

Does education inc

Professor of Dance and Director, Centre for Dance Research (C-DaRE) at Coventry University **Sarah Whatley** argues for a change in perceptions for every body dancing

Perhaps the greatest barrier for dancers with disabilities accessing dance at a Higher Educational (HE) level is the perception that a career in dance is 'off limits' to them. A student may feel that the course will not prepare them with the skills, knowledge and independence to take them into work beyond graduation. But every aspiring dance student is different. Each has their own sense of ability and identity, and sometimes multiple identities (which may include them as a member of the disabled community). But it is probably the case that whilst the student with a disability has had to come to terms with a sense of being more different her entire life, and the realities of the barriers that get in the way of her being able to ignore her difference, the prejudices that still lurk in the dance studio and are re-inscribed in the 'perfected' dancing bodies in the name of 'excellence' and 'quality' persist through an aesthetic of similarity and flawlessness. And that does no favour to any dancer, disabled or non-disabled, and neither does it move the artform forwards.

There are of course examples of individuals with disabilities, who have carved out interesting and productive careers as dancers and in the dance sector more generally, but these individuals are too few and many have had to find a way into the profession that has bypassed full-time HE or vocational dance training. So whose responsibility is it to ensure that dancers with disabilities are included? Many dance curricula do not overtly

discriminate against the dancer with disabilities. But that doesn't mean to say that the curriculum is accessible, appropriate and inviting to those students who may perceive themselves to be discriminated against.

Some are more explicit in addressing inclusion; for example the relationship between Trinity Laban and Candoco, now just over a year in operation, has, according to the website, been set up 'to achieve greater access for disabled people into the dance profession and to advocate for the importance of inclusive practice in enhancing creative endeavour'. Such statements are to be welcomed but where (else) is change happening? Most dance courses place unusually high demands on students when compared to other subject domains. Students work long hours, working collaboratively with others, developing a wide range of intelligences, all of which can feel daunting to navigate for students with physical, sensory or cognitive disabilities. Students are unlikely to find themselves in classes where there are others with visible disabilities, so whilst there may be an ethos of inclusion within the class, the experience of the student who feels her difference to be hypervisible may be that she finds the dance class (in particular) an uncongenial environment in which to feel equal but different.

The uncomfortable truth is that there is also still anxiety and fear amongst many who design and teach courses in dance in HE about how to accommodate and support students with disabilities. This is not surprising given the additional work needed. No student, disabled or not, simply slips into an existing provision without some kind of adaptation or additional support, if only for monitoring how the various strands of a course and its related assessment take account of, or not, the individual's needs.



Sarah Whatley. Photo: Valentina Bachi

So what will make a difference?

We have to change perceptions and this begins much earlier than the time when students might access HE. We also have to invite disabled students to audition and apply for our courses and then learn with them about how we might need to shift or rethink our curricula. Hopefully each student will be a valuable ambassador to encourage others to follow but this carries with it a weight of responsibility, which not all students will want. Equally if not more important, we have to appoint role models in our institutions; as dance course leaders, studio teachers, managers, lecturers and researchers. Then the discourse of 'inclusion' will evolve to reflect an inclusive community of practice in our universities and colleges, and beyond into the profession, which focuses on the materiality of every dancing body and which will then, in turn, undermine those structures that still persist in reinforcing systems of oppression and exclusion in dance.

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lude?

Three articles pose this question and give three different perspectives on the way in which the FE/HE sector is accessible for disabled people dancing

Mikey Brooks is a learning disabled dancer and performer with varied experiences of education. Here **Benjamin Dunks**, Artistic Director of Attik Dance, speaks to him about his various challenges

Attik Dance is a dance company in Plymouth working primarily in education and in the community. We have a wide range of projects and programmes of work across these areas, one of which is our Attik 360 company with learning disabled older teenagers and adults. This working relationship, in particular with our 360 participants, constantly brings us into conversations around education, performance education pathways and where and how our company members are able to keep learning and training within the education system.

