

The TradLABB: A Framework for the Lifelong Learning Journey of the Irish Traditional Musician.

Liz Doherty 

Independent Scholar, liz@lizdoherty.ie

Abstract.

This paper proposes a new framework that is intended to enable and encourage the Irish traditional music learner to better understand his/her journey of becoming an Irish traditional musician. The TradLABB maps out the learning process as having, simultaneously, a progressive (horizontal) dimension and a depth (vertical) dimension. 'Trad' is an abbreviation of 'traditional' and 'LABB' is an acronym for Learning-Appling-Being-Becoming, the iterative cycle that has been identified as underpinning the process. The framework has been developed in order to help learners visualise the stretch of the journey involved, and to enable them to situate themselves along the continuum of learning at any given time. It is intended to support learners in taking more ownership of, and responsibility for, their learning, to understand the 4 key elements of the process, and to encourage them towards becoming more reflective practitioners. The TradLABB is also presented as a tool for traditional music educators. It challenges teachers to find imaginative ways to articulate previously tacit methods and approaches and encourages them to explore new and innovative ways of supporting learners at all stages of the journey.

Keywords: Framework; Irish traditional music; Iterative learning cycle; Lifelong Learning, Reflective practice; Teacher.

1. Introduction.

Irish traditional music is practiced within a wide range of contexts, both structured and unstructured, formal and informal, professional and participatory.¹ Multiple supports, structures and resources exist to accommodate learners of all ages and in any geographic location. The options and opportunities have grown exponentially since the 1950s, as increasing numbers of new and established organisations (e.g. Comhaltas, Na Píobairí Uilleann, Harp Ireland, Music Generation, Cairdeas na bhFidléirí) and events (e.g. Scoil Samhraidh Willie Clancy, Scoil

¹ These resonate with the range of typologies of professional development outlined by the National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education (2016).

Ghemhridh, Meitheal) have foregrounded the teaching and learning of traditional arts (music, song, dance). Further and Higher Education providers have increased their provision in this area, and the online space has seen an acceleration in growth of both synchronous and asynchronous learning platforms (e.g. Online Academy of Irish Music,² The Fiddle Clinic³ etc.). This has created a crowded and dynamic teaching and learning environment, one with a global reach. It contrasts sharply, of course, with the previous localised and informal transmission process, magnificently evoked by Seamus Heaney in *The Given Note*:

He took it

Out of wind off mid-Atlantic.

Still he maintains, from nowhere.

It comes off the bow gravely,

Rephrases itself into the air. (Heaney, 1998:36)

Developments in the teaching and learning of Irish traditional music have been the focus of much scholarly research (Cawley, 2013; Johnston, 2013; McCarthy 1990, 1999, 2004; Ó Canainn, 1978; O'Flynn, 2006; Vallely, Doherty, Smith, McGettrick, Vallely, Wilkinson, Moloney 2013; Veblen, 1991, 1994; Waldron 2009). Collectively, this work illuminates the rich tapestry of approaches and methodologies at play and, in particular, highlights the '*multiple, fluid and overlapping ways in which the traditional music community defines itself*' (Johnston, 2013, p.112). Becoming an Irish traditional musician involves 'enculturation' (Herskovits, 1948), defined by Merriam (1964, p.146) as 'the process by which the individual learns his culture'. This '*process of conscious or unconscious conditioning*' (Herskovits, 1948, p.9) is fluid; indeed, '*there is no apparent consensus ... about any activity that learners must engage with in order to develop as Irish traditional musicians ... [there is] no evidence that there is one culturally defined way in which to become a traditional musician*' (Cawley, 2013, p.322).

Within the community of musical practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Kenny, 2016) there is a tacit understanding that becoming a traditional musician involves a journey, across a sustained period of time. Ultimately, the process is one '*...in which newcomers slowly move from the*

² <https://www.oaim.ie>

³ <http://fiddleclinic.ie>

periphery towards the centre of a community of practice...' (Cawley, 2013, p.15). Progression is loosely guided by a general community consensus about where an individual is on the continuum of learning and development at any given time. This illuminates the reality that the Irish traditional music community is rich in wordless knowledge (Heneghan, 2004; Veblen, 1991, 1994).

