

Early Dance in the “Big Society” Era: Making Historical Dance fit for the 21st century

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In early dance we tend to be more than a little preoccupied with the past, however, for the EDC to have relevance in the 21st century we must become more future focused and ask where the next generation of Early Dancers and Early Dance researchers will come from.

This paper outlines and develops different ways of taking early dance to children, students and adults. It suggests a curriculum that can be imported to places where people already meet (and possibly dance) socially and sets out ways to promote, deliver and develop that curriculum. It suggests ways that we can present historical dance to show its relevance to British society today. Children will always need to learn how society functions; social dance is able to teach manners, turn taking, self-control/discipline and team work. It can also teach physical skills such as balance and agility. In times of austerity, people need to feel a sense a community, to feel a connection with others. Social dance can fulfil this.

Before we get to the meat of the issue, let us identify what “The Big Society” is. Government officials assure us that it is not public services “on the cheap” so what is it?

“The Big Society is the Government's vision of a society where individuals and communities have more power and

responsibility, and use it to create better neighbourhoods and local services.”
Department for Communities and Local Government

The Minister for Decentralisation, Greg Clark “described three elements being essential to creating the Big Society:

“The first is about what the state can do for us. The second is about what we can do for ourselves. And the third is about what we can do for others.””

I see dance as a social activity with educational and health benefits. Often, when learning a codified dance technique, opportunities for creativity (and all the associated learning and mental health benefits) are limited, this need not always be the case.

1. Firstly, let us consider Where and When we will find new participants to engage with historical dance, and Who they are. The obvious starting place is children at school: either in curriculum time, as part of history, drama or PE lesson or an after school activity in its own right or as part of dance, history or drama club. Older students at further or higher education require enrichment activities or dance could be part of a performing arts course or history qualification.

Interested in dance	Interested in historical dance
Everyone else	Interested in history

When considering recruiting adults, let us first put people into boxes. If we want to get people into the upper right quadrant, it is easier to pull someone over from a neighbouring quadrant than from the bottom left.

People interested in dance will be found at dance classes, tea dances, theatres and dance competitions (this applies equally to children and adults). Nonsuch's appearance at Move It 2012 is a good example of this. You would have to tread carefully, teachers are unlikely to take kindly to you 'poaching' their students but it is worth having the conversation; would they be interested in you giving a taster session or demo to their students/members? Can you do some kind of exchange; for example they teach you how to use an expressive, expansive ballet port de bras in return for you teaching them the historical roots of ballet technique? Or a similar history swap with ballroom dancers. Perhaps you have a performance opportunity coming up and you offer to coach anyone interested in performing with you. Or suggest a collaborative creative dance piece, maybe as part of Big Dance 2012, where you work together with your differing styles to create a new work (whilst the hip hop vs. ballet is now an overdone cliché, I think this idea has real potential especially if you pair it with innovative costuming ideas). Lovers of history can be found at historical venues (stately homes, etc.), libraries or even at the cinema (I know of an argentine tango teacher who had a roaring trade after advertising at cinemas where "Evita" was showing).

Finally, also recall that historical dance is often a gentle physical pursuit which, in keeping with our Big Society theme, could be made attractive to the less fit or mobile as gentle social exercise to aid with balance, mobility and a light cardio workout as well as the mental health and well-being benefits of enjoying music with a social group. We can also look at places where these people meet: retirement homes, day centres, churches, health centres, even weight loss groups. I also have a personal theory that social dance is beneficial to people living in care homes as it is an opportunity for non-medicalised touch. As we have seen there are many groups of people who would gain from engaging with Early Dance, now let us establish what they could gain.

