



Notes on training community dance professionals

By York Dance Space in collaboration with Campbell Edinburgh

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Conversation

Notes on training community dance professionals

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York Dance Space (led by Hannah and Drew Wintie-Hawkins) is an independent arts organisation and a building in the UK city of York's Tang Hall district. Since opening in 2016, the organisation has worked with more than a thousand community members in York and North Yorkshire – engaging children, young people, adults and older adults in contemporary dance activities in theatres, art galleries, nature reserves and car parks. The organisation's growth and increasing sustainability have fostered significant learning and reflection about what it means to be a dance professional in the current cultural landscape.

What follows are some ideas for preparing tomorrow's dance professionals to work in a precarious and uncertain future. These ideas attempt to look beyond the training that happens in technique classes and studio spaces, investigating instead how dancers in training benefit from learning about wider ecologies of arts, culture and health. They also explore the challenges and joys of working in community contexts. The text has been developed from an interview with Hannah and Drew carried out in November 2024. The material has been edited for clarity.

Sustainable dance ecologies depend on partnerships, community engagement, and a broad understanding of dance practice

To be sustainable, we work with a huge number of partner organisations and community groups. The benefits of these partnerships reach far beyond our individual organisation. It is important that dancers and the wider dance community recognise the relationship between successful grassroots activity and the professional touring circuit. Without having communities that have participated in dance and love dance, there isn't an audience for dance. Without people having positive experiences with dance growing up, or in their communities, there won't be audiences for dance in the future.

Facilitating positive experiences with young people also helps to create the future workforce for dance. Community engagement creates pathways for families with children wanting to go into the arts. Community dance spaces help people see that dance is something that you can do as a job and as a hobby.

We really need to break down the barriers between professional dance and community dance. The audience numbers who see your work when you're working with the community are often much larger than if you were making a piece with professional dancers. Understanding the value of working with communities is vital for dancers. And dance is so much more than what happens in theatres. It's for health. It is for keeping fit. It's about joy, emotional release, and being social.

Developing dancers should learn the broader skills of being a dance artist

One of the key challenges for our organisation is workforce planning. Many of the young dancers coming into the profession don't recognise the realities of being a freelance dance practitioner. They haven't been trained to see the value in being a community dance artist. They haven't been shown the impact that it can have and how fulfilling it can be. They also haven't been taught that there is a huge need for dancers working in contexts of community engagement and health.

Professional dance training is still primarily focused on gearing dancers up to perform rather than teach or facilitate. That kind of training encourages young dancers to imagine having careers that are increasingly rare. Dance institutions are still very stuck thinking that a dance artist is someone who is going to be part of a rep company on a two-year contract or work as a choreographer. Because of that, many dancers aren't offered chances to learn other important skills. Many young dancers are not equipped to be leaders or to facilitate dance work with diverse communities.

No one taught us how to go for funding, manage partnerships, or how to write bids. During our training, we learned a lot of the stuff that shaped the approach we use now outside of our higher education institution. For example, we worked with Rosemary Lee on an external project for Dance Umbrella and on another project with Michael Keegan-Dolan

for Fabulous Beast. Those projects got us out of the institution and made us see, 'Oh, this is what it is to be a dancer!' We were lucky to be involved in big projects and see how they worked. We saw what it meant to produce a large-scale event and work with communities. It was through seeing really good examples of big community projects that we began to recognise the kinds of skills we needed to develop. It also helped us to see other ways of being a dance artist.

Seeing bad practice is important too. Seeing people who don't do it very well is just as valuable as seeing good practice, because it makes you think, 'We need to make sure that definitely doesn't happen in our work.'

Dancers need to learn how to speak to blokes in ties

A key challenge of working successfully in community contexts is meeting with stakeholders and talking about your work. As dance practitioners, at least 30% of our work is not making or teaching dance in the studio.

Reflecting on her personal experience, Hannah notes:

One thing I wasn't prepared for when I started was going into rooms full of blokes in ties. Later on, I did a really good CPD program with Matthew Bourne's New Adventures called Overture. That was really big for me. It was a big, warm hug. The training provided me with the tools to go and speak to people. It really helped with my confidence.

I think one of the biggest shifts in confidence for me was having a child. Because it puts what we do into perspective. I understood that if we're going to do it, it needs to be worth it for us – to be away from our child. That helped me be more confident in the money we asked for. It made me more confident in being very specific about what I wanted to create. It also helped me speak up for the community groups that we engage with.

The ability to advocate for your needs and be specific about what you want is really important, because a lot of the labour we provide is invisible to people without dance expertise. They see you in the studio or rehearsals, but they don't necessarily understand the work that goes into the planning or the creation of choreography. If you can't speak confidently to people, it's hard to ask for what you need – whether that's time, support or an appropriate day rate.

Building sustainable careers and organisations takes time and reflection

Success in community dance practice depends on a holistic, three-dimensional understanding of how community arts projects work and thrive. It also demands a lot of self-reflection about what you can offer a community.

After finishing training, and as our work and practice developed, we began to see the inequalities within arts education. We also saw how valuable dance could be to a lot of people in communities that weren't

accessing dance. Hannah went through her whole life as a young person in York and not had the experiences of dance that other people in other places were getting. There was a massive gap in access to dance and a lot of things that needed to change in our city. We felt like we had a lot to offer. That's why we opened York Dance Space.

It took a long time. We've been open for seven years. When we first started, there was often just one person in a class. It definitely took eighteen months to be able to commit to the organisation as a full-time job. But now many of our classes are at capacity, and our first-ever student is in our youth company. She's nearly eighteen.

We've only really discovered what type of artists we want to be in the last five years. It's taken a long time to break through all those stereotypes of what a dance artist needs to be. It's only recently that we've really understood what is needed and what's relevant financially and personally to build up a community that is going to continue to pay to come to classes and engage with the work. It's taken a long time to build up the trust and relationships where people continue to invest in your business and organisation.

A sustainable career as a community dance practitioner depends on having a long-term strategy for engagement. Instead of just thinking about what you need in the next eighteen months, you need to consider what you need over a much longer period of time. Boys' dance is the big buzzword at the moment with so many organisations. Funders and NPOs are saying, 'We need boys aged fourteen to eighteen'. But from our perspective, as the people delivering the work, it's too late. It's challenging to get fifteen-year-old boys to come to a dance class. But if you focus on primary school boys, you're much more likely to grab hold of their interest, build up relationships, and let dance become part of their identity.

If dance is going to be a part of people's lives, we need to engage with them in their communities. Dance can't be a solution for public health problems if it isn't valued by people. And if people can't see dance, or don't have access to dance, they aren't going to value it. Conversations about access and community engagement need to be a part of people's training. There is so much more to being a dance professional than being on stage.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

York Dance Space was created in 2016 by dance artists Hannah and Drew Wintie-Hawkins. After graduating from London Contemporary Dance School, Hannah and Drew had wide-ranging performing careers before moving back to Hannah's hometown of York to create their own independent dance organisation. For more information, see: <https://yorkdancespace.com/>