

## Engaging with NOS within Higher Education

**Lucy Nicholson**, lecturer and **Ruth Spencer**, part-time lecturer and independent dance artist share their experience of working with the National Occupational Standards (NOS) for Dance Leadership within the dance course at the University of Central Lancashire

**July 2011 and a professional development day at Cheshire Dance led by Lisa Craddock from the Foundation for Community Dance (FCD) introducing the National Occupational Standards (referred to as NOS or the Standards) was the beginning of a journey to discover how we could effectively deliver and embed the NOS for Dance Leadership within our Higher Education course at the University of Central Lancashire (UCLan).**

We wanted to take the opportunity to share our progress with this and also felt compelled to respond to a recent article by Anna Leatherdale in *Animated* (Autumn, 2012) that questioned the suitability and effectiveness of Higher Education establishments in preparing students for the reality of the world of work.

At the University of Central Lancashire our course is heavily aligned to the breadth of professional practice, and delivery is supported by teaching placements, observations, job shadowing opportunities, student-led community projects as well as a range of projects working with dance professionals. The BA (Hons) Dance Performance and Teaching course is comprised of four inter-twining strands of learning; Contextual Studies, Technique and Choreography, Somatic Movement Education and Teaching (Education and Community). Our aim is to provide our students with the necessary skills for a direct route into the dance profession to work with confidence in a range of creative, educational and community settings supported by an ability to seek out and engage in meaningful debate around their evolving practice and what it is to be a dance artist in the 21st century.

Community dance as a profession has long recognised the need for a language or mechanism through which artists can articulate and share skills, knowledge and understanding amongst themselves and those outside of the profession through a common framework. The arrival of the NOS proposes to do just that.

We wholeheartedly agree with the approach FCD and the Dance Training and Accreditation Partnership (DTAP) have taken – that the Standards must be developed, promoted and advocated by the sector for the sector. The biggest

danger for the NOS, as we see it, is if, as a profession, we begin to feel the Standards are imposed upon us; something we should engage with rather than something we want to engage with.

Within the already busy life of an independent dance artist, the Standards need to add value at a professional and personal level. It is important that they don't become a test, something to be passed, ticked off, achieved and then forgotten about. The NOS have the potential to be signposts within the portfolio career of a dance artist, a tour brochure offering possibilities of where you may want to travel next.

Having said all this, we have not arrived smoothly at this realisation. In our initial attempts in looking at how to integrate and embed the NOS within our course we fell into the trap of engaging with the NOS as an academic exercise.

### Grappling with the NOS

Our initial response developed a box-ticking task for students creating a paperwork exercise that gave them an indication of skill and achievement. There was a hefty document to work with which stated knowledge and understanding and performance criteria relating to each standard, all familiar in academia but not very surprisingly our students were not enthused...to be honest nor were we. Something that clearly had value was becoming dry, bureaucratic and academic.

So, we changed our approach...

Rather than looking at how we should deliver the NOS to students we asked ourselves what skills do students need to be able to engage with this process of self-evaluation throughout their career? At undergraduate level, they don't necessarily need to put themselves through another assessment that gauges their proficiency as a dance artist as long as (and this becomes really key) our degree assessments do this already.

We gained more clarity...the NOS must not become another set of criteria. They are the inherent skills required of a quality dance practitioner and if our degree is 'doing its job' they should be embedded within our delivery. Our task became a much more engaging one of delving into our



UCLan 2nd year teaching placement, student teachers Rhys Roberts and Laura Worden. Photo: Fraser McMillan

degree content and finding which modules concentrated on developing which skills.

But hang on...

The temptation was to, again, become a slave to the NOS and try to identify every standard within the course content. Is this realistic? Can the skills, knowledge and understanding of a lifelong career in dance be squeezed into a three year course? Could we be in danger of sacrificing depth in pursuit of breadth?

We realised that to embed the NOS within our degree was not to shift or change our content. It was to deliver with an awareness of our ultimate goal; to develop employable, creative, curious and engaging dance artists who can function in an ever changing cultural climate; artists who know their own practice, who are open to lifelong journeys of self-development and growth, artists who have, "self-awareness, self-inquiry, and self reflection" (1) at the heart of their practice. It becomes too easy as a teacher within an educational institution to get stuck on the goal of students passing assignments, completing modules and ticking off criteria and yes, this is an important role in students' academic learning but what we're interested in is making that criterion relevant; making assignments reflect the current skills required to be a successful practitioner and in turn, we hope, providing "extrinsic motivation to their learning". (2)

So job done we thought – ensure that as a staff team we are aware of the NOS, map our delivery to ensure throughout the degree we're embedding key skills apparent in the NOS and remain abreast of any current shifts in the dance sector...