Through custom and practice, some classification of practitioners has, nonetheless, been adopted. For example, those recognised as expert or master players within the tradition (both current and historical) are confidently (albeit, subjectively) identified. At the other end of the continuum, a tri-partite model of beginner-intermediate-advanced, is commonly utilised in order to organise and manage learners. This model, however, presents several challenges and, in particular, has contributed to some potentially limiting beliefs becoming widely adopted. The model properly captures the early part of the learning journey only, and aligns specifically to teacher-led scenarios (e.g. classes, workshops). However, it is often mis-interpreted as representing the entire stretch of the Irish traditional musician's learning journey.⁴ Such a belief is further compounded by the fact that, aside from Further and Higher Education options, there are few structured learning opportunities available for post-'advanced' learners⁵. This highlights a significant lacuna in the provision for learning for those who have progressed beyond the early-stages of learning, in other words, those who have exhausted teacher-led classes and workshop options, but who have not yet reached full mastery of the artform. Furthermore, learning at the upper reaches of the continuum, is not often visible. For masters of the tradition, the presentational side of their artistic contribution is generally prioritised, rather than the process. This compounds the perception that such artists exist in a post-learning zone. While this is not the case – and master players, in fact, engage in ongoing and deep learning – it, nevertheless, perpetuates a belief that it is acceptable (perhaps, even necessary) for learners, at the preceding stage of development, to disengage with (visible) learning.

This paper proposes a new conceptual framework that maps the complete stretch of the lifelong learning journey of the Irish traditional musician. It aims to present fresh thinking in terms of the

⁴ This thinking is further supported by the popularity of a graded exam structure within traditional music, where attaining Grade 8, while a significant milestone, is sometimes perceived as marking the end of the learning journey.

⁵ Classes for adult learners are generally aimed at those adults who are at the early stages of their learning journey, rather than late-teens/young adults who have progressed through the beginner-intermediate-advanced, teacher-led, model.

progression route involved, and to encourage something of a perspective transformation, in order '*...to allow a more inclusive, discriminating, and integrative understanding of one's experience and a greater capacity to act on those insights...*' (Mezirow,1990, p. xiv). The TradLABB framework includes, simultaneously, a horizontal dimension (to represent progression along the continuum) and a vertical, or depth, dimension (to represent the process). It maps out the lifelong learning journey of the traditional musician across 4 major milestones, from Beginner through to Expert level. The process, continuously engaged in at each stage of the journey, is one of Learning, Applying, Being, Becoming (LABB). It embeds self-reflection into the process in an effort to encourage the traditional music learner to more fully unpack the learning process by articulating, and thus making visible, everyday practices (Higgs & Titchen, 2001, p.95) at every stage of the journey. It ultimately supports the development of a lexicon around the learning and teaching of traditional music within the community, so that practitioners might, more confidently and convincingly, articulate their personal process of enculturation: the process of becoming a traditional musician.

2. A Reflective Approach.

'Transforming experiential and tacit knowledge into principled explicit knowledge ... about teaching requires ... intentional reflection for the purpose of making sense of and learning from experience for the purpose of improvement' (McAlpine & Weston, 2002, p.69). The TradLABB is the outcome of a process of deep reflection into a sustained period of personal experiential knowledge in the field of Irish traditional music. The value of experiential data is expounded upon by Anselm Strauss (in Maxwell, 2005, p.11), where he argues in support of the researcher's technical knowledge, research background, and personal experiences. His advice – *'mine your experience, there is potential gold there!'* (ibid.) - was the starting point for this work. I have been involved in Irish traditional music as a practitioner, learner and teacher, for over thirty years. During that time, I have systematically documented my experience in reflective diaries, memos, peer reviews and student evaluation reports, thus generating a rich body of personal data (1994-). It is through the process of re-visiting this material, and reflecting deeply on it through the lens of both teacher and learner, that I have been able to draw from this experience and thus inform and shape this map of the traditional musician's lifelong learning journey. The TradLABB has emerged from under the skin of my personal lived experience in traditional music.

