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# Dance Club at Scrubs

People Dancing member **Helena Webb** reflects on leading a dance and choreography course with inmates at HMP Wormwood Scrubs

We've just finished leading the 3rd session with the guys. They excelled in a pair exercise where you hold a rolled-up yoga mat between one of your palms and one of your partners and move around the room. Afterwards we spoke about part-time veganism and whether dancing showed your feminine side, over bananas and juice. Now the group are heading back to their cells to be locked up for the next 2 hours, or if they don't have an activity this afternoon until the evening, or perhaps tomorrow morning. Dancing in prison is strange, you get the group moving through the space, starting to expand their bodies, thinking creatively and then they are locked in a tiny room for hours.

Dance Club springs from Scottee's Notepad Warrior course ([www.scottee.co.uk](http://www.scottee.co.uk)) leading me to think about my anger at feeling afraid walking home alone and working with many men and father-figures in Dad Dancing (by Alexandrina Hemsley, Rosie Heafford and myself).

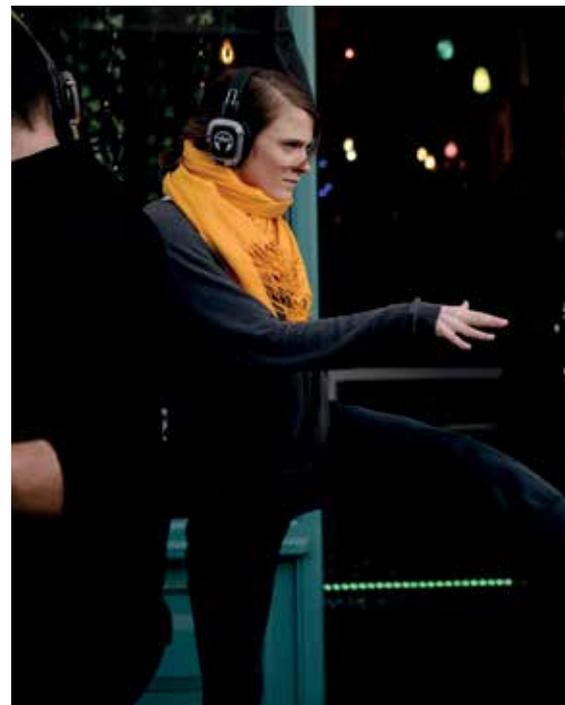
With the belief that dancing together can create spaces where difficult conversations can be

broached and behaviours challenged. Dance Club endeavours to create a space for incarcerated men to improve communication skills, express themselves creatively and challenge negative masculine behaviours prevalent in prisons.

The course is split over eight 2-hour sessions plus a taster session, led by myself and fellow dance artist Marc Stevenson. We run it at Seacole, the mental health facility at HMP Wormwood Scrubs with support from their Occupational Therapy led team. We made the course expecting the group to be very uncomfortable with dancing. But we had 22 men at the taster session and they really went for it! These are some things I've learnt so far..

## Music is key

Music is often key when leading dancing sessions but when participants don't have access to playing whatever they feel like, it's huge. Initially I was mostly using upbeat dance tracks, they gave a good energy and a lot of people remarked that it was like being in a club - a setting many of them had danced in previously. Every week I >





Alexandra Baybutt and Marc Stevenson live-interpreting recorded scores made by Dance Club participants. Photos: Zoe Manders



Audience interacting with Dance Club at Scrubs public exhibition. Photo: Zoe Manders

ask for music requests to load onto my MP3 player for the following session. Tastes are pretty far reaching but jungle and drum 'n' bass are favourites. When I started introducing some more ambient music the groups focus shifted to one of serious work, someone said how it made them feel calm and helped them to "focus on the contemporary dance style".

**Some of the rules seem absurd, counter-intuitive and a waste of time but they are non-negotiable**

I'm not a security expert, nor do I know the ins and outs of the Ministry of Justice's budget but some of the rules or lack thereof don't make any sense. A Dance Club participant said that he thinks a lot of the regulations come from people watching the film *The Shawshank Redemption* too many times. I'm allowed to bring in homemade cake but not homemade CD's.

