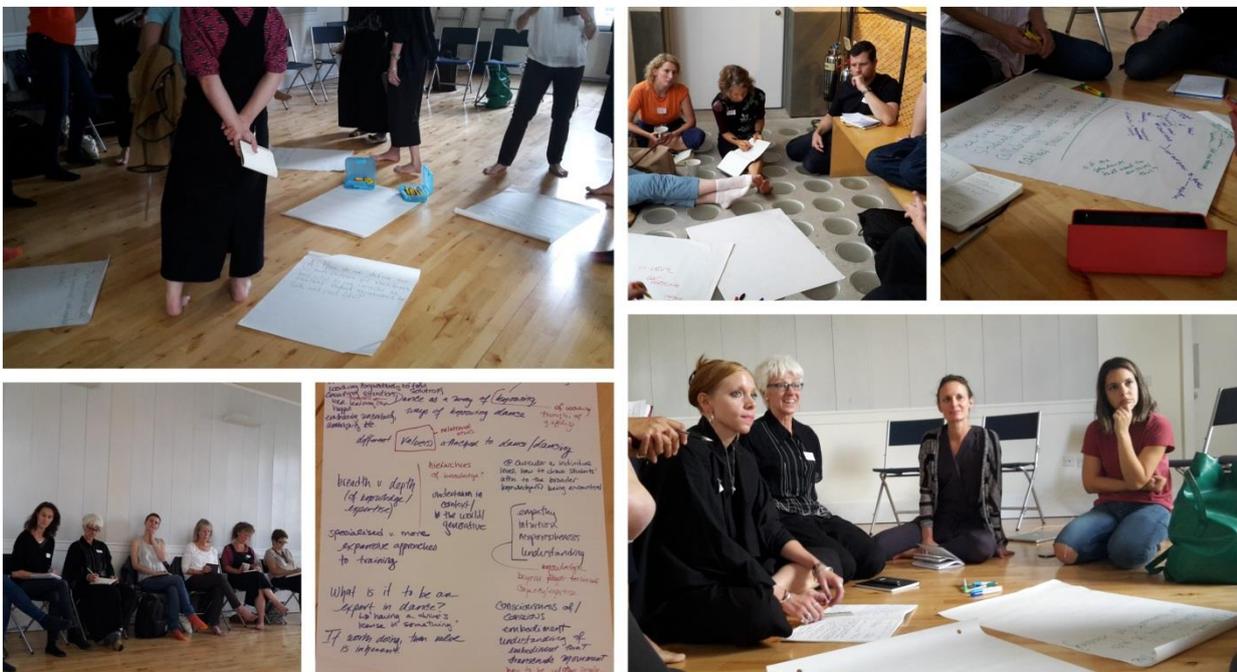


Higher Education Round Table 2018

Excellence, Failure and the Expert

6 September 2018
Independent Dance



Attendees

| | | |
|----------|---------------|-------------------------------------|
| Adesola | Akinleye | Middlesex University |
| Nina | Atkinson | Canterbury Christ Church University |
| Fiona | Bannon | University of Leeds |
| Theresa | Beattie | Independent programmer and producer |
| Renate | Braeuninger | Researcher |
| Rosemary | Brandt | Trinity Laban |
| Beth | Cassani | Leeds Metropolitan University |
| Katye | Coe | Independent Artist |
| Noyale | Colin | University Campus Suffolk |
| Nicola | Conibere | Coventry University |
| Sue | Davies | Chair of Independent Dance |
| Jamieson | Dryburgh | Trinity Laban |
| Mark | Hamilton | Regent's University London |
| Antje | Hildebrandt | Coventry University |
| Naomi | Lefebvre Sell | Trinity Laban |
| Stephan | Mason | Kingston University London |
| Sara | Matthews | Trinity Laban |
| Becka | McFadden | Trinity Laban |
| Orley | Quick | Lewisham Southwark College |
| Sonia | Rafferty | Trinity Laban |
| Sara | Reed | Coventry University |
| Erica | Stanton | University of Roehampton |
| Georgia | Tegou | University of Roehampton |
| Gabriela | Tropia | London Contemporary Dance School |
| Lauren | Vincent | Buckinghamshire New University |
| David | Waring | Trinity Laban |
| Angela | Woodhouse | Middlesex University |

These notes attempt to capture some of the discussion between the attendees; they contain contradictions, omissions and a host of unresolved questions, as did our conversations on the day.