Reflection is defined as ‘...*the purposeful framing and reframing of material in external or internal experiences ... with an intention in the learner of learning from the process*’ (Moon, 2004, p. 102). The process of reflection that led to the TradLABB was structured according to Moon’s ‘Generic Framework for Reflective Writing’ (2006, p.161). This outlines a 4-step process, moving from descriptive writing (Level 1) towards deep reflection (Level 4), where there is ‘*clear evidence of standing back from an event and there is mulling over and engagement*’ (Moon, 2006, p.162). In particular, in the zone of deep reflection, it is clear that there is “*learning to be gained from the experience and points for learning are noted*” (Moon, 2006, p.163).

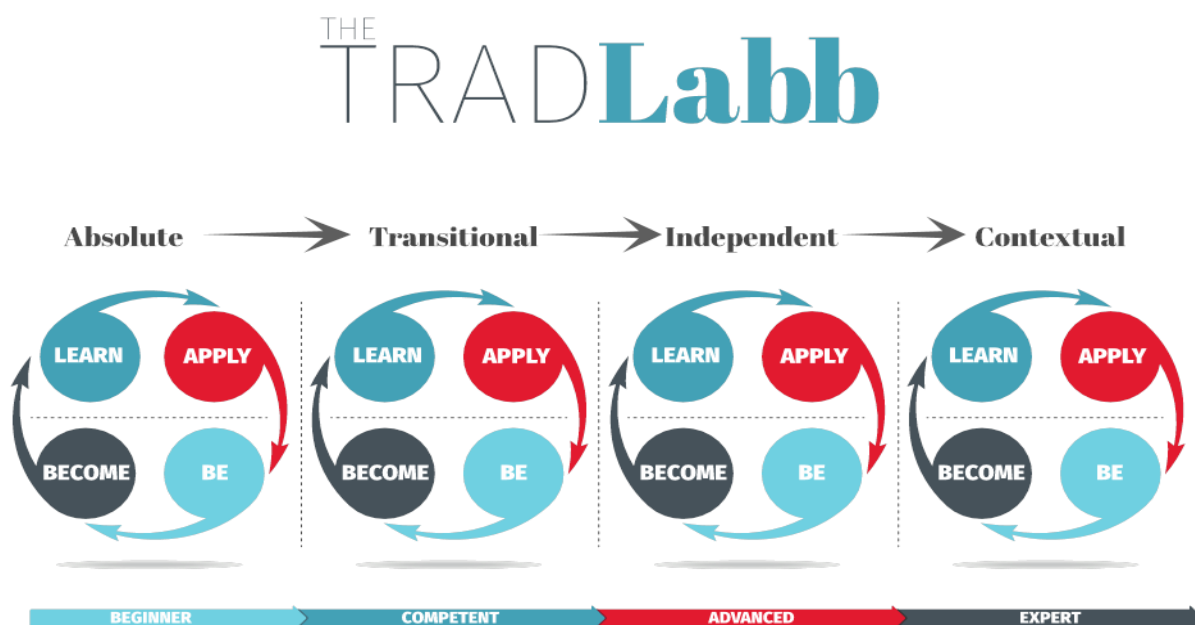
Emerging from this process of deep reflection on my personal experiential data, three core questions emerged around the teaching and learning of Irish traditional music that shaped the subsequent research:

1. What do traditional music learners need in order to develop a fuller understanding of the progression involved in their traditional music learning journey?
2. How can the learning process be clearly explained for the student of traditional music?
3. How can teachers better support students to understand and engage with their enculturation as traditional musicians?

3. TradLABB: The Horizontal Dimension.

Various models exist that outline generic progression routes in any given activity from novice through to expert level (e.g. Dreyfus, 2004). Theories of learning offer alternative paradigms (e.g. Baxter Magolda, 1992; Dewey, 1938; Higgs & Titchen, 2001), and several have been devised that specifically relate to music (Johnston, 2013; Jorgensen, 1997; Schippers, 2010). Each of these involves a continuum of learning, where a gradual increase in levels of engagement with, and ownership of, the learning is represented. The TradLABB captures the lifelong learning journey of the Irish traditional musician in a horizontal dimension, through 4 milestones: Beginner-Competent-Advanced-Expert. These are represented in a linear fashion, and establish discrete points along the progression continuum. Progression between stages should be fluid and ideally in a forward motion. There is no prescribed timeline (or associated age profile) for advancement.

Figure 1: The TradLABB: A map of the lifelong learning journey of the Irish traditional musician.



