’s multi-modal approach to practice-as-research (Nelson 2013, p.26). My research question can perhaps only be answered through this type of arts practice research; in exploring and evaluating the expressive possibilities afforded by unusual motor structures of my bodhrán playing, I must rely on my creative faculties and musical judgement in the “doing-thinking" of performance (Nelson 2013, p.61). Communication of this embodied, embedded, enacted and extended knowledge (van der Schyff et al. 2018, p.5) is well-served by Geertzian thick description that uses autoethnographic journaling, video documentation and academic writing.

As is evident in online video streaming and social media platforms (see Appendix B: Unorthodox Bodhrán Motor Structures), a variety of different motor structures (not limited to the five styles referenced above) are used by bodhrán players to construct the distinctive motor grammars of their playing style. As I have shown, this variety of motor structure is not described in detail in the sparse academic literature, perhaps unsurprisingly given that the very large majority of players seem to rely exclusively on the particular motor structures popularised by Peadar Mercier, and developed in turn by Johnny “Ringo” McDonagh, John Joe Kelly and the current younger generation of bodhrán players (see Appendix A: Orthodox Bodhrán Motor Structures).

Despite the theoretical possibility for unique expression afforded by the motor structures of a given grip posture, there is some truth to Cunningham’s assertion that:

In all bodhrán styles the player’s rhythmic repertoire comprises ‘down strokes’, ‘up strokes’, ‘doubling’ or ‘trebling’ and combinations of each.

(Cunningham 2011, p.72)

That is, no matter which grip posture is used, the rhythmic patterns generated by each are equivalent in some abstract sense. This brings us to the crux of my research question: exactly what expressive possibilities can be developed by exploring the motor structures of different grip postures afforded by a bodhrán stick? Up until recently, my own playing could be described as sitting squarely in the Peadar Mercier lineage, also incorporating a particular adjustment of this grip posture taught to me by Colm Murphy. In attempting to answer my research question I incorporated the more obscure Sean Ó Riada grip posture into my playing, to see what (if any) unique musical expression it affords.

# Motor Structure and Expressivity in Bodhrán Playing

To research the development of musical expressivity afforded by embodying unusual motor structures in my bodhrán playing, I dedicated a daily session of practice to focus on a particular grip posture, which I term [‘the Ó Riada grip’](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g6sw4ozuuiI&t=3396s) (Brian Sheehan 2022, Clip 14). Eamonn De Buitléar (associated with Ó Riada’s seminal ensemble Ceoltóirí Chualann, Bradley 2011, p.121) can be seen performing this motor structure: <https://youtu.be/2VjkR9GNqwo?t=19> (Pedro Fernández García, 2008). Exploration of this grip posture quickly extended to include another closely related posture which I term [‘Tommy-meets-Colm'](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g6sw4ozuuiI&t=259s) (Brian Sheehan 2022, Clip 3). These sessions (usually about an hour in length) included unaccompanied playing, playing to recorded music sources, targeted video documentation of my playing, and journal writing. Journal entries gave a broad account of the activities of a session, as well as my reflections on those activities. Between February 21st and March 18th, eighteen bodhrán practice sessions generated two data sets: eighteen one-to-two-page journal entries, and approximately thirty-four short video clips totalling just under two hours of footage (Brian Sheehan 2022, [available](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g6sw4ozuuiI) on YouTube unedited and indexed by clip number).

I performed a thematic analysis (See Appendix C) of my journal entries by selecting recurrent, related words (‘codes’), grouping these codes into clusters, and finally, identifying themes that emerged from these code clusters when taken in the overall context of the research process. Themes that emerged from this analysis were: ‘development of nomenclature’; ‘rhythmic nuance’; and ‘switching between grip postures’. These three themes are discussed below, with reference to relevant video clips of my practice.

## Development of Nomenclature

An unforeseen insight that emerged from this research was the value of developing succinct yet information-rich ways of verbally describing the embodied motor structures of bodhrán performance practice, which is as yet underdeveloped in the academic literature.

