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Process, Developing Graduate Employability

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Dance and Social Inclusion: Facilitating the Process, Developing Graduate Employability

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Abstract: This collaborative paper explores issues in response to current concerns regarding dance training within the U.K's higher education sector pertaining to graduate employability and professional development. Current research into this area suggests that dance graduates whilst retaining a specialism in their art form, often lack a broader range of leadership and facilitation skills necessary to support and develop careers as freelance practitioners working within a range of dance contexts. The conference paper presents the findings of a collaborative pilot project between the University of Leeds' B.A Dance programme and Dance United, a U.K. based organisation specialising in the field of dance and social inclusion. Drawing upon exemplar from the Dance United/University of Leeds pilot project the paper explores how collaborative research involving higher education and the dance industry can develop mutually beneficial relationships.

Keywords: Dance, Training, Social Inclusion, Knowledge Exchange

THIS RESEARCH EXPLORES issues in response to current concerns regarding dance training within the U.K's Higher Education ¹sector pertaining to graduate employability and professional development. Current research into this area suggests that dance graduates whilst retaining a specialism in their art form, often lack a broader range of leadership and facilitation skills necessary to support and develop careers as freelance practitioners working within a range of dance contexts. The research explores a collaborative pilot project between the University of Leeds' B.A Dance programme and Dance United, a U.K. based organisation specialising in the field of dance and social inclusion. Drawing upon exemplar from the Dance United and University of Leeds pilot project the paper explores how collaborative projects involving Higher Education and the dance industry can develop mutually beneficial relationships.

Graduate Employability

Dance and its transformational properties experienced by those engaging with it appears to have received an upsurge in interest and increased popularity in the U.K in recent years. Inevitably fuelled by the rising popularity in televised dance talent shows and creative approaches to addressing national health and fitness issues, dance and it's transformational,

¹ See Burns, 2006 '*Mapping the Terrain: Entrepreneurship and Professional Practice in Dance Higher Education*, Palatine Publishing, Hall, T 2007 *The Dance Review*, U.K Government Report: Department for Children, Schools and Families. Burns, S. (ed) 2008 *Dance Training and Accreditation Project* and the recent '*Making a Move*' initiative instigated by the Foundation for Community Dance, U.K.

life-enhancing qualities appears to be back in favor and back on a range of governmental and educational agendas.

Community dance² is defined here by Chris Thompson (in Amans, 2008:xi);

Community dance is primarily a social activity, uniting creativity and physicality in a way that offers the experience of *communitas*, of solidarity and significance in an immediate and grounded way.

As such it can be further defined as a field of practice with the potential to affect personal and social change. The facilitation of community dance experiences therefore requires careful development reliant upon the community dance practitioner's skill, commitment, awareness (of self and others) and enthusiasm for engaging with this particular form of dance work.

Despite the increasing interest in dance and its application in a range of educational and community contexts in the U.K, industry definition and regulation guidelines are illusive and the career path for those individuals wishing to engage with this type of work remains unclear, Sue Ackroyd observes;

In community dance, there are no formal or universally agreed criteria that determine an individual's 'readiness' to practice as a professional. Expectations around standards, competence and 'professionalism' have evolved organically, over time and in tandem with the nature and demands of the work, so there is no prescribed route into the profession and few 'must haves' or 'must dos' on the way to becoming a professional practitioner. (in Amans 2008:121)

The 'organic' nature of the practitioner's world of work is understandably a key component of a form of practice which relies upon a degree of malleability in order to respond to the needs and demands of a wide range of client groups and community contexts. However, this lack of regularity inevitably gives rise to a range of issues pertaining to the training and development needs of dance professionals and undergraduate dance students in preparation for entering this particular field of rapidly developing work.

In a recent survey of dance training and employment contexts dance consultant Susanne Burns (2008) identifies that, for many years Higher Education establishments have produced dance graduates with a bias towards performing and choreography with few graduates actually gaining employment in these areas due to high levels of competition and limited employment opportunities:

It is evident that, despite the primacy often designated to the performer and choreographer, they make up a very small proportion of the dance labour market. The market demand appears to be for dance practitioners who can teach, facilitate dance work in community contexts and manage and produce the work.