This still, however, leaves us ticking boxes, signing off criteria and giving out grades, this in itself is not a realistic picture of how a dance artist would interact with the NOS.

As a dance artist, the NOS, particularly with the support of FCD's Development Needs Analysis (DNA), provide a lens

through which a practitioner can arrive at a picture of their current thinking and focus within their work. Take a picture in six months' time and the focus could be very different. The aim, surely, is to keep a sense of balance between the different aspects of our profession, recognising that certain elements of our practice come to the fore and subsequently fall into relief. Our practice mustn't fix but continue to change, adapt and evolve.

It struck us that even more important than embedding the Standards within our delivery, again something that should be quite straight forward if our degree is playing the role it should, were the skills with which to access them. A strong practitioner needs to be able to analyse their practice, reflect upon it, learn from it and develop from it and although the NOS dedicates three Standards to the evaluation and reflection of our own practice what we are becoming more and more aware of is that it is being a reflective practitioner that allows us to access the Standards altogether.

This realisation echoed questions raised by the Creative Leadership Enquiry Group speaking at the FCD/De Montfort University Conference: Community Dance in the 21st Century, "Is it our responsibility to hand the community dance leaders of the future a map with the destination marked with an X and the route highlighted with a neon pink marker pen? Or should we be teaching them how to drive and how to navigate so they can find their own way forwards?" (3)

The reflective process is central to effective engagement with the NOS and where we are finding an exciting shift in our students' practice.

### Our proposal

Aligning with two key reflective models (4) we arrived at a process based model that our delivery could focus on developing throughout the degree. Being creative

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Top left: Lecturer, Lizzie Long and student Kristi Trown, UCLan somatics lecture. Bottom left: Student teachers Rhys Roberts and Laura Worden, UCLan 2nd year teaching placement. Photos: Fraser McMillan



practitioners above any academic loyalty, models can have a tendency to be limiting and for us we're looking for a transformative level of reflection that allows us as artists to arrive at key realisations about ourselves in all aspects, not just specific to certain experiences. We took these pre-existing models of reflection and arrived at four important qualities that above all else we want to develop in our students:

1. Self-awareness – the importance of knowing ourselves, our practice, our bodies, our values and beliefs
2. Objectivity – the ability to stand outside of our practice and see it, evaluate it, comment and question it without judgement or conflicting emotion
3. Process – orientation – to be aware of our learning on the journey to our outcome and not missing all the fascinating things along the way
4. Curiosity – approaching our work innovatively, with a sense of experimentation and having the confidence to question.

Please note that we're talking specifically about qualities as opposed to knowledge, understanding or skill – don't worry they're all being abundantly developed and assessed; for the purposes of this article we're interested in the qualities dance artists need to be able to access the NOS at a deep and effective level.

What we find exciting is that these four qualities are inherent within creative practice, particularly so within dance as very few artforms force us to learn so much about our own bodies and beings while also asking us to create from an external perspective finding a balance between self-

awareness and objectivity. Emphasis on process has long been a hallmark of the quality creative practitioner and where is creative inquiry without curiosity?

### Our key realisations

An important realisation for us is that at an undergraduate level the NOS are not there to add to our delivery or our curriculum; they are not an assignment or a test, they are something to be engaged with, they are guidance to a successful career and the facilitators to on-going personal reflection underpinning our practice. We feel our role as tutors on this degree is to ensure we provide the lifelong skills required to access these Standards and to encourage students to truly embark on a journey with them; give out the NOS and they will pass an assignment, teach the skills to engage with the NOS and they will feed their practice for a lifetime!

Our students' reflective voice is already getting stronger, more independent and more relevant to the development of their practice. In turn, supporting the creation of uniquely individual dance artists of the future who engage and steer their own enquiry and learning needs.

Our journey with the National Occupational Standards is not about academia, degrees or qualifications, it is about vital qualities we need to exist within the bigger picture of what it is to be a dance artist in the UK in 2013 and beyond.

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- (4) Gibbs, G. (1988) *Learning by Doing: a guide to teaching and learning methods*. UK: Further Education Unit and Kolb, D. A. (1984) *Experiential learning: experience as the source of learning and development*. New Jersey: Prentice – Hall.