



Lucy Nicholson with outreach groups, Dance For All studios, Athlone, Cape Town. Photo: Helen Linsell

Finding the balance

Dance artists **Helen Linsell** and **Lucy Nicholson** reflect upon their project with Dance For All in the disadvantaged communities of Cape Town, South Africa asking, 'does discipline have to be sacrificed to reach inclusive practice when working with young people?'

Dance For All (DFA) is a non-profit organisation which, 'provides children in historically disadvantaged communities with the opportunity for enjoyment, promotion of self-esteem and empowerment through the medium of dance' (1).

Our month-long project in South Africa aimed to be a professional development and research opportunity during which we created two new pieces of choreography with DFA's junior and senior groups whilst also observing our international peers. Our trip was supported by Arts Council England (North West and Yorkshire regions) and The Lisa Ullmann Travelling Scholarship Fund.

We first worked together on Dance United's (2) Academy project in Bradford, with young offenders from community and custodial contexts as well as young people excluded from mainstream education. We then went on to co-direct the community element of the company's Destino on the Road national tour. It was during this process that we established a strong teaching partnership that we decided to develop internationally whilst gaining further insight into

other dance practices within the field of social inclusion.

Our first and most significant observation was the extremely high standards of technique and performance that we witnessed during the preparation for DFA's anniversary tribute gala. It was astounding to see every single child and young person demonstrating such an exceptional ability. This led us to questioning what it was about this programme that was producing such quality. Two things became apparent to us: the discipline inherent within the young people's culture and the teacher-led delivery of classes and rehearsals.

The teacher-student relationship became a fascinating discussion point for us. It was explained, by a DFA member of staff, that strict respect for any elder is a fundamental aspect in South African culture. This, as we witnessed and experienced, evidently transferred to the dance studio. The approach was predominantly teacher-centred and 'command' based and we noticed that teachers made (what seemed like) a conscious decision to wear everyday clothes and deliver movement verbally with minimal physical

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demonstration. This seemed to make a strong statement which established the status of the teacher within the session and visually separated them from the students.

Perhaps, because of this particular approach to teaching, our first session in the township of Khayelitsha proved to be more challenging than we had anticipated. After planning what we considered to be an inclusive and engaging session, as we would for any community dance session in the UK, we were surprised to be met by a somewhat passive response. The participants were completely compliant and followed all our instructions without question but seemed almost puzzled by our approach. When we plan sessions, one of our key aims is to ensure that the participants feel they are in a comfortable learning environment. However, in this particular context, we found that our open and interactive delivery caused a certain element of unease.

We realised that community dance practice and education as a whole in the UK has moved much more towards a participant-centred and collaborative approach. Therefore, the pressure is to keep classes new, fresh, interesting and engaging to ensure our practice is inclusive. When replicating this model with young dancers in South Africa, who were used to more traditional teaching methods, we needed to give them time to adapt and understand not only our style of movement and choreography but also our entire teaching methodology.

After allowing for this period of adjustment for both ourselves and the young people and reflecting on the cultural differences in our teaching, we noticed just how vibrantly both junior and senior groups responded. Suddenly they transformed into communicating, engaging students and this, combined with their intrinsic discipline and overwhelming enthusiasm for learning, made for some of the most enjoyable classes we have ever taught.

We were also able to achieve far more, in terms of creating two new pieces of work, than we had initially expected. Due to a number of reasons, including national public service strikes and the closure of all schools across the whole of South Africa, our contact time was dramatically reduced. Despite these time constraints we were able to

produce two new and contrasting pieces of choreography that were performed to a public audience. We believe this was possible as a result of the level of motivation, commitment and most importantly discipline that the young people worked with. This led us to assess the role of discipline within youth dance practice in the UK. Has our prioritisation of inclusive practice and differentiation, two things we are both very passionate about in our delivery, compromised the level of discipline across the sector? Does one have to suffer at the expense of the other?

In our experience the benefits for young people of instilling discipline within community based dance practice are:

- To provide structure
- To understand the boundaries between teacher and pupil
- To create awareness of the concept of consequences
- To ensure safe practice
- To demonstrate professionalism
- To achieve high standards
- To work with respect.

On the other hand, with reference to our experience in Cape Town, we wondered if the strong discipline which the young people worked with could affect their process of learning. Were their classes as fulfilling and their experience as rewarding by simply attending, learning technique or choreography and leaving without a more interactive and/or creative experience?

We found it interesting to reflect upon our teaching practice in the UK and notice where its strengths lie: we run sessions inclusively that are individual-centred and focus on allowing participants to develop socially, cognitively and artistically as well as physically and technically, we think that producing high standard work is vital in building young people's self esteem and we are also great believers in ensuring the process of getting to that performance is equally enriching. What we have learned is that it is when inclusivity and discipline are equally balanced that best practice in British community dance can be achieved.

This is undoubtedly an ongoing discussion as well as a challenge amongst us all as community dance practitioners and invariably we may incline towards one more than the other in different circumstances. However, what this particular professional development experience has highlighted is: 1) to have confidence in demanding and maintaining a disciplined studio environment and 2) to recognise that inclusive practice and discipline can and should exist alongside each other and to strive towards this philosophy within all our practice with young people – in both formal and informal contexts.

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References

- (1) www.danceforall.co.za
- (2) www.dance-united.com



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