

**TaPRA 2017**

**Training Working Group**

**'If the Hat Fits'** Examining the impact of male-only, Extra-Curricular provision on male dancers studying in Higher Education.

Film and Presentation

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## **ABSTRACT**

*The value and identity of the male dancer has been scrutinised since the conception of formalised dance. The dance class, as taught in Higher Education, is a challenging context for males where instructive language, movement concepts and level of technical proficiency are unfamiliar and destructive to development and confidence (Risner, D. 2007:141). 'If the Hat Fits' is a PAR film and paper that considers the formal training of male dancers in HE. The research presents a case study championing the benefits of male-only extra-curricula training provision as fundamental to employability and the development of the 'emerging professional'. Findings offer new perspectives on the value of non-assessed training opportunities that foster vulnerability, risk taking, self-efficacy allowing students to 'try on' a professional identity.*

*Key Words: Male Dancer, Higher Education, Training, Employability*

## **Introduction**

***It's an overcast Saturday outside in the University playground there's 8 male dance students. It's the meeting place to discuss ideas for their film. One dancer confidently and without apology shares his choreography, another gets up and joins him, chipping in and suggesting another route through the sequence. The rest join and begin learning the material keen to explore the nuances, eager to master the tricks. Another animatedly mimes ideas to the media student about how the phrase could be shot. Together they weave in and out of the dancing group forcing the camera to keep up with the energy of the movement. They are both smiling "yes, yes, that looks cool XXXX .Do that again but move it out past the camera". The experimenting continues throughout the session moving from the playground to studio. The energy and focus is driven yet there is laughter and much 'banter'. It's rare to hear silence. The session culminates in all involved watching the rushes. They congratulate each other, laugh heartedly at their mistakes and debate how best to move the idea forward. Their conversations turn into practical experiments. It's an hour past the end of the session but no one seems to care"***

These observations were gathered during the creation of the dance film 'If The Hat Fits' which was embedded within a PAR activity that became the focus of my MA in

Education. It was created and directed by male dance trainees all whom were part of the all-male extra-curricular provision- EdgeFWD which I facilitate and artistically lead on at my Higher Education institution. The creation and production of the film acted as a conduit for research that considered the impact of this training on students. The investigation gave insight to the lived male student experience. The 14 men present shifting vistas of themselves, moving through, with and beyond set identities or stereotypes. Choreography acknowledges the dancer's history and experience. The ensemble is unified until the climax of the film when we witness each dancer sharing their individuality, acknowledging their departure into the 'real world'. The film is their legacy and captures the essence of them as dancers and as this group of men to whom the hat really did fit.

### **Male Dance Training in HE**

EdgeFwd grew vernacularly out of a need to support male dancers in the department. All expressed feelings of isolation and a dislike of being singled out for feedback. There was also a shared anxiety about their ability to fulfil their aspirations compounded by the recognition of their limited technical abilities in comparison to the female students. As stated in the Youth Dance England (YDE) publication, *In and Beyond Schools*, 'Boys are the largest group of disadvantaged young people in terms of dance opportunities' (YDE. 2010:16). The document goes on to suggest that, 'The lack of access to dance in schools impedes boys accessing dance opportunities beyond schools' (ibid). It could be suggested that the impact of this inequality of pre-HE dance provision is evidenced in the gender ratio of students enrolled on the dance course at the Institution where I lecture. Between 2009 and 2014; 243 female students enrolled on the single honours course in comparison to 23 male students. Unlike males, females often begin their dance training, 'as early as three years of age girls and unlike boys, often grow up with dance as a taken for granted activity of childhood' (Risner, D. 2007:141). This can mean that for some male students the formalised dance class, as taught in HE, is a challenging context where instructive language, dance terminology and level of technical proficiency are all unfamiliar. When entering HE dance sessions the lack of formal dance experience challenges the male student and if unsupported the dancer's self-motivation wains, disrupting full engagement and hindering their development. (Risner, D. 2008; Stinson, 2005). Studys that consider male participation in dance have suggested that some of the issues of isolation and lack of confidence can be improved by having more male dance peers and more opportunities to interact with other males in the dance environment (Risner 2010, Williams 2003). I have had previous experience working with male only youth dance groups and have seen first-hand the impact this single sex training has on participant sand the quashing of engendered stereotypes and movement practices.

