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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 who reported the following experience;

I know there's a fear of the unknown, I think when I've gone to other auditions I scared people a little bit thinking 'oh god there's a disabled person in my class' – and because dance is so visual I think it really scares people.

cited in Whatley, 2008, p. 8

Once again, in acknowledgement that there is still work to be done, CandoCo is now developing progression routes for young disabled people wishing to train as dancers in mainstream educational establishments. They are also continuing with work to support disabled dancers and choreographers, and with the wider dance sector to promote working more inclusively (<http://www.candoco.co.uk/about-us/background/>; accessed May 1 2010).

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 (Hons) Dance and Professional Practice course. Students who begin to experience dance whilst at Hereward College then look for an advanced level programme and Coventry is often a logical choice as it provides some continuity and is geographically close-by. This relationship means that there has been a valuable opportunity for several years now to work directly with disabled dance students to explore ways to enhance their learning experience. As a further consequence, the University has established national recognition for its work in this area, which has led to a small but regular application to the course by students with disabilities, confident that they will have a valuable and well-supported experience. Tutors are nonetheless mindful that disabled dance students continue to represent a very tiny minority on the course. There remain no disabled dancers on the teaching faculty (an indication of the work that still needs to be done) and every student who joins the course brings new and different challenges; it is inappropriate and unhelpful for everyone involved to regard all disabled dance students as having the same needs.

The first outcomes of the research conducted at Coventry revealed a range of important messages for all those who teach dance at HE level. Perhaps the most significant outcome was that any adaptations made to teaching and assessment methods in response to the needs of disabled students are on the whole better

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. Another important reminder is that non-disabled students are also faced with making adjustments when working alongside students with disabilities. Feedback from students makes clear that as they become more familiar with the learning environment, all regard the process of adaptation valuable and beneficial to them in their development as dance artists. But nondisabled students can initially find the experience unsettling and confusing, particularly when having to develop skills to negotiate the presence of wheelchairs in class, or accept that guide dogs need to be present for those with visual impairments, or if it appears that more attention is given to a particular sub-group of students. Perring (2005) registers a similar point when discussing the experience of all those involved in learning-disabled arts. He observes that;

it is vital to acknowledge and explore the interests of the nondisabled artist who often works with and facilitates the learning-disabled performer. Where such a reflexive approach is overlooked, the presentation of the learning-disabled "body" or subjectivity may be unconsciously determined and represented by a nondisabled cultural interest and perspective. However, if it is encouraged, it might offer the chance to work toward a creative collaboration that permits the full expression of individual subjectivity and experience for all involved.

Perring, 2005, p. 177

The development of the methodology for supporting dance students through a rigorous technical and creative dance programme has run in parallel with a move

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 bodily control and aesthetic virtuosity and can create a 'multipurpose hired body [that] subsumes and smoothes over differences' (Foster, 1997, p. 256) has resulted in an approach that places more emphasis on the presence of the individual. The curriculum includes contemporary dance, ballet, contact improvisation and a range of body-based practices (e.g. yoga, Pilates®, Skinner Releasing Technique, Body-Mind Centring®). As the body has come further into focus, students have been asked to confront their own experience of embodiment and to question dominant views of disability as standing for something diminished, and as equated with loss. All students are encouraged to be aware of their own particular disabilities, whether transient or permanent, visible or hidden, life-long or following trauma and students work together to address the wider tendency to see disability as 'other'.

Consequently the dichotomy posed by the label 'integrated dance' whereby disabled people can be 'categorised as sub-human, giving definition to their non disabled counterparts' (Campbell, 2009, p. 27) is subverted or weakened in the process. Importantly, by working together as creative collaborators throughout their studies, the interest in bodily difference as an exotic spectacle (Mitchell and Snyder, 2006, p. 157) is diminished. The impact of this work and the re-evaluation of the purpose, delivery and assessment of dance technique within the curriculum as a whole, has fed into revisions to the overall philosophy and direction of the course, thus acknowledging the intention that students with disabilities should not be marginalised in the ongoing commitment to enhancement within course development.

During the early stages of working with disabled dance students it became clear that one of the most effective and productive ways of supporting students during their studies is the provision of a learning support team; those who are dance experts and have the skills and experience to translate for the student and provide a valuable link between student and tutor. If working effectively, the learning support assistant (LSA) provides the student with support to make the transition into the programme, as well as support at the point of exit from the course and into employment. The LSA is part mentor, part study 'buddy' and trusted friend in the learning process, providing individual support through the student's journey through the course. This 'in-between' role was described by one LSA at Coventry who explained;

..it's like we're friends, we're work colleagues – it's a very strange mixture but it kind of works to enable the level of trust required. It's so important to get that in studio time because there's a feeling with the [disabled] student sometimes that they're in the spotlight working with someone separate, and sometimes in the class it will be separate so that we can get them [the disabled student] to think about this one element, to get them to feel it's OK, this is your training, it's fine. It's quite an intense sort of relationship – it's supportive as well as facilitating, it has to be caring and understanding.