² The term 'applied dance' is also frequently included under the wider umbrella term of community dance. Applied dance refers to the application of dance practice and activity in order to achieve a specific set of aims and objectives e.g. dance and social inclusion.

As a result, Burns observes that the industry itself has developed its own, home-grown approach to professional development evidenced by recent developments by the UK's Foundation for Community Dance's framework for continuing professional development and Trinity Laban's work with Dance UK and Youth Dance England to develop a programme that will provide structured training for dancers working with young people and in schools. Burns suggests that both Higher Education and the community dance sector could work together more closely to develop this work and address issues pertaining to training, skills development and graduate employability.

The pilot project described in this paper arose from a desire to explore and address these issues and to consider ways in which Higher Education dance programmes and the community dance industry could work together to facilitate the dance graduate's transition into the world of work and effectively bridge the gap between graduation and employment.

The exemplar project engaged undergraduate dance students in a week-long residency in which they explored methods of developing leadership and facilitation skills specifically aimed at working with young offenders. The project sought to identify how to develop these skills in dance artists and introduced the students to the particular challenges of working with groups of vulnerable or volatile young people who have not experienced contemporary dance before and may be switched off from learning of any kind. Furthermore, the project sought to identify the optimum stage in an undergraduate's journey to introduce this 'hard edged' community work: the premise being that this type of training may in turn enhance their learning and skills acquisition across other areas of their degree programme.

Dance and Social Inclusion

The area of applied contemporary dance practice is rapidly expanding in the United Kingdom in line with the growth of the arts in social inclusion sector³. Dance United is the UK's leading dance in social inclusion organization, the company's mission is to demonstrate that interventions modelled on professional contemporary dance training can turn damaged lives round in a sustainable manner. The company have developed an international reputation for creating quality contemporary dance training and performance projects with disadvantaged and marginalised individuals and communities: from street children in Ethiopia to young offenders in Bradford and 'reluctant' young gangsters in East London.

Following the establishment of Ethiopia's first contemporary dance company, *Adugna*, for street children, the company shifted its focus in 2000 to the criminal justice system in the U.K. Following the development and delivery of several prison-based projects the company developed *The Academy* training programme in 2006. The programme located in Bradford, West Yorkshire comprises a full-time twelve-week accredited dance-based community justice programme and functions as an alternative to custody for the most challenging young offenders. The award-winning *Academy*⁴ programme is based on quality and excellence. The participants adhere to a number of rigid principles and routines and the programme

³ For a discussion of the expansion of this field in relation to government funding and arts policy in the U.K see Houston, S, (May 2005) 'Participation in Community Dance: a Road to Empowerment and Transformation?' In *New Theatre Quarterly* vol. 21:2.

⁴ *The Academy* programme has received the following awards: Award for Excellence and Innovation in Arts Work with Young People at Risk (2007), the Youth Justice Award (2007) and the Koestler Trust Award (2008).

demands professional standards of discipline and focus whilst providing a safe and secure environment in which continuous support is provided.

Dance United's approach to dance and social inclusion focuses on sustainability, the *Academy* programme has seen over one hundred and forty nine young people successfully graduate with a Trinity College qualification over the past two and a half years and *Adugna* in Ethiopia continues to develop its work and extend its repertoire.

The company's latest project has been to stage a large-scale inter-generational project, *Destino*, at Sadler's Wells. The project brought amateur and professional dancers to Sadler's Well's main stage and engaged one hundred and twenty participants who worked together to create a performance event which blurred the boundaries between community and professional dance⁵. *Destino on the Road* replicated this process in the regions as the work toured across the U.K involving participants from regional community dance groups and the work was then performed in a series of regional venues including *Stage@Leeds* the performance venue housed within the School of Performance and Cultural Industries at the University of Leeds.

