What we took away from our conversation with Professor Nicola Shaughnessy.

To launch our series, we had a stimulating and lively conversation with Professor Nicola Shaughnessy, who is Professor of Performance at the University of Kent. We don’t have the space to summarise all the great insights Nickie shared with us, but the conversation is available to listen to as a [podcast](https://anchor.fm/convoartshealth/episodes/Episode-2---In-Conversation-with-Prof-Nicola-Shaughnessy-e1002ta).

We do want to share some of our take-home messages around the nature of interdisciplinary research and the integration of arts and performance methods into health contexts.

**The value of conversation**

We started by reflecting on our conversation series as a space where we’re able to ask questions about interdisciplinary research that we normally aren’t able to ask. Research outputs are typically formal and result-orientated. Researchers do not always have the space in their published work to talk about their research journey, about what initially drove them to pursue a particular line of research, and what happened on the way. We were struck by Nickie’s openness about how the personal and professional interact in her research, and how she dispelled certain stereotypes about autism, drawing on her own experiences.

This openness certainly created an opening for us to develop a deeper understanding of Nickie’s research. It also made us reflect about the nature of academic research. Far from devaluing the objectivity or scientific value of research, the personal perspective instead helps us to develop a richer understanding of research projects and outputs. Such a rich personal perspective is often central to what drives research in arts and humanities.

**A series of peculiar accidents**

We also talked about research journeys as an endless series of peculiar accidents. Despite her distinguished career and many achievements, Nickie still spoke of feeling in the wrong place – and not fully knowing how she got there. She suggests such uncertainty is common among interdisciplinary researchers. A research career is certainly not always a straightforward process. Researchers don’t exactly know how it will all pan out from the get-go of their PhD project (indeed, it can often take years for researchers to fully understand the significance of the PhD thesis in their career development). Nickie also spoke candidly about the infamous “imposter syndrome” which many academics feel – and that it is important to speak with candour about such doubts and insecurities.

Again, openness about vulnerability is something that typically does not have a place in formal outputs like peer-reviewed papers or funding applications. And there may be good reasons for that. Nonetheless, it is important to create spaces and conversations that give voice to the inherent vulnerability of research, especially interdisciplinary research. Nickie spoke of the value in seeking out different educational environments and communities of practice – and, in a sense, that’s exactly what doing interdisciplinary research involves.

When engaging with scholarship from different traditions and disciplines, there is always a stepping outside of one’s comfort zone and a sense of anxiety around working with researchers who know far more about some of your own research interests. We are grateful to hear somebody with such an established track record as Nickie reassure us that we’re not the only ones who encounter these doubts and insecurities – and that they are indeed a normal part of doing interdisciplinary research.

**Collaboration between arts and healthcare**

Finally, we were excited to learn about the positive impact of Nickie’s projects which have successfully integrated arts and performance methods into a variety of health contexts. We listened to thought-provoking testimonies about how drama exercises and creative workshops could be integrated in the training of clinicians to deepen empathy skills and the value of lived experience and participatory community research to enhance understanding of neurodiversity. We also learned about how the Imagining Autism and Playing A/Part projects demonstrate the contribution of creative and performance based practices to the well-being of autistic young people and their learning environments. (You can learn more about the experiences of autistic girls and women by watching this [animated short](https://www.bbc.co.uk/iplayer/episode/p08z30ky/animated-thinking-i-feel-different), which we also discuss in the podcast.)

Nickie did stress that when we talk about these research projects, they really are projects of larger teams. It was therefore great to hear some of Nickie’s collaborators share their thoughts during our conversation. It was also particularly valuable to learn about the many similarities between the conversations Nickie has with colleagues in arts and humanities and the conversations that her collaborators have among themselves in their home disciplines, including psychology and psychiatry. Nickie therefore stressed the importance of having conversations and dialogues across disciplinary boundaries, and across (sometimes real, sometimes perceived) boundaries between arts and humanities & science and medicine – so that we can learn from each other and develop together. We couldn’t agree more.

**Listen to the podcast**

We recommend you have a listen to our [podcast](https://anchor.fm/convoartshealth/episodes/Episode-2---In-Conversation-with-Prof-Nicola-Shaughnessy-e1002ta) to hear the full story.

If you have any further questions or comments, do contact us at aestheticsandhealth@kent.ac.uk.

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