Introduction

The title and theme of this year's round table is Excellence, Failure and the Expert.

We would like to offer you this gathering space for useful exchange in the context of higher education and the wider dance sector.

In the usual tradition, we've taken prominent comments from last year's round table, which recognised the part we play in being 'the institution' and how we can make this beneficial in instigating changes from within. Two distinct but related comments emerge from the discussion: the first being a question of how we can find excellence within risk and failure as integral to a learning process, the second was a recognition of current trends of 'Rejection of the expert', asking 'do the students feel there is a point to learning from someone else?'

2016 saw the introduction of the Teaching Excellence Framework for Higher Education which aims to 'recognise and reward excellence in teaching, learning and outcomes, and to help inform prospective

student choice'. Awards are based on metrics including student ratings and destination of leavers' surveys which capture graduates' employment, earnings and skills six months after leaving.

The Office for Students' guidance on [The Teaching Excellence and Student Outcomes Framework \(TEF\)](#) sets out:

“Students invest significant amounts of time and money in higher education, and should expect a high quality academic experience. The TEF measures the things students care about: teaching, learning and what students go on to do afterwards.

As well as helping prospective students to choose where to study, the TEF encourages universities and colleges to work with their students to develop an even better student experience for all.”

These frameworks extend ideas and practices of consumer exchange into education, which causes tensions within arts education, in particular in fields where measuring return on investment through markers like salary or employment status may not give a full picture.

If we **agree** to buy into the notion of education as an exchange, whereby the student invests time and money in return for 'excellent learning experiences, how do we define our own criteria of excellence? What do we consider an excellent student experience to look and feel like? What would we consider an ideal student outcome based on the reality that students face in the world as they leave? More and more the notion of student consumer satisfaction is put in the place of learning. If we are to think of learning as the ideal outcome – what does excellent learning look like? Does learning always involve a satisfying experience? In experimental sciences, failing to achieve particular results is an important part of gaining knowledge, prompting further questions and refinements in the research. How much do we see failure to achieve, or failure to meet a standard, as an important part of artistic learning processes? Can we see failure as a mechanism for understanding what needs to change in order to meet standards, or helps us re-orient the standards we are aiming for?

In other words, can failing to meet criteria be of value? When can we flex criteria, or define them more individually? How could we therefore value the failure as, to quote Einstein, “success in progress”?

Equally, how much space and permission do our educational programmes offer for students to try out radical ideas, to practice an unconventional approach, to take risks, without that risk being too great a threat to the efficiency of a programme? In what situations can a mistake or disruption give us the answers?

In posing all of these questions, I'm aware of the **time** it takes to be able to learn from failure and the time it takes to offer permission to play, fall about, bump into things and make mistakes and how little time we have to therefore do the thing that is learning.

Finally, if we do not accept the idea of education as a consumer exchange, how might we **resist** it? Can education be more of a collaboration; can we work with the students as equals? How can this sit within the reality that currently exists in the system of education when the economic balance is the way it is: students pay and work to meet criteria, and teachers are paid to assess whether the criteria are met.

Since the Brexit leave campaign's public rejection of the expert, there are many situations that are increasing whereby established knowledges and expertise are thrown into doubt and dismantled. Current cultural shifts seem to value populism over specialism. At the same time, drives towards diversity and inclusion mean an acknowledgement that there are **many knowledges and ways of knowing**, and we hope and work towards a world where knowledges from marginalised groups have

traction and value. Where does this leave the notion of expertise or being a specialist in the field of dance or the arts? Do students feel they need to be each their own expert and there is no point to learning from someone else?

