

Passion in process

Credit: Author's personal collection.



Creative Producer/Facilitator, **Darcy Kitchener** on a recent dance and digital art residency with young disabled people in Bedford, sharing its mission, methods and results – including deeper awareness about own her practice.

In the words of the old song: 'What a Difference a Day Makes'...or in this case 'Two Days'! As a part of my previous role producing and facilitating community dance programmes at Moving Together, I partnered with Fermynwoods Contemporary Art to deliver a creative project combining digital and physical artforms. The delivery team consisted of myself, a dance practitioner and Stuart Moore, a digital mastermind/ technology guru! The two-day residency in May 2023 aimed to nurture confidence and creativity at Grange Academy, a Bedford-based school for students with a diverse range of special educational needs.

The brief for the project was all about empowering a group of young people through embedding the notion of freedom and expression within artistic processes. No activity had the possibility of a wrong answer. This approach brings about endless opportunity, which can either become intimidating or galvanising for those taking part. As a facilitator, I saw my role as ensuring the outcome was the latter for our 13 teenage participants, who were introduced to us as having a significant lack of self-belief and conviction in their own contributions and ideas.

Day one of our residency was all about building a healthy rapport and trusted relationship with the

participants. A friend, who works in the pastoral side of secondary education, once told me that her most profound learning was the realisation that as humans, we naturally don't listen to a voice without a prior cultivation of respect for its source. I found this really inspiring and reflect on it every time I plan a session within which I am meeting a group of young people for the first time. For those first ten minutes, it's not about dance, it's not about tech, it's not about whatever the intended 'final product' needs to be. It's about creating an environment that provides value in the interactions: participants that feel they are gaining something worthy of their time with people who are worthy of their time and are inhabiting a space they are worthy of themselves.

My approach for the all-important first ten minutes is very simple:

1. Check in
2. Learn names
3. Play games

This worked really well with the Grange Academy students, who discovered a new love for creative movement relay races!

For Stuart and for me, our brief for this project was heavily process-focused with no pressure on a final piece of work. We were striving for intangible outcomes, which left room for us to build >>





Darcy Kitchener. Photo: Auhor's personal collection.

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our engagement activities around a multitude of creative entry points.

I have found that a high quantity of short, interactive tasks is an effective approach to engaging more students for a longer period of time, especially disabled children and young people or those with specific or additional educational needs. With this in mind, we built a circuit-based environment of tasks, methodically placed around the space, with each allocated area housing a particular prop, resource or digital device. Activities included digital/dance mashups such as

- building a movement phrase based on remote-like rules and instructions, such as Play, Pause, Rewind, Fast Forward, Restart, Mute
- digital drawings and patterns created using spinning wheels, light-up buttons and graphic tablets
- movement responses to programmed LED light panels.

All of these provided an opportunity to engage in a variety of ways including moving, seeing, hearing and touching.

A Moving Together 'rule' for leading sessions

is to always join in throughout an activity, not just parachute instructions into the space and then remove yourself from the subsequent work undertaken until it's finished. Therefore, whenever we could, we implemented reinforced instructions via visual aids, spoken explanations and physical demonstrations. This approach to every task seems to effectively level the playing field between leader and participant, building on that trusted and positive relationship so integral to the success of a community project and seemed to work particularly well in this context.

The rotational structure to delivery also lent itself well to a participant-led process of producing a creative outcome alongside the session's intangible aims. By following the aforementioned active facilitation rule and upholding a constant open communication with participants during sessions and after tasks, we soon found what the group collectively and individually enjoyed. This allowed us to steer the rest of the session time along the road of their interests, sustaining high levels of engagement and excitement for the work being produced; cultivating skills of leadership,

communication and independence in participants.

Engagement was high throughout the two-day residency, but that does not mean there weren't instances where individuals checked out of an activity and removed themselves from the collective conversation. Adaptable Plan B initiatives were always needed, which ranged from independent drawing tasks, to session photographer, to playing the role of DJ. Keeping the students involved in some way, however light touch that might be, was always the goal. Realistically, this cannot always be achieved and sometimes students needed a five minute time out, but I have always found that providing the option to see a way of rejoining via a different lens can be helpful in decreasing the risk of losing engagement entirely.

One participant's journey through the project has stayed with me. On the first day, she was a non-vocal presence yet quickly became a leader amongst the group. She choreographed digitally and physically, collaborating with her peers and driving the final product, which ended up as a multi-layered dance and digital extravaganza. There was a projection of the participants' dancing silhouettes on a digitally enhanced background, alongside a live dance routine, which was performed with small LED panels as props. The LED panels even had participants' dancing silhouettes made up of colourful pixels shown on loop. This particular student showed confidence in the preparation for a sharing to a younger class cohort and even offered to help introduce their work and process to those coming to watch.

Moving Together is a community dance company based in Leicester striving to provide quality dance opportunities for people of different ages and abilities. Since 2011, the organisation has been delivering creative dance provision for children and young people within education and community settings, specialising in Arts Award delivery and being acknowledged as a Trinity Champion Centre and leading UK provider of the framework. The company also delivers dance for adults over the age of 55 through classes across the Midlands, offers development opportunities for those working towards a career in the arts and has significant experience in consulting, delivering staff CPD and managing wider dance events. Moving Together pride themselves on having nurtured many successful, long-standing partnerships with education institutions, arts and cultural organisations and heritage centres including the National Space Centre, Aakash Odedra Company, Curve Theatre, The Core at Corby Cube and De Montfort University.

Yet when it came to the sharing, the student felt she couldn't go ahead and ended up watching her peers perform the work alongside the audience.

At first, I was gutted. I felt so sad for her, as she had worked so hard and shown such faith in herself leading up to the sharing, but then I took a moment to realise how much of a journey this student had been on in just two days.

As facilitators, I think we are all sometimes guilty of hoping for a preconceived perfect outcome culminating in a confetti cannon and a standing ovation. This expectation clouds the real progress at the root of a community project, which in this case, was a young girl finding her confidence within her class environment, showing her skills as a leader, and showing maturity through the understanding and value of making her own decision to step out of the final performance. Our success wasn't found in audience members throwing flowers onto the stage, but a student's evident development of confidence and conviction.

Mission accomplished!

Info

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 [MovingTogetherDance](https://www.facebook.com/MovingTogetherDance)

 [@moving_together](https://www.instagram.com/@moving_together)

 [@moving_together](https://www.twitter.com/@moving_together)

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Darcy Kitchener is now Creative Producer at ArtReach
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Darcy Kitchener. Photo: Sarah Salotti Photography.

