

# Higher Education Round Table 2019

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5 September 2019  
Independent Dance



## Notes

This was the sixth annual Higher Education Round Table held by Independent Dance.

ID is not a higher education institute itself, although we partner with one on delivering an MA; we offer this as an informed but neutral space to bring people together, and to share resources and actions. Each year the topic emerges as a response or refinement to something in the previous year. In addition, this year we held a consultation process to explore the main concerns the sector faces in the current climate, and to ensure that the round-table remained useful.

There are many pressures on HE sector as a whole and some that are specific to dance, and there was a desire to deal concretely with these in a collegiate space. We recognise that we can by no means come to a consensus about a single most important issue to prioritise, as not all the corners we are fighting for are the same. Hence the afternoon will first focus on the 'how' not the 'what': acknowledging that there are a lot of different and specific issues to address, but to start by identifying *how* we can move towards making change, and perhaps glean strategies and approaches from each other that can help us address our own context.

## Question 1: examples

***How do we communicate with impact and influence the network of political relationships that we rely upon?***

These could include funders and stakeholders; the Department of Education; MPs; as well as the young people / learners who need to create a vision for their future.

***What examples do we have of forms of resilience, invitation or resistance that have worked?***

This could be: Ways of communicating / Actions which have had some kind of impact / Things we have seen work in other fields or contexts we could borrow or adapt / Examples of collective or individual actions or strategies / Finding a different language to communicate

In focussing on the 'how' we invite groups to share experiences of how we – as individuals or groups – have succeeded in galvanising and making change happen. This might include forms of resistance as well as action.

An attendee added that these big organisational issues distract us from the core work, the pedagogy with our students, and drew attention to the importance of thinking about how we preserve that in and for our students.

The attendees split into four groups to discuss this in more detail, and then came back together to share key points and questions.

➡ **These comments do not represent consensus within the group, rather the breadth of discussion, with points and counterpoints, and individual perspectives.**

### Group 1

- Acknowledgement of a greater need for communication for dance to go out of this place that doesn't speak well about itself in order to advocate for itself; the need to articulate dance more / better to make it heard and seen
- Ensuring that artists are in positions where their contributions are part of the decision making; part of the process, or higher up in the leadership
- Who from within the sector who can advocate on our behalf?
- Decision makers can be quite removed from the research that is going on; we need to consider how we connect them back with the people working with the research, and with the students
- People noted the problem that by the time you hear about decisions it's often too late; how to get into the process at an earlier stage
- A topic of discussion was the language we use, and how we speak about work; "hacking" the language. Policy documents can be hard to read; the group voiced an interest in creating an active use of language to talk about dance, and being able to communicate what we mean within dance – and crucially finding ways how dance might lead the *creation* of policy more
- The group debated the idea of changing our language – and the desire to keep the essence of what dance is in the field. Language as something that can be empowering for the dance field but also something that can remove agency.  
Building a language / vocabulary that identifies sensations and experiences of dancing which don't have the same form of scholastic language, the weight of history, and acknowledging that behind that sometimes can be a suspicion of the body
- An attendee gave the example of trade unions, which are historically much stronger in music, film and television. Equity is expanding its dance profile, but as a sector we are not as strong. Trade unions are advocates as well – we should think about the role unionising could play.
- A strategy is being proactive and creative, to drive the agenda through what we choose to do in our own practice.
- One attendee gave the revalidation moment as a positive action, an example of expressing agency; writing a programme and pushing for the integrity of the form, and pushing back by being ambitious. Revalidation is a point of (re)negotiation happens which has scope to set out the pedagogy and philosophy behind the course.
- Revalidation costs a lot of money for the university so they don't happen very often, and they can feel rushed, so it's important to argue for the space to reflect.
- The group underlined the desire for collective, collaborative communication

### Group 2

- The group discussed that 'our' language comes from a passionate place, and we believe in it, and REF / KEF / TEF doesn't. The language of those frameworks does not necessarily explain

the lived experience of what we are doing, so rather than thinking about how we meet these things, thinking about how we reach to them and bring them into our process and thinking. Part of our resistance could be to maintain a place where the words we use are meaningful to us.