This horizontal dimension aligns with Dewey's principle of continuity of experience, where experiences that are worthwhile, educationally, '*...should do something to prepare a person for later experiences of a deeper and more expansive quality*' (1938, p.47). Each milestone on the continuum of learning is aligned with a stage of knowing (Baxter Magolda, 1992, p. 265).

For beginners, the stage of knowing is 'absolute' (ibid.). Here, the learner receives wisdom, follows example, and assumes an unquestioning role. Knowledge is a commodity: learners are there to get it, and teachers to pass it over. Gay McKeown, Director of Na Píobairí Uilleann, refers to this as 'transactional' teaching⁶; it also aligns to the 'banking' concept of education explored by Freire (1968). This stage of knowing is well serviced within the Irish traditional music community. Learners are typically shown how to hold the instrument, find the notes, and are introduced, sequentially, to simple repertoire and techniques, often through a process of imitation, where the student mimics the teacher.

⁶ Personal communication, 14/9/2020.

Competent learners are at a stage of knowing that is 'transitional' and where elements of certainty and uncertainty are both present (Baxter Magolda, 1992, p. 265). Learners are interested in understanding, rather than simply acquiring, knowledge; indeed, they need to understand in order to begin making their own judgements. In the context of Irish traditional music, the learner will present as being more curious and questioning. S/he will begin to listen more carefully, and become more aware of possible choices (e.g. around variation, phrasing, arrangement). Gradually, the learner will begin to experiment with those choices, representing a key moment in the awareness of the creative process and the possibility of expressing an individual style. At this stage of knowing it is critical that the teacher adjusts his/her teaching style and methods to accommodate the progressing learner, in order to appropriately and confidently encourage and support those changing needs.

Advanced learners, at a more 'independent' stage of knowing (*ibid.*), are beginning to form their own opinions, and are gaining confidence in expressing themselves. While learners may (understandably) feel that they have out-grown the widely available teacher-led learning supports available, it is, nonetheless, critical that other options are made available in order to support those learners direct their own learning. Peer-to-peer learning is important here (e.g. through sessions and in performance contexts); this highlights the value of the community of musical practice in this process. Also important is the on-going support and guidance of a 'more experienced' learner (Johnson, 2013, p. 208) in the form of a coach, mentor or masterclass facilitator - someone who is equipped to encourage the development of musical independence, to challenge and stretch the student, and provide a context for exploration. Without this type of learning support, advanced learners may find themselves stuck, under-motivated, and unsure about how to self-regulate and manage their own learning. This is particularly evidenced where learners have not been prepared, in the previous stages of the learning journey, for becoming independent learners.

The fourth, expert stage of the lifelong learning continuum, represents that cohort recognised as masters of the tradition - those experienced and influential individuals who demonstrate a high level of professional artistry, intuition, and contextual knowledge (Baxter Magolda, 1992, p. 265). Typically, there is a perception that such musicians have arrived at the end point of their

enculturation journey. Yet, these artists are still learning, still continuing to grow; indeed, it is their heightened level of critical self-awareness, their refined capacity for professional inventiveness and responsiveness to contextual circumstances, and their openness to continuous development, that allows them to maintain their position as experts in the field. Within Irish traditional music, learning at this level is often not visible. The focus is on the presentation of completed artistic works (e.g. performances, recordings) rather than the process involved. In terms of the lifelong learning journey, specifically in terms of situating all learners (from beginners to expert, and at every point in between) on a single continuum, it is imperative that we find ways to enable the learning happening at the upper ends of the learning journey become more visible to all.