Dance United continually seek to challenge preconceptions regarding dance and its potential to impact positively on disadvantaged people's lives. For example, the company are planning to pilot the *Academy* model in London (focusing on young people prone to knife/ violent crime and gang culture) and Wessex.

The Process

The company devises and run initiatives which use dance to transform the lives of people from across communities including the young, the elderly, the marginalised and those affected by poverty, social inequality, crime and lack of opportunity. The company make no distinction between community and professional dance teaching and deliver the highest quality arts process with the most disaffected and challenging groups. The twelve-week *Academy* programme consists of daily technique class, advice and guidance on healthy eating, diet and exercise and the learning of repertoire led by a company artist culminating in an ensemble performance presented in a professional theatre venue.

Dance United's biggest challenge has been to demonstrate (to funders, legislators and the arts-world itself) how dance can act as a transformational tool in the heart of marginalised communities. Through their approach to dance and social inclusion the company have demonstrated that dance is not a 'soft option' and that this type of work can provide structure, discipline, focus and a powerful channel of expression for people who can feel isolated, alienated and powerless. The efficacy of this approach is supported by feedback from key stakeholder-partners who work alongside the company, one such response is provided here:

I've got quite a bit of experience working with offenders. I've seen offenders working on building sites, I've seen offenders joining in team sports, I've seen offenders doing anger management courses, but of all the things that I've seen offenders participating in, contemporary dance, much to my surprise, has turned out to be the one thing where I've seen people make the most progress over the shortest period of time.

⁵ The programme included work choreographed by Russel Malliphant, Hofesh Schecter and dance artist from the Dance United company. Performance works were performed by both professional and non-professional dancers.

(Recruitment & Referrals Co-ordinator; Bradford Youth Offending Team October 2007)

Ann Dils and Ann Cooper Albright (2001) have argued that, as the body becomes ‘culturally active’ through dance, the dancer becomes more able to recognise and question the restrictive stereotypes ‘inscribed upon it’. This as Anthony Peppiatt (2005) asserts, will often lead on to the development of an understanding of the possibilities for bodily agency and the attainment of power within social life. As Ireland (2007:211) observes, paradoxically perhaps, these crucial changes are facilitated rather than impeded by the formal disciplines of professional dance:

The embodiment and practice of dance technique and the discipline of the studio provide the tools for creative engagement and experimentation with dance. It is not until the studio etiquette and technique are embodied that the dancing body can be empowered to experiment within those boundaries. Studio etiquette includes wearing appropriate clothes, taking shoes and socks off and adhering to any other rules enforced by the dance teacher in that space.

Through participation in contemporary dance classes the *Academy* participants are provided with an opportunity to develop new understandings regarding their bodies, themselves and their potential for ‘bodily agency’ (Peppiatt 2005) in a positive manner.

The process operates on a number of levels for the participants and is summarised here:

- Making dance choices demonstrates to young people that they can make sense of and can be more in control of the life choices they make.
- Stripped of their normal ‘props’ barefoot indeed and wearing dance uniform, they are totally exposed with nowhere to hide.
- As they learn new (and highly challenging) dance techniques, they demonstrate that they can take huge risks, pushing beyond what they think they are capable of, and achieving way beyond their expectations (and usually beyond the expectations of their parents and peers).
- Moments of stillness and focus within the dance repertoire reflect how far they can feel comfortable with themselves and hold on to something grounded at their core when the going gets tough.
- Dancing as part of a group demonstrates how well they can work with other people; they can simultaneously trust and be trusted (sometimes by literally supporting or lifting each others’ weight).
- They can value themselves as highly as the professionally staged productions they perform in.
- The way they are applauded by the viewing audience signals they are visible, acknowledged and appreciated.

The experience of disciplined professionalism transfers to other areas of social life and serves to counter earlier experiences in the educational system.

It is for this reason that Dance United places the performer at the centre of its activities and, as the majority of participants have grown up in a disadvantaged environment, explains why the organisation insists on providing first rate facilities and expertise.

