

# DansAthletic – the marriage of the dance and sport sectors?

The recent launch of DansAthletic: A Teachers Resource – a user-friendly resource pack for teaching dance in schools inspired by the Olympic and Paralympic Games – marks a significant shift in how East London Dance works with the sports sector. **Polly Risbridger** and **Tia Hassan** tell us more

**At East London Dance** we take pride in our partnership - working with organisations and individuals from a whole range of sectors. Over the years we have honed our skills at adapting our language, talking their talk, identifying our measures of success, making the case for investment, understanding the landscape.... We have become skilled at being chameleons in an ever-changing world of government targets and agendas. But how far do we go to adapt and meet other agendas? Do our partners really get our agenda... our art form?

For many years we have received project funding from Sports Development Teams, Primary Care Trusts and other sports and health partners who were recognising the benefits of participatory dance activity, for example getting young women more active, offering an alternative form of physical activity to traditional sports, and helping meet targets around reducing obesity. But this was often a light touch partnership - a source of income for the work we want to do with clear outputs and outcomes but no true engagement in our vision.

In 2006 Pro-Active East London arrived under the dynamic direction of Jason Fergus. It was established with the aim of 'developing existing and establishing new ways of using sport and physical activity to bring about positive change in the social and economic well being of East London's communities'. Following several meetings we soon realised we had a new partner in our patch that was genuinely interested in working in partnership - going beyond the number crunching, to engaging in debates about practice and form, ready to challenge the sports world around the value of dance, and demonstrating an absolute loyalty to the work of East London Dance and the London Thames Gateway Dance Partnership.

And so began our journey into the realms of SSPs, PESSCL / PESSYP, PDMs, SSCOs, CSPANs - a minefield of acronyms from the thriving sports infrastructure. How could we navigate and infiltrate this maze?

We are extremely lucky at East London Dance to benefit from two energetic and inspirational PE and Dance Advisory

Teachers in our geographical area - Bobbie Gargrave (Barking and Dagenham) and Lucia (or Loo) Devine (Newham). They both have an invaluable passion and knowledge for dance and have been able to guide East London Dance through the world of physical education and dance in schools. So we sat down with Loo who helped us navigate the sports infrastructure - drawing me diagrams, decoding the acronyms and giving names of key people to pursue.

At this same time a new resource pack was in development - DansAthletic: A Teacher's Resource - following two successful participatory projects with choreographer, Luca Silvestrini. The first project was a fantastic dance film, Start to Finish, which was made in 2005 to raise the profile of London's 2012 bid amongst young people in East London directed by Luca Silvestrini and Bettina Strickler from Protein Dance with film maker, Roswitha Cheshier (the film features on the interactive DVD in the DansAthletic pack). In 2006 we launched the Big Dance with a live performance at Canary Wharf developing the ideas from Start to Finish further. There were just too many fantastic, creative ideas to let disappear, so we set about developing the DansAthletic resource pack.

We pulled together a team of dance, education and sports specialists to develop the resource and approached Pro-Active East London as an investor to help get it off the ground. The London Borough of Newham (via Loo Devine) also invested in the development of the pack and together they formed a valuable advisory group to develop and market the pack as well as ensuring it had maximum impact on the sports sector. Jason Fergus from Pro-Active East London expanded our strategic vision for the pack - seeing it as a key legacy tool for the Olympic and Paralympic Games, developing an upskilled workforce, building healthier communities and raising participation levels.

Since the pack's launch in October 2008 the feedback has been overwhelming and the impact already being felt. Partnership Development Managers are buying packs for every school in their partnership; the pack is inspiring

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**Above:** Photo: James O’Jenkins.

borough-wide dance festivals; advocates are influencing PGCE courses to make this a key resource for new PE teachers; dance specialists are using it as a training tool with school teachers in their counties; we are presenting at the Association for Physical Education (AfPE) conference; we are being invited to Community Sport and Physical Activity Network (CSPAN) meetings (which we have been trying to crack for years!); and the young people who feature in the pack have even performed in front of the Olympic Organising Committees from around the world following an invitation from LOCOG as part of the Beijing debriefing. The sports sector are grabbing hold of this resource and engaging with dance in a way we haven’t seen at East London Dance before.

So why has the sport world picked up so much on DansAthletic? As a Partnership Development Manager in Redbridge, Ally Traynor, says "many sports teachers are out of their comfort zone teaching dance. DansAthletic gives them a chance to approach dance through a medium they are comfortable with. If a rugby playing, testosterone filled male PE teacher can feel comfortable teaching dance by using this resource, then this can have a similar impact on those types of pupils learning and enjoying dance".

So placing dance into the comfort zone of PE teachers is vital. But this isn’t the first dance and sport resource and won’t be the last - there must be something else.... Perhaps what DansAthletic has done is capture the imaginations of these PE and sports teachers. Not only does DansAthletic just get you to teach dance based on sporting actions - it uniquely gets you to explore the emotion behind competition, the feeling of striving for improvement, the way you experience sport through the media. It has lit the fuse for these teachers to go beyond the literal into the performance behind sport. Not only has it given them plans, structures and material to deliver dance confidently but it has also left some room for their imagination - the chance for them to work with young people to be creative.

