



Need to know

Dance United trustee **Pauline Gladstone** examines the wants and needs of artists working with challenging groups who are hungry for more knowledge and further guidance

‘What else do dance artists need to know besides dance to work with challenging groups?’ 63 dance professionals from across England, all of whom are deeply interested in this question, met at London’s Interchange Studios on April 20 2009 for a Dance United Open Space Event facilitated by Improbable Theatre Company. The latter has pioneered the use of Open Space Technology, a lively and interactive method of stimulating dialogue and learning where the participants set the agenda and deal with the issues that are most important to them.

Participants at the Open Space event included representatives from institutions such as Laban and Trinity College, and dance artists from a wide range of companies and charities. Our central query unearthed a whole set of urgent questions:

- Without a national standard how do we know who is suited to undertake this kind of work?
- At what stage in professional development should this vocational element be introduced?
- How can dance artists access internships and apprenticeships in the social inclusion sector?
- How can we ensure that young or emerging dance artists are not put off from this work?
- What is the viability of a community dance teachers’ training course?
- Would accreditation help bring the industry into the mainstream?
- How can dance agencies and accreditation bodies join up to support dance artists who want to work in social inclusion settings?

The need

Before I address all that we uncovered relating to the above list of questions, a bit of background might be useful. The

Open Space day was initiated by Dance United, the UK’s leading organisation for dance in social inclusion. As Victoria Hunter, dance lecturer at the University of Leeds, explained at a recent Arts in Society conference in Venice, (1), dance in social inclusion can be defined as a field of transformational practice with the potential to affect personal and social change. Its facilitation relies upon the dance practitioner’s skill, commitment, awareness (of self and others) and enthusiasm for engaging with this particular form of dance work.

Despite the expansion in the dance in social inclusion sector, there are no agreed industry guidelines or standards for training. As a consequence, the career path for individuals wishing to engage with this type of work remains unclear. Sue Akroyd is the Head of Community Studies & One-year Programmes at Trinity Laban. As she observes (in Diane Amans’ book *An Introduction to Community Dance Practice*): ‘In community dance, there are no formal or universally agreed criteria that determine an individual’s “readiness” to practice as a professional. Expectations around standards, competence and “professionalism” have evolved organically, over time and in tandem with the nature and demands of the work, so there is no prescribed route into the profession and few “must haves” or “must dos” on the way to becoming a professional practitioner.’ (2)

The dance consultant Susanne Burns has also identified a significant problem in this area. For many years Higher Education establishments have produced dance graduates with a bias towards performing and choreography, and few graduates actually gaining employment in these areas due to high levels of competition and limited employment opportunities. As she writes, ‘It is evident that, despite the primacy often designated to the performer and choreographer, they make up a very small proportion of the dance labour market. The market demand appears to be for



Above: Post-Graduate Certificate: Dance in the Community students on training course at Trinity Laban, 2008.

dance practitioners who can teach, facilitate dance in community contexts and manage and produce the work.’(3)

The result, as Burns observes, is that the industry itself has developed a home-grown approach to professional development. This is evidenced by modules from Higher Education dance, community dance or dance therapy training; short courses run by Dance United and East London Dance; and the use of generic courses in anger management, conflict resolution and mediation skills. In response the Foundation for Community Dance is working towards a framework for continuing professional development, through its Making A Move project and by setting up a National College for Community Dance. The Foundation for Community Dance (FCD) is also working within the Dance Training and Accreditation Partnership (DTAP), which includes the Council for Dance Education and Training, the dance Conservatoires (including Trinity Laban), Dance UK, the National Dance Teachers Association and Youth Dance England. DTAP is focusing on the development of national occupational standards and a qualification for dancers working with young people and in schools.

It is Dance United’s firm conviction that, in order to thrive, this sector needs to attract more dance artists of calibre to work in the community with groups who have never danced before and who may be disaffected, disengaged and marginalised from mainstream culture. Currently dance in social inclusion is undervalued as a career choice - partly because of a misconception that artistic standards are lower, and partly because dance artists fear what they may have to deal with.

What dance artists want

This report, generated and written up by the participants during the Open Space event, aims to make a contribution to this debate. As the previous bullet points make plain,

together we identified a thoroughgoing range of concerns and needs that are of vital interest if this particular area of dance work is to improve and thrive.