**"I'm an optimist and I think dance can be worthwhile for anyone, especially those whose challenging masculinity has hugely impacted their lives."**

**You have little control over who will turn up to sessions**

You can follow up with people and make sure they have all the right paperwork but if the wing is on 'lock down' they're not coming. Lock down can be triggered by lots of things including a search for contraband or violence on the wing. The whole wing is affected and there are no exceptions. We have also had participants being transferred to

other prisons and others being put in segregation.

**Time doesn't exist**

The session runs 9-11am – that is what Marc and I have planned for. But the group arrives anytime between 8.45-9.30am and leave when the prison officer comes to get them. This is also non-negotiable. We have been lucky with a good prison officer who gives us a 10-minute warning before moving people back to the wings – giving us time to stretch (and finish the biscuits!)

**I find it easy to forget I'm in prison**

Although the room is pretty grim (with a concrete carpeted floor and tiny windows) and by no means a dance studio, with an occasional prison guard peeping in through the open door, I still forget where I am. Ultimately we are leading a dance class and I'm looking at participants



Marc Stevenson and Helena Webb with participants at HMP Wormwood Scrubs.  
Photos: Jenny Joyce

engagement, the expansion of their bodies, their commitment or lack of it to the task and how they interact with others. I find it easy to think of them as participants and not prisoners.

### **In reality, rehabilitation is way down the list**

If rehabilitation was a guiding principle of the Ministry of Justice then prison would look nothing like it does. Prisoners would be given respect, privacy, rest, safety, purpose, opportunity, enough food, regular showers and help. Instead they are locked in small rooms on echoing hallways with too much time and nothing to do with it. There is a creep towards privatisation following the US model that is creating a system that makes profit from having people in prison. It wants them to keep coming back. It doesn't want them to live well outside. Our (current, at the time of writing) Prime Minister promises 10,000 more prison places in the hope it will make him look 'tough on crime'. It's ludicrous, cruel and depressing to me. There are people who are trying to work against this inhumane system to make life better for prisoners but there are limitations to the impact of their work when the system is so archaic.

### **This course isn't for everybody**

I'm an optimist and I think dance can be worthwhile for anyone, especially

those whose challenging masculinity has hugely impacted their lives. However, some people can't access what I'm offering; they find the big group difficult or are too afraid of looking 'silly'. One guy, in a follow up conversation, said (with a smile) that he just didn't think he'd be able to take it seriously.

### **Don't shirk on your emotional support**

Thankfully I had a heads-up on this one from Siobhan McGrath, who having previously worked in resettlement is now Education Producer at Arts Admin. Siobhan and dance artist Lanre Malaolu ran the only other UK dance project in a men's prison I could find evidence of in the last few years (I would love to hear about more if you know them). One of Siobhan's many nuggets of wisdom was to get some therapy support for you and your facilitators in the budget.

### **Biscuits**

Might seem like a tiny thing in the grand scheme of things but biscuits are a big deal. Prison food is notoriously bad and canteen (how prisoners buy themselves extras) is limited. I brought in a new kind of chocolate digestive with caramel chunks last week which the guys loved. Bananas also go down a storm, and grapes, any fresh fruit which isn't really battered is a novelty. As

prisoners eat all their meals locked in their cells, these snacks offer a rare opportunity to share food in a group. The guys are very caring and polite with each other and us, making sure everyone has been offered all the different kinds of biscuits and pouring each other juice. It's a moment when we hear about what else is going on for them; upcoming court dates, kids visits, release. It feels a friendly way to finish the sessions.

The group are already wondering what will happen when Dance Club finishes, can they carry it on? They are recognising the value of having a space to be physical and silly and creative and reflective. One member of the group arrived very stressed and agitated to the session last week, he wasn't able to come in for the first 20 minutes until he calmed down but at the end, amongst the banana skins and biscuit wrappers he told the group how he was feeling "So much better, and it's because of this class, it really is the best thing for me."

### **Info**

[www.helenawebb.com](http://www.helenawebb.com)

Dance Club at Scrubs culminated in November 2019 with an exhibition sharing the work of the group through audio recordings and drawings. This was shown both inside and outside the prisons walls. Recordings are available to listen to online, please visit the website address above.