It has also found a way to communicate the uniqueness of dance and given them a language to talk about dance with.

As Luca Silvestrini says "Sport and dance offer a good and useful marriage, but as in all long lasting relationships, it’s about respecting and complementing each other. It’s not about becoming one - dance and sport are different and unique. I began to work on DansAthletic convinced that sports in general, and the Olympic and Paralympic Games as a specific theme, are very good vehicles to discover, generate and learn movement, and offer ideal starting points for the exploration of physical interaction and contact work. The muscular and emotional similarities between a dancer and an athlete, as well as their focus and strive for improvement, offer both a context and a positive point of reference for young dancers, and they are especially useful to those less familiar or uncomfortable with physical expression."

So the sports world is now using our language, adopting our best practice and realising the vast potential of dance to not only inspire and motivate young people but to get young people active, fit and healthy. It is just the start of East London Dance’s journey into the world of sports and of course the Olympic and Paralympic Games but we are in as good a position as ever to realise a true cultural and sporting legacy with a bit of help from our partners along the way.

Polly Risbridger is Creative Producer at East London Dance and produced and edited DansAthletic: A Teacher’s Resource. Tia Hassan is Communications Officer at East London Dance.

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DansAthletic: A Teacher’s Resource is an inspiring, accessible and user-friendly resource packed with creative ideas for teaching dance in schools, inspired by the Olympic and Paralympic Games and includes a free interactive DVD and CD with music by Weapons of Sound. It is written by Kathryn Sexton and Luca Silvestrini and developed with support from Pro-Active East London and London Borough of Newham and is available to buy from East London Dance for £50 + postage & packaging.

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# Dance to make you 'feel good'

Independent artist **Gerry Turvey** describes her work with dance and mental health

**As dancers and dance practitioners** we are all aware of the personal, mental and physical benefits of being in touch with our bodies. We have our bodies as our artistic tool, as well as our creative and expressive outlet. The daily connection of mind and body is part of our fundamental way of being and well-being. We know we 'feel better' for dancing, breathing, stretching, and sharing our movement with others...to us its obvious isn't it? How then, can we think about using dance as a pivotal tool towards improving mental health for those of us who struggle at times in our life with some form of mental ill health?

For the past 18 months I have been involved as a dance worker with LocoMotion dance group in Huddersfield. This is a unique and diverse group of people who come together once a week to share movement and dance improvisation within their differing body histories. Billed as 'dance to make you feel good' the group are part of an umbrella organisation HOOT Music and Dance. The class is aimed at users of the mental health system, anyone challenged by mental ill health, or anyone at any stage of the recovery process, though anyone is also welcome to take part.

The dance group has its own momentum. It is a place to 'be' and a place to 'be part' of something. There is a sense of safety and belonging for participants, and yet it is not closed. It

embraces new members and passing visitors with a real sense of welcome, sharing, and inclusion that is valuable and encouraging for new dancers to return.

The class has a very simple structure with no pressure to be or do anything, rather I aim to construct open tasks that can allow for personal interpretation, and there is a sense of value to everything that is offered and achieved. We focus on getting in touch with our breath, and through that the physical body, so perhaps that leaves space for the mind to follow rather than dictate.

Most of the sessions use the development of a structured improvisation; this allows individuals to have a safe place for creativity and finding different ways of expression with the body, and to create relationships with partners or others in the group. Nothing is perceived as 'wrong'. All suggestions from participants are valid and used as part of the dance, and therefore create a contribution to the group. Touch (which could potentially be an issue) seems to integrate itself seamlessly and everyone has a sensitivity to each other, this helps to make the physical contact integral to the work.

We also play a great deal, and I aim to encourage this and then layer it with the use of structures such as repetition, ritual, harmony, physical conversations, meetings, following/copying. Also, perhaps

without the group being aware of it, I use some risk-taking, both physically and mentally. For example working with the eyes closed, or falling and being supported by partners. This can be challenging and sometimes daunting, but ultimately empowering and life-affirming. For some people the very fact of coming each week, being there, dancing and interacting, allowing physical contact is in itself a risk, and the great thing is that they continue to take it!

I am constantly amazed and impressed with the level of commitment, the ability to be open and share, and the enormous amount of creativity generated each session. Each week I leave with a sense that huge achievements have been accomplished. Participants offer so much that is real; they dance with a sense that their contributions are from the heart, with a sense of generosity and of honesty. For me as a facilitator this is humbling, and ultimately deeply fulfilling.

Dance uses the co-ordination of mind and body, and creative activity uses the left side of brain for concentration. Dance creates social interaction with others, a unique form of literal self-expression, by engaging with the physical self. Independent and creative actions encourage self-esteem and empowerment; this is enhanced by the interaction with music, and safe structured physical contact with others. It gives people choices, allows >