Mikey Brooks is a learning disabled dancer and performer who works with Attik Dance as a member of Attik 360 and who started a Level 3 BTEC in Performing Arts a couple of years ago but left the course after three months due to what he describes as a 'failure to support his needs', particularly around writing and stress. He is currently on the BTEC Level 3 Extended Diploma in Performing Arts at City College Plymouth, where he is finding his needs to be met, but not without some challenges. I interviewed Mikey about the question 'Is education for me?' and started by asking what he finds easy about his BTEC and what he finds hard...

Mikey: The whole performing thing is good and fine for me. It takes me a

So education is for me, but it has to have the right people to support me and communicate with me to make it happen.

couple of minutes to get a character, you know I'm always pretty good at improvising. One of the things that really ticks me off is the other students don't really know when to be quiet when they're asked to. I find that secondary school puts you in a really small box, and when you go to college and university you kind of feel more open, and then the box is shattered, and then suddenly you get a little bit more childish. I'm a bit like that some days and some days I'm not.

I guess all in all that the performing side of things is ok, the students are good when they are more focused but the biggest one of all is me coping with the writing because I feel like every time I hear something like 'you've got to do this such and such word assessment' I just freak out, I just like go into the corner and basically freak out. I think it is my way to get through it. If I get through this stress first it means I won't feel stressed when I am doing it.

It's like you warm up to do a whole show, so I stress now and then focus on the work. But then again it depends on what the writing skills that are expected of me are. Sometimes I need it to be a little more clear about what is expected, so someone helps me to clearly understand what I need to do in that time. My own writing is easy, but when it comes to writing like this it takes a while to get me on the move with it. All I really need is like a stress pill to calm me down.

There are people helping me out though, like Hendriken (a Learning Support Assistant within City College Plymouth). She is absolutely amazing - I'm glad I'm working with her. She is a really lovely person even though she works with every other student as well. The tutors are really nice and everyone is, you know, they want to see a great performance, just like I would. They want the students to realise that the



Mikey 'Spikey' Brooks, Attik Community Dance Platform. Photo: 2013 © FotoPlus Collective www.foto-plus.org

tutors want this show or this writing almost more than they do.

Ben: So basically being in education for you can work, but it is just about the structure of the support, and if there is support there from someone like Hendriken, you can do anything. Is that also assuming there is good communication between staff and tutors to go with the support?

Mikey: Yes. I understand why the tutors want everyone to do all they are asking of us to make us be actors. Of course there is research (don't really like it but there you go) I prefer research on a video... What they want from the training is everyone to have the full potential of themselves and others and just go with it and kick the performance into life and have a good time of it. People say 'this is educational'. No it's not, this makes you better in the future.

So education is for me, but it has to have the right people to support me and communicate with me to make it happen, and to help when I get stressed about doing difficult things.

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Kimberley Harvey,
freelance dancer, teacher
and choreographer

The year is 2004 and I discover that a nearby college offers a BTEC in Dance. The first thing I did was to attend the Open Day. Thinking back, maybe alarm bells should have rung when there was no step-free access to the studio, which meant that I, as a wheelchair-user, was stuck. My Grandmother went down to speak to the dance tutors, who assured her that a lift was going to be installed, but I'd hoped that they would also come up and talk to me, as I was the prospective student. They didn't. I remember being frustrated but nevertheless I was intent on applying and I received an invitation to audition.

After my audition performance came the interview and all seemed to be going well. My feelings of optimism grew when the tutors talked of the course, saying that they saw no reason why the dance modules that 'weren't accessible' to me (e.g. Tap), couldn't

be substituted with equivalent modules from the BTEC in Performance Studies. After a long wait, the outcome of my audition was a 'no' and the reason given was 'that the exam board wouldn't accept the adaptations that would need to be made in order for me to do the course'. Instead, the college said I would be welcome to participate in the dance club that some of the dance students ran once a week at lunchtime – I politely, but firmly declined!

