

My apprenticeship – an unexpected opportunity

Tracey Brown, mentoring, training, development leader, Rubicon Dance and **Esther KilBride**, freelance dance leader, describe Rubicon Dance's commitment to apprenticeships

The Rubicon community dance apprenticeships are tailor made, individual, intensive part or full time work shadowing programmes across our diverse programmes in Cardiff and Newport that were set up in 1994 with Ruth Till, our then Director.

Rubicon apprentices work alongside our most experienced and highly skilled community dance leaders working with a range of ages and abilities and in a range of community contexts on a consistent basis. The programme is a unique opportunity to focus thoroughly on developing one's own practice,

leadership skills and management with a range of groups within the community dance sector. This is done in a supportive and experienced environment within a busy and thriving community dance organisation. Rubicon Dance established its community dance apprentice programme to address the shortage of highly skilled dance leaders who could work with, manage and inspire a range of groups. To date we have trained 24 apprentices, most of whom are working in the field of community dance development at Rubicon in

Wales and beyond.

Rubicon welcomes apprentices who have backgrounds not only in dance but in a far wider context using transferable skills. We have had a whole range of people aged 21 years to 50 years and over join us as apprentices. We look for people who have a passion for dance and a desire to work within the community dance sector.

Each apprentice agrees a tailor made programme from 150 sessions that Rubicon currently leads each week. We work with all ages – boys, older people, schools, in hospices,

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Esther KilBride, daycare session, Ely and Caerau integrated children's centre. Photo: Sian Trenberth Photography www.sian-trenberth.com





Esther KilBride, daycare dance session, Ely and Caerau integrated children's centre.
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in hospitals, with young people, with adults, etc. so apprentices can select their programme with ongoing advice from myself on a weekly basis. We work with the natural strengths or interests of an apprentice in the very first term of the training programme and develop this over time. The programme is very well established having been set up 19 years ago – it's tried and tested and it works! We have had apprentices from Zimbabwe, Australia and USA who have come specifically to train with Rubicon in this very specialist area.

Ruth Till and myself are now working with other community dance organisations across Wales to set up a pilot Wales-wide apprentice training programme that is relevant for the diverse community dance organisations in other parts of Wales. An apprentice working in Cardiff, where Rubicon is based, will have a very different experience from someone working in the rural areas of north Wales. We are also keen to keep potentially excellent community dance leaders in Wales.

Below is a log book that Esther KilBride kept during her time as an apprentice which highlights her huge learning curve in work – shadowing, getting to know groups and communities, being mentored and supported and finally into the leadership of diverse groups and into the freelance community dance sector:

I have been attending Rubicon dance as a participant for the last eight years and volunteering with them for the last five years. I was not trained as a dancer but having this background with Rubicon meant that when the opportunity to apply for the apprenticeship came up I was already familiar with their work and therefore already very deeply committed to their ethos. I was excited to be given a place as an apprentice and enthusiastic about the opportunity to spend a whole year learning and developing. Not having had formal dance training I never imagined I would be considered for a community dance apprentice

programme and didn't think I had the necessary skills.

My apprenticeship programme ran for a full year with ongoing support after that as I made the transition to working as a freelance community dance leader. Taking a collaborative approach to designing my programme throughout my apprenticeship was very helpful; it allowed me to build on my strengths and interests but also encouraged me to reach outside my comfort zone in a supported way.

My programme consisted of shadowing and participating in a wide variety of sessions from the community programmes in Cardiff and Newport as well as the centre programme at Rubicon. It included sessions in a daycare centre, adult and toddler classes, sessions for adults with disabilities, sessions for 60 years and over, classes in school curriculum time, after-school dance for children, a boys only dance class, and an inclusive class with children from a special needs primary school and a mainstream primary school. I also continued volunteering in Saturday morning children's classes.

Shadowing a number of different and highly skilled dance leaders on a regular basis and being able to see a variety of different leading styles week in week out was something I found really useful. As I became more familiar with the different settings that Rubicon works in, I was able to focus my attention on observing and building up my understanding of the different dance content that the leaders used in each setting.

Towards the end of my first term I started on my leadership practice. This didn't happen until I had had ample opportunity for shadowing and observation, I really appreciated that I was encouraged to lead the timing of when to start this part of my apprenticeship. Feeling supported by the experienced leaders I was shadowing really gave me a confidence boost and receiving detailed feedback on my first sections of leadership felt like a great incentive to take on more.

I started to build up my leadership >



Esther KilBride and Moorland Primary after-school dance session.
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practice in my second term, first with short sections within longer sessions and then in the classes where I felt most confident, progressing to leading full length sessions with support from the dance leaders.

These regular opportunities to lead allowed me to start putting into practice everything I had observed and discussed with my mentor so far, I was able to develop my skills in a curriculum setting and lead larger groups more confidently. As I have grown in confidence I feel I have been able to become more responsive and adaptive in my leading style and able to experiment with structure and pace. I increased my experience in leading dance with older people, early years sessions and adults with disabilities. The acceleration of my leading practice and accompanying lesson planning was very intensive at this point and at times felt like a steep learning curve.

My third term was about consolidating and bringing together observations and reflections and building them into my own practice to develop a leadership style that is an authentic expression of my personality and skills.

My programme during the final term has encouraged me to focus and take on more intensive leading in what we have defined as my key areas, while also still allowing time for new experiences. Over the entire apprentice programme my timetable has been structured to reflect this balance –

between focusing on building specific skills and areas of interest while also encouraging new experiences and challenging my expectations of what I can achieve. This approach has been invaluable and due to this I feel I have achieved more than I ever thought was possible a year ago.

Throughout my apprenticeship I spent time outside of the dance programme shadowing and observing in various community settings; I spent a day in a children's daycare centre and did a day of classroom observation in two different primary schools, with a year one class and a year three class and their classroom teachers. Both of these experiences really helped me get a sense of the behavioural expectations of those settings as well as gain a deeper understanding of the different abilities of these age groups.

One of the most important parts of my apprenticeship has been the scheduled time each week with my mentor Tracey Brown. It has been invaluable to have time to reflect on everything I have been observing and learning and to have help analysing my observations. It was also an opportunity to learn background information about the different settings and client groups I have been working with. This support was all the more effective because of the flexible and personal nature of it; more than once a week meetings, texts after a session that my mentor knew I was apprehensive about or taking extra time to talk through feedback in as

much detail as I needed.

In this way I have been able to build up a thorough and balanced understanding by combining my practical experiences and observations with supported reflective learning. Throughout the apprenticeship this has been the key part of translating observation into practice and is one of the things that has made this year such a successful learning experience for me. Another important part of mentoring this term has been about planning my development and freelance work once I'm no longer an apprentice.

As my year as an apprentice came to an end I could look back over an intensive, challenging, exciting and inspiring experience. Over the entire year I have experienced, observed, participated and led dance in a wide variety of community settings; a total of 520 sessions. I have been able to achieve and accomplish more than I ever thought I could.

The next stage of my development will be moving into my career as a freelance practitioner and I start the new term leading nine sessions a week for Rubicon. This apprenticeship has been the best year of my life so far, and I am now looking forward to the year ahead.

For more details on Rubicon's community dance apprentice programmes **contact** tracey@rubicondance.co.uk / +44 (0)2920 491477 **visit** www.rubicondance.co.uk