

A Little Update from the Chair of Trustees

It seems like the right time to touch base with you all and let you know how things are going here in the world of the NVN Trustees.

We're Trustees now because we have charitable status. Of course, everyone can keep up to date with what we're doing from the minutes of our meetings but – seriously - no-one can blame you for not having them constantly at your elbow.

It also feels like we're Trustees because you trust us - to keep guiding our Network forward and keeping in touch with our evolving needs.

Our Network is diverse community ranging from a group of friends meeting in a kitchen once a week for a good old sing, to full time practitioners running choirs and workshops for a living.

So how to serve this diversity? Our website is continually evolving with professional support and advice - insurance, copyright, inclusion for example - and a variety of tools and resources to support your work from the kitchen to the concert hall. These resources do not come from the Trustees - they come from you and they are the very essence of what our Network is about.

We Trustees have been thoughtful over the years about being a professional organisation and have examined a number of ways to move forward. We have had working groups looking at Tiers of Membership and at training validation or accreditation. None of these ideas seemed quite right for us; they were unsettling to members and clunked against our concept of ourselves as a Network. The same ideas kept coming round and round with no resolution.

What about the people we work with - the ones who come to us for a singing experience? We know that potential choir members pick a choir because it's on the right night or in the right place or because their friend goes or because they really like the MD or they like that kind of singing - not because someone is senior or has passed an exam.

My background is in mainstream teaching. It's a heart-breaking profession crippled by targets and testing in a vain attempt at providing measurable evidence of good learning and teaching. One of my jobs was observing other teachers - I sat through the most tedious hour of my life watching an ambitious yet untalented young man,

delivering a music lesson in which he had made sure to tick all the boxes. It had no music in it. It was stifling and joyless. He got promoted. The worst teachers in the world meet validation standards regularly and it makes it worse because they can point to their certificates or titles and be protected by them. We broke education in this country. Talented teachers are leaking out of the job with their integrity and autonomy in tatters.

It's a rubbish model and rather than increasing professionalism it destroys it. There is no compunction on us as a Network to organise things in any way that doesn't fit who we are.

Fortunately, it is possible to be a respected professional body without going down that route. It was Val Regan of Sheffield who first identified a way forward. It's called Community of Practice and it's receiving more and more support world-wide from organisations like ours. Community of Practice just means a community of people who do similar work. The practitioners may have come from different traditions and may do slightly different jobs, or the same job in slightly different ways, but they form a community under a common aim - in our case using the natural voice to heal, empower, enrich, include, entertain, comfort, connect, exalt, defy, reclaim, honour and educate.

COP is kind of perfect for us. It's based on a network of peers. A *network of peers*. We learn from each other and we each take responsibility for our own development. For example - a recent initiative has been the development of Regional Networks. They are all different, but people have really embraced the idea. There you have COP in action. A group of people sharing a locality, willing to be in touch with each other to offer mutual support. They haven't been designed or ordered by the Trustees. They are all different. No-one has told anyone how it must be done - or even that it must be done. All that has happened is that people have shared how they set up their own network, the Trustees have found little budgets to help with room hire or whatever, and members have gone ahead and organised. Some of them send us short reports to let us know how they are getting on. We need more, and the system needs embedding into our structures, but it's such an obvious thing to do that members have taken it on without any fuss or objections. Not top-down but peer-led. It's very exciting.

Gill, our administrator, publishes a list each month of training opportunities and workshops, and on the website there are

suggestions aplenty on how to find mentors or ways to learn from others. It should be possible to find something that fits where you're at.

The exciting thing about COP is that it's how we have always done things informally - passing on skills to each other, attending workshops, training and events, picking up good practice as we learn. We naturally reflect on our work, "O that went well. I'm glad I prepared that awkward section so carefully." Or "Hmm, I rushed that bass-line a bit. I'll break it down more next time." If we don't do that, our work grinds to a halt.

Now, with lovely synchronicity, we have members of the Trustee Board who are experts in COP and in the forefront of developing practice. The practices of peer learning and self-reflection and the broad ideals of our Network can be wrapped around with tools and techniques that members can use. The academics on our Board are busy linking up with other organisations and individuals - some in other countries - who are developing ways of peer-led practices.

We are hoping for a conference next year. We are hoping to have development and discussions at the Gathering. We hope we are reflecting what people say they want. There is room and respect for different points of view and ways of doing things. Everyone's opinion is useful and valid.

We are growing bigger each year. These are exciting times for us with many new professional opportunities as the world catches up with what we have always known. Sing the future folks.

Best wishes, Jules

Jules Gibb - September 2018