



Louise Portlock.

## Ignition on

**Louise Portlock**, Inclusion Manager at Gloucestershire Dance, is fired up about widening professional opportunities within the dance and disability sector



Louise Katerega (left) and participants in Ignite the profession. Photo: James Rowbotham.



Participants in Ignite the profession. Photos: James Rowbotham.

**At this moment I can only count a handful of professional disabled dancers, teachers and leaders in contemporary dance across the UK, many of them currently employed by professional companies.** So where is the next generation coming from?

Candoco's foundation course, which ran from 2004 - 2007 and was funded by the Learning and Skills Council (LSC), was set up following DfES-funded research in 2003 into the lack of disabled students accessing vocational dance and theatre training. At the time this was heralded as the beginning of new and sustainable progression routes for young disabled people into the arts. The funding, however, was redirected after just one year to the Dance & Drama Award Scheme Team at the LSC. Eventually the LSC itself redirected that same funding entirely to the vocational schools for 'widening participation' (1) projects.

Gloucestershire Dance (GD) has been supporting the work of disabled artists and practitioners since 1994. The county dance agency has rooted this development work in an extensive programme of dance development in special schools, the local FE College for young people with disabilities and in communities.

Velcro Dance Company, a small-scale integrated company managed by

GD, has been creating work, developing dance artists and inspiring audiences in schools, local halls and at conferences and platforms nationally for 16 years. Underpinning the company's work is a belief in equality and empowerment, and the balance between performance and education.

'What makes you a professional?' I asked the dancers from Velcro. Responses from the disabled company members included ideas around being in the studio on time, staying focused, and listening to and supporting each other. Nothing regarding levels of technical competence or the number of years spent training in the sector was mentioned.

There was no doubting the power and impact of Velcro's performances, but feedback from the fully trained, non-disabled dancers regarding their 'Velcro experience' was interesting. There was recognition during the review that they were playing a role beyond dancer in the company, largely due to the lack of training and relative inexperience of disabled members in the basics of performance and touring.

So how do we support emerging disabled dancers to become 'professional'? They're not ready for study at The Place, Laban or Northern School of Contemporary Dance nor

are these and other schools equipped or resourced to fully support them.

GD is seeking to plug this training gap by piloting a new training programme called Ignite. This course is designed to support emerging talent in the dance and disability sector from across the UK. A grant has been secured from the South West Community Foundation to support the training of disabled dance leaders and the development of disabled and d/Deaf (2) choreographers. The course aims to provide a bridge between community participation and the professional dance world, offer guidance on CV writing and marketing yourself as a disabled artist, and provide tailored advice, information and signposting opportunities.

Ignite is a comprehensive mix and match programme to suit the individual needs of emerging disabled and d/Deaf artists. Course participants will work with nationally recognised practitioners in the field of dance, disability and inclusion. Artists including Louise Katerega, Marc Brew, StopGAP and Sarah Pickthall are part of the delivery team. We're still considering the best way of sharing the outcomes and learning from the course, but it's hoped that it will be disseminated to our main partners for further discussion and development.

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Lisa Simpson (centre) in Ignite the profession. Photo: James Rowbotham.

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A recent review of Velcro led by Louise Katerega, a specialist trainer in integrated dance, has raised fundamental questions and issues that needed addressing. She’s also been involved in the first weekend of delivering Ignite and brings the following points to this discussion. ‘For at least a decade I’ve spent time at conferences with those involved in dance by, for and with disabled people,’ she says, ‘talking about the yawning gap in training provision between the access workshop and the professional company. And I’m talking about “training” as in “for a career in an industry.” That’s something different from “activity,” as in school, or “participation,” as in a community dance group, however high quality those two things may be (and I’ve seen many fine examples countrywide). Disabled dancers are still lacking in through-routes from the playspace to the workplace. This is especially true of those who, for reasons such as age, family commitments, type of impairment, lack of suitable support or geography cannot access the few British FE and HE courses that do exist. Gloucestershire Dance has stopped talking about it and done something comprehensive for motivated adults that genuinely reaches the parts a workshop cannot reach, and that professional companies too often have had to provide alongside their other work. Although I’m teaching on the course I also plan to attend some of

the sessions myself to fill gaps in my own knowledge – for example, how to negotiate the benefits system to pay disabled artists.’

What are our next steps? Following the Ignite pilot, and thanks to additional funding from the National Lottery, GD will develop a more comprehensive training scheme for two consecutive years starting in 2011. By working to test and develop courses, and gathering evidence and learning, we’re refining a local model that we hope can have national impact. We want to move the sector into a position whereby progression really is possible for disabled dance artists and future leaders. But this can’t be done alone, and so we’re hoping to share our experience by joining up strategically with others. We don’t want Ignite and Velcro to operate in a vacuum but rather to reverberate learning and impact across the range of other dance initiatives in development including DTAP, the Centres for Advanced Training and the numerous opportunities for young people through Youth Dance England initiatives.

There needs to be parity for learners so that core competencies and training pathways are also available for disabled aspiring professionals. Because without giving such opportunities to fresh talent, where will the next generation of auditionees for pioneering British companies such as Candoco and StopGap come from?

We’re going to spend this year consulting and developing national partnerships to support the growth of this course. I’d really like to hear from other organisations who would be interested in working with us.

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(1) From the web page for the Higher Education and Funding Council for England: Widening access and improving participation in higher education are a crucial part of our mission and form one of our strategic aims. Our aim is to promote and provide the opportunity of successful participation in higher education to everyone who can benefit from it. This is vital for social justice and economic competitiveness. Widening participation addresses the large discrepancies in the take-up of higher education opportunities between different social groups. Under-representation is closely connected with broader issues of equity and social inclusion, so we are concerned with ensuring equality of opportunity for disabled students, mature students, women and men, and all ethnic groups.

(2) d/Deaf is a composite of self-identification to do with very personal distinctions between deafness as a disability (little d) versus being a part of the Deaf culture (big d).