

Exploring impact and conditions for success

People Dancing's 11 Million Reasons to Dance strategic touring project took place between 2016-2018. Following its completion a full evaluation of the project was conducted, and the report is soon to be published. Here, Coventry University PhD candidate and evaluator, **Kathryn Stamp**, reflects on the development of the evaluation

In November 2016, the 11 Million Reasons to Dance (11MRTD) project began its 12-month Northern England and West Midlands tour, opening in Runcorn, Cheshire. The visiting collection of 20 photographs, taken by photographer Sean Goldthorpe, are inspired by iconic dance scenes from films that have been reimagined to include or foreground disabled artists. Accompanying this exhibition, which has toured both nationally and internationally, was a collection of project activities designed to engage with community groups, support local cultural organisations and offer performance opportunities to dancers with disabilities.

The intention of the 11MRTD strategic touring project was not only to continue to bring attention to dance and disability artists, highlighted through the original 11 Million Reasons photography exhibition, but to develop a model for the furtherance of cultural provision in areas with low levels of dance engagement. The focus was on both professional development for emerging and established

disabled dance artists, and increasing engagement in the arts through new audiences and creating opportunities for disabled people to participate in local dance activities.

Emphasis for the evaluation was on exploring people's experience of the 11MRTD project as artists, participants, project partners, venue staff and deliverers. This, coupled with quantitative data from venues regarding audiences, helped to shape the breadth and scope of the impact as well as exploring the depth of people's experience of the project. Exploring the possibilities for evaluating impact led to consideration of what is deemed 'success' for an arts project and, more specifically, a dance and disability intervention project.

It could be said that by setting out clear and concise aims for a project, organisations are highlighting the areas where there is intended to be impact. However, there is also the possibility that impact happens organically elsewhere, therefore being open through evaluation to

surprising and unexpected outcomes is important. Are there organisational shifts that alter the core values of a company? Does an individual participant have an important and significant story of the intricate impact in their experience of a project? Artistically, are there powerful developments in the use of certain mediums of stylistic adaptations? All of these could be highly significant to a project and could help to establish the deemed success level of a project, but the conditions in which this 'success' can happen are extremely important.

The 11MRTD project is rooted in engaging local communities and partnering with cultural organisations and venues in the delivery of the project. One significant feature of this has been the personalisation opportunity for each locality. The nature of this tour has allowed a bespoke package to be designed to reflect each locality, the needs of the local community, plus utilisation of the cultural organisations and venues' skills. This allowed for relationships between organisations





11 Million Reasons to Dance, inspired by the stage performance in the film *The Full Monty*. Photo: Sean Goldthorpe.

and venues to be brokered and nurtured, with tailored training of local dance practitioners enabling the development of grassroots provision, a key feature of the project that was highly valued by the contributing partners.

The 11MRTD strategic touring project has reached more than 100,000 people (including social media activity, participants, delivery practitioners and audiences). Through community engagement dance classes and workshops, over 200 adults and young disabled people engaged with the project and experienced quality inclusive dance activity. Nearly 40% of visitors to the photography exhibition had not attended any dance and disability events in the past year, suggesting that new audiences had been reached to some extent.

Public reaction to the photography exhibition and the performance events in each location were very positive, with many asking for more opportunities to engage in future events. Over 90% of audiences claimed that the 11MRTD project

had changed their opinion of dance and disability in a positive way. More than 160 people attended training events held to promote quality dance and disability provision and equip people to provide opportunities for participants and performers. However, as with many multi-faceted projects of this size and nature, there were still some challenges. These varied from technological challenges to venue capacity changes and from considerations around multiple stakeholders and beneficiaries to the complexity of managing a project on a large geographical scale.

Looking to the development of the project, or 'next steps', there is much learning that can be garnered and utilised from the experience of 11MRTD. Firstly, the use of photography in this project not only allowed for a longer-term arts engagement in each location, but also introduced new audiences to dance and disability work. Therefore, engagement with a new media format for future exhibitions, building on and going beyond the photography focus of 11MRTD, is a suggested route

for People Dancing activity. This has already been developed by the People Dancing team, with the creation of a digital version of the photo exhibition, exploring the imagery from a new direction, in collaboration with poets, actors, audio describers and the dancers themselves.

The valuable relationships that have been initiated through this project seemed to be of great importance to the participating partners. Therefore, the development of networks, with a focus on sharing ideas and resources as well as using locations as tour sites for new work, is recommended. Finally, consideration of the possibility of engaging with new locations, where there are currently low levels of engagement with the arts amongst people with disabilities, could also be a valuable direction for a second phase of the project.

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