Rather than tying myself in knots trying to verbally describe complex three-dimensional musculoskeletal movements of the bodhrán-playing body, a convenient strategy emerged almost immediately in my journal writing. In my first journal entry (21/02/22), I used the term ‘Colm Murphy grip’ to denote [the way](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9iUNZ5YJVXA) (Conor O' Sullivan 2020) Colm taught me to hold a bodhrán stick. This way of identifying bodhrán techniques with reference to their well-known exemplars has been a feature of my conversations with bodhrán-playing friends, and with my tutor at the Irish World Music Academy, Jim Higgins. During lessons with Jim, we would frequently refer to “the way” a particular well-known player might execute a technique; techniques were exemplified with reference to Johnny “Ringo” McDonagh, Tommy Hayes or Dónal Lunny for example. For someone familiar with bodhrán playing, evoking these names indexes a wealth of information about diverse aspects of these individuals’ playing styles. For someone not so familiar with bodhrán playing, these names can be used to [access secondary sources](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gmQmpwrA_UM) (as is encouraged throughout this text), such as online video archives, to develop an audio-visual understanding the performance parameters in question. In this way, the language construct of a musician’s name indexes and is contextualised by first- and second-hand audio-visual knowledge of that player’s embodied techniques.

In my journal entries, I developed a shorthand for identifying grip postures based on this idea, and so many entries contain references to ‘Colm Murphy grip’ (or just ‘Colm’), [‘Ó Riada grip’](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g6sw4ozuuiI&t=3396s), ‘Tommy grip’ (after Tommy Hayes), ‘Ringo’ (after Johnny “Ringo” McDonagh). This idea is further extended in my second (22/02/22) and third (23/02/22) entries, where I begin to use the term [‘Tommy-meets-Colm’](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g6sw4ozuuiI&t=259s) to denote a certain grip posture that can be seen as a hybrid of the Tommy and Colm grips, and is also quite similar to the Ó Riada grip.

## Rhythmic Nuance

The abstract concept of a quaver rhythm at a given tempo can be embodied in practice using, for example, either the Colm grip or the Ó Riada grip. However, that is not to say that both articulations are equivalent. An important finding of this research project is that the different motor structures I explored express the same abstract rhythm in different, albeit nuanced, musically useful ways. Consideration of this question arose frequently in journal entries, such as here:

I keep questioning whether this method is actually creating anything new. This method being, the exploration of different grips and consequent stick movements and drum orientations.

[...]

Sometimes the difference is slight, but maybe something comparable to playing near the bridge or nearer the fingerboard on a fiddle. (sur pont Vs sur tasto?)

(Journal Entry 15, 15/03/22)

To convince myself that there is a valid musical reason for using the motor structures of the Ó Riada grip, I [directly contrasted](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g6sw4ozuuiI&t=5719s) (Brian Sheehan 2020, Clip 26) this posture with the Colm grip in performance, eventually concluding that they do in fact express the same abstract pattern differently:

I recorded an example of this [a slide pattern that switches between Ó Riada and Colm grips], and the equivalent articulation of this pattern in Colm alone for comparison. They are **same but different**. Playing it all in Colm grip sound [sic] flatter, more even, more consistent.

[...] Ó Riada adds a “wavering” unevenness to the phrase.

(Journal entry 16, 16/03/22)

Switching between Grip Postures

Overlapping with the above question of evaluating the unique rhythmic nuances afforded by the motor structures of the Ó Riada grip, the theme of ‘switching between grip postures’ was very evident in my journal entries. Given that the difference of articulation between the motor structures of the Colm grip and those of the Ó Riada grip (or the related Tommy-meets-Colm grip) tend toward slight rather than being extremely pronounced, it was found that these differences could be shown most effectively (and so, be used in the service of musical expression) when they are juxtaposed directly in performance as above. In this way, musical expressivity is not only found within one motor structure or the other, but also emerges in the discrepancies between them. In practice, this switching of postures can happen from bar to bar, or even within the bar. Early in the research I noted that “The feeling of exploring these grip transitions and the different textures created by each are very satisfying” (Journal entry 4, 24/02/22)

