

Collaborative working and sustain: a reflection



Sarah Whatley. Photo: Alice Read.

Chair in Dance and Director: Centre for Dance Research (C-DaRE)

Professor Sarah Whatley talks about collaboration being at the heart of research and introduces dance researcher and educator **Kathryn Stamp**

Sarah Whatley

C-DaRE has always valued, and placed great importance on, the links we have, and continue to build, with the cultural sector. A feature of our team is that there is almost no border between the ‘researcher’ and the ‘practitioner’; many in C-DaRE are (or have been) active performers, makers and choreographers, so balance working across the research and professional communities. One relationship that has been important to us for many years is with People Dancing. We have benefited from an exchange of knowledge and ideas, which has informed and supported a lot of our research activity.

As an example, a recently completed Arts and Humanities Research Council-funded Collaborative Doctoral Award has enabled a candidate to develop a PhD in close partnership with People Dancing. Below, Kathryn Stamp describes her journey through this programme. Kathryn’s research fed directly into People Dancing’s future work. Reciprocally, Kathryn gained a wealth of skills and experiences and has used these well to secure a Post-Doctoral Fellowship in C-DaRE to continue her research.

We are now looking forward to another Collaborative Doctoral Award with People Dancing, this time funded through the AHRC Midlands4Cities doctoral training programme. In Autumn 2021, Georgina Cockburn began her PhD journey, researching the Living Well Hubs initiative, working

to grow on

closely with the Live Well & Dance *with Parkinson's* programme. As Kathryn outlines below, aligning an extended research project with a programme that has to be agile, responsive to a range of stakeholders and has a range of delivery points can be challenging. Research is emergent, needing time for the core research questions, methodology and subsequent analyses to develop. But this makes for a dynamic relationship and all those involved grow through the conversations, adaptations and the unexpected. The outcomes are exciting and transformative, and for us in C-DaRE confirm the importance of the collaboration that is at the heart of so much of our research.

Kathryn Stamp

Collaboration can be described as 'a situation in which two or more people learn or attempt to learn something together' (1). Much of my training and work has been dependent on collaboration as a way to innovate and to learn. My experience as a teacher prior to embarking on my PhD study certainly developed my collaborative skills and understanding, working alongside others towards a shared end goal. What is often of great interest is when collaboration happens between two groups or people who are situated in faintly different domains; either different disciplines within a cross-disciplinary project or in different institutions or organisations but within the same sector. What can each party learn from this collaborative engagement and cross-pollination of ideas? How might a project be elevated through this encounter of different minds with different approaches and possibly different intentions?

“The symbiotic relationship offered by collaboration can enable new learning and knowledge to be uncovered.”



Photo: Kathryn Stamp.

My PhD was a Collaborative Doctoral Award, a venture designed as an alliance between Coventry University and People Dancing. Collaboration was built into this project from the ground up. The research was focused on evaluating the 11 Million Reasons to Dance (11MRTD) project, during its touring year, to interrogate emerging ideas around dance, disability and public engagement. During the early stages of the PhD, I worked closely with People Dancing, following the project around the Midlands and north of England, engaging with associate artists, regional organisations, local inclusive dance groups and People Dancing team members. Here, I reflect on what this experience taught me about the process and concept of collaboration.

The symbiotic relationship offered by collaboration can enable new learning and knowledge to be uncovered. Through the process of working with other people on the 11MRTD project, I learnt more about my own working style, communicating with others and alternative ways of viewing tasks. I tend to be quite practically minded, often adept at problem-solving and responding

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to emerging situations, probably from my years of teaching, but I find that broader, creative, 'blue-sky' thinking doesn't come as naturally. Working with a team which had this great breadth of creative experience, and was strategically minded and able to focus on both the macro and the micro, enabled me to adjust my practice to embody more of this adaptiveness. I felt as though, especially as a researcher working 'hands on' in the dance sector, I gained an insider's insight, the ability to enter into a different environment and learn proactively from the experience.

“The benefits of collaboration are becoming more acknowledged, especially as the world strives to innovate.”

It is important to acknowledge that not all aspects of collaboration are straightforward or unproblematic and not all collaborations are successful. Often, the nature of collaboration is to innovate, to problem-solve or to explore, which invites and embraces critique and challenge. Whilst sometimes this challenging may lead to uncomfortable circumstances, the opportunity to grow and discover new insights, as a result of the challenge, is significant. It was my role as researcher to evaluate the 11MRTD project, to look objectively at its impact and perceived 'success', but also to interrogate any areas of concern or places for development. Through a dialogic relationship and an openness to hearing this critique, People Dancing were receptive of challenge in order to develop their thinking around the project, and the way forward from it. But it wasn't always plain sailing. As someone who is eager to please and dislikes disappointing people, delivering this critique felt like the challenge moment for me. Nevertheless, the process of thinking how to communicate these critical points, how they measured up against the successes of the project and how these challenges served as an opportunity to think forward, for both People Dancing and for me, felt like a real breakthrough. It was these points of tension that became central to my thesis argument and post-evaluation exploration and, as is so often the case, the juicy ideas of interest arose from moments of unease.


One of the main reasons for collaboration is often to gain from the expertise of the other collaborators. People Dancing offers exactly what

its name suggests; access to people, dancing and access to great knowledge about the diversity of people dancing. As a researcher, and as part of a research centre like C-DaRE, I offered insight and expertise through interrogation and depth of enquiry, supported by an institution with particular ethical and methodological expectations. Collaboration is, or should be, reciprocal. It is not always evenly balanced, but reciprocation can also, sometimes, be subtle. One may not realise what they are gaining from the experience of collaborating until reflecting upon it later. It was only when 11MRTD had finished touring and my role with People Dancing shifted into more of an outsider researcher position that I was able to reflect on the breadth of knowledge and understanding I had gained from this engagement. These weren't always earth-shattering revelations. Sometimes it was a snatched conversation with an artist during the interval of a community performance event, or discussions with the project's artistic director over lunch, or even one of the long train journeys to a venue, which offered me time and space to process or prepare. But these were experiences resulting from a collaborative endeavour. The reciprocal nature of collaboration works to allow us to offer and also to receive; to gain something which we need and to share something of which we know.

The benefits of collaboration are becoming more acknowledged, especially as the world strives to innovate and as the challenges facing organisations and researchers require more transdisciplinary engagement. Collaboration should be entered into with a clear idea about the expectations and demands of each party, with shared (although not always identical) intentions and through a dialogic relationship. Collaboration could be the route to sustaining and innovating the dance sector, by renewing how we work fruitfully together, especially given the challenges we are facing around funding cuts, devaluing of the arts and the demands of a more greatly digitised, COVID-impacted world.

Info

www.communitydance.org.uk/creative-programmes/11-million-reasons-to-dance

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Reference

1. Dillenbourg, P. (1999). What do you mean by 'collaborative learning?' In P. Dillenbourg (Ed.), *Collaborative-learning: Cognitive and Computational Approaches* (pp.1-19). Oxford: Elsevier.