Ruby Ireland (2007 : 323) argues that, because dance enables ‘disempowered’ people to operate in environments which are outside of their everyday life experience, it can raise the individual’s consciousness of their bodily behaviour and its effects upon themselves and others. She writes:

This bodily consciousness has the potential to break the established habitus to find an adjusted physical relationship with the new environment.

In this sense, the *Academy*’s development of the individual’s physical posture and presence represent the meeting point of ‘external social structures and internal social agency’ (Jenkins, 1992:19) constituting a synthesis of the inner world of the individual and an outer world that, for these young people, is all too often characterised by what Pryce (1979) calls ‘endless pressure.’ It is perhaps this aspect of the programme, through the development of the individual’s embodied confidence, which has the most potential to develop a key range of transferable skills and thereby invoke personal change. This development of embodied confidence is achieved through the discipline of the dance activity with its demand for focus, stillness and ‘present-ness’. The dance discipline both in rehearsal and performance requires the individual to be present in their body in the moment and, within this moment, the individual must also be present to themselves. Within this process the individual addresses their own sense of reality in the here and now with and has limited scope for engaging with external issues, conflicts or extraneous relationships. This sense of paying attention to oneself through the medium of dance has the potential therefore to develop and increase self-knowing, empowerment and embodied confidence.

Dance United’s work demonstrates that the unique nature of the high quality dance *process* experienced by the Academy participants contains the potential to effect change.⁶ Evidence collected over the first two years of the programme’s operation suggests that the *Academy* makes a major positive impact on participants’ attitudes and behaviour and indicates that participants are less likely to re-offend than their peers and, on completion of the programme, have much higher than expected rates of transfer into education, training and employment. These ‘hard’ outcomes are underpinned by measurable increases⁷ in participants’ capacity to learn and the development of a range of key life skills, to which dance as a process and a context is crucial.

There is convincing evidence⁸ that the *Academy* has made a major positive impact on participants and that this has transferred into other areas of their lives. The programme has successfully engaged a constituency that is largely alienated from formal learning, imparting measurable increases in confidence and self-awareness, communication and coping skills, flexible thinking and self-control. These have fed through into a willingness to take up or re-engage with educational and employment pathways, improved personal and family relationships and a reduced risk of re-offending. In terms of the bottom line, the indications are

⁶ In order to evaluate their work the company commissioned the ESRC Centre for Research on Socio-cultural Change at the University of Manchester in 2007, led by Dr Andrew Miles, to design an evaluation model for the *Academy*.

⁷ See Miles, A, and Stuart, P. (2008) *The Academy: A report on outcomes for participants*, ESRC Centre for Research on Socio-Cultural Change, University of Manchester, UK.

⁸ See Miles, A, and Stuart, P. (2008) *The Academy: A report on outcomes for participants*, ESRC Centre for Research on Socio-Cultural Change, University of Manchester, UK.

that actual recidivism rates for *Academy* participants are considerably lower than among the general population of young offenders on community orders.

The rationale for arts-based interventions is cogently argued by the eminent American criminologist, Elliott Currie (1985) who distinguishes between ‘deficit’ and ‘opportunity’ oriented interventions with young people who break the law, arguing that, whereas deficit-oriented programmes which currently predominate in the youth justice system, offer only ‘the prospect of dull conformity’ (p.27), opportunity-oriented programmes hold out the possibility of ‘changed lives’ (p.27). In these terms, then, arts-based interventions represent opportunity-oriented interventions which aim to change lives.

Within the *Academy* programme dance as both context and mechanism is crucial to the way this change is brought about. The *Academy* demands professional standards of discipline and performance while providing a high quality environment in which individuals are supported, given respect and treated on their merits. Participants’ learning is informed by a number of non-verbal, dance-mediated processes, which work to bring about wider changes in attitude and behaviour. These include the mental discipline and bodily control encapsulated in ‘focus’ and the development of embodied confidence. The public performance dimension of the programme creates both a pressure that generates co-operation and responsibility and a sense of achievement, which in turn sponsors ambition.