[It was found](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g6sw4ozuuiI&t=1329s) (Brian Sheehan 2022, Clip 6) that the switching of grip postures maps naturally onto the binary call-and-response phrase structure characteristic of Irish traditional dance music, where “melodic structures in this repertoire are largely constructed from bar-length motives to create 2-bar sub-phrases, 4-bar phrases, and 8- bar parts” (Doherty 2022, p.22). It also echoes the weight-shifting dynamic created by the bilaterally symmetrical steps of Irish traditional dancers:

I ended up trying to switch between Colm and Tommy-meets-Colm (TmC?) every bar. I like how this agrees with the natural phrasing of the tunes and echos the weight shift of dance steps from left foot to right foot.

(Journal entry 5, 25/02/22)

# Conclusion

In this written component of my arts practice research project, I used the concept of motor structure (Baily and Driver, 1992, p.63) to compare bodhrán performance practices which use a stick. By analysing existing performance practices in this way, I explained the motivation of this research to explore the ‘Ó Riada’ grip posture as a possible means of developing expressivity in my playing. I followed Nelson’s multi-modal approach to arts practice research (Nelson 2013) to produce and analyse two datasets: video clips, and journal entries which documented my daily practice.

My research found that a useful, succinct nomenclature for bodhrán stick “grip postures” can be developed by using the names of well-known exemplars to reference their corresponding grip postures. It found that musically-useful differences in articulation were evident when the same abstract rhythm was articulated with different grip postures; in particular, a difference in articulation was shown between the “Colm Murphy” grip posture and the “Ó Riada” grip posture in my own performance practice. Finally, it found that this difference in articulation can be further exploited for musical ends when grip postures are directly juxtaposed in performance; I taught myself to “switch between grip postures” to achieve a textural effect that can be used very effectively to express the nested symmetrical phrase structure of Irish traditional dance music in a unique, novel way.

It is perhaps this last finding that is the most significant contribution to the embodied knowledge of bodhrán playing. Although I found examples in the literature, and in common practice, of musicians using a variety of grip postures to construct their playing style, each player tends to use only one grip posture in their playing. This arts practice research shows that it is possible to switch between grip postures in the moment of performance, allowing a new palette of textures to emerge from a bodhrán player’s intelligent (Nelson 2013, p.40) use of movement in performance practice.

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Appendix A: Orthodox Bodhrán Motor Structures

Peadar Mercier (seated on left): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5VN-sWGKO3s,> <https://youtu.be/OQ_DWMbsgx0?t=32>

Johnny “Ringo” McDonagh: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gmQmpwrA_UM>

Colm Murphy: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9iUNZ5YJVXA>

John Joe Kelly: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qh3sR1LSLho>

Aimée Farrell Courtney: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kyteqPrKDg8>

Appendix B: Unorthodox Bodhrán Motor Structures

Tommy Hayes: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Xtfl_2jvfD8&t=95s>

Seamus Donoghue: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pOLIJUq9Lg0>

Éamon De Buitléar: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2VjkR9GNqwo>

Stevie McNamara: <https://youtu.be/EBwTNaGGPBE?t=38>

Louis Bingham: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6XGVHrvmM-w,> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DO0vRlFntws>

Spotlessshadow: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G3BMm3v7V4c>

Beaver Randolph: <https://www.facebook.com/beaver.randolph/videos/5616123838415820>

Miłosz Trzcinski: <https://www.facebook.com/100001223451927/videos/413680443632884,> <https://www.facebook.com/100001223451927/videos/4066448576739217>

Gerard Kinsella: <https://www.facebook.com/gerard.kinsella.161/videos/429071095183609>

Margaret Beckwith: <https://www.facebook.com/margaret.beckwith.50/videos/515216519702861>