2. The previous section has already briefly touched on "why historical dance?", namely the major hooks of education and health but let us consider some more reasons. Let us not be too hasty to discount "just because" but those people are likely to find you without much prompting (assuming you are findable, social media discussion to follow). You are also able to offer an introduction to (or re-acquaintance with) social skills (e.g. turn taking, cooperation, politeness, restraint) not just for small children but for older children and possibly for people with learning disabilities or brain injuries or degenerative diseases (such as dementia). The blogger Scott Young also makes the connection between ability to dance and ease in social situations. He particularly draws parallels between the ability to perform dance in public and public speaking. As dance teachers, my colleagues and I have noticed that many of our students are successful at job interviews and other assessments where presentation is important, success we attribute to being comfortable with performing from an early age. Many forms of historical dance offer access to the performing arts to people with limited mobility or just lesser technical skills. There are many people out there who have always wanted to dance but never got the chance as a child, you can be the key to fulfilling a long forgotten dream.

Whilst many dancers find it almost distasteful to seek reasons to justify dance (for many of us, the dance is all the reason we need), in the 21st Century it is often helpful to think of reasons that will persuade others in particular the gatekeepers to groups and funders of projects. Once the "why" we should dance has been fully explored, this will give us clues as to what we should be dancing.

3. The "where" you have found the group you want to work with should give you many of the clues you need about how to make Early Dance relevant to you potential participants.

What are your objectives and what are the objectives of the people booking you? Your objective may be to share a love of dance, to ensure a piece of history gets passed along or

to recruit new dancers. Whilst your employers may want to raise the profile of their property/event, want a new way of engaging with an old subject or some teachers may just want their class babysat for an hour (you have been warned). And what about your participants? Unless they have contacted you directly, it's unlikely that the ultimate consumers of your workshop have had much input into the planning of your visit so will not have had the opportunity to explicitly share (and probably have not even considered) their objectives. Unfortunately, I can offer no better advice than "guess"! Let us imagine your participant is street dance fan (but do not fall into the trap of assuming that every young person is). First ask what it is about street dance that excites that person; it could be the music (might struggle with finding common ground there unless you dance to beat of a drum...), the physical challenge, the mental stimulation of mastering complicated step patterns, the drama, the costume, the battle / competitive aspect, performance or social aspects. Make your guess and start there, in familiar and unthreatening territory for your participant before attempting to take them deeper into your world.

Are you fitting in with another curriculum or are you developing your own? Be aware that as more schools become academies, the National Curriculum, even after its current review may not have much relevance (currently a third of secondary schools in England are academies and as such do not need to follow the National Curriculum <http://www.education.gov.uk/edubase/search.xhtml?page=1>). At the 1999 Early Dance Conference titled "Education and Early Dance", Mary Collins wrote a very helpful paper in fitting in with the (then) National Curriculum (which, coincidentally, was also "currently under review"). In post 14 education, as just one example of a curriculum you could be part of, the new BTec First in Performing Arts by Edexcel could contain historical dance either in Unit 2: Preparation, Performance and Production where candidates have to rehearse and perform a production based on (as one option) existing choreography or Unit 4: Dance Skills

where learners have to practise technical dance skills in two contrasting genres. The most exciting option to me is the idea of producing your own curriculum. You can choose to offer a wide course of study ("Historical Dance") or you can focus in a small topic (e.g. "The Minuet" or "Dances from the 1830s"), the curriculum could develop technique in the individual performer or it could trace increasing complexities in floor patterns. What about structuring a youth dance programme along similar lines to private dance school? It would probably require a catchment area to include a large, wealthy town; large enough to support the niche offering, wealthy enough for households to have a disposable income to spend on activities for the children. Whilst it would require more exploration and likely sponsorship by a larger body such as a school or college, I foresee that it is possible to gain some form of accreditation for such a curriculum through the Open College Network or a dance examination board such as the IDTA.

What is the time frame you are working with? Do you have participants for 10 minutes as they pass by your display at a stately home or do you have a group for an afternoon a week for 12 weeks (a whole term)? The timeframe is obviously going to impact on the level of detail you can impart.

Once you have worked out your overarching objectives, the next step is to fill in the detail of your sessions

4. So we have established the initial "buy in", you have got your foot in the door and you are ready to deliver your session, let us examine how you can get people hooked and motivated to pursue dancing further.