Breakout session 1

Four self-selecting break-out groups addressed one of four headline questions for 40 minutes; then fed back to the whole group.

- A. How do we define our own criteria for excellence, and what do we think an excellent student experience looks and feels like?
- B. In what ways does (or can) the notion of failure fit into our framework for learning?
- C. In what ways can we see the relationship between student and teacher as collaborative and reciprocal rather than being a consumer exchange
- D. How and where do we value specialism and expertise in dance?

Each group also proposed a new question / provocation for the second breakout session.

A: How do we define our own criteria for excellence, and what do we think an excellent student experience looks and feels like?

What do we consider an excellent student experience to look and feel like? What would we consider an 'ideal student outcome'? What does excellent learning look like? Does it always come as a satisfactory experience?

- Important to note that one's criteria and the student's experience are different things
- The student's reflection and feedback will likely be very different depending on the point at which the question is asked – depending on where the student "is at"; always a challenge for useful feedback at the point when the student might be using or synthesising knowledge from their course after they have left / at later stages in their career. How to gear criteria towards what the student will require to work as an artist long after they've left university and make their life as an artist
- Making a distinction between the experience and the outcome: one might be great, and the other not
- How to measure an experience as opposed to an outcome: was the experience challenging enough; whether there was growth; have they gained attributes that they will need as artists?
- A very good experience means that there are times when they are floundering, when they are provoked – conveying to students that "this is why you come here": to be challenged. That experience is the learning experience and it requires challenge and difficulty; which also means discomfort and how to experience that in a safe environment
- Thinking of it as the student experience puts it back in time because now it's seen as a reciprocal experience between student and teacher
- There is a "fakeness" about the word *excellent*, which relates to the consumer experience

B: In what ways does (or can) the notion of failure fit into our framework for learning?

Can failing to meet criteria be of value? The value of mistakes? When can criteria be flexible?

How do we encourage students to play and experiment? How do we protect the time it takes to learn from failure, and the time it takes to play?

- (The thought experiment: students wanting a poor experience)

- Incorporating failure in a framework for learning: detoxifying failing, constructing playful ways of letting risk be part of processes
- Comparison with artists in the field, the agency of the artists making their space and deciding which choices to make, encouraging students to think of having that ownership
- Taking away things like outcomes, making the ground unknown, students create their own landscape
- Creating something together
- Failure being about challenge, dealing with difference and being comfortable with challenge, with not having an end product, or the product being different; this means we have to think about the outcomes we set in the frameworks we create
- Metrics of marking and evaluating create failure as a toxic word; and yet trial and error is tried and tested as a methodology. This means “failure” is in the system already; so how do we create a way to incorporate this without letting metrics introduce something unhelpful
- Examples of modules where the assessment is about the student’s reflection on process and product, not the product itself, allowing for positive learning even if the product ‘failed’
- Our responsibility for making the experience of failure as not destructive or undermining; that this can be a positive process
- Acknowledging the importance of fun, intuition, and play

C: In what ways can we see the relationship between student and teacher as collaborative and reciprocal rather than being a consumer exchange

Are there other ways of co-creating the learning experience? Where do we find reciprocal / collaborative ways of learning?

- Is this a question the students need to answer instead?
- Acknowledgement how hard it is to measure process
- Some discussion whether “collaboration” is the right word to use. Is collaboration the goal of that relationship?
Instead, is it transactional, is it sharing responsibility? Collaboration implies equality which flattens everything out; aiming for an equitable exchange instead?
If so, how do we enable the relationship to be equitable, and the students to take responsibility? The consumer word creates passivity, we do we create something active
- Pass or fail vs getting grades: Students might feel that “this isn’t worth it, I didn’t pay to just get a 2.1” so do we take out the grading? Not getting a grade might also be a de-motivator.
- Grading / marking needs responsiveness to the context of the learning
- Starting from the assumption at the beginning of the year / term / module: “Everybody’s got a first; now you’ve got to keep it.”
- As a field we are not that interested in metrics because there are things we understand very well that aren’t measured by metrics; and that needs to go out into the world now.
Measurement is effective because it gives us a way of recognising when we’ve moved forward; but when we measure a thing we don’t have to measure every bit of a thing.
- Sometimes refusal or negating some elements of measurements is essential

D: How and where do we value specialism and expertise in dance?