Training and Facilitation

Burn’s (2006) observations regarding skills shortages within particular areas of the U.K.’S dance industry are exemplified through Dance United’s own experience of recruiting dance artists to work with the company delivering a range of projects. The company have identified an acute shortage of suitably trained dance artists confident enough to work with challenging groups. In order to address this problem they have developed their own bespoke training course in order to address this particular skills gap. The five-day training course focuses on introducing dance artists to a range of skills required to work effectively within the field of dance and social inclusion. Essentially, the training focuses on how to deal with confrontation, conflict and challenges to the dance teacher’s authority by introducing and developing the facilitator’s ‘tool-bag’ of proactive and reactive strategies. Dance artists also learn how to create a dance methodology that is strong enough to minimize meltdown and explore methods through which a shared and effective behaviour management system can be developed.

In addition to the community dance artist’s necessary possession of a key range of core dance competences and dance-specific knowledge, Dance United have identified a range of specific person-centred skills and qualities which they perceive to be essential in order to engage with their particular strand of applied dance practice. These skills are summarised here:

- Resilience and a commitment to stand still and firm if faced with provocations.
- Quick-witted and self-confident enough to experiment with responses.
- The ability to develop empathy with adolescents and their often chaotic lives.
- Able to steer a fine line between genuine warmth and interest in the participants and over-familiarity, i.e. keeping clean and clear boundaries to stop them being drawn in to life stories and personalities.
- Flexibility i.e. unfazed by bad language and poor inter-personal skills/manners.

- A good sense of humour and a clear sense of proportion.

In order to assess both the efficacy of Dance United's bespoke training course and the possible benefits of introducing this type of training to dance students during their undergraduate training a four-day version of the programme was held at the University of Leeds in June 2008. Students from the B.A (Hons) dance degree programme participated in the four-day course led by the training team at Dance United including the company's lead facilitator, Assistant Artistic Director, lead dance artist and two graduates from the company's *Academy* programme who facilitated key aspects of the course's behaviour management component. Students from levels one two and three of the B.A Dance programme were invited to apply for a place on the training course on a voluntary basis.

The course included practical dance, facilitation tasks (including feedback), group, pair and individual exercises, video material, discussion and analysis, an outline of the course structure is provided here:

Day 1
Creating a tool-bag of pro-active facilitation strategies embedded within contemporary dance teaching

This day focuses on how to build a contemporary dance methodology with sufficient pro-active strategies to motivate and contain disaffected and potentially disruptive young people in education and other community settings

Day 2 and 3
Creating a tool-bag of re-active strategies for dealing with non-engagement, resistance and challenging behaviour within contemporary dance teaching

This day practically explores ways to deal with provocations and conflict and how to strategise responses to particularly challenging behaviours presented by volatile and often vulnerable young people in education and other community settings.

Day 4
Facing Facilitator Fear and Vulnerability

This day aims to explore what 'triggers' our own reactions as dance artists when facing challenges to our authority in the dance space and how we can increase our confidence to effectively respond to 'nightmare scenarios'

The course, therefore, aimed to introduce the students to Dance United's training approach and philosophy by focusing on the relationship between pro-active dance-based strategies embedded in a particular contemporary dance methodology and re-active non-dance strategies which, when combined, have the potential to successfully resolve challenging behaviour, resistance and non-engagement within participant groups. In particular, the project challenged the participants to consider the following questions:

- What is the relationship between ‘soft’ group management and ‘hard’ dance skills embedded within Dance United’s contemporary dance methodology?
- How far does such a methodology minimise risk and meltdown?
- How and why do particular strategies work?

