



Zoe Parker with participant, Leaps and Bounds project. Photo: Brian Slater / Yorkshire Dance

## Invitations to dance

Dance artist and facilitator, **Zoe Parker** shares her thoughts on dance and wellbeing for learning disabled adults at Yorkshire Dance

**Leaps and Bounds is a dance project for learning disabled adults funded by Adult Social Care and managed by Yorkshire Dance.** This article reflects on one of the groups that participate in this project, which I co-lead with dance artist Rachel Dean. In one of our sessions, about a year ago, I was watching participants improvising and it occurred to me that what we were doing in these sessions was something very special and worth sharing. So, I consulted with a range of people that had participated with the

group, asking the following questions: what outcomes had we achieved; and what approaches did we use to get there?

### Outcomes

I have seen huge improvements in wellbeing in the group: physical fitness has improved; flow of movement is smoother; concentration and ability to work independently stronger; verbal and non-verbal engagement with material more meaningful; and functional mobility has increased. As

an example, getting up and down from the floor was a movement that initially proved difficult for many participants, and now, two years on, there is an ease and flow in those movements for many participants. There is also a real sense of contentment and the freedom to express. Participants say that it's a place they 'can get messy' and really lose their inhibitions.

"I have seen the group grow in confidence, from cautious movement to ownership of the space and their bodies within it. There is 'a genuine buzz and excitement' from participants on arrival for the session and a sense of belonging and familiarity to the surroundings." (Kate Ferris-Neely, Youth and Community Dance Manager, Yorkshire Dance 2012.)

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Top and above: Participants, Leaps and Bounds project. Photos: Brian Slater / Yorkshire Dance

improvements. They say that participants respond in surprising ways that they have not witnessed in other situations.

“For me, personally, being able to join in has been great and has had a positive impact on my working relationship with clients. I have got to know more about our clients by coming to these classes.” (Sam Silkestone, Support Worker.)

There has been significant progress in individuals within the group. In particular, the progress of one person comes to mind. When I first met this participant, she did not interact or connect with other people and showed very little emotion in her facial expressions. She was easily upset by change, and seemed disengaged with the environment around her. In contrast, two years on, she will comment on ‘missing someone’ when

they are absent, she will assert ‘whose turn’ it is to lead an activity and direct others in movement. The expression of joy that fills her face in certain moments is hard to describe in words. These kinds of moments happen often and with many of the participants.

#### **Our approach**

At the heart of our approach is improvisation: listening, noticing and connecting from and through the body. We maintain a sense of trust and enquiry using a range of movement material that mostly comes from the participants. This is a person-centred approach and we often use props to instigate activity. One of the props we particularly used early on in this process was the parachute. We used it to: introduce sensory stimulation; build functional skills of moving in and out of the floor; teach collective listening;

and focus on individuals. One activity was to move individually on top of the parachute as the rest of the group created waves with the parachute. Sometimes, participants would roll, and other times, they would just lie still and allow us to collectively move them, or rotate them on the parachute. Participants often expressed intense joy from this experience.

As facilitators, we allow participants to follow a specific task or do something completely different, if they want. We put the process very much in ‘their hands’. There is a sense of importance given to stillness and to waiting until participants are ready to move, which has real impact: when the whole room stops and gently waits, full of curiosity, for that one person. It’s a huge collective listening. Support workers say that this experience allows them to stand back and let participants >



Participant, Leaps and Bounds project. Photo: Brian Slater / Yorkshire Dance

do things for themselves. We reflected that this is because the space feels safe and that there is a shared positive regard for what is happening in each moment. This value allows a real sense of freedom and can lead quite organically to people in the group taking charge of what will happen next. I think Rachel sums this up quite nicely:

“The most important things are: taking time, noticing small things and giving them space to develop. Working like this means that everyone’s contribution, in each moment, is relevant and valued.” (Rachel Dean co-facilitator, Leaps and Bounds).

This trust in each person’s contribution is important and I believe fundamental if we want people to feel more empowered and be more independent. It means, however, allowing people to self-manage: not always easy. To illustrate my point let me share with you an example from my first session with this group. In this session I had a very different approach to managing the learning environment. One of the participants continually

left the room, and so each time this person left, I felt concerned. There was a voice in my head saying that it was ‘my responsibility’ to get this person to ‘join in’, so I encouraged, repeated instructions, even physically lead them toward the circle. Though my intentions were good, my focus had not been on that person’s choice, but about my need to get a ‘result’.

This approach does take a ‘leap of faith’ because you do not know what will happen next. It requires resourcefulness. For instance, we might start from stillness and relaxation, and then begin to explore certain patterns or ways of moving, giving really open suggestions or imagery for moving. This can evolve into movement improvisation, where at times, participants become completely immersed in their own dance. This way of working is exciting and, on a deeper level, it is life affirming, because it ignites a creativity that transforms. Part of the process, is that we are all experiencing on the same level, stepping outside of that only briefly to fulfil other roles. I believe this

approach is one of the key reasons that participants feel so able to voice either physically or verbally their needs and where they want to take the process forward. One support worker described it as ‘being invited into another’s world’. That element of choice seems especially poignant here; it is the delight of being ‘invited’ to dance.

Leaps and Bounds aims to encourage independence through exploration in movement. This project has been grant funded by Leeds City Council to support adults with learning disabilities to move out of day care settings, enabling them to take a more active part in community life. Yorkshire Dance is one of the organisations funded to manage this.

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