



Above: Sessions with English National Ballet at PGR. Above right: Fleur Derbyshire-Fox. All photos: British Council Hong Kong

Overcoming cultural boundaries – sharing practice

Fleur Derbyshire-Fox, Director of Learning, English National Ballet enters into intercultural dialogue in China and reveals how the creative practices in current Ballet education can build new potential with non dance professionals and people with disabilities

We never guessed that our first recce to China would be the catalyst for the myriad of cultural opportunities that have opened up in Hong Kong and mainland China; personally, it has been one of the most enriching and challenging experiences of my dance career and I know that English National Ballet has similarly benefitted.

Building relationships in China is all about face-to-face meetings, and a choreographed approach to exchanging business cards and gifts. Meeting after meeting ensued to establish partners for our main objective – the project Swanning Around (1), and from the culmination of all these positive exchanges, the British Council subsequently invited English National Ballet to devise a professional development programme for its

capacity building initiative Train the Trainers. This is part of an on-going professional development plan aiming to develop the capacity of arts organisations in China to engage more effectively with audiences in their communities.

The regional British Council offices brokered new partnerships in Hong Kong, Shanghai and Xi'an, a priority city for the British Council Beijing office, and, as part of the Train the Trainers programme, English National Ballet devised three bespoke projects:

The first, Access, Inclusivity and Involvement was a three-day pilot project at the Providence Garden for Rehab (PGR) in Tuen Mun, Hong Kong, and focused on how to access ballet as a means of inclusive participation and creative expression. Discover Ballet was a two-day residency at Xi'an

Conservatory of Music, and centred on the language of ballet, how to creatively explore repertoire, themes and character in a community setting. The third project Creative Engagement at Tongji University gave degree students studying ballet in education an insight into how repertory can be used creatively as the stimulus for generating choreography for people of all ages and abilities. Our team comprised Danielle Jones and Laura Harvey, Learning and Participation Officers in the Department of Learning and Hayley Arundel, Associate Dance Artist. Jon Petter, a highly experienced and versatile musician, composer and workshop leader completed the team.

For this article I am focussing on the residency at the PGR, in Hong Kong, which brought together the 'trainers' – in this context, they were social

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workers, care-givers and special education needs teachers, with the 'clients' - adult residents with mental health issues including schizophrenia, autism, depression and learning difficulties. It is important to recognise that the 'trainers' were not community dance artists or arts facilitators - for the majority of trainers, they were experiencing dance for the first time, as were their clients. Our aim was to share our teaching methodologies and good practice with the trainers and to provide a tool kit to enable the work to be continued post-residency. In three days, this was a big ask...

We planned the residency at PGR around Swan Lake, teasing out the themes, characters and textures and enhancing the creative work with the use of props – ostrich white feathers for the swans, blue and silver silk scarves for the lake and stretchy green fabric for Rothbart's underworld. Similarly voice, music and percussion were additional layers to foster creative expression within the sessions. With all the planning in place, our mantra was

to remain flexible whilst maintaining a balance between being responsive and culturally sensitive to the needs of the group whilst pushing the boundaries of what could be achieved by both the clients and the trainers.

Each day was structured with a trainers-only session, followed by the main session with trainers and clients working together as one group. At the end of each day the trainers attended a reflective session with the team to discuss the day's learning outcomes, any arising issues and the plan for the following day.

Cultural sensitivities and boundaries emerged from day one and became an ongoing point of reflection amongst the team over the three days.

Language and labels long eradicated in the UK were part of the cultural language at PGR and risked alienating the team and more importantly limiting the creative potential of the clients; Danielle Jones noted: "The 'normalization policy' at PGR suggests that there is a global definition of 'normal' that we should all aspire to be



or become."

Learning through the experience of participation was not a familiar concept for the trainers and we sensed the trainers retreating as their clients gained in confidence creating a shift in status in the session. The notion of inclusive working and placing the participant (the client) at the centre of the activity was entirely new and



All photos: Sessions with English National Ballet at PGR, British Council Hong Kong



unexpected as Yvonne Tse from the British Council Hong Kong noted: “To breakdown the hierarchy between social workers and clients is something that they/we didn’t expect. In PGR the social workers are those who give orders and the clients are those who follow orders.”