- We acknowledge that there is fear, because there is hierarchy and power; but you are also able to choose your relational space in the structure.
- The group rejected the idea of resilience because it gives power to the very thing you are trying to change.
- Even if the institute isn't thinking of itself as collaborating with us, we can act as if it were.
- Sticking with your practice gives you a grounding that allows you to reach into other areas
- Conflict can be a productive thing, as in an artistic collaboration; in what ways can we translate this across
- The value of silence rather than resilience – not filling things in but allowing solutions to emerge; allowing ourselves to be in a space that isn't preoccupied with resisting, instead spend that energy on your own agency. If we spend all of our time resisting then the students are not getting the best out of us – put the energy in the pedagogy so that the disconnect between institution and learner doesn't continue.
- Not feeling threatened – thinking about inviting collaboration, educating people in management
- We should be advocating for empowerment and choice within the studio practice and how strong that is, to nurture the student's way of seeing the world through movement.
- Work with the time that things take – instead of pushing against something, allowing the time for slow burn practices; to accept that things take a while, and that they are layered
- Free students up from thinking that they need an A\* - it's their role to debate, discuss, critique (and there is a big gap to bridge between learning in secondary and tertiary education – goal oriented learning vs broader take on education)
- The agency that students are giving from the beginning is a political animal; it has an effect on politics, the environment, how we bring that in, give them power to critique, consider, work with those things. Build into assessments the possibility to throw us a question.
- We choose when to engage with things like learning outcomes and what of that do we bring in / leave out when we are in the studio
- Changing the language in handbooks is progress: making significant shifts in how the language represents how we think about learning

### Group 3

- Agreed the importance of communicating the integrity and value of our practice
- A need and desire for coalitions, collective voices
- Discussed the function and the purpose of resistance, to identify whom and what we want to resist; and resistance not as a static stance, instead performed with fluidity
- Acknowledging and promoting dance as a nucleus of developing skills and methodologies (e.g. dance and architecture: the body as an apparatus for a site inspection); its work within, and relevance to allied fields of study (health and wellbeing, architecture) and the ability to work with those languages

The ability to communicate and connect with other social activities, and considering what could we exchange or give

- The group also questioned resistance, as well as the danger of conforming or morphing our practice to submit to dominant forces
- The group posed that it would be useful to consider what is lacking, what hasn't been achieved yet in dance research, and safeguard currency and relevance that way
- There was a suggestion of tracking the impact dance has in measurable ways on many level (human, economic, social), and the challenges therein; the possibility of working with, or drawing on, the work of organisations like One Dance UK, Dance HE

#### Group 4

- Discussed self-care: the importance sometimes *not* to do something, to take the time out to refuel and recharge. The perseveration of self-care to make sure you can keep on with what you are doing
- Slow burn: the notion that the energy of the fire is highest when it's burned down a bit – it can be powerful to think of yourself as a slow burner
- Maintaining flexibility in response, supported by strategies that allow you to see something up ahead that might be a difficulty and finding methods of working with it (ways around, ways through, finding allegiances)
- Communicating beyond the institution, e.g. dep of education; and not just telling but also showing them what we are doing
- The visibility of the intrinsic value of dance in people's lives – such as the work of One Dance UK; snapshots and individual stories are not quantitative but powerful  
An attendee ventured that the value of dance is heard, but that the sophistication of the knowledge, and the legitimacy of developing knowledge *through* dance isn't recognised  
Attendees noted that music is seen differently from dance in terms of respect / value as a field.
- The group discussed the notion of invitation in this context – why do we feel the need to invite. The need for resources means we have to engage, and not always on the terms we would choose.  
This led to a sidebar about what our responsibility is to make sure that we have money, and the proposal from an attendee that we each need to buy more dance tickets; in turn this opened a conversation about students paying for theatre tickets, and how the practices around that had changed over the decades.
- Participants talked about the value of voicing the students' experience to the staff, and thinking of the students as having agency, and as collaborators in creating change (e.g. when a course is under threat of closure). This happens within a context balance between the business of academia – the course has to be financially viable, and 'deliver bang for the buck' – and education. We can engage with students on the basis that they can work with us to improve the situation for themselves and for fellow and future students. Students might not know that their course is under threat; knowing the full picture places them in a position of responsibility for the development of the art form, by contributing to the state of the sector.
- The group discussed survival and resisting strategies – including silences, and not doing.

## Question 2: Actions

***What do we need to do now? What can we do? Who is involved? Who do we need to communicate with?***

For this task, participants were invited to form twos and threes and identify something concrete they are hoping to achieve in their specific context, and what actions they might take to make that happen.

A participant suggested the option of adding accountability, deciding to check in on your conversation partner at a particular point in the future. Someone else noted the ability to come together and draw on others present to support each other in addressing vulnerabilities.

## Round up from Question 2

Heni invited each participant to share an insight or action.