The undergraduate participants engaged with a range of role-playing and practical dance exercises which gradually introduced them to Dance United’s philosophy and practical methodology. Each session required the students to reflect upon and evaluate their experiences and to build upon new knowledge gained in one session and apply it in subsequent sessions. For example, one particular workshop task required the students to work with a partner in a role-play situation whereby one student was asked to simply encourage their partner to walk from one side of the studio to the other. Their partner was required to play a ‘reluctant’ and ‘resistant’ role and to only respond to what they considered to be convincing and effective motivational strategies employed by their partner. The enactment of this task incorporated many amusing and illuminating moments as the ‘facilitators’ were required to think on their feet and improvise and enact a range of strategies aimed at physically motivating their partner. The subsequent reflection and evaluation exercise following this task enabled the students to identify a wide range of tacit interpersonal, reasoning and strategic thinking skills which they had drawn upon to facilitate the other person’s engagement in the activity. These skills included empathy, explanation, negotiation and humour. This process of revealing, identifying and quantifying their own skills enabled the students to acknowledge the range of facilitation skills they already possessed which in turn produced an empowering effect as they began to realise that they already possessed a significant level of skill which (when identified) could be called upon in future work. Following the five-day course the students were asked to reflect upon their experience in the form of a questionnaire, when asked ‘what new skills did you learn?’ one participant observed:

I have learnt a lot about myself, I have learnt to keep an open mind when facilitating and teaching and realise that there is more to it than I first thought. The course made me think instead of just doing and I have learnt a lot of new teaching skills.
(Course participant, University of Leeds 2008)

The development of this type of reflexive skill was identified as a key benefit by a number of students as they learnt to articulate their experiences and their emotional and personal responses to a range of tasks which frequently took them outside their ‘comfort zone’.⁹ In addition to the development of reflexive skills throughout the course the students also identified a range of practical skills they had developed and commented upon the value of this type of ‘hands on’ experience. In particular, the majority of students identified the opportunity to deliver a seven-minute teaching task as the most enjoyable and worthwhile part of the course, one student observed; ‘learning about structuring a class and dealing with behavioural issues in a professional manner was valuable’ another identified the feedback they received following this task and their development of teaching strategies as a key learning outcome.¹⁰

⁹ Course participant observation, Dance United training course, University of Leeds 2008.

¹⁰ Course participant feedback, Dance United training course, University of Leeds 2008.

In this sense, the students gained an embodied understanding of the experience and requirements of this type of challenging work.

Throughout the week the participants also worked alongside two graduates from Dance United's *Academy* programme who contributed to the facilitation of role play tasks and led workshop sessions themselves. This process enabled both sets of students to interact with other young people from a very different social background and challenged notions from both perspectives regarding social inclusion and pre-conceived ideas regarding university education and the 'type' of people who study there, one University student participant observed:

[the project] really made me think about the experience of others and the huge clash of cultures between someone going in to work at the *Academy* and an actual participant.
(Course participant, University of Leeds 2008)

This process of re-considering and re-evaluating prejudice concerning social class and education was also reflected in the feedback provided by one of the *Academy* students who observed that the University students were 'not really different to us'.¹¹

Whether the question regarding this type of experience impacting upon the student's main programme study skills acquisition has been addressed is as yet unclear and will require further research to investigate fully. However, the potential ripple effect of this type of partnership work is already being felt, for example, some of the students who participated in the project have based their final year dissertation studies on issues relating to the field of dance and social inclusion and others have also participated in leading dance workshops within primary schools and have applied their leadership and facilitation skills in these areas. The main benefit of this project perhaps is the establishment of a tangible link with the dance industry which enables students to gain first-hand experience of the world of work whilst still at university enabling them to construct their own learning experience in response to their experiences gained within the wider world of work.

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Victoria Hunter is a Practitioner-Researcher and Lecturer in Dance at the University of Leeds. Through her role as programme manager for dance she has developed a number of knowledge transfer research initiatives aimed at developing links between Higher Education and Industry. These initiatives include: Sept 2007-Oct 2008: 'Developing Community Dance Leadership Skills for Graduates': In consultation with Yorkshire Dance, a regional dance agency (Funded by the Centre for Cultural Exchange). April 2008: Dance United/University of Leeds pilot project. (Funded by Creative Partnerships). July 2008: 'First Steps', Phoenix Dance Theatre/University of Leeds knowledge exchange project (Funded by the Higher Education Innovation Fund). She is also currently researching a PhD in site-specific dance performance exploring the relationship between the site and the creative process her research is practice-based.

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