

Finding the right fit

Three practitioners talk about their pursuit of a career in community dance, their different experiences and the continuing professional development journeys they pursued to develop their own style of practice within the sector



Louise Barnes

Sessional Project Worker, Elder Tree Befriending Service

I am a comparative latecomer to working in the community dance sector. As a child and teenager, I was passionate about dancing but after finishing school, I embarked on a completely different career for the next 20 years. I continued to dance recreationally throughout my life and increasingly felt the drive to pursue a second career in community dance. For many years, I was part of an inter-generational ballet class and this fuelled my interest in inclusive practice and the desire to advocate the belief that dance is for everyone. I had experienced first-hand the social and psychological benefits of inclusive dance classes.

Having taken the decision to pursue a career in community dance, I knew that I needed to firstly refresh and increase my fundamental dance knowledge. Ultimately, I really wanted to practice dance with older people but I realised I had to go back to general grassroots as a starting point. So I enrolled on a BTEC in Dance at City College Plymouth. This was a great experience for me, not only increasing my dance confidence but also, once again, highlighting the fact that barriers are effectively broken down by dance; I was the sole 'mature' student in a class of 17-20 year olds and the rapport that grew between us because of our shared passion, was incredible and only served to inspire me further.

Having completed my BTEC, I spent a lot of time identifying my continued learning needs in relation to the community dance sector and in particular practice with older people in which I had a specific interest. I knew I had to build up my experience of the field in order to increase my confidence and knowledge of safe practice, and although I felt confident with my practical and technical dance skills thanks to the BTEC, I had very little teaching/leading experience. I had already identified that I wanted to work with older people but I realised the need to research all possibilities in this



Above: Louise Barnes with participants from Green Candle's Senior Dancers Moving into Maturity training, Green Candle Dance Company. Photo: Ellen Brittany Lake. Left: Louise Barnes, Elder Tree Active Steps session. Photo: Darrell Clegg

area and to build up experience to be accepted as a credible practitioner.

If I had been younger and embarking on this as a first career, I would have liked to have done a formal full time community dance degree or something specific like Green Candle's new accredited Level 3 training course: Diploma in Leading Dance for Older People. However, because of family commitments and other financial responsibilities, I had to do something more flexible and local to home to fulfil my learning needs.

I took every learning opportunity I could, both practical and theoretical; short courses and workshops, training days, shadowing other practitioners as well as personal study and research. I hoped that the combination of all these different continuing professional development methods would equip me with a rounded learning experience.

I enrolled on various short courses

including the Moving into Maturity training with Green Candle Dance Company, a Circle Dance for Dementia workshop (supported by a bursary from Plymouth Dance) and Dance with Older People, a FCD Professional Development Course with Diane Amans. These all gave me specific insight into working with older people. To give me dedicated support with leading dance sessions, I did the Sports Leaders Level 2 award in Dance Leadership through Exim Dance Company, which included running a class for over 50s on a studio open day. This gave me direct leadership experience but with the support of an established teacher. From this, I had the confidence to run some classes at a holiday club for primary school aged children. Although my ultimate goal was still to work with older people, I recognised the importance of gaining leadership experience with all sorts

of groups with varying needs and the work with children served this purpose, as did volunteering on a project with Attik dance for adults with learning and physical difficulties.

I also approached various practitioners in Plymouth who kindly allowed me to shadow them. These included Anna Leatherdale in her work with people with Parkinson's, Sue Smith in her sessions for cancer patients and Jenny Horton-Plant who runs Active Steps classes for Elder Tree, a befriending service working in partnership with Plymouth City Council to provide an innovative and unique service for vulnerable people over the age of 50. For me, this was one of the most valuable strands to my learning journey as it gave me a first-hand, practical insight into working in the sector, and as it happened, led me directly to a job.

One of the biggest challenges I

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faced in getting established in this sector was not knowing when I could legitimately call myself a 'community dance practitioner'. When did that happen? How could I pinpoint the time when I was ready, when I had built up enough experience and knowledge? It wasn't just about me being confident in myself but how others perceived me, when I was respected as a credible leader. I was also aware that I was much older than most practitioners starting out in this field but I tried to use that to my advantage, drawing on my life experience, people-skills and general maturity, when faced with challenges.

I thought that it would be hard to break into a completely new sector but working hard at building up experience, contacts and knowledge made it a quicker transition than I expected. I appreciate that there have been elements of luck along my journey to securing a job in the sector but the learning routes I took definitely helped me to that end. I realise that as a practitioner, I will continue to learn throughout my career; ongoing learning is invaluable and you can always develop and be better at what you do.