- How we support freelance staff with flexible timetabling
- How we could develop staff (employed and freelance) in other ways in their careers
- Even in a small department where it is easy to communicate, it's more complex if there is habitual mismanagement, and it is certainly complex in larger universities
- Discussed portfolio careers, and helping prepare student for carers though professional practice portfolios, and understanding the industry that they are preparing for; also working to ensure students understand that there is a big infrastructure offering a variety of roles, not only as a performer
- Highlight the importance of transferable skills
- Working with partnerships
- Bearing in mind that students need to be ready for jobs in 5 years which perhaps don't exist yet
- Remembering that progress and change are inevitable
- Identify who is placed in a position to communicate and advocate, and to support that particular leader and have them voice what it is we need to get out
- A personal conversation about where we are at in our lives
- Community of recognizing what else is being said, and feeling less isolated
- I'm leaving an organization and that gives me freedom: I can say what I feel I need to say
- Freelancers position is particularly important now, bringing knowledge of the evolving field, and we can talk about this in a positive way
- There is room for us to be recognised as *artists* who are teaching, and to develop ourselves and our art outside of institution so that we can bring that back to the educating  
At the same time, you don't *have* to teach your practice, and not only develop your practice through your teaching – also develop it separately as well
- Need to talk to management more because there hasn't been a culture of research
- Recognising that it is a large task to change a culture that is deeply embedded in 18<sup>th</sup> century Europe, so how do you affect change has to be focused and structural
- Awareness that there is agency in how we train the next generation; we can keep the sense that we are educating individuals within the artform, and wanting to see them grow, be enquiring and grow the artform

- We could do much better tracking where the students move on to, do we have an alumni list that can capture the breadth of what people go on to do (and specifically questioning whose job it is to do that tracking).  
In terms of evidence of impact, the wider industry has produced great figures about return of investment, and I would love to understand that for dance – health, wellbeing, children and young people engagement – to find and present the data so that people in power would understand what we do for the wider society
- Specifics about data available, and the definitions of the data collected were discussed. When graduates go into other fields, we can show that they are also equipped to be successful in those fields. (Discussion about what data is available; whether it includes freelancers; classification as ‘highly skilled’)
- Are there other lenses to look at that data, economists who could look at that data?
- (One Dance UK research about independent sector, including trying to tackle representing economic impact, report available on request <https://www.onedanceuk.org/one-dance-uk-commissions-research-into-freelance-workers-in-dance/>)
- Smaller specialist institutions tend to do well in the TEF
- Equipping students with models other than capitalism
- I want to focus on looking at each individual student and that they are equipped to communicate the values of dance to people who haven’t experienced this directly. To actively foster responsibility and leadership within them; and to encourage communicating with communities, politicians, civil servants; finding platforms where students experience the change they are capable of generating, where they can see their value
- One of the problems with communication within your given institution is that you will usually talk to a business person whose skillset is to manage the organisations (with no academic or artistic background)
- What are the other bodies outside of the institution we have to speak to?
- Britain was a leading country in dance education, and what has gone wrong if we are now asking how do we argue for dance education’s value and worth? I have witnessed a huge streamlining within courses, that has cost us something
- What do we mean when we talk about dance – contemporary dance has its history, that of a rebellious practice in the 50s and 60s: there are other forms, how do we acknowledge and include these?
- Conservatoires vs university programmes – we have come to build courses that produce neither a performer nor an academic, and I wonder whether we have sacrificed something; – e.g. dance degrees in universities in Europe focus more on the aesthetics of dance, not engaging with practice.
- Conservatoires vs universities – yes we are producing a hybrid and we are creating something new, including how those knowledges are recognised and understood
- In our pair we addressed practical issues: numbers of students dropping; a demographic dip; feeling that our legitimacy is questioned because numbers have dropped. How can we challenge a negative thought process about student numbers? We worked on these things to develop specific actions (e.g. putting information on screens within the university) to make people aware, to make sure management sees what the students are getting out of their degrees.

- Re. demographics: the students that are there matter. They are ambassadors for the artform. It's not always about who *isn't* there.
- Important to emphasise to learners that you can study something and have a variety of employment opportunities beyond just the one conception of dance studies and dance jobs – research, science, psychology, management
- We need to work on understanding what people perceive, and on demystifying. It would be useful to not just understand our own perspective, but bring together what we understand from institutions, externals, so we know what we are dealing with; we could then all get together to try to understand that, and as a community support each other, not just tap away at it individually (this could be a task for Dance HE?)
- How do we foster a sense of hope when going into the studio with a new group of students; despite the shifts in the micro climate of the institution and the macro of the political sphere
- Reconnecting to the sense of excitement and privilege to meet all these new students and get to work with them
- We challenge the students to be responsible, and take charge of their learning – and they challenge us as well. The student graduates we meet are so ready to challenge, and go and create.
- I'll consider how I might become an agitator; not always moderating my values to accommodate others, accept that I won't be liked,
- We have a great community, with the potential to help each other and sustain energy collectively. I feel that the country has shifted to something unkind, and dance has been a much kinder field. I am glad I work in this area and with these people.