It is incumbent upon HE to support all students and it would seem irresponsible to engage a student if they did not seem capable of achieving the qualification. As asserted by Stinson, due to the shortage of male applicants, it can be difficult to reject males at audition whom although show passion and raw talent for dance, lack fundamental training (2005). Male privileging in dance is recognised and is a concern for female dance students and young female professionals (Clegg et al, 2016, Stinson 2005, Risner, 2014; Wright, 2013). Although there are fewer male dancers a much higher number of them are recipients of grants and awards and are often those

holding influential positions in Dance (Stinson 1998/2005). Recently the Arts Council has supported *The Bench*, a project developed to promote female choreographers in light of serious concerns about the lack of equality faced by female artists within the dance sector. This is a wider topic that can be explored here. It is poignant that at my institution we do now ensure parity of experience with the addition of a female company in no small part due to the impact of EdgeFWD.

## **The Employability as an Imperative at HE**

Employability is seen as a significant antecedent in improving the student experience. In the 2007 CAREER survey, '92% of students believed that it is very important that higher education should be preparing them for the world of work' (Brown, 2007:36). Furthermore potential students are now made aware of potential course and career prospects when approaching university with DLHE and Key Information Set (KIS) data in University league tables. However, there are debates between those whom argue for a university experience that is intellectually-stimulating, underpinned by significant research and which resists the instrumentalisation of individuals and those whom see a focus on employment as an economic imperative. What can't be ignored in light of the introduction of the TEF is the increasing emphasis by the government to ensure that employability is high on HE agendas.

The suitability of course design in dance degrees and their success in producing graduates able to establish a career in dance has been contested. Significant sector audits were done by PALATINE, *Mapping dance* (Burns, 2007), *Your Degree in Dance and Drama- Making it Work* (Duncan, A. 2007). Publications highlighted the unpredictability of the creative industries and the significance of preparing students for 'portfolio careers'. *Mapping Dance* reported that many students were not adequately prepared for work, 'HEI's are not responding to the needs of the sector and are not producing people we want to employ so we have to grow our own' (cited in Burns, 2008:32). The document presented studies of good entrepreneurial practices in HE, however, it reported that these practices were not felt within the profession (ibid). Many drew upon the findings of Burns' report and began to defend, re-examine and re-draft their dance offer (Jaundrill Scott et al 2009; Hunter & Gladstone, 2009; Childs & Clegg, 2012; Childs, 2016). However, again in 2015, the training offered to UK dance students was interrogated, this time by high profile UK choreographers and professional dance directors. They criticised British dance education for failing to produce employable graduates, suggesting they, "lack that strength and rigorous training" of overseas counterparts (Khan, A. quoted in Hemley, M. 2015).

It appears that a degree can 'open doors' for dance graduates but alone isn't enough to secure continuous employment. 'Graduates must be able to proactively navigate the world of work and self-manage the career building process' (Bridgstock, 2009:35). To attempt this, graduates need to have had experience within their field and to be aware of the landscape they are entering. The importance of work-based learning (WBL) and work-related learning (WRL) within the curriculum is underlined by Nixon et al, 2006 as a 'legitimate mode of learning which offers significant value to HE institutions' strategic teaching and learning agendas' (Nixon, I. et al. 2006:3). The value of WBL AND WRL is highlighted in much of the HEA and QAA literature

and in papers by (Mason et al, 2003; Moreland, 2005:4; Bridgstock 2009, 2016; Nixon et al, 2006). WBL and WRL allow students to contextualise their practice engaging them fully in Kolb's Learning Cycle.