cited in Whatley, 2008, p. 16

A role descriptor for the LSA was developed together with a clear set of guidelines to support the LSA, the student and the staff team as a whole. What emerged quite quickly was the lack of professional recognition for the role. The University has a well-resourced team to support all students with disabilities but there is no provision for support within a specialist learning environment, in this case the dance studio. There is no system for training or for employing people with specialist skills; or for accrediting those with the appropriate expertise required of this role. In response, a more systematic approach was developed over time at a more local departmental

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 students are on course to achieve the learning outcomes. But some adjustments or modifications may be required for disabled students along with a commitment to gradually increase the demands on the student. Working in partnership with other students and not always the LSA is important for the student to discover more about her/his own movement range. Students with disabilities should be discouraged from attempting to emulate or replicate the movement of their nondisabled partner. The value of observation is important in recognising habits, areas of weakness and for identifying any unseen learning disability which may result from or be connected to a physical disability. If detected, further support can be provided through close one-to-one work with the LSA or other trained support workers.

The LSA plays an active role in studio work, advising the student about possible adaptations of movement material and offering additional imagery or other information to help the student translate instructions for his/her own body. The LSA can also support the student to make transitions between different parts of the class and between moving and writing. Tutors are encouraged to demonstrate and /or

explain clearly, offering a clear basis for adaptation and interpretation whilst clarifying the anatomical purpose of movement. Students are thus encouraged to explore the sensation of movement; there is no requirement to reproduce the same form and aesthetic outcome. Adaptations need to be sufficiently demanding. Progress and achievement should not be based on the student's ability for simple imitation.

A learning agreement which is signed by the student, LSA and tutor outlines individual goals, mapped against the learning outcomes for each module. As with so much of what has been discovered, and continues to be discovered by working with disabled students, methods to improve the experience for these students is frequently a more productive method for all students. But there are implications for all those involved. Such student-centred learning is time consuming and requires a commitment to provide the resources (time and people) to ensure that the system is effective. As all students demand more from their course; more tutor feedback, more studio time and more preparation for employment, finding additional time to accommodate disabled students needs further investment, but an investment that is hard to quantify. Costs for the LSA's time in class can be met directly by the student who receives additional financial support from the government in the form of a grant but all other costs have to be met by the department. Staff development training is an ongoing cost and time within the curriculum is given over to inducting other students into an inclusive dance learning environment.

As a result of this work, which is under continual review, both staff and students are more confident and able to be open about strengths and weaknesses of the course and their experience within it. Each disabled student who joins the course is very

well aware that they are part of the development of better methods and more sophisticated processes to support each and every student. Overcoming the difficulties of being 'clumsy' with language, of overcoming the often uncomfortable process of noticing difference is something to be learnt more by nondisabled students than those with disabilities who have frequently spent their whole lives dealing with exclusive language, disabling behaviour and so on.

With due consideration given to providing inclusive learning experiences in dance at HE level there is reason to believe that the community of professional disabled dance artists will continue to grow. Collectively, disabled dancers now feel more empowered to challenge the 'history of the dominant Western theatre dance tradition [which] has reflected a particularly pervasive social coding of the body that enforces a corporeal hierarchy serving to invalidate differentiated, heterogeneous, and physically impaired bodies (Smith, 2005, p. 76). By entering into the performative spectacle of theatre dance, Smith tells us that disabled bodies 'disturb the ground on which the dominant history of mainstream dance has been developed' (Smith, 2005, p. 76). But disabled dancers also have a political voice; disability should not be seen to be something to be overcome, to be hidden or disguised through performance.

Indeed, as Cheu points out:

To articulate, to perform a disabled body, thereby positing disability as cultural construction and as a "way of being in the world", the disability performance artist must refute the need for medical cure and assert the right of the disabled body to exist.

Cheu, 2005, p. 139

Denying difference is to ignore the opportunity that disability dance provides to conceive and organise bodies (differently) (Albright, 2001, p. 60); if the disability is erased, so too is the dancer.

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 and beyond might help individual students to feel part of a larger group of learners. A similar network for LSAs would also offer support and an opportunity to share best practice. These might be reasonable ambitions but it requires hard work as well as a commitment from all to not only accommodate difference but to celebrate difference. The rewards are students who enter the profession and help to make a difference to their own lives as well as those with whom they work. As the aim at Coventry has always been to give voice to those who dance, it seems fitting to end with a comment by one student who has been working as a dancer ever since graduating. She reported that 'after four years here I've learnt to look at myself more clearly and now, yes, I am a dancer, and I can do what I want to do' (cited in Whatley, 2008, p.19).

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