George Duggan: <https://www.facebook.com/george.duggan.77/videos/10218755703539202>

Nicolas Dupin: <https://www.facebook.com/nicolas.dupin.bodhran/videos/10220101824438913>

(Facebook links require login)

Appendix C: Thematic Analysis

# Identify main emergent themes

**Developing nomenclature** (“grip postures” “Colm, Ó Riada, Tommy Hayes, Ringo” “switching” “perpendicular” “oblique” etc)

**Rhythmic Nuance** – Same but different, Participatory Descrepencies

**Switching between grip postures**

**Wellness and Workload**

# Name Code Clusters

Naming Grip Postures

Describing Playing Movements

Switching Grip Postures

Descriptions of rhythm

Musical Context of Practice

Nuance

Somatic Description

Potential for musical expression

Intuition

Novelty

Stress and College Work

Codes

## Naming grip postures

Colm Murphy Grip (1) Colm style (13) Colm (13,14,16,17)

Ó Riada Grip (1,4,6,7,10,11,12,13,14,15,16,17)

Tommy Hayes

Tommy meets Colm (2,3)

TmC (6)

Tommy Grip

Ringo (3)

Top-end grip (8,9)

## Musical Context of Practice

Dan Gurney (7)

Andy Martyn (7)

Brighde Chaimbeul (8, 12)

Johnny Doran Finbarr furey (10)

Caitlín Nic Gabhann (11)

Mícheál Ó Raghallaigh (12,13)

Emma O’Leary (16)

Aidan Connolly (17,18)

Jim Higgins (18)

Without music (4)

No music (15)

## Describing playing movements

Radius/ulna rotation

Straight-wristed (1,13)

Broken wrist (13

Wrist-hinging (2)

Thumb/index grip (1)

Balance point for the stick (5)

Nearby Ó Riada

Grips are related (4)

A link to the Ó Riada grip (4)

Allow transition (

Two extremes (13)

Angle (11,13)

Angled (17)

Vertical (17)

Turned bodhrán (13,14)

Drum position (14)

Rocking the drum (17)

Perpendicular (11,13,14)

Oblique (11,13,14)

Long muted beater (9,15)

Long stick (14)

Muted (14)

Open drum, sounds (9, 10)

## Nuance

Micro-rhythmic (9, 10)

Micro-rhythm (16)

Swing (16)

Detail (9)

Wavering (16)

Nuance (10)

Extra little flick (15)

Slight (11)

Difference is slight (15)

Slightly different (16)

Seeing how the different grip are related (4)

Greater sonic differentiation between the two disciplines (13)

Difference between (14)

Participatory discrepancies (15)

Equivalent articulation (16)

Same but different (16)

Almost identical continuous roll in the Ó Riada grip (4)

## Somatic description

Feels awkward (1,7)

Can’t fully control (5, 6)

Throws off the left hand (13)

Aren't reliable (12)

Control (9,10)

Controllable (8)

Muscle control (11)

Connection (11,13)

Connected (17)

Couldn’t connect (7,)

Purchase (10,11,13)

Lean into (10)

Comfortable (3)

Naturally happens

Natural position (13)

Aware of niggles (3)

Tightness across my shoulder blades (10)

Bothered by my shoulder (12)

A bit sore (12)

## Switching Grip Postures

Flipping over to Ó Riada grip (8)

Between positions (14)

Grip transitions (4,)

Different textures created by each [grip posture] (4)

Seeing how the different grip are related to each other (4)

A continuous downbeat roll in Colm grip transitions easily to an almost identical continuous roll in the Ó Riada grip (4)

Sonic differentiation between two disciplines (13)

Difference between (14)

Participatory discrepancies (15)

Equivalent articulation (16)

Same but different (16)

A link to the Ó Riada grip (4)

Switched from (Ringo to Colm 3)

Switch between (Colm and Tommy-meets-Colm, 5)

Switching between (8, 15,16)

Changes between (16)

Switched to charlie byrne (15)

