



LEYMN

# Musicians without Borders

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A case study written by LEYMN Apprentice Cina Aissa, January 2017

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### Introduction

My name is Cina Aissa and I am a former LEYMN Apprentice and a community musician working across early years and dementia care. I have a passion for inclusion through music and the arts.

Community Music Leadership for Peace-building and Social Change was a training course run by [Musicians without Borders](#) at the SOAS Summer Music School in July 2016. Musicians without Borders is a network of musicians working in conflict zones. It is open to all musicians who want to make a difference in the lives of those who have been affected by war. I went along to find out how the course applied the theme to both community music work with migrant communities and learning within an early years setting.

## Beginning with a 'hello' song

The course began with a strong 'hello' song; a great icebreaker, giving the participants a sense of belonging, as well as a musical warm-up and social interaction with their peers. There is no shortage of 'hello' songs out there, depending on the focus of your session. You can also compose your own, based on one, two or three simple chords which could serve as the basis for saying individual participants' names. If in the presence of a multicultural group, you can ask the participants how they express greetings in their own culture/language and then ask the group to repeat it. An extension to this would be to ask participants to move around the room greeting each other, shaking hands, saluting, bowing, etc. This first personal interaction can be an introduction to later dance exercises done in pairs.



## The attitude of the trainer

A vital ingredient to a successful session is the attitude of the trainer. We were lucky to have this demonstrated by our three fantastic trainers, Otto, Sherwin and Amanda. Even though each had a different personality, they all had a very inclusive approach, an engaging manner, as well as an approachable, non-threatening attitude. Sherwin, an imposing man over six feet tall explained how he often started a session crawling on his hands and knees to diffuse fear, provoke laughter and foster a sense of trust with new participants. He rightly explained that a small child can easily feel intimidated by an adult who is a stranger, especially if they are tall and physically imposing. It is our job as practitioners to put participants at ease before we engage in music-making activities.

Another essential principle for facilitators is to be a supportive, encouraging music mentor. When a participant gets the pitch wrong, we don't correct them, we simply demonstrate the right pitch at the first possible opportunity, without putting anyone on the spot. This is because Musicians without Borders put the emphasis on participatory music sessions rather than on communicating didactic principles or teaching per se. We were reminded that in some Musicians without Borders sessions, some of the participants might have had an adverse, maybe even traumatic interaction with school and teaching in the past, or maybe they did not have the opportunity to attend school because of war and/or conflict, so the sessions have to be open and inclusive, rather than formally educational. Music, movement and self-expression have miraculous healing properties for those who have been affected by war, conflict and trauma, so taking part in making music with Musicians without Borders is intended for therapeutic rather than educational reasons.



## Non-verbal communication

Non-verbal communication was also a very important tool in the trainer's toolkit. Sherwin (again!) took us through a whole drum circle session using mime and facial expression as his only communication methods. It was surprisingly clear and created a level playing field. It is important that the facilitator uses clear gestures, acts gently and invitingly, smiles a lot and makes eye contact with every single person in the room. Non-verbal communication is especially useful when working with early years and/or speakers of other languages.

Finally, each section of the training was punctuated by discussions between the participants. This time spent talking was important to highlight what worked and what didn't; a time to air ideas, issues or concerns as well as open up wider discussions on themes such as cultural appropriation. Cultural appropriation was seen as irrelevant by some of the participants, but being open to discussing it and hearing a range of opinions on the matter demonstrated an open-mindedness and a self-reflective attitude that are essential to anyone who is considering working with disadvantaged family groups from ethnically diverse backgrounds. Asking oneself, correcting oneself, and listening to each other are some of the rings that form the call and response chain of a positive music session aimed at survivors of war and conflict as well as other marginalised families everywhere.

