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Strategies for inclusion in dance; disability, performativity and transition into and out of higher education

The last decade has seen a welcome increase in the number of disabled dancers performing in professional dance companies but these companies are still commonly referred to as 'integrated' or 'inclusive' companies. Some might be seen to have become part of the mainstream in the sense that they receive regular funding and thus stake claim to a presence within the wider professional dance community. But a label of 'difference' frequently persists and there is still a long way to go before disability in dance is simply one more bodily possibility. Some performers prefer to find ways to consciously perform their own identity as a disabled performer, whilst for others there is a strong desire to be viewed as an individual, regardless of disability or impairment. But for many people with disabilities, disability is something one *does* rather than something one *is* (Sandahl and Auslander, 2005, p. 10). The performative nature of disability in everyday life is thus a reality for many disabled people. Suggesting that there can be a separation between the experience of disability as a bodily and/or cognitive condition and the expression of this experience through the act of performance is perhaps problematic but does raise the kinds of questions which many disabled people confront when considering whether or not to pursue a career in dance. Disability provides a powerful challenge to the prevailing dance aesthetic which tends to privilege the acquisition of a 'flawless' body. It is within this broader cultural context that training and education providers should and have begun to address the very real barriers to participation in dance that are experienced by disabled people.

In the UK there are relatively few students participating in higher education (HE) who describe themselves as having a disability. In 2007 a detailed study was carried out to assess the scale of participation by disabled dance students in dance courses in higher education in the UK (Whatley, 2007). The research specifically focused on the participation of students with physical and/or sensory disabilities. The data collected revealed that less than 0.5% of the total number of students studying dance for at least 50% of their course in HE in the 2004-05 academic year (based on a response rate of just over 60% of all those questioned) were disabled. Few of those students either required or were provided with some form of one-to-one specialist support within the dance studio (Whatley, 2007). The study did not consider students with learning disabilities but anecdotal evidence suggests that participation in HE by learning-disabled students is even lower. There is little evidence to suggest that participation has increased since the research was carried out although there have been various conferences and projects that have at least drawn attention to the situation and have worked to give voice to disabled dancers as well as their teachers and potential employers (Whatley, 2008).

At the root of the low participation rate seems to be a problem with young dancers accessing appropriate experiences to prepare them for higher level study and training. This deficit was addressed briefly by one of the UK's leading integrated dance companies, CandoCo, which was able to offer a Foundation Course in dance for disabled students to specifically prepare students for advance training. CandoCo was founded by Celeste Dandeker and Adam Benjamin in 1991 with the aim to perform work by professionally trained disabled and nondisabled dancers. The company has established a profile as a world leader in inclusive practice, touring

works by major choreographers and offering wide-ranging learning and development opportunities. Sadly, after only three years of the CandoCo Foundation Course funding was withdrawn following a review of training paths in the UK and an initiative to increase access for disabled dancers to vocational dance training programmes. This initiative, though well-intended, has not been particularly successful. As with many other schemes which are aimed at supporting disabled students by addressing equality of opportunity, insufficient attention was given to the needs of the teachers who had little if any experience of how to adapt and translate teaching and assessment methods to accommodate students with disabilities. As a consequence, disabled dance students remain in a very small minority in the UK. Moreover, teachers report a level of anxiety and a lack of confidence in how to appropriately adapt programmes of learning. This was something observed by a student with severe visual impairment at Coventry University in the UK

At Coventry University a sustained period of research has investigated the very real issues that face disabled dance students when studying dance at higher education. The University has enjoyed a close relationship with Hereward College, which is located in Coventry and is the national college for students with disabilities. For some time now there has been a dance provision at Hereward taught by graduates of Coventry University's BA

methods for all students; many innovations in teaching and learning in the dance studio have developed directly from working with students with disabilities. As Adam Benjamin points out, 'in terms of teaching methodology, an integrated workshop or class can function perfectly well without the presence of disabled student; it simply doesn't miss a beat when a disabled person joins it' (2002, p.16). Alternative methods for delivery are equally valid for non-disabled as disabled students.

towards a more somatically-informed approach to the acquisition of dance
'technique' in general within the course. A considered move away from traditional
methods for teaching dance techniques that tend to emphasise the development of

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level and has resulted in rewarding experiences for LSAs as well as the students who work closely with them. Initially, LSAs were recruited from final year students. LSAs are now mostly recent graduates and graduate students, acknowledging that the LSA needs direct experience of the dance class and the demands placed upon students. As a team of experienced LSAs began to grow, peer-to-peer and mentoring support was introduced, underpinned by a clear set of guidelines and procedures, and overseen by experienced dance teaching staff. LSAs are now very experienced themselves having developed the role in close association with the students they support and having attended various training events but the role still lacks visibility in a broader national or even international context in the form of (for example) professional body recognition.

A number of principles underpin the successful implementation of the LSA provision. In broad terms these principles cover effective communication, organisation, observation, appropriate goal-setting and partnership working. Effective communication is achieved through regular dialogue between the student, LSA and tutor to address issues of language, terminology and the translation of tutor feedback. Importantly, a careful assessment of the student's range of movement and a clear assessment of movement potential is useful to ensure that the student is appropriately challenged throughout the programme. Ideally this is a process that is undertaken by a physiotherapist or other trained body worker but with great care to ensure that the process is non-judgemental, avoids labelling disability as pathology and is designed to facilitate an open exchange between all those involved. Tutors often tend to avoid making physical demands on disabled students in class, which can lead to students finding the work unchallenging, resulting in complacency or a

tendency for the student to be reluctant to work beyond what feels 'comfortable'.

Students, tutors and LSAs all benefit from a clear knowledge about what the student can move on his/her own, what parts of the body can bear weight, what can support weight and where a student experiences genuine physical limitations.

Organising studio-based class work means giving careful consideration to the need for dividing the student's learning between group activities and one-to-one focused work with the LSA. As with all students, the setting of appropriate goals needs to be done at the start of the programme and requires regular monitoring to ensure that

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well aware that they are part of the development of better methods and more sophisticated processes to support each and every student. Overcoming the

Ultimately, the development of strategies for inclusion in dance leads to greater awareness of the damaging effects of a corporeal hierarchy, which might result in less oppressive ways to read dancing bodies. For all of us directly involved in the management, design and teaching of dance in HE, a useful reminder comes from Phelan who observes that 'consciousness of disability awakens us from our untested beliefs in embodiment: disability consciousness transforms one's worldview because it reorders the invisible and visible frames that illuminate our worlds (Phelan, 2005, p. 324). Inclusion in dance is in sight but until there are more opportunities for young disabled dancers to find routes into HE and more opportunities for disabled dancers to find employment as professional artists, participation in HE by those with disabilities is likely to remain very low. Establishing networks across the higher education landscape, both within the UK

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