To begin with, dance artists want to understand the nature of the groups they would be working with, the appropriate ratio of support staff to dance artists, and their responsibility to and for participants beyond the session and working space (including pastoral care and longer-term progression routes). They need to clarify the nature of relationships with partner agencies, especially who is responsible for what. They also want to better comprehend other agendas or policies relevant to the sector, for example, child protection; a basic knowledge of detecting drug/drink abuse; legal requirements (e.g., Criminal Records Bureau checks); employer/commissioner aims, expectations and learning objectives (as, for example, in literacy and numeracy).

What dance artists at this event unanimously and loudly called for is induction and training in group facilitation, including how to overcome their fears, how to use their art form to its fullest potential and how to deal with behaviour management in the dance space. They asked for training that includes approaches to setting ground rules, boundaries and contracts with groups, and more knowledge about group dynamics, stages and processes. During the day it became clear that there is a real need for artists to develop any number of skills. How, for example, do you avoid getting wound up by participants’ behaviours? Or how can you control the working environment by appropriately removing physical distractions, obstacles and temptations? And how do you deal with attachment and loss issues when projects end?

What dance artists desire is a good-enough tool-bag of behaviour management strategies. Supplied with that, they might better be able to defuse confrontation, overcome

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Above: Pauline Gladstone, facilitator, with Post-Graduate Certificate: Dance in the Community students on training course at Trinity Laban, 2008.

resistance or apathy and maintain boundaries. They want to understand how much information about individuals they need to know, and how to gauge the needs of the group in relation to the needs of those individuals. Their goal is to get under the skin of what might motivate challenging behaviours (for example, somebody refusing to take off their shoes and socks). They would like to know how to prevent conflict by embedding pro-active strategies in their teaching, and what kind of expectations to have. They want to be able to deal appropriately with bullying, inappropriate sexual behaviour and challenging project partners such as over-authoritative teachers. Additionally, they wish to know several how-tos, as in how to create a shared behaviour management plan before the project starts; how to manage children who don’t listen; how to motivate participants who are apathetic and disengaged; and how to use their body language and voice to best effect. Above all, they would hope to find ways to face their own vulnerabilities and volatilities when there are challenges to their authority, and to learn to breathe within the heart of chaos.

As this report makes plain there is much to be done to strengthen the sector. In the meantime, through the Open Space process some ground rules emerged. To that end, for their work in social inclusion dance artists would like to ensure that these minimum standards are met:

- Team teaching: at least two dance artists in the space
- Project managers/commissioners to ensure a support worker/teacher (who knows the participants) is present throughout all sessions
- Integrated dance and support teams wherever possible
- Dance artists and support workers, where possible, train and are inducted together
- Supervision available to debrief (even if for only a quarter-hour) after each session for dance artists and support workers.

As for qualities within themselves that dance artists most want to nurture, we came up with the list below:

- To be resilient and centred enough to stand still and firm if faced with provocations, and quick-witted and self-confident enough to experiment with responses
- To have empathy with participants and their often chaotic

lives

- To steer a fine line between genuine warmth and interest in the participants and over-familiarisation, i.e. keeping clean and clear boundaries to stop from being drawn into life stories, offence-related chit-chat and personalities
- To be unaffected by whether they’ll be liked or not by the participants
- To be unfazed by bad language and poor interpersonal skills/manners
- To maintain a sense of humour and proportion
- To trust their own life experience.

What next?

Given the weight of all of these needs and desires, it’s no surprise that Dance United’s Open Space day culminated with a final question: what next? The group wants its report to reach the Foundation for Community Dance as a preface to exploring how these training needs could be met within the new National College for Community Dance, and for it to be seen and acted upon by the DTAP group.

What mustn’t get overlooked are the heartfelt pleas for practical training in people management tools and techniques so practitioners are confident enough to walk into a dance space with a bunch of disaffected young people who have never danced before, and skilled enough to get them dancing and keep them achieving.

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- 1) Hunter, V. 2009, ‘Dance and Social Inclusion: Facilitating the Process - Developing Graduate Employability’ Arts in Society conference, Venice.
- 2) Amans, D. (Ed) 2008, ‘An Introduction to Community Dance Practice’, Palgrave Macmillan, p121
- 3) Burns, S. 2006, ‘Mapping the Terrain: Entrepreneurship and Professional Practice in Dance Higher Education,’ Palatine Publishing, Hall, T, 2007 The Dance Review, U.K Government Report: Department for Children, Schools and Families. Burns, S. (ed) 2008 Dance Training and Accreditation Project and the recent Making a Move initiative instigated by the Foundation for Community Dance, U.K.