As Jon Petter reflected: “This is possibly the hardest task they face, to

re-define their relationship within the creative workshop environment being used as they are to having their clients function within clear-cut well-defined ‘rules’ where they tell them how it is going to work, and needing to get to a place where there is more mutual trust, where it is alright for everyone including the trainers to make mistakes, indeed where the trainers can learn from the clients.”

Testing knowledge and understanding with the aid of the interpreter was essential. It was clear in those early stages that the basic principles of working in a democratic space as equals were not understood by the trainers. The challenge was to cut through this cultural barrier and to gain the trust of the trainers. Unpacking our methodology in the reflective sessions and giving the trainers a comprehensive framework for the creative tasks gave them renewed confidence in the combined session.

The breakthrough for the trainers was in part due to the transformation of their clients throughout the workshop

process. The simple touch exercises in the circle made a deep impression on the trainers: “We were becoming more creative through the body movement exercise. Such exercises are able to enhance communication between the social workers and mentally disabled people who are less verbally accessible. For instance, a big circle was formed in the beginning for all participants. In a big circle, trainers were able to warm up their bodies and make connection with the clients without boundaries/hierarchy. It provided a great experiential learning opportunity for the trainers...”

The clients continued to surprise us; we had been advised by PGR to give the group plenty of rest breaks since many were on medication. The dance and music activity inspired an awakening for these people... suddenly they were actually making eye contact, conversing and making creative choices, feeling joyful; the space filled with their energy...they were dancing with a renewed freedom and gaining some control in their lives.

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Sessions with English National Ballet at PGR.
Photo: British Council Hong Kong

Clients shared their feelings in the sessions: "I am so happy"; "I feel free as a bird"; "I want to exercise every day and do more. It makes me feel happy." Seeing one client age 68 roll on the floor and inspiring others to do the same was an amazing defining moment!

With the group consolidated, the participants (clients and trainers) developed a performance piece incorporating, dance, music and voice to share with an invited audience on the final afternoon. It was an incredible achievement and a cultural shift whereby trainers and clients danced together, created music together and ultimately performed as one community.

Following the performance, Friendly Au Yeung, from PGR said simply: "It was a meeting of hearts... through the dance programme you (clients) have shown us who you really are..."

Feedback from the trainers was positive especially in terms of how they now perceived their client relationship: "Through the dance workshop, they were able to see the other side of the clients which were hidden in ordinary days."

The trainers observed that the elder clients, "were surprisingly enjoying themselves in the dance movement, in particular when they enacted the 'roots' scene of Swan Lake with the staff and social workers. The clients felt the sense of connection with the trainers and staff through body movement and direct body contact when they were dancing together."

Another social worker commented: "I got the feeling of being enlightened. I will bring the touching feeling back into my life and work. I was inspired by the tools that used by the English National Ballet trainers and the creativity on music."

The programme certainly succeeded in introducing ballet to the trainers as an accessible art form that can benefit their clients' relationship building, emotional wellbeing and deepen their connection to others and to the world around them. We left feeling elated and at the same time with a heavy heart, frustrated that we were leaving when there was so much potential.

Since then we have heard from PGR that several of the trainers have successfully incorporated some of the exercises into their daily routine with their clients. A trainer from Guangzhou

has committed to bring the same model to the Mainland and conduct workshops for a disabled group.

And to the future? The British Council is organising a second dance programme at PGR to build on English National Ballet's residency. We look forward to keeping in touch with the progress of this programme whilst making plans to return when the Company tours to Hong Kong and the Mainland.

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References

(1) Swanning Around - English National Ballet in partnership with the Royal Albert Hall, WebPlay and the British Council involving over 200 young people from across the UK and China. The aim of the project is to foster inter-cultural dialogue and understanding between young people in the UK and China through the framework of dance. UK performance was at the Royal Albert Hall 14 June and at Shanghai World Expo for UK National Day 8 September 2010. www.ballet.org.uk/other-events/shanghai-world-expo.html