Credence is given to the benefits of Extra- Curricula Activities (ECA) as a valuable method of developing components of employability (Pegg et al, 2012) As the dance courses come under greater scrutiny to achieve parity in contact hours with other non-vocational subjects, opportunities for practical experimentation and application of skills outside the curriculum becomes paramount. Research confirming that ECA's have a positive impact on graduate employability is limited. Qualitative studies that consider the graduate voice include; Stevenson and Clegg's, 2010 investigation into the value of ECA's to staff and students and Greenbank's 2015 examination of student engagement in ECA's and factors influencing participation or non-participation. EdgeFWD provides opportunities for students to engage with professional networks beyond HE. Stevenson and Clegg's 2011 paper considers how engagement in ECA's can aid development of student's 'future selves' whilst offering them opportunities to purposely embody the present.

## **Research Imperative**

EdgeFWD has now been running for 7 years. The group has been awarded many accolades at: Institutional, National Higher Education and National Arts Level. In 2012 the initiative was shortlisted for a THE Award for Excellence and Innovation in the Arts in the same year their work received a multitude of 3\*, 4\* and 5\* at The Edinburgh Fringe. A significant proportion of graduates are now working in dance and the arts. The accolades and achievements offer some quantifiable measure of the success of the initiative. However, there has been little research activity that captures the full impact from the student's perspective or from my own reflections and observations of the group as facilitator. This opportunity to understand the success from the student voice has been neglected hampering and undervaluing our full acknowledgment of impact on the male student experience, 'reality as experienced by the student' has an important additional value in understanding students' learning (Entwistle, 1991).

## **Participants**

The participants comprised of 13, 3<sup>rd</sup> year students whom had taken part in the ECA since Year 1 or Year 2 of their studies. The devising, creation and filming took place in June after completion of their assessments. This allowed participants to fully invest in the project and captured a specific moment in their undergraduate journey when they were keen to quantify and reflect upon their development and overall university experience.

## **Research Strategy**

The Case Study research design allows for an empirical in-depth investigation with the students in their distinct working environment. Here studying the 'phenomenon

within its real-life context' (Yin, 2009). The interpretive nature of the case-study fits well with a phenomenological stance. As Stenhouse, argues that one of the strengths of a case- study is the 'capacity to interpret situations rapidly and at depth and to revise interpretations in light of experience' (1995:6).

The investigation gives value to the lived male student experience and follows a person centred, phenomenological line of enquiry within a hermeneutic framework, recognising that there 'is no one stable and overriding interpretation' (Buckland. 1997:197). Therefore, the methods balance verbal reflections from participants in the form of face-face interviews and my own focussed observations as a reflexive practitioner and facilitator of the provision. By engaging in qualitative investigation my hope was that I could bring to focus meanings and interpretations about the impact and value of the ECA blurred by the external frameworks and markers of success. Here drawing on hermeneutic analysis to discover deeper interpretations that may challenge or support surface narratives.

## **Limitations**

Limitations of the research are that findings are being gathered from a small sample of participants. Although validity may not arise from drawing general propositions that are replicable, what we discover from their individual narratives could be used to explore current, traditional or unfounded existing knowledge (Wellington, 2015:177). A common criticism of case-studies and qualitative research is the issue of subjectivity and the researcher's presence. True objectivity is a challenge to achieve as I am both researcher and facilitator of the activity. However, this is the reality of the lived experience of all involved and as such is be embraced.

## **Key Findings**

### **Connecting pleasure and enjoyment to motivated learning**

- -Developing entrepreneurial behaviours
- - Belonging- A community of Male Dance Role Models

### **The Value of learning experiences beyond curriculum**

- *Extra Curricula Activity as Work Based Learning*
- *Opportunities to Play the Professional*

### **Connecting pleasure and enjoyment to motivated learning**

In their interviews students highlighted EdgeFWD sessions as a place where they could have fun. The research highlights the importance of creating a learning environment for male dancers, which although concerned in artistic and creative development encourages play. This engages with 'The Pursuit of Pleasure' championed by Britton (2010) as integral to transformative learning, risk taking and self-development. Their playful conduct and vocal exuberance is captured in all the devising footage. Here the teaching approach counterpoises Van Dyke's concern

