



## Investing in yourself

**Anna Leatherdale**, Foundation for Community Dance (FCD) Producer, professional development, sets out the importance and value of investing in continuing professional development

A couple of years ago I attended an event where I heard Janet Karin, from the Australian Ballet School, talking about the way in which many dance teachers tend to fall back on teaching content that they are most familiar with, using teaching methods that they themselves experienced while they were learning. Recreating the time chart that Karin showed at the conference made me realise that my

much-admired dance teacher had probably learnt her craft in the 1920s (which may account for why I'm so adept at the Charleston!) and that her teacher would probably have learnt her craft in the 1870s when Dega's Ballet dancers rehearsed in salons with gilt-encrusted mirrors. While this gives me a wealth of history to draw upon, the idea of relying on content and approaches to pedagogy that are

well over one hundred years old seems absurd, yet many teachers working across a range of community contexts still seem to think that once they've become teachers they no longer have to remain learners.

Now, in addition to working for FCD I'm a dance practitioner working in rural Devon. In addition to working with children and young people (as my dance teacher did before me) I



Foundation for Community Dance Summer School 2012. Photo: Rachel Cherry

work with a wide variety of groups across my local community including special schools, an older women's dance group and specialist cancer and Parkinson's health groups. I'm in the process of making the transition from dance teacher to community dance practitioner where in addition to the skills of a dance teacher I need to know how to run my own business and secure on-going work.

Despite having been a dance teacher for over 20 years I recently undertook a course at Trinity Laban that enabled me to gain the Diploma in Dance Teaching and Learning (DDTAL). I found the course immensely valuable because it brought me out of the isolation of my own practice in deepest

Devon and gave me the opportunity to meet other dance teachers working in genres as diverse as traditional Thai dancing to Street Dance. Many of the people on the course felt isolated in their practice and every one of us had committed to the course because we wanted to improve our teaching ability. In addition to attending course sessions together we shared music and teaching resource lists, created formal and informal networks, swapped reading lists and simply talked with one another over coffee breaks, lunch breaks, walks to the station or journeys on London Transport. While the formal course was incredibly helpful and supportive it was the opportunity to interact and

learn in partnership with other dancers who were also committed to their own learning that was perhaps the biggest benefit of doing the course.

When we think about continuing professional development (CPD) we often think only about finding a course – often a practical one – that will help us improve our practice. But those informal CPD opportunities – talking with other practitioners, watching other people lead a dance session, reading an article that stimulates our thinking or simply taking part in active reflection about our own practice, are all valid ways of engaging in continuing professional development.

I think that the most crucial thing about engaging in CPD is the ability >



Above and top: FCD Summer School 2012. Photo: Rachel Cherry

to recognise your own CPD needs and then identifying your preferred ways of learning. There are lots of ways that this can be done – talking with friends (even the non-dance variety can act as a sounding board to help us identify our needs), keeping a reflective journal, participating in the FCD's online Development Needs Analysis (DNA), making lists of things that we feel unconfident about and want to improve. Sometimes I find I have to make a trade-off with myself: I prefer to learn with other people in a supported learning environment but I can't always afford to take the time off work to go on a course or pay for the course fees so I find another way to gain the learning opportunity that I need. Taking part in an online course via a free webinar (web seminar) or reading a book isn't going to allow me to get the level of interaction that I crave in order to break down the feelings of isolation that I often feel as

a practitioner, but it may help to extend my understanding or point me in new directions that enable me to meet my primary learning goals.

CPD is mandatory for many sectors. Doctors, physiotherapists, nurses, exercise professionals, teachers in further education – all have to evidence that they have taken part in CPD activities (ranging from 30 to 70 hours a year) in order to be able to continue to practice. Why is CPD considered by these professions to be so important? Perhaps it's because, as Janet Karin pointed out, the world is constantly changing and in order to be the best that we can be we need to continue to grow and change with it.

Later this year FCD intends to introduce a fellowship programme. It will enable members to provide evidence about the range of CPD that they've undertaken during the year and gain recognition for their commitment to improving their

I think that the most crucial thing about engaging in continuing professional development is the ability to recognise your own CPD needs and then identifying your preferred ways of learning.

practice. Practitioners will be able to claim credit for a wide variety of CPD opportunities ranging from reading, peer-mentoring, participating in an online course or observing another dance professional's lesson. This is just one of FCD's on-going efforts to help members get better at what they do. We hope that the provision of the Development Needs Analysis and online reference materials, the continued publication of *Animated* and other supporting publications like the handbooks for dance leaders, plus the lists of regularly updated courses and CPD opportunities will provide members with a wide range of support mechanisms. For, as author Laurie Gray said. "The best teachers become the best teachers by being their own best students."

**contact** [anna@communitydance.org.uk](mailto:anna@communitydance.org.uk)  
**visit** [www.communitydance.org.uk/professionalpractice](http://www.communitydance.org.uk/professionalpractice)