



Above: Niki Pollard (far right) and local children in the river Bovey. Photo: Hazel Jones.

A question of practice

Independent dance artist **Niki Pollard** wonders how community dance artists experience – and use – the practices of their peers

This article sprang from three questions I want to ask of community dance practitioners - that is, many of you who are reading this now. But if I were to feel comfortable in the asking, it seemed I should first try to answer them myself. It may be, however, that my questions or responses will prompt you to respond in turn.

My questions grew from a curiosity about how we meet a new dance activity from out of our existing movement practices. In particular, how does a community dance artist experience the practices of other dance professionals? In concrete terms these questions relate to early career experiences and continuing professional development, which are currently hot topics for the Foundation for Community Dance.

First, some background. Last month I opened up my dance practice to my community via an 'open studio' in the village hall. I danced for 16 hours in support of local children who'd been fundraising to 'adopt' ponies at £16 each through a Dartmoor pony conservation charity. (Aptly,

their activities included an outdoor community dance). The link between my dancing and the village children may have encouraged people to drop in who might not otherwise seek out dance (particularly at the improvised, non-stylised end of the contemporary spectrum). Additionally I invited people to be involved in the process by bringing me objects to move with. These included a drain pipe, an umbrella, a dolphin figurine and a bouncy ball. Visitors talked with me about their responses and were welcome to handle the objects and look through my workbooks. Many commented either that they didn't know what to expect, or that this certainly wasn't it. They described how they were meeting my dance practice with bridges built from their existing experiences, including t'ai chi, ballroom dance, art psychotherapy and professional community theatre.

It's only in the last year that I've led dance activities, so the fascination I felt in how people responded to what I offered is fresh for me. I remember, for example, the hesitant parents who gamely agreed to dance with me



Above: People living in sheltered housing, Dance This Way on World Dance Day 2009, Dance in Devon. Practitioner: Katherine Nietrzebka. Photo: Kevin Clifford.

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alongside their children in a field on World Dance Day (1). Gradually they made sense for themselves of what we were doing through links to their wider lives, e.g., parenting, the martial art BaGwa and Maori ways of being on the land. The parents were clear with me that they’d never imagined they’d perform any manner of dance, let alone in a field. Our first exploratory try in the field was under cover of darkness. We linked hands and strode the length of the field, their giggling and willingness meeting my passion for the artform and producing the beginnings of energy and conviction in the project.

As soon as I begin to reflect upon how people are meeting my dance practice, a second question arises: How am I meeting others’ dance practices? This was brought home to me at a weekly professional class in contemporary technique when a fellow participant, who is a secondary school dance teacher, told me that she drew on this class in her lesson planning. I began to wonder more about the ethics of how dance practitioners acknowledge and credit one another. How do dance artists negotiate their interrelations day-to-day? As an early career practitioner I’m finding my way. For example, community dance practitioner Katherine Nietrzebka invited me, and my children, to workshops of Dance This Way, a project for dance and older people sponsored through a partnership between the local district council and Dance in Devon. The latter agency then asked me to lead Dance on the Move sessions at Exeter’s Playday in the Forest, which Nietrzebka had led the previous year.

After talking through her experiences of the previous year, and remembering my children’s pleasure in her workshop, I adapted some of her tasks for the family playday. I contacted her to check in with her about

this, and to offer thanks.

Something is at stake here that’s more than ethical. When I participate in a dance workshop I respond as a dancing human being. I’m also aware, if subliminally, that the experience may colour how I, in turn, lead dance. To those of you with longstanding expertise in leading and teaching dance this may be self-evident. But should we acknowledge it more? After all, it entails a tidal change in one’s self-perception as a practitioner. This may be one outcome of the research that Gill Clarke is proposing into ‘the fluid social webs of embodied practices and circulating ideas that characterise dance’s intangible cultural heritage’ (2).

And now to my questions and answers. Firstly, when you began to guide, teach and lead others in dance, how aware were you of any dance teaching that you had received?

During a workshop a particular phrase from a teacher, or an activity, may become anchored in my memory with an experience or insight that feeds my own dance practice. In the weeks following I may, as I dance, recall the phrase or re-visit the activity, finding that it enlivens or attunes my practice. Performance writer Susan Melrose (3) might characterise my re-use in terms of an ‘enabling metaphor’ in which I’ve carried over into my practice, as an enabling element, what was offered to me. Although it’s all too probable that I don’t use the phrase or activity quite as the workshop artist did, my muddled or misremembered version may nonetheless be valuable to me as a somatic trigger. I recently heard dance artist Eva Karczag describing how specific she is in her language when teaching somatic approaches to dance (4). She recognised that her use of words was vital as it enabled her to generate an experience for a student that was embodied rather than mimicked. I



Above: Participants in Field, performed on World Dance Day 2009 as part of a county-wide Dance in Devon community project with Charlie Morrissey for the Cultural Olympiad. Photo: Richard Gladstone.

wonder what the implications are for artist-to-artist acknowledgment if, say, when I come to teach I draw upon inaccurate yet enabling experiences.

From this comes a related question: Can you trace in your teaching a sense of adaptation, inheritance or re-working of other people's approach or teaching that you yourself valued?

When I began dancing in a field with other parents and children on World Dance Day, I'd planned to start from quiet, exploratory activities to ground and awaken sensation. Using scores for moving along the riverbank or between trees, I was aware of my ongoing training with Helen Poyner in outdoor environments. Faced with the excited energies of children, aged 2 and upwards and scattering busily throughout the field, I swiftly modulated those scores. An exuberant approach seemed more effective; by drawing on parenting and improvising skills to follow children's ideas with gusto, the event could be swept along by raw enthusiasm. It was when we were 'joining up trees' – that is, holding hands to make lines that rippled from tree to tree – that I recognised it as a daisy chain, and remembered Rosemary Lee talking to me years earlier about spontaneous folk dances. I'd not realised until that moment how profoundly my approach to this project had been inspired by watching her make *Passage* (2001), a project that grew from the lively experience of workshops with thirteen dancers of different ages (5). In making *Passage*, Lee used workshop tasks that she has consistently returned to over the years when working with groups. One of these was 'body parts chasing,' in which a focus is placed on various part of the body to pull you through space. Doran George referred to what sounded like a comparable task in the autumn 2009 issue of

Animated (6). This got me thinking about tasks that run and run, and wondering how much might be gained if dance practitioners shared their top five activities: reliable favourites, activities for getting out of a tight corner, tasks to wake a room up after lunch (7).

This leads me to a third question: If you're an experienced dance artist and teacher, are you aware of how your work is received, shifted and revisited in other people's work and teaching? And how do you feel about this? Over to you all.

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1. Our dance was part of a Dance in Devon project for the Cultural Olympiad, involving simultaneous dances by community groups across the county, linked by the experiences of a workshop with Charlie Morrissey
2. personal correspondence; publication forthcoming
3. sfmelrose.u-net.com
4. The Great Divide was a discussion event curated by Joe Moran (Dance Art Foundation), chaired by Professor Sarah Whatley (Coventry University) and involving guest provocateur Lizzie LeQuesne, and participating artists Chris Crickmay, Doran George, Eva Karczag, Sylvia Hallet and Jessica Lerner. The debate took place at the Herbert Gallery in Coventry on Wednesday 24 June 2009 during the Summer Dancing festival (artistic director Katye Coe)
5. See the *Passage* pages in Lee's areas of the ResCen website, www.rescen.net
6. Doran George 'Dancing the unfamiliar'
7. An Introduction to Community Dance Practice by Diane Amans has some activity lists in its resources sections, for example.