around the feminisation of dance teaching, successfully confronting its traditional 'feminine values' of obedience, silence and conformity (Van Dyke. 1992 in Risner, D. 2007:141). It is when playing and improvising that male students appear to forget their limitations in technique and allow themselves to experience the pleasure of dancing without the restrictions of reduced self-confidence. As suggested by Shernoff, to experience pleasure a human must perceive the activity as 'worth doing for its own sake, even if no further goal is reached' (Shernoff et al. 2003:160). This idea stems from 'Flow Theory' and is often referred to as 'Optimal Experience' (Csikszentmihalyi's 1990, Csikszentmihalyi, Schneider, & Shernoff, 2003), which is linked to increased engagement in learning via intrinsic enjoyment of the learning activity. From the limited research into flow states in dance one of the central antecedents in achieving 'flow' was in finding the fun in the task. Recent studies in the UK and US in pre professional training have suggested that a lack of perceived fun and enjoyment in dance training has prevented students fulfilling their full potential (Shernoff, Csikszentmihalyi, Schneider, & Shernoff, 2003, Urmston and Hewison, 2014).

A necessary component in their of enjoyment and commitment to EdgeFWD was their relationship with the other members.

***"It's always a positive vibe in the studio. It's like a family of brothers and working together. It's just a really nice place to train really" (Student 3)***

***"It's like a brotherhood like er, like a legion." (Student 5)***

At times, I observed their behaviour as comparable with that of family members. Hugging was common between group members; to greet, to thank, to support and appreciate. Their embraces were illustrative of the depth of their relationships. The closeness and unity of the group is reflected in the embrace motif repeated throughout the film. The dancers fall into the embraces with force, commitment and trust catching each other's weight. They hold each other tenderly taking time before parting passionate and caring. The embraces are more than locker room bravado, they are genuine and unapologetic. These initially improvised hugs became a deliberate addition to their choreography.

This brotherhood narrative continued in their discussion of how EdgeFWD felt like a safe place to express individuality and to develop confidence. One student referred to his peers as "the pack" whom, at spotting a vulnerable moment in his development came together and cheered him on to success. There is camaraderie in which effort and attempt are encouraged and individual strengths appreciated. There is a climate of wanting to achieve but rather than produce an ego involving competitiveness, students rally together to support, teach, learn or improve new skills. Here we witness the group displaying characteristics akin to those displayed in high achieving sporting teams where team cohesiveness is seen as an essential for success.

***"In an Edge FWD rehearsal there is the genuine celebration of the body, of physical finesse, of control and rigour, the concentration of focus and the pleasure in achievement, and most notably, and perhaps here most***

***differently from (most) sporting contexts, there is the genuine celebration in the achievement of others” (Hewison, J. 2013).***

This is suggestive of task-orientated behaviors in which focus is on process rather than outcome (Horn, T,S. *et al.* 2012:27.28). Task-orientated behaviors are positively linked to success with a tendency to take on challenges and a willingness to expend effort, qualities that were witnessed from the group (ibid) I became aware after a few months of facilitating EdgeFWD that this willingness, or necessity to develop became synonymous with the group. They would be found in studios after closing time and a culture of experimentation and collaboration developed. In the film this culture of self-training and self-development is captured in every shot. As the camera tracks the protagonists, we observe men dancing in every available space, alone, in pairs and in group.

These activities are key attributes of an entrepreneurial mind-set. Bell’s findings link successful employment with two aspects of an entrepreneurial mind-set; a proactive disposition and achievement orientated motivation (2016:11). One could suggest that due to limited contact hours these students were facilitating their own opportunities and making use of the EdgeFWD and independent practice to engage in the active experimentation and self-reflection essential to complete their learning cycle.

***“The fact the studios were available to use out of hours so as a result I found myself doing a lot of self-development ....unknowingly preparing myself for a having to do self-development when I left university.” (Student 1)***

The acceptance of peers as a valuable resource for development is essential and is noted as a key strategy by the students. A study by Williams (2003), cites that there is a frustration with the absence of male role models as dance teachers. Risner adds to this suggesting that without male leaders in dance, stereotypes of the male dancer become further embedded into culture (Risner, D. 2007). Although facilitated by a woman, the men in EdgeFWD have ownership and are, therefore, dance leaders. The participants are their own role models and in dancing together with this philosophy they both appease and subjugate heteronormative values and homosexual representations focusing on their individual experiences and their relationship as a group.