How do we work against the wider trend suggesting that we ‘have had enough of experts’? How does this intersect with diversity and inclusion, and an acknowledgement of different knowledges, and different ways of knowing?

- Many younger artists want to be teachers rather than participants; looking for something one can sell and produce, something one can market. They may also reject notions of established forms of knowledge, seeking to disrupt and dismantle; how to work meaningfully with students when they question whether there is a point in learning from someone else. We want to think not in terms of particular specialism and expertise, but outside of the box, strategies, techniques and processes outside of this.
- Who is the “we” who determines value
- “Value” can take on many forms = embrace lack of consensus
- Can we specialise in current HE conditions? Do we need to deliver on everything?
- What exists as a contemporary dance practice, with its roots in 60s and before, is profoundly against those terms of expert and specialist and now we use those terms on those practices
- Resist the assumption that there might be a group that has the right answer –acknowledge the diversity of practices
- A lot of questions come out of how things are currently phrased in HE, and among faculty there is a great sense of wanting to resist this; so how do we situate ourselves differently in our language, constructing a different vocabulary, or using the given vocabulary very consciously
- Expertise confers confidence; it gives value to have it be recognised in other spheres
- Easy to think of dance as in service of another subject (e.g. using dance to teach maths, or as something that helps alleviate anxiety/stress; seen as supportive or palliative instead of for its own value), but then maybe that’s not how we have to see it. At the same time, with current developments (such as STEM focus) keeping dance in schools overall is key at this point

Breakout session 2

Three self-selecting break-out groups addressed one of the new headline questions for 30 minutes; then fed back to the whole group.

- A.2: What questions need to be asked of students in order to evaluate their experience in order for them to evaluate their experience? And when do we ask these questions?
- B.2: In what ways do we students / teachers / assessment leaders create space for messy, productive, constructive, playful failure?
- C.2: What process can we offer as an alternative to the notion of ‘measure’? How can we open space for things to be real that cannot be measured?
- D.2: What are the many knowleges that encounters with dance can generate? What can dance practices teach us about value?

A2: What questions need to be asked of students in order to evaluate their experience in order for them to evaluate their experience? And when do we ask these questions?

No one chose to work on this question!

B2: In what ways do we students / teachers / assessment leaders create space for messy, productive, constructive, playful failure?

- The notion of ‘keep practicing’ – maybe not exactly failure, but trial and error which is crucial to artistic processes; prepare students that there isn’t always a clear outcome, instead constant trial and error. Some pathways will not work out, and knowing and working with that is a transferrable skill students take with them
“Keep making mistakes”: in science it is important to keep failing; or in ceramics where ‘failure’ will happen quite often and is factored into the process

- It can be quite easy to create a space for failure – it's the mark that creates the issue which then muddles the message of what is failure / success.
- Possibilities / examples:
Create areas in the programme where students are asked to make 'bad' work, and to reflect on that;
Co-Lab: a student collaborative between music and dance, in which they create projects over the course of two weeks; in this module the process and the students' reflection is assessed, not the end product. This raised the question how do we then translate the skills they gain there onto the next thing where they DO have to make something
- The skills gained during HE study include coping with things going wrong and problem solving – we need to look for ways to develop those in quite a rigid education system
- Something might be a failure at a particular point in a student's journey when it is measured/assessed, but that resolves differently over the course of their overall journey
- We / students are primed to think that there is a product that you can get right...
- Our job in HE to undo a lot of stuff that's been taught in school
- Questioned the word "failure"; discussed differences in individuals' personal understanding of the word fail; some people who never perceive that they fail, and how that feeds into teaching and feedback processes; students agreeing / not agreeing with assessment of failure
- Getting might get different feedback on something (fail/success) and what to take away from that
- Fostering the ability to look at work dispassionately, but also with fondness; less about failing but more about discovery

C2: What process(es) can we offer as an alternative to measuring through money, time, space? How can we open space for things to be real that cannot be measured?

