

# Independent Dance

## Higher Education Round Table 2016

9 September 2016

### Shared futures: HE and the profession



#### Attendees:

Akosua Boakye	Canterbury Christ Church University
Amy Voris	Manchester Metropolitan University / Northern School of Contemporary Dance
Andrew Graham	Independent Dance board member
Angela Woodhouse	Middlesex University
Angela Pickard	Canterbury Christ Church University
Anna McDonald	Manchester Metropolitan University
Eddie Nixon	The Place
Helen Kindred	Middlesex University
Jamieson Dryburgh	Trinity Laban
Katja Vaghi	Roehampton University
Katye Coe	Coventry University
Libby Worth	Royal Holloway University of London
Nina Atkinson	Canterbury Christ Church University
Noyale Colin	University Campus Suffolk
Pam Johnson	Arts Council England
Renate Braeuninger	University of Northampton
Robert Nicholson	University of East London
Robyn Caberet	Sadler's Wells
Sarah Alexander	Bath Spa University
Shantel Ehrenberg	University of Surrey
Sonia Rafferty	Trinity Laban
Stephanie Schober	University Campus Suffolk
Susanna Recchia	Roehampton University (PhD candidate)
Theresa Beattie	freelance
Victor Fung	CAT Scheme Nottingham
Vida Midgelow	Middlesex University
Yael Flexer	University of Chichester

#### For ID:

Kirsty Alexander, Gitta Wigro, Ella Tighe, Claudia Tonietto (ID Student placement, via Surrey University)

## Introduction

This year sees our fourth round table discussion for artist-teachers working in the academic sector.

Each year, the discussions we have suggest the starting point for the next year, and the interconnections over the years point to an interesting realisation: each year, we recognise that we need other groups of people in the conversation.

In 2013, we discussed the changing contexts and expectations of teaching choreography, but from that discussion realised that we needed teachers across the curriculum to be in the room and to be part of the debate. Last year we discussed the relationship between technique and creative practice. We discussed how traditional boundaries between technical, performance and choreographic practice have become blurred by the influence of somatic practices, and by the proliferation of choreographic approaches and making processes across the professional sector. These shifts have contributed to a changed ecology and this lead us to this year's topic, the relationship between education and the producing / commissioning side of the sector.

**How do we understand the needs of the artform from the perspectives of our various roles, and share our imaginings of how best to support its ongoing evolution?**

**How do we prepare students for a world which is for them to build, and which we perhaps cannot fully imagine?**

We are also aware that we are not the only ones for whom this topic is 'live': The Culture Capital Exchange and De Montfort University are both presenting events exploring the relationship between higher education and the professional sector this month.

We also want to recognise that the conversation is happening in the context of austerity and after the vote to leave the European Union, which have had, and will have, a significant impact on the HE sector. Depending on the outcome of negotiations on freedom of movement, it will also affect artists – the nomadic nature of practitioners who work and live in more than one country. The models of production are diverse and international.

While we don't know yet what the economic context after an eventual Brexit will be, we need to think how we meet that challenge.

Are we shapers or servicers of the dance ecology?

Kirsty mentioned that she is excited by seeing artists (whom she knew as students) creating a dance ecology she had not imagined. As educators, how do we make space for this imagining?

In today's conversation, we hope to cross between the HE and professional sector, and the funding divide between HEFCE and ACE.

## First set of break-out groups

Each group was asked to identify what the specific questions they felt were central in relation to education and the profession; what we think the ecology is, will be or might be - what we are preparing them for; and as educators what do we want from each other.

Kirsty added an example, namely the relationship between process and product, and the possible resistance to product when students are immersed in a very process-oriented space.

## Feedback from breakout groups

### Group A

- Noted how many connections there are already across the group, and that there already is a lot of connections in HE – which lead to discussion about who then are we *not* connected to? E.g. the commercial sector and health & well being
- The idea of risk, and HE being a place to support risk-taking as opposed to professional work which might be less risk taking because of commercial pressures
- At the same time HE sector not outward facing to the same extent
- Learning for learning's sake – should preparation for the 'industry' be something universities do?
- Vocation – a life's vocation, longevity, a sense of commitment to the arts, having a sense of belonging to the field
- Corporate structures in HE and the pressure they put on development of courses, which makes it harder to grow / evolve courses organically
- Students might be great at producing experimental work but are they ready to produce for the contexts that exist currently?
- Practice as research – the UK is known for that, and while it's hard to articulate the body, it's possible for this to be recognised
- You can do a dance degree in each geographic area of the UK, and what difference has that made to the local and national ecologies?