I am now working as a sessional worker for Elder Tree, and am very fortunate to be learning 'on the job'. I run my own sessions but have the support of Jenny Horton-Plant as my mentor, providing on-going training and advice. It is a completely unique organisation providing 17 dance sessions (soon to be 20) a week, both standing and seated, for the over 50s participants. Plymouth is very lucky to have that resource and I am incredibly fortunate to be a part of it. Because there is no creative pressure, we have the freedom to do what we want, tailoring our practice to the needs and abilities of our groups. This role provides me with another area of ongoing development; learning how to maintain stimulating sessions for the long-term, not just flashes of interest. For my chosen area, I couldn't be in a better place and I now have the confidence to call myself a community dance practitioner.

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Left and right: Candoco Dance Company, Youth Classes (Molly Stroyan in the background).
Photos: Pari Naderi



Molly Stroyan

Postgraduate student studying Community Dance,
Trinity Laban Conservatoire of Music and Dance

Upon graduating from my BA (Hons) degree in Dance, Performance and Teaching last July, I felt my skills in dance facilitation were at a level that needed some more experience. Through observation of current practice, I would be able to learn more from a variety of other sources and environments. I wanted to develop my skills to a level at which I felt much more confident in my ethos and my own practice in community dance. It was this overarching need that drove me to researching what I could do next, before I dived head first into the 'real world'. The Postgraduate Diploma Community Dance at Trinity Laban Conservatoire of Music and Dance seemed to be the perfect option to feed this hunger to continue my professional development. It also provided an excuse to embark on a journey amongst the thriving London dance scene.

Doing more research, observation, taking part and contacting numerous community dance practitioners and specialists, in as many varying community dance fields as possible, enabled me to identify what was best for my current learning needs in relation to the community dance sector. I have had the pleasure of working with a varying range of groups along this journey so far, (such as Dance for Parkinson's, early years and integrated dance, to name a few), which have provided me with enriching and broad experiences.

Working closely with these groups has enabled me to grow in my practice, as I can now value what is important, analyse what does and doesn't work and what I would do

differently in each specific situation that I have been a part of. This has helped me to consider what I would do if a similar situation arose within my future facilitation. It has also allowed me to question my own worries, artistic integrity and prejudices, and helped me to develop an ethos that sits comfortably with me as a person, as well as a community dance artist. I am now able to confront issues that arise, and develop professionally, in order to become a well-rounded dance artist as well as a more open-minded individual in everyday life.

The process of thinking about where I want to start to work in the community dance sector is somewhat similar to that of choosing the right dress – a frustrating process of elimination and yet rewarding when I find the right one! Trying on and viewing different ways of wearing dresses highlights that some suit and some don't quite fit, which is similar to 'trying on' different ways of facilitating and managing a class. Some styles don't suit my personality and whilst this process can be exhausting I hope to eventually find a teaching style that fits me like a glove. Sometimes the 'yes', 'no' and 'maybe' piles of dresses are balanced, or, if I'm lucky, the 'yes' pile is mountain high.

When something just 'clicks' with you – you just know it's the right route to take. Like the 'right dress'; somehow you just know that's the one. These new found facilitating skills can then fold perfectly into my teaching toolbox (or handbag) that I can carry comfortably around with me.

Having experiences of working with and studying as many different groups

of people in different community settings as I can (these opportunities are undoubtedly helped by having a student status) enabled me to feel I can be confident within any situation or opportunity that may arise throughout my career. I also believe that acquiring a vast and useful teaching toolbox that is inclusive and can be transferred to work within any group, by tailoring specific needs appropriately, is the key to starting work in the sector.

My most recent experience in the sector has been on a placement with Candoco Dance Company. Candoco is a professional touring dance company that consists of disabled and non-disabled artists. The learning and outreach work that I was primarily involved with was the inclusive Youth Dance class. (1) This is definitely a line of work I'd like to proceed with once my academic training is complete. Watching how a regular group grow and develop as people and as dancers, in such a short amount of time, has really influenced the way I think about my foreseeable future as a creative community dance facilitator.

Inevitably, there are challenges to face when it comes to me being established and this journey will begin when I complete my course at Laban this summer. I am looking to start my career in the North East of England, where I was brought up and where I first found my love for dance. I believe that sometimes you lose your passion for the thing you love so much when you study and analyse it for such intense periods of time. This is a challenge I feel will haunt me >

throughout my career and I feel I must keep remembering the passion and motivation for promoting dance and its benefits. I feel as dance artists we must dance for ourselves, alongside providing opportunities for others. That way we get the best of both worlds! Another challenge: networking is also something that needs to remain current and consistent in order to get work and make work happen. Another challenge that is probably at the top of most artists' lists, is funding (that word made you shudder?). Newcastle has suffered big arts funding cuts in the recent past, so that will be a challenge to confront when it comes to applying for funding as an emerging artist. All fingers and toes firmly crossed!

I guess the main point I am getting at is that if I can remain openminded to the opportunities, communities and people I want to work with, whilst staying true to my own personal values, I'll always find something that interests me. Ongoing learning is integral to an ever-changing profession like dance. Continuing my professional development and finding learning opportunities from a variety of sources is very important and valuable in order to become the best possible community dance artist I can be. It keeps me engaged and interested in the artform and keeps my work as an artist and facilitator current and valuable to my participants. It also makes me challenge myself and my views and opinions on ongoing issues within the community dance sector. My advice is to constantly reflect on and document practice in order to figure out what the main aspects of dance and dance teaching are that keep you ticking – these will change over time, but they can always come back around, just like fashion!