I still went to that college, instead studying for non-dance related 'A' Levels, but that didn't stop me from discovering (with the help of Cando2's youth coordinator), directly from the exam board in question, that they wouldn't have given the response the college had claimed. What they said was that when colleges blame the exam boards it is most likely that in fact it's the college that is objecting to the situation!

Let's fast forward to 2008... I had finished training with Candoco on their Foundation Course in Dance for Disabled Students and was delighted to discover that I had been accepted

to study for a BA in dance at university. Although at the time I was happy to choose this university, it should be mentioned that, as a dancer with a disability, I didn't feel like I had many realistic options.

It was at this point, with the prospect of living away from home for the first time and needing help with care from people beside my family i.e. a Personal Assistant (PA), that I became acutely aware of what my disability would mean in very practical terms. I was allocated a PA for seven hours per day (this was not enough, firstly given my needs, but also given the fact that as a dance student your schedule is different from other university students – mostly 8.45am starts and 5/6pm finishes, not including additional rehearsals). There were also additional PA issues; alongside being segregated to live in a block with only other disabled students, I was also the only female and the only first year in the flat. I mention these issues because, although they are not dance-specific, they had a big impact on my experience and ultimately contributed to my decision not to stay.

Anna Bergstrom and Kimberley Harvey, Subtle Kraft Co., Cravings of Intimacy & Solitude, Theatre Clywdd, Wales. Photos: Roswitha Chesher







Anna Bergstrom and Kimberley Harvey, Subtle Kraft Co., Cravings of Intimacy & Solitude, Theatre Clywdd, Wales. Photo: Roswitha Chesher

Things hadn't gone as I had hoped. The course, although taught by teachers incredibly experienced in their field, didn't 'fit' me, and at times I felt that the directions I was being encouraged to go in were conflicting with my previous training. I was very uncomfortable.

As a dancer with a disability, you get used to being a 'guinea-pig' and people saying 'this is all still quite new to us', 'we're still learning so we will need your help'. However, in this particular scenario, various factors (including academic pressures and other issues previously mentioned) meant that I wasn't coping very well, and that I actually wasn't in a position where I felt that I could 'help' the university to the level required (for my own benefit) and after six months of trying, I left. I loved dance and was determined to continue my training, but I'd realised I couldn't make university work for me.

At that point, part of me did think I was moving away from an opportunity to progress further in dance because

up until then I had only ever associated professional dancers with 'traditional training' and I need to mention Candoco's role during this period, both in terms of the opportunities I was offered, but also in terms of their support.

The experiences I'd had with Candoco gave me the confidence to believe that I could continue my training by developing a portfolio of training experiences over the coming years. This involved me participating in mainstream technique classes, workshops, residencies and performance projects (either where I was dancing for others, working with dance students or projects that I initiated myself).

In terms of these experiences, yes, I have had the pleasure of being taught by some truly amazing teachers whose teaching practices are inclusive but I have also been in classes where I've been left to fend for myself entirely. At the time I did accept that I had chosen to put myself in that situation, but there were definitely moments where I felt I

needed correcting or more clarification in order to adapt the dance material and I'm ashamed to say that I didn't always feel able to or comfortable to speak up and ask for help.

However, I knew that devising my own timetable of training and developing a portfolio of experience (i.e. bespoke training as opposed to being in an institution) suited me far better. Sometimes it was quite a steep learning curve and it required a good deal of self-motivation, but some of the experiences I've had would definitely not have been possible had I kept to my original path.

Education does and has included me, but not always in the 'traditional' or 'formal' sense. Now it is 2014 and I work as a freelance contemporary dancer and dance teacher, as a Candoco Artist and a dancer and co-choreographer with Subtle Kraft Co. and I'm still learning!

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