3.1 The TradLABB: The Vertical Dimension.

In traditional music teaching and learning, significant weight is placed on repertoire.⁷ However, when we reflect on what a master or expert traditional musician looks like, we see and hear layers that go far beyond the tune, e.g. communication, authenticity, identity, process etc. Schippers (2005, p.33) suggests that we must constantly monitor not only the sounds, '*...but also the underlying systems of belief of the forms of music with which we engage.*' This '*...typically involves more than just the core subject of learning, in this case the music; it features an integrated learning on a more holistic level*' (Folkestad 2006, p.137). The TradLABB framework incorporates a vertical (or depth) dimension, in order to acknowledge the deeper, experiential learning and living aspect of becoming a traditional musician. This is represented by a perpetual, cyclical system of learning-applying-being-becoming, inspired by Higgs and Titchen's 'knowing-doing-being-becoming' model (2001, p.13). It allows the learner to take into account, at each stage of the learning journey, propositional knowledge (facts, techniques gained from learning), practice-generated knowledge (acquired from applying the learned knowledge in context), craft-knowledge (the previously wordless knowledge acquired through the lived experience of being a traditional musician), and personal knowledge (gained from the individual experience and the self, as one becomes a traditional musician) (ibid.). At each stage along the TradLABB continuum, the individual engages in a process of learning, applying the

⁷ '*... the initial imperative is to master a tune as soon as possible; preparatory work, such as learning about posture or developing a basic level of musical literacy, is not encouraged; the impetus is to get a tune "out" of the student as quickly as possible*' (Doherty, Wilson & McKeown, 2013, p. 1185).

learning, being and becoming as is appropriate to their particular stage of knowing. Therefore, the intrinsically motivated learner who is a Beginner, learns and applies the music and musical knowledge appropriate to that level, while being and becoming holistically engaged as a learner at that level. As s/he progresses to the next milestone and stage of knowing, the cycle begins again, although now starting from a more informed and engaged position, because of the prior learning and experience. This is a highly iterative process. It is a process whereby each individual ‘...*negotiates and renegotiates participation in the community of practice*’ (Matusov, Bell & Togoff 1994, p. 918) as h/she progresses along the continuum.

David Elliott’s praxial philosophy of music education (1995) is relevant here. This ‘...*integrates so-called practical and mental skills; it brings together doing, making, feeling, and thinking; and it complements action with reflection...*’ (Gruhn, 2005, p.105). So too is the work of Virginia Garrison (1985, p.268) who, in her study of traditional and non-traditional learning practices in the Cape Breton fiddle tradition, highlights the importance of the individual developing a sense of responsibility for his/her own learning. The TradLABB model highlights the ‘transformational imperative’ that is called for across the stretch of learning (Johnston, 2013, p.291), and encourages learners to take responsibility and ownership of their own learning by increasing their reflective capacity.

In order to support learners towards deepening their reflective practice, the following questions have been formulated around the cycle of Learning, Applying, Being and Becoming:

Table 1: A set of reflective prompts for structuring self-reflection for the traditional musician.

What am I doing in order to LEARN?	What am I currently learning? Why am I learning this? What am I gaining by learning this? How am I currently learning? Where am I currently learning? Who is helping me to learn this? What am I doing to support this learning? How do I know when I have successfully learned this?
What am I doing to help me APPLY that learning?	What am I doing/do I intend to do with this learning? Where am I going to apply it? Why am I going to do that? How am I going to do that? Who can help me do that?

	<p>How can I help myself to do that?</p> <p>How well am I doing this?</p> <p>How might I do this differently?</p>
<p>What am I doing to help me BE the best traditional musician that I can be right now?</p>	<p>How do I see myself as a traditional musician/learner right now?</p> <p>How have I engaged with the learning/applying thus far?</p> <p>How do I know all this?</p> <p>Am I happy to be at this point? Why?</p> <p>What are my goals going forward?</p> <p>Am I thinking beyond the music/the sound/the practice?</p> <p>Am I influencing/supporting anyone on my journey? How do I know this?</p> <p>What do I need in order to stretch/challenge myself?</p> <p>Does what I need currently exist? How can I avail of that support?</p>
<p>What I am doing to help me BECOME a better traditional musician?</p>	<p>Where am I at in my journey of becoming a traditional musician?</p> <p>Am I happy to be at this point? Why?</p> <p>Do I want to be at a different place?</p> <p>How can I get there?</p> <p>What is my motivation in learning? What/who inspires me?</p> <p>What personal values have I drawn on in my journey? How is this evident?</p> <p>What am I doing to continue to grow as a traditional musician?</p> <p>What do I need in order to stretch and challenge myself?</p> <p>Does what I need currently exist? How can I avail of that support?</p>

The questions are intended for everyone who identifies as a lifelong learner in traditional music. Responses will reveal the increased depth of experience as the learner progresses along the continuum. These questions can also be used by teachers, in order to help guide and support students towards becoming more reflective practitioners. The prompts above can be used to generate a descriptive account of the learning at any given time. This description can then become the basis for deeper reflection, though a process of further questioning, mulling over, standing back, and responding to those questions.