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(1) Short video that highlights how important and beneficial creative classes for disabled and non-disabled young people are: www.candoco.co.uk/learning/youth-dance/classes

Lindsay Jenkins, Freelance dance practitioner and Programme Coordinator, FCD

I graduated just under five years ago, and have worked for the Foundation for Community Dance (FCD) as part of the programme delivery team for a little over four years. During this time, I have been fortunate to have maintained strong links to the arts sector as a practitioner. As well as participating in several projects as a performer, I have taken many opportunities to lead creative sessions of my own, with all age groups and in a number of different community settings, from primary schools to local Women's Institute (WI) groups.

Despite having been able to preserve a balance between nurturing a career with FCD and pursuing artistic opportunities, I find myself at a turning point in my professional development, with a desire to dedicate more time to my growth as a dance practitioner. As my involvement in dance leadership has increased, I have become more aware of where my professional interests lie and where I perceive the gaps in my knowledge and skills to be. Part of this is due to the nature of my job at FCD which gives me a unique perspective on the sector and the role of a dance practitioner. It is also a result of my ongoing personal enjoyment of dancing, passion for working with people and awareness of the benefits dance offers to physical and psychological wellbeing.

I feel that I am still very much at the beginning of my development as a dance practitioner. It has only been within the last year or two that I have felt clear about what I hope to achieve (although I expect this will continue to shift as time goes by) and, even though there are several, I can identify one experience in particular that has informed the recent choices I have made about my continuing professional development (CPD).



In January 2013, I was delighted to be accepted into Curve Young Dance Company, which is based at Curve theatre in Leicester and provides a weekly session for 12-26 year olds to develop their contemporary dance technique and work creatively towards a number of performance opportunities. I decided to join the company not only because I simply enjoy dancing and it's on my doorstep but because I felt a need to continue to develop and be challenged as a dancer in order to supplement my development as a dance practitioner. My experience of formal dance training makes up a relatively small part of a much broader study of the performing arts and when I began leading dance at the age of 20, I did so with a certain amount of self-consciousness about my own abilities and 'talent' as a dancer.



All images: Lindsay Jenkins took part in Willi Dorner's Bodies in Urban Spaces, Loughborough 2009. Photos: Daniel Clarke

positive environment for them.

In order to support this part of my practice, I decided to attend Safe in Dance International's new course, Healthy Dance Practice, led by Charlotte Tomlinson. I'd been aware of similar courses in the past but had never been sure if it was quite what I needed. However, with greater clarity around the skills and knowledge I now hoped to gain, I leapt at the chance to take part and it proved to be an invaluable experience. Whilst the course covered many topics that were new to me (such as 'motivational climates' and detailed anatomy), a lot of the course content was what many would consider common sense (offering easier alternatives to certain movements or reminding your participants to keep hydrated, for example) but the process of reaffirming these things, and then consolidating the learning through practical application, has embedded them into my practice in a way that 'just knowing' doesn't do. I believe this to be one of the benefits of undertaking CPD of this nature; you are enabled to develop skills in a way that 'sticks', and in doing so are reminded what it is to learn, to be the student again.

The most important lesson I have learned about my professional development needs is that so long as I continue to recognise how my needs evolve over time, and invest in my development in a way that is responsive and flexible, I can be sure that I am supporting my practice and my future as a professional in the way that is best for me. Equally valuable has been the realisation that investing in yourself professionally can simply mean investing in yourself, full stop. When it is your own creativity, physical skill, compassion and charisma that is your product – such as it is in community dance work - I believe professional and personal development are seldom mutually exclusive.

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Investing in yourself professionally can simply mean investing in yourself, full stop

It wasn't long before I reached the upper age limit of the company but (once I resigned myself to no longer being considered a young person!) I was thrilled to be asked to return as workshop assistant to Mel Knott, the company's dance leader. Having worked in this capacity alongside Mel for almost eight months, I have benefitted from both observing the planning and delivery of the weekly sessions and creative projects (which I consider to be an excellent CPD opportunity itself), and an ongoing awareness of the environment that is being provided for the dancers.

It offers me unique perspective on the facilitation of youth dance work, and has fuelled my interest in and awareness of the countless ways young people of considerably different ages, abilities and levels of engagement with dance move through a creative journey together and how the needs of each of them are considered along the way.

This experience, as well as the challenges posed by the classes I have delivered for dancers and non-dancers of varying ages and abilities in other contexts, has caused a shift in where I place importance on my development needs. Where I had previously prioritised the development of my own technical ability and creative skills, I now place more importance on the skills required to work effectively with all people, facilitate their creative process and provide a safe and