According to Dan Pink in "Drive", to establish motivation a person needs to experience autonomy, mastery and purpose. Autonomy should mean that the participant has free choice in task, time, technique or team. This does not necessarily mean a student is free to pick their own subject (I write as the teacher who had a boy who just wanted to play basketball in my dance class) just some aspect of how to reach the learning

goal. I am aware that this maybe heretical but I suggest you offer autonomy in task. In most circumstances, autonomy of time will be taken out of your hands and technique is something that you will probably want to preserve. I assume that some of you will be wondering why I do not just suggest offer autonomy in team selection; it seems obvious especially when teaching partner dances or dances in a set. I also know that the people wondering must have never had the delight of asking a class full of primary children to get a partner! (My advice for avoiding the chaos that ensues if you ask a class of children to take a partner is to engineer a situation where the children happen to find themselves next to someone either by making two lines or an inner and outer circle.) I am not sure why allowing dance students to create their own work is so controversial; no one would baulk at suggesting musicians write their own music in order to gain better understanding of, say, rondo form or drama students improvising a new scene in a play to further develop a character. Mastery of a subject lies at the edge of our ability, to increase mastery, we must have “Goldilocks” tasks (although remember autonomy); not too hard, not too easy but just right. The final ingredient “purpose” is more difficult for educators. Purpose cannot be given, it can only be found by an individual, however maybe the setting we are working in may give us some clues as to how our offer fits in with their wider world.

I have recently experienced two contrasting experiences of offering autonomy in task. The first version was of writing a galliard for students at my ballet school to perform at the Early Dance Circle Festival at Rochdale Town Hall in November 2011. A group of students I am very familiar with (I have been teaching the oldest student in the group for over 10 years) learnt some set 16th Century dances and we set about writing two galliards. We first learnt the basic step, then we learnt some more interesting variations and then we developed our own steps. We took two pieces of music, one we started with a duet I had originally learned from Paul Kent, arranged it for two couples and added a new ending. For the second piece, we invented an entire new dance. The students were really captivated by

the competitive aspects of the dance, seeing parallels between a modern day street dance “dance off”. Studying the galliard also gave me the opportunity to teach batterie earlier than I would have normally had I just been teaching ballet. The pieces were well received at the Festival. Several people commented on the athletic elevation we used which is ironic since one of the values of historical dance for vocational dance schools is the honing of stagecraft without the need for extreme turn out or extension (i.e. the ability to extend the leg high above hip level). Nicola Gaines discussed the benefits of studying Early Dance for serious ballet students in her paper presented at the 1999 Early Dance Circle Conference, ‘Education and Early Dance’.

For my second example, I worked with a group of Year 2 students as part of their PE provision. They are studying Henry VIII for history so I thought I would link the dance sessions into their study of the Tudors. The class was boisterous but I believe, compared to many schools, they were well behaved. The intention of the class was to give them a set step (singles and doubles) and let them create their own dances eventually working as a two couple set. However, I think the level of accuracy required to distinguish between a single and a double is beyond the average 7 year old. The class disconnected from the task, thankfully, I could fall back on several set dances as described in the Dolmetsch guide to Tudor dancing in schools. If I got the chance to run the session again I might base the session on floor pattern instead and get the pupils to create a dance with whatever foot work was comfortable.