Switching from Colm to Ó Riada (16)

Different switches (17)

Between (13)

The switch (9)

Mixing (16)

Sonic differentiation between two disciplines (13)

Orientation (13,14,15)

Weight shift of dance (5)

I like how this combo feels (16)

Boxer's combination punches (15)

Combo (16)

Experimenting with different switches (17)

Between the two disciplines [Colm style, Ó Riada with drum turned more parallel to chest] (13)

Between the two extremes of each configuration (13)

The crossover (15)

Continuum (13)

## Potential for musical expression

Sonic differentiation between two disciplines (13)

Different textures created by each [grip posture] (4)

Difference between (14)

Participatory discrepancies (15)

Equivalent articulation (16)

Same but different (16)

A continuous downbeat roll in Colm grip transitions easily to an almost identical continuous roll in the Ó Riada grip (4)

## Intuition

Seems like something worth putting some time into (6)

Seems to be the most fertile territory (14)

Dipping my toe (10)

Dipping into (17)

Useable (3)

Doable (9)

Possibly (8)

Should be possible (13)

Seemed like/to (8)

Interesting/promising feel (1)

Feels like (11)

I like how this combo feels (16)

## Novelty

Something I haven’t had before (6)

Strange (14)

Different (14)

Different intonation (16)

Different grips (15,16)

Newish (1)

Newer (9)

New (14,15)

Unique (15)

Uniquely intoned (17)

Creating (15)

Innovation (15)

Exploring new movements (4)

Exploration (15)

## Descriptions of rhythm

Quaver rhythm (1,4,11, 12)

Sur pont, sur tasto (15)

1-bar phrase (15)

Motor rhythm (1,12)

Ghost notes (6)

Triplet

Downbeat rolls (4)

Paradiddles (1, 6)

Diddles (6)

Doubles (6)

Cross-rhythmic

Accented (9,10)

Accents (14)

Articulation (9,15,16)

Attack (14)

Grooves (9)

Back-of-tricks (9)

Carry a tune (11)

Upstroke (1, 11,13)

Downstroke (1, 11,13)

Slides (15,16)

Pattern that seemed to fit that tune (17)

Seemed to fit well (17)

Fit very snugly (18)

Drop straight back into a more regular rhythm (8)

Humpty-dumpty (15,16)

Rashers and sausages (15,16)

Lurching pattern (17)

Pattern (16,17,18)

Associating patterns with tunes (18)

Varied intonation (16)

Intonation pattern (18)

Variations and permutations [of patterns] (18)

Flowing double-ended textures (9)

## Stress, college work

Stressed (7)

Struggle (7)

Frustrated (12)

Force-fed theory (7)

Not able to settle (12)

No satisfaction (7)

Drudgery (8)

Sick (7)

Workload (7)

College work (12)

So much reading to do (13)

Play for myself (8)

I want to keep playing (8)

Have to stop here (13)

Felt much better (8)

Struggle (7)

Feels achy (7)

Satisfying (4,

Great feeling (13)

Feeling good (17)

## Outliers

Stretches (4,5,)

Warmup (5)

Important progression (8)

Questioning (15)

Calibration (5)

Configuration (13)

Rotating (4,)

Wide circles (4)

Excursion (17)

Concentrated (11)

Align (13)

Enjoy, enjoyable, enjoyed (4, 9, 15)

Feels exhilarating (8)

Exciting (10)

Skittish (10)

I love piping (8)

Meditative (4)

Clears my mind (4)

Felt good (1)

Adjustment (1, 11)

Playing around with (8)

Happy medium (5,11,13)

Zone in (5, 16)

Focus (18)

Evenly spaced (16)

Unevenness (16)

Lands nicely (16)

Law of the lever (10)

Gravity (8,11)

Flatter, more even, more consistent (16)

Complex shifting rhythm (8)

Feels evenly spaced (16)

Mnemonic aid (18)

Charles Keil (15)

Brendan White (15)

Charlie Byrne (15)