MA Bursary Report – Kate Curtis, Year 2, Anglia Ruskin University

Embarking on a two-year full-time MA in Music Therapy was both the most exciting and terrifying thing I have ever done. At the age of 30 I was working as a secondary school music teacher, both loving and hating my job. As stress levels rose I made a brave decision to jump out of my successful career and go back to university to train in the profession I really wanted to be part of: music therapy. People thought I was mad but I felt it was the right thing to do. I have been proved right; as I continue through the course my passion for music therapy continues to grow and I know I am going in the right direction.

Year 1 (2016/2017)

The first year began with semester one being ‘lecture heavy’ and mainly based at the university. In this time we focused mainly on the theories behind music therapy, with an emphasis on child development. All students are required to conduct a series of six parent-infant observations. I had the opportunity to observe a mother with her six-month-old son, which was a rich and enjoyable learning experience. These observations formed part of my first essay, which focused on attachment theory.

In the second semester the theoretical learning was focused on psychoanalytical theories. My essay in this area was focused on countertransference and proved very useful for my clinical work. We also received a number of practical workshops, which focused on improving our musical improvisation skills.

During the first year I was on placement for two days a week in a Sure Start Children’s Centre. This started with a four-week observational period in semester one. I was able to observe a number of individual music therapy sessions led by a qualified and experienced music therapist. I was also encouraged to join in with some of the sessions, and by the end of the four weeks had led parts of some sessions. I was very grateful for this immersive experience at the start of my placement as it really set me up for the second semester.

In the second semester, I took on four of my own patients, who were all children under five. The reasons for referral included diagnoses of autism and resulting communication difficulties, and challenging behaviour. I thoroughly enjoyed this placement and would definitely consider working in this area once I am qualified. I received some excellent feedback from supervisors, staff and parents, which was incredibly rewarding.

The clinical work of my first placement was supervised both by the on-site music therapist and through group supervision at university. Group supervision was one of the most valuable experiences of my first year on this course. All groups are led by experienced music therapists from the university staff team and made up of around five-six students. During the supervision groups, we watched videos of each other’s clinical work and discussed it critically. This process involved a huge amount of self-reflection for me and at times was very challenging but it proved a rich and rapid learning experience that I will never forget.

In general, by undertaking this course I have experienced vast personal growth in the space of a year. In my first year of study I found my biggest challenge was to shake off my ‘teacher persona’. Being a therapist is something entirely different to being a teacher, requiring brand new levels of patience, tolerance and understanding (both of oneself and of others). Throughout the year all students are encouraged to reflect on themselves by engaging in personal therapy, experiential music therapy groups and group supervision. This process takes honesty, commitment and resilience but is necessary for becoming an effective and sensitive music therapist. Embarking on personal psychotherapy once a week is also an expensive thing to do but it is a compulsory requirement of the course. The grant that I received from The Music Therapy Charity has helped me to pay for my personal therapy during the first year. This has been an absolute lifeline and I could not be more grateful.

I am pleased to say that I completed all parts of the first year of study with first class marks, which means the hard work really paid off! The first year of the course was incredibly full-on and at times, very difficult, but it has also been the most wonderful and exciting year of my life.

Year 2 – Semester 1 (2017)

The first semester of the second year has flown by incredibly quickly. In theory, this year should be less intensive, as we only have one day at university and one day at placement but I have found that I am still flat-out! So far, for me, everything has been about my placement/clinical work.

My placement for the year is in a neurorehabilitation unit, working with adult inpatients with traumatic and acquired brain injuries. During the first year of the course I had become very interested in brain function and wrote about it in both of my essays, with regards to attachment and countertransference. When I was offered the chance to complete a six-month music therapy placement in neurorehabilitation I jumped at the chance.

Before I started the placement, there was no music therapy available at the hospital, which means I have had to set it up from scratch and I am presently the only music therapist on site. Although this has been a daunting prospect, I have approached is as an exciting privilege. Naturally, I have felt a responsibility as a representative of the music therapy profession and as a result, I have worked incredibly hard to learn as much as my brain will allow and make a positive impression in the setting.

To start off with I immersed myself in literature about Neurologic Music Therapy (NMT) and watched as many videos of the techniques as I could find. I also attended an introductory course into NMT at the Royal Hospital for Neuro-disability.

At placement, I spent the first four weeks adjusting to the surroundings and getting to know patients and staff. I had no previous experience of working in hospitals so there was a lot of new information, experiences and emotions to process. During these four weeks, I was able to observe and sometimes assist in physiotherapy, speech and language and occupational therapy sessions.

Gradually through the first semester I have built my case-load and have worked with four individual patients so far. I have mainly been working with patients on speech and language aims, using techniques based in singing. In the second semester, I am hoping to gain experience of further NMT techniques relating to sensorimotor and cognitive aims. I am pleased to say that I am well supported with this by my supervisor; a member of university staff team who is an expert in the area of music therapy for neurorehabilitation.

In addition to my work with individual patients I have also established a weekly music therapy group. The group focuses on collective singing and provides patients with an opportunity for social interaction and self-expression through music. I find the potential role of the group, within neurorehabilitation as a whole, very interesting and am therefore making it the focus of my major project, which will be completed in semester two.