Another approach to using historical dance with younger people could be to use historical dance as a starting point to create a piece of dance that is definitely situated in the 21st Century (as outlined in the following scheme):

Planning a lesson:

Remember, the idea is to get the dancer hooked so they want to find out more whilst letting them stay close to their comfort zone. In "Magic Moments" (2008), Reed sets out a method for planning a creative dance lesson for younger children as follows:

1. Choose a theme
2. Brainstorm all ideas related to the theme (appropriate to the age group)
3. Choose from the brainstormed ideas those that relate easily to movement. Place this idea in the dance explanation boxes. These boxes relate to Laban analysis of movement:
 1. Body Shape – What? Body parts: Head, hands, back etc. Shape: Curved, twisted, angular, symmetrical, asymmetrical
 2. Space – Where? General. Levels. Pathways. In the air or on the floor. Directions.
 3. Dynamics – How? Speed. Power. Flow
 4. Relationship – with Whom? Individual. With a partner. With a group. With a teacher.
4. Now select ideas, songs and activities and structure them into the Framework plan below:
 1. In the circle – Introductory activity that can be done in a group circle. The younger the child, the more activities will need to be done in the group circle
 2. In the space – an activity than can be done individually in the space
 3. Extension work in the space – two activities that can be done moving around the space
 4. Create a sequence – A motif in which a sequence of moves is created. (With young children this may take the form of a dance story or a song.)
 5. Present/Perform/Appreciate – Opportunity to present work to others
 6. Warm down – Activities for calming down/ending the lesson

Ludusdance, a regional dance agency based in Lancaster and a leading dance in education company have a similar structure for developing lesson plans appropriate for Key Stage 2 to post 16 students

1. Aims of a Dance lesson - Ludus have both Movement aims and Cognitive aims
2. Warm up
3. Introduction of the movement material - Ludus quote Marion Gough "It is important to move the students from familiar movement patterns to more unfamiliar ones. A lesson generally focuses on opposing movement actions and qualities building balanced movement vocabulary for the students."
4. Exploration and development of movement material
5. Composition
6. Appreciation
7. Evaluation (teacher activity)

With adults I have successfully used historical dance as part of a wider creative movement session. Again, the key to introducing this

work is to start with the dancers' objectives, capture their imagination and then introduce more information (further dances or work on

technique). My classes came to me for exercise, social interaction and for creative movement. One of the first dances I introduced was “Branle des Sabots”. I discussed how the dance challenged their balance, agility (rapid change of direction), calf muscles and posture. I originally taught the dance in a line but then, once the directions were mastered, we performed the dance in a circle to allow for social interaction. Whilst the steps were set, I offered creativity in setting the scene, inventing scenarios such as castle balls and elaborate costumes. Dances such as Halfe Hanikin were also highly successful as they allowed for more social interaction than occurred in our usual individual creative movement exploration. I have experimented with using both authentic and contemporary music. The common rule that “you can’t please everyone all the time” applies here. Some people were happy to step out of their comfort zone with unfamiliar dances as long as they had the security of familiar music. Others thought I was dumbing down. Also, within my dance school, an adult tap class was introduced to historical dance (through Brenda Hartley-Smith) and now they regularly dance as part of “White Rose”.

If you are offering Early Dance as part of a health project for older people, you want to be choosing dance movements that challenge balance (by shifting weight from foot to foot) and promoting leg strength (by demi plié and rises), both of these are key aspects of falls prevention work. Also having to use the brain to imagine and retain floor pattern and steps is a good mental workout, and is preferable to crossword puzzles for many thanks to its social elements. You would need to avoid sudden changes of direction and crossing the legs in case of brittle bones. Also many older people I have worked with dislike turning so I usually make it optional or take it out altogether. If you are looking for external funding for this work, it may be useful to relate your work to the “five ways to well-being” agenda (<http://www.neweconomics.org/projects/five-ways-well-being>). So you now have a successfully (or otherwise) delivered project, what to do next?

As we continue to race through the 21st Century, one of the biggest developments is undoubtedly the growth of social media. I suggest that you find a way of storing and sharing sessions that you have developed and an evaluation. A large electronic repository of shared resources and feedback could be motivating to other practitioners to go out into their community and widen the search for those future dancers and researchers.

This paper set out to demonstrate practical ways to engage with new audiences for Early Dance using many of the relevant structures in the 21st Century. Whilst we are happy to discuss and debate any of the ideas within the paper, it would be our hope that the reader considers this a call to action and takes some of these ideas out to their local community to share the dance.

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