### Group B

- How do you go about preparing students for the world, and the individual having agency in the world for which you are trying to preparing them?
- Noting that HE is impinged upon by outside influences – student numbers, frameworks, corporate-ness
- Discussion about the place for teaching your own practice and research; aligning how we research as an artist and aligning that with the curriculum
- Acknowledging that students have a particular vision of what they are hoping to gain from their studies when they arrive (the Ebacc has made a difference here), a fixed idea of what they want or are, and how to unpack that, the desire to expand those ideas. This tension is exacerbated by the high fees students now pay; putting all that money into the unknown, wanting accountability...  
Also noting that this is not entirely a new thing – students have always had expectations; but there is a shift – student and consumer...
- It can be difficult to talk about pressures and worries such as Ebacc because marketing /recruitment departments are already worried about sufficient numbers for dance courses
- Diversity was raised as a concern - CAT schemes for instance support specific groups of people into specific programmes, but do not 'catch' everyone
- Recognising the difference in teaching between undergrad and postgrad level, and the level of 'preparation' for the outside world in those two contexts

### Group C

- Who is the rest of the world?
- Careers might be very fluid. Many dance degrees have conversations about portfolio careers, but are we preparing them enough to consider the context that their work is going into? Students do not necessarily understand that their work is going into the rest of the world – not just a theatre with your friends in it. In relation to what and whom are you making your work?
- Preparing students for a vocation – for a life-long career; not only business skills, but also whether the work they make is ready for the profession
- Interested in boundaries e.g. students wanting to do something for which they are not likely to get funding; and bridging different ways of working within dance, also the ‘non-professional’ aspect / amateur practices of the profession, e.g. dance animateur
- Profession, marketplace, industry, sector – all corporate terms
- How can we prepare them when landscapes are constantly shifting – how can we predict what will be there when they graduate
- Example of an inventor who saw his role as looking for good problems to solve, and ascribed this to his education. The focus of his degree hadn’t been about how to design something, but about how to contribute to the world. What problems do you want to solve? “His eyes are on the world, not just following his own instincts”
- “Choreographers rarely ask what questions the producer has at the moment... “
- If you study history, you already know that you are probably not going to get a job as a historian, so what is your rationale and expectation?
- Marking and assessments create a tension with experimentation and risk-taking

#### Group D

- Is it harder to get funding for more avant-garde work, which might be seen as elitist, and there is an assumption that the general audience is unable to understand this kind of work. Positing that the current contemporary dance scene is in Brussels, Paris and Vienna, with the UK largely funding conservative work, and/or socially oriented work. This in turn means that audiences are used to seeing conventional work, traditional musical theatre etc., which then informs what students want and expect from their degree and career. Where do students see themselves going?
- Referenced Rudi Laermans book [Moving Together: Making and Theorizing Contemporary Dance](#), 2015
- Discussion about practice and theory as separate; a critique of theorisation of dance
- How to disseminate practice and getting better at that (Liz Lerman)
- The workings behind the scenes in organisations and venues are not necessarily visible, how can we open them up? (e.g. the 9-month Surrey University student placement)
- What we wanted to be when we were 17...
- Students feeling that they have learned a lot, and now it’s useful to see how it works in “the real world”

#### Second set of breakout groups

Topics distilled from discussion in the first round

- **Is education preparing you for a vocation**

- **The real world** – a school not being the real world; the real world and the rest of the world
- **Curation and production** – how that might play a role in the ecology; curation as a subject, locating oneself in the field, rethinking the notion of production through the lens of curation

As part of all three conversations: is there perhaps more possibility for risk and experimentation in HE than in the wider world?

