

Response-Relationship-Engagement-Dance

Dawns i Bawb (DiB) is the community dance organisation for North West Wales. Covering urban and rural areas, a city and an island!

It is unique, being one of the very few dance organisations in Wales working primarily through the Welsh language. Artistic Director, **Catherine Young** underlines its value

DiB will be celebrating its 30th birthday in 2019.

I, however, have just celebrated my second year as DiB's Artistic Director. With this new appointment, DiB's Board of Directors saw an opportunity to implement some changes and set me the initial task of developing the following:

- giving more presence to the Welsh language in all aspects of our provision
- making use of my skills as a choreographer to develop our provision
- giving focus to low engagement with dance and to developing relationships.

This was potentially an exciting shift for the organisation and gave me the opportunity to implement my vision into an already successful and exciting programme. About six months into my new post and coinciding with the updating of DiB's Four Year Business Plan for Arts Council of Wales, I approached the Board of Directors about rewriting our mission statement (which can now be found on our website). I felt that we needed one that was more relevant to our new vision, that incorporated DiB's history and ongoing ethos but was also a statement that was 'live' that is, was one that would continuously be considered in response to what we plan and what we do. Reading the current mission statement posed a lot of questions for me: What are we saying? To whom? What is its purpose? What happens to the mission statement once it is written? Was it available to anybody and if so - who? And - what effect would this have?

The decision to rewrite the mission statement gave me the opportunity to consider all of the above. I wanted the whole team to consider this as a 'live' document; one that we continuously refer to as we plan and develop our provision, one that is always present (as opposed to being tokenistic and put on the shelf and forgotten about once written) and, most important, one that is available to everyone that wishes to read it and is accessible, that every single person feels that it is relevant to them.

With availability and accessibility in mind, we decided to make our mission statement public on our website and social media pages. This meant we needed to think carefully about what we wanted the reader to know, and how we wanted the statement to make the reader feel. It felt to me that if it is literally a statement of our mission, it needed to be our opening act; it had to be something that engages people from the very beginning. We refer to the word 'engage' a lot within the community arts sector in Wales. It constantly raises debate - what do we mean by it? Is it the right word to describe our work? Is it time for us to move on from using the word? I have colleagues who dislike the term 'engage' in reference to their work, some intentionally avoiding its use as

a reference to their practice.

Not me, however. I feel that engagement is one of the most crucial aspects of our work and that it is only through engagement that our community dance objectives can truly happen. Our mission statement talks more about engagement than it does about the actual activity of dance, and intentionally so. We engage with people and communities during the dance but sometimes we need to engage before the dance, and it is this that we are considering in our mission statement and in our vision.

We refer to two key words which I see as part of the process of engagement and to be at the forefront of us achieving our mission - response and relationship. Where relationships are formed, engagement will follow. We form relationships by responding to the communities, groups and people that we work with. We therefore have a process-response-relationship-engagement-dance.

I refer to this process in the planning of our programme. There is nothing new in this concept, particularly with those working in our profession. We know that this is what we do. My question to myself was, do our communities know? It is a particularly important process for those of us who work with people and communities where, statistically,

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Dawns i Bawb Creative Workshop, 'Be Creative' event, Galeri, Caernarfon. Photo: Dawns i Bawb

engagement with dance is low or non-existent. I felt that if we wanted our mission statement to be relevant to everyone, it was important that we refer to this too. We therefore state that while we believe that anybody can dance and believe in the benefits that dance can offer, not everyone agrees that dance is 'for them'. We acknowledge that this notion of dance exists but aim to create exciting and innovative opportunities to challenge this.

This notion has helped us in defining our work. We have been exploring different ways to begin engagement and build relationships. Some examples have been performing 'pop-up dances' in busy locations around our remit areas, allowing those who might not necessarily make the decision to go and see a performance, to 'come across' dance. On Valentine's Day this year, dancers from our weekly sessions invited someone that they love to attend the session with them. Some watched and some took part. But almost all were people not involved in dance and therefore,

engagement began.

Our biggest challenge in relation to the engagement process was during our last annual community dance showcase through completely changing the format. The notion was to explore the engagement of our communities as audience members; as a step towards developing relationships that would eventually lead towards deeper engagement. I wanted our annual showcase to be more than an event where different groups have their time on stage and the audience consists of parents attending just to see their child perform. I wanted an event that would appeal to a wider audience - that all our communities would talk about and be excited by.

With this in mind, we created a dance adaptation of Un Noswyl Nadolig (the Welsh version of 'Twas the Night before Christmas) where all groups contributed to create one production as opposed to a series of showcase dances. It was a resounding success and as a Christmas event, the performance sold out with family,

friends and the wider community. It engaged our audience to an extent we had never experienced. We saw this through the feedback we received. Eight months on people are still talking to us about it and how the performance made them feel and asking us what the next performance will be. We also saw an increase in participation and in people engaging with our social media posts. More people know who DiB are, what we offer and what dance can offer. They might not be people who are in the dance studio (yet!) but we regard this experience as definitely being part of the engagement process and as important as the engagement in the dance studio.

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