Taking away measures is a way of decolonising – going against the idea that things are only true if they can be measured. Away from the notion that everything has a value. Learning process beyond just getting a mark. What's outside the measure? What alternative to measuring can we offer?

- The idea of journey, going from one place to another, a process of shift and change, not necessarily in a linear journey, going to multiple places and locations; expanding our knowledge, our terrain
- the agency of the student, how they measure themselves = reflection, giving space for that; how do we support the student to give them space to think about their progress
- Thinking of tracking instead of measuring – ability to track what that path / journey is; what those points along the journey are; not a line, perhaps a circle, or branches
- Adopt / adapt the approach in maths to "show your workings" – you might have the wrong result but if you used the right process you still get marks
- Assessment and feedback – the latter gives you a sense of where you are in a process; the assessment gives a snapshot
- Assessment is imposed on us (lecturers); it can inhibit being organic with how we work. A way to deal with that could be being transparent – an alternative to measuring is exposing the tensions we're in in enabling a particular process and the dictates and being clear about that
- Making dance solid – the thinking that is going on, in the person, there is movement and dancing, what else brings you here, what else are you going to use to inform your artistry
- Language of one context and which can be reused in a different way to reclaim, things don't have to be toxic.

D2: What are the many knowledges that encounters with dance can generate? What can dance practices teach us about value?

- Noting the use of dance in schools to teach other subjects such as maths; dance is valued as a means rather than as its own subject
- Unpicking terms: dance as opposed to dancing, and how those might be valued differently outside of the discipline
- Types of knowledge, breadth vs depth, specialised vs expansive / interdisciplinary
- What are the many knowledges: Empathy intuition, responsiveness, understanding, embodiment, how to be with other people, to negotiate, and to be flexible
- Brought in a quote from Rosemary Lee about Gill Clarke:
"Gill's passionate belief was that the dance practice she and her colleagues are involved in, has strongly embedded ethical values that are fundamental and timely; readiness, openness, curiosity, embracing individual enquiry, working co-operatively to find solutions, creating situations where learning can happen, embracing uncertainty, ambiguity and specificity, and "tuning" ones "skills of attention". What better approach to our time and place."
[Gill Clarke obituary by Rosemary Lee](#)
- Looking at ethics – struggling with the word value and looking for other ways of thinking about it; dance as an ethically informed education, about relationality and dialogue; the opportunity for transmission between people
- Teachers fail. We can be vulnerable and not have assurance that we can produce what you want.
- If a student has been given a fail by a teacher, they can think about what that means for them, whether the student 'accepts the premise'; the ability to subvert, to be subversive
- Bringing in your own struggles as a teacher is also problematic; it might be tricky to bring all of that into the space. Transparency might go well for some students and not for others...
- We should be aiming for our learners to outgrow us, they should subvert and perhaps reject us. And yet – respect for knowledge; students might start rejecting us 'too early' – missing out on our expertise and guidance
- We now need to be entertaining... it's not my job to entertain, it's my job to create a learning environment – which is not always fun
- Students become experts at being students. They take on the roles: complete module, and progress learning. The desire to convey to the student: I have been doing that for longer than the student, so listen to me; and then develops a space where they are level with me because we are engaged in this learning experience
- Important for the students to know that sometimes it is really valuable to learn what you don't enjoy; we assume that a bad feeling is something to get rid of. That is often really instructive: the uncomfortable stuff. The one thing that *didn't* go well will be the thing that bugs you... and that's where you'll learn.

To close, Henrietta thanked everyone for the lively, frank, open and provocative discussion.



Independent Dance
2018