### Feedback from breakout groups

#### **Curation**

- Explored the concept of curation and connotations that are positive and those that might feel less so = placing things together, a space that's held, taking care, process, specificity of intention, tension between curation being a supportive role but also one of control
- Curation as a creative practice and what that means for the field and how it can bridge different sectors, bring different things together
- The cliché: "Now everyone's a curator, all the art is rubbish" – where is the expertise in that process?
- The more talking happens between HE and venues the better
- As students leave they have a way of placing themselves
- Terminology: curator / producer / programmer – do we want to adopt a visual arts term?
- Role of educator: "specialised facilitation"; care-taking and stewardship
- There's a curatorial role in designing a curriculum – what does thinking about it this way open up? How do you put together and offer an experience; hosting and the social aspect of curation; the generative act of curation: an invitation and an allowing – good curation gives support but that is so light-touch that it is barely noticed. Good producers do that too.
- There is a tension between controlling the experience and opening the experience

#### **Preparing for a vocation**

- You're not delivering what will get them an A grade but what gives them wider skills
- The notion of un-graded modules (which exist in other European institutions) , allowing space for the student to develop their skills
- The idea of being in awe of something; not delivering, but experiencing
- The political environment – 'giving young people an education' rather than creating an educated person
- Putting an emphasis on the qualification creates problems; when the school leaving age was 15, many left without a qualification and took on a job, which was not seen as a failure. Is it possible to separate education from qualification?
- Qualifications make education a positional good – the important thing becomes that you have higher qualifications than others, not that you have them per se
- Grades are so destructively powerful; what if instead of getting rid of grades we over-grade students, and give them grades every week for everything! Grades would lose their power
- Guiding the students in their understanding of how the process is assessed
- Culture of having to reveal your process in order for an external audience to feel satisfied
- Where are the links between the commercial / musical theatre education pre-18 and being able to continue this post-18 in a university setting without financial constraints

- There is a difference between application and reflection (in the context of transferable skills) – the example of a student questioning the use of certain tasks which appear reiterative (“You’ve taught me, I’ve listened, I’ve taken it in, the key points are on moodle – what’s the point?”)
- We are all very busy – who is asking us to do all this work? How to push back when it is not a person asking for all this delivery but a more nebulous context / perception / convention
- Referenced article on US National Public Radio [Resisting The Corporate University: What It Means To Be A 'Slow Professor'](#)

### “The real world”

- Sharing experience of teaching at [La Manufacture](#) in Lausanne (CH), which offers a dance degree: The idea behind it is to create a school where labour is integrated in the programme (students clean, cook, have 24h access to the building, participating in local civic activity is one of the modules). Direct responsibility given to the students: your own actions are part of how the school functions. The artist sharing this said that when teaching there she feels all the students have a sense of responsibility to participate in the interaction, and understand the learning experience as a contributory one
- The function of institutions, and how we feed the institution – often decisions are motivated by what the university needs to sustain itself before thinking about what the students need
- Why do we look at institutions as disconnected from the rest of the world?
- How can we forge connections; e.g. creating a feedback loop for year 4, 5, 6... when students have left, could they still receive something from the institute and bring their experience back into the university and to the current students
- Agency and responsibility were words that came up throughout; teachers artists modelling a way of being in the world
- Students often value input and teaching of outsiders over that by artists who are part of the staff; “No matter how much experience you might have, you’re perceived as not being out there.”
- Maybe we are aching to get back to a moment when training wasn’t placed within academia, something we perceive as freer
- We talk about academia and the institution as if they were something separate from us; yet we are the institution, and we need to recognise that, and use it

### Round-up

To close, each attendee was invited to offer one word or sentence to take away from the day

- Who is the rest of the world?
- Putting an emphasis on relationship in my practice
- Stewardship
- To be in awe of something
- What is the connection after someone graduates
- What is the process and the product in HE
- What makes dance graduates more likely to stay in dance?
- Getting to know the students practice *before* they arrive
- Looping the loop back when they’ve graduated

- Thinking about curation – an individual show belongs to a wider question
- Bridge the gap between our practice as artists and the institutions, how to give that to students
- We are the institution
- Not saying ‘institution’!
- Designing an experience for students
- The low professor, and taking care as a role model
- The education that happens through interaction, what kind of interaction should I facilitate
- The curatorial term
- “Hosting the experience”
- Awe and wonderment over assessment and excellence
- How can you work without being assessed
- What is specialised facilitation
- Enabling graduates’ empowerment, ownership and agency – how might that influence surrounding ecologies, and what does a connected dance ecology look like
- How can different questions be answered by dance
- What does a ‘being in the world’ dance education look like, what do I do to help dance education be in the world
- How can we make boundaries more porous between different kinds of dance
- What can I do if I want people to be self-reflective, how do I help them to do that without telling them that’s’ what they have to do
- Owning your experience
- A “grade A” day

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