

More than a luxurious hobby

Dance's value in a crisis of care

Credit: Harry Taylor.



Creative Health and Community Dance practitioner, **Stella Rousham** calls urgently for the embedding of dance as a resource of care and shares her holistic approach to dance for health with groups at Trinity Laban and The Blair Academy.

In the heat of the 2020 summer lockdown, a poster from the government's CyberFirst Campaign went viral: a ballet dancer with the heading 'Fatima's next job could be in cyber' (1), articulating what dance artists have long understood – the British government dismisses dance as an out-dated, luxurious hobby, not a viable, valuable resource fundamental to social and political life.

I challenge this disparagement of dance and argue that greater funding and infrastructure such as social prescribing, could position the dance sector to play a critical role in tackling the on-going crisis of care. Through reflections on my own experience in creative health and community dance, I make a case for recognising dance as a valuable resource of care, which is urgently needed to address the failures of the crises-prone welfare state.

The crisis of care in Britain

Marxist-Feminist Nancy Fraser, identified the inherent 'crisis of care' in modern economies, emerging from 'social-reproductive contradictions of financialised capitalism' (2). Put simply, reproductive and care work – giving birth, washing up or looking after elderly relatives – is essential to sustain capitalism. Caring labour keeps humans alive, fed, and healthy, and reproduces economic and cultural life.

Humans cannot work, socialise or create if they are not fed, dressed and sheltered, however, the capitalist imperative to accumulate profit means that our capacity for caring labour – funding, time, staffing, resources – is continually undermined. Since the 2010 Health and Social Act, the NHS has faced

brutal austerity and privatisation. Between 2010–11 and 2014–15, annual NHS social care spending fell by 1.57%, leading to a 15% gap in spending on social care, estimated to have contributed to nearly 60,000 excess deaths since 2010 (3). This impact was most explicit during the pandemic, with already marginalised groups – low-income families, care home residents, elderly populations, disabled individuals and those of global majority heritage – among the worst hit (4).

Dance – A valuable resource of care

My trajectory into community and health contexts started during my graduate internship in Children and Young People's (CYP) Dance Programmes and Public Engagement at Trinity Laban in London in 2022. I assisted Youth, Older Adults and Health Activities at Laban, including Dancing for Health, a weekly 2-hour creative class for adults with acquired brain injuries and strokes. I've since started freelancing for The Blair Academy, a social enterprise that delivers Hip-Hop sessions to London care home residents.

Both Laban and The Blair Academy's sessions were not explicitly remedial, but uniquely enabled physical, mental and social flourishing through a holistic approach, participant's creativity, human connection and corporeal awareness. Each session started with chair-based mobilisation and self-massage. I witnessed how powerful straightforward seated movements are as a tool for developing bodily awareness, mobility, and self-esteem. Through massage, participants tune into what feels achy, sore, >>

A young woman with her hair in a bun is captured in a dynamic dance pose. She is wearing a light pink hoodie and olive green cargo pants. Her arms are extended forward, and her body is slightly arched. The background is a plain, light-colored wall with a vertical metal pole on the left. The floor is a polished wooden dance floor. The overall scene is brightly lit and conveys a sense of movement and energy.

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tight, or unstable, and how to use their own body to support caring for this.

Dancing for Health participants recounted difficulty reaching objects or changing clothes, but, after incorporating reaching and extending movements into class, found their capacity for movement was much greater than expected. Through the flow and joy of dancing collectively to music, these classes help participants overcome the stigma, low self-esteem and inhibitions which can come with a medical diagnosis or condition.

Beyond developing corporeal awareness and mobility, sessions enable mental wellbeing through empowering connection with personal identity, culture and agency. Charlie Blair, The Blair Academy's founder, encourages practitioners to not assume a culturally and ethnically homogenous older population and to use a range of music genres: great grooving tunes, which also enable care-home residents to feel more connected to their identity, memories and cultural heritage.

Improvisation, play and creativity were at the heart of Dancing for Health. Rather than attempting to 'rehabilitate' or 'cure' participants, sessions promoted physical, social and mental wellbeing through creative movement and recognising participant's agency, voice and power. One participant's banner, made for Glasgow's COP-26 Climate Conference, inspired a session exploring protest. This resulted in a short choreography and spoken word piece being presented alongside the protest banner at Sotheby Gallery's 'Humanity: The Outside In' exhibition.

Social prescribing and keeping dance accessible

Many British social care provisions are not free at point of use and adult social care's means-tested funding results in roughly half of service users privately financing care (5) with those in greatest need hit the hardest by inflation (6). With as many as 13 million adults struggling to meet basic needs, additional costs such as private dance classes are being cut (7). I saw young people increasingly struggle to attend Trinity Laban's youth dance programme due to financial barriers.

Dance must be embedded within a state funded model, through policies such as social prescribing (8) to realise its potential. The NHS in England introduced social prescribing in 2019 to provide additional support for individuals with multiple or long-term mental or physical health conditions by referring patients to non-medicalised local services. (9)

Social prescribing could alleviate pressure on existing services and is part of the NHS Model of Personalised Care that seeks to give users more agency over their healthcare (10), but it still faces logistical and practical implementation challenges. Nevertheless, research has found that the policy effectively promotes physical and mental health, with the University of Westminster reporting A&E

attendances had reduced by 24% and GP visits by 28% (11). Given greater funding and infrastructure, practices such as social prescribing offer a promising solution to the 'crisis of care' – one in which dance plays a central role.

Dance – A career for the future

I envision the need for holistic, accessible care growing in the future. Britain has high populations of aging people – 85 years+ is the fastest growing age group, with numbers in this bracket expected to double by 2041 and treble by 2066 (12) and young people predicted to have lasting wellbeing detriments following the pandemic (13).

Far from the CyberFirst Campaign tarnishing dance as a "luxurious hobby" that won't survive the digital revolution, organisations like The Blair Academy demonstrate that, given greater infrastructure and funding, dance provisions are immensely valuable resources of care. Dance is a career of the future and is fundamental for the flourishing of social, cultural and political life in Britain.

References

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