4. Impact of the TradLABB.

The TradLABB is offered as a practical intervention to support teachers and learners of traditional music through mapping out the lifelong learning journey of the traditional musician. It provides a framework that encourages deeper reflection and discussion around progress and process. It enables and empowers the traditional musician to make, what are often, “*taken-for-granted practices*” (Higgs & Titchen, 2001, p. 92) more visible. This is to support ongoing development and growth within our community of practice so that, as traditional music teachers and learners, we might be better equipped to appropriately and creatively respond to any new opportunities and challenges we might be faced with.

The TradLABB has been tested and refined through focus groups, workshops and robust interrogation from a wide network of critical friends from within the traditional music community (2016-). Qualitative data, gathered from participants⁸ enrolled the online programme 'A Framework for Teaching Irish Traditional Music',⁹ reveals how using the TradLABB model has impacted positively on their individual teaching and learning practices¹⁰ :

'[The TradLABB is] ... encouraging me to apply a deeper level of thinking in my teaching practice ... it's motivating me as a teacher to think outside the box, seek out, and apply new skills.'

'I've learned so much about myself as a musician and as an educator and noticed so many things that I have shied away from ...without even being aware that I was doing so.'

'I was able to write down valuable notes on how to overcome challenges and deal with issues ... because you have made it easy for me to identify and write down the many reasons why I should.'

'The TradLABB is framed and stuck up on the wall where I teach. It has challenged me to re-think some of my practices and try out new ideas – and I can just see the students' brains starting to think in a different way. Amazing. I love it!'

'Never mind traditional music – this model will resonate with literally every music teacher of any genre. Indeed, I hope that more educators in vastly different fields come in contact with your TradLabb structure'.

⁸ Participants enrolled on online course September 2020-January 2021. This is the first widespread dissemination of the model. Feedback collected using slido.com and personal email communication. All used with permission.

⁹ Available at <https://iteachtrad.com>.

¹⁰ Quantitative data, gathered from teachers (n=42) engaging in training around reflective practice using the TradLABB model, reveals that there was an increase of 93% in teachers' own confidence around their ability to reflect on their teaching, across a 3-month intervention (September-November, 2019).

5. Conclusion.

'A journey into professional artistry is one of transition and melding' (Higgs & Titchen, 2001, p. 237). The journey of Learning-Appling-Being-Becoming for the traditional musician is a lifelong process. The TradLABB framework is presented as a tool for helping learners to:

- (a) map out their individual learning journey through a transparent progression route;
- (b) understand what they are trying to achieve at each step of the way;
- (c) become more reflective and articulate about their learning; and,
- (d) take more responsibility for their own learning.

The TradLABB may also be a useful tool for teachers, helping them to:

- (a) understand the needs of their learner at each stage of the journey;
- (b) be open to adapting their teaching practices in order to meet the changing needs of the progressing learner;
- (c) explore new ways of doing things;
- (d) consider possible roles and contexts beyond those that are teacher-led;
- (e) support students to become more reflective practitioners;
- (f) commit to seeking professional development opportunities for themselves as teachers;
- (g) embrace a growth mindset – and not simply to settle for the status-quo;
- (h) take stock of their ongoing journey as learners themselves; and
- (i) allow themselves time and space to support their own, ongoing learning.

The TradLABB framework represents a new contribution to the teaching and learning of Irish traditional music. It presents an opportunity for teachers and learners to clearly and strategically consider the individual's learning journey and furnishes them with practical tools to prompt reflection and encourage discourse about the hitherto tacit process of learning. It allows each individual to situate him/herself within the continuum of lifelong learning and reminds us that the learning does not stop (unless we make that choice for ourselves). It highlights the reality that learners, at certain stages, are currently well serviced (particularly those at the start of the continuum), but that there are also gaps in existing provision for those who are more advanced

and experienced. In this regard, it may well challenge the sector to respond with appropriate and innovative interventions.¹¹

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¹¹ E.g. Coaching, mentoring, master and apprentice programmes, masterclasses.

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