### **The Value of learning experiences beyond curriculum**

Their appreciation of the EdgeFWD and the opportunities it offered for professional practice were raised in their interviews and in the written testimonials.

***“I will take all their different choreographic techniques but also I suppose the discipline that XXXX has given us. It’s been place where we have grown up and got ready for our future.”(Student 10)***

The dancers referred to the professional choreographers with whom they created work, as friends, “*Inside and outside the studio*” whom took them under their “*wing*” They also referenced them continually when creating material for the film either stylistically or by sharing tasks that they had explored. Examples from the repertoire

created by professional choreographers are seen throughout the film, in the placement of props and in the dynamic ending sequence which pays homage to the movement history of the group. Early exposure to the reality of how professional contacts are made and opportunities to practice professional interactions was highlighted as something they valued as preparative for the industry, particularly when engaged with activities outside of University.

They recognised the advantages gained from non-accredited work-based learning on projects with professional dancers with professional expectations. My observations revealed the depth of learning and the maturity of the 'soft skills' that can only emerge from work-related learning (Hardacre, K. & Schneiedr, K. 2007). Examples of their increased awareness and application of professional protocols included; dancers arriving punctually, warming-up without prompting, increased rehearsal stamina, ability to maintain motivation when challenged, risk taking and professionalism on set. Within this investigation students demonstrated that they were able to; 'capitalise on their skills within the context of the wider application of their work within society' (Burns, S. 2008). Comments from interviews also highlighted how this exposure increased confidence in gaining future employment.

This stresses the significance of ensuring provision of WBL as paramount in the arts where experience is often given greater credit over degree classification (Ball, 2003). One could argue that the experiential learning they gained whilst working with EdgeFWD was tangible and that the 'real life' application allowed for deep and memorable learning. When filming on location I viewed the dancers re-situating these acquired professional practice skills into a new context, a vital attribute in achieving graduate level employment (Mason et al., 2003: 8)

Another element underlined when discussing their extra curricula practice was that it offered space to,

***"..to play and explore within the university walls without the universities expectations" (Student 1)***

As lecturers we can often feel restrained by assessment criteria, bound by professional parameters and are limited by contact time. My concern is to whether this can sometimes hinder us offering enough opportunities for experimentation with fun, failure and risk-taking in technique teaching. At a point when discussions are being held to whether EdgeFWD should be credit bearing, it would seem pertinent to investigate the extent to which elective engagement and non-assessment effects participant's motivation for learning. *If enjoying learning is to be a priority, then the focus needs to move from attainment and its relationship with satisfaction, to learning and its connection to flow states* (Lumby, J. 2011:263).

## **Conclusion**

It is evident that EdgeFWD has been significant for this group of students' performing arts development and has been influential in nurturing this group of young men to feel confident about themselves and their futures. In line with a phenomenological approach I understand that these findings may only be specific to this group of



students. Conversely, the investigation has not drastically shifted my approaches to teaching the EdgeFWD. It has instead crystallised the positive impact of, what were initially instinctive teaching approaches, on the student experience and has thus cemented these within my pedagogy for teaching male dancers and indeed all dancers. Central is the acknowledgement of the bearing of motivational climate created by the facilitator. This includes ensuring the teaching is autonomy supportive, the encouragement of *task* rather than *ego*-orientated behaviors, the facilitation of activities that develop cohesiveness alongside opportunities to be challenged and take risks. We have seen how this approach is similar to that witnessed in elite sports teams of which there is plentiful Sport Psychology research. Within this investigation I noted how little research has been undertaken with male dancers and specifically male dance companies in regards to motivational psychology.

As suggested earlier in this paper, curriculum practice hours in universities can be problematic in preparing students for performance career. However, we have seen that dedicated practice within an ECA that allows for work-based learning with professional artists can significantly impact student's expertise and thus job prospects. This aligns with the retorts to recent criticism from many dance employees who have called for, 'more flexibility in school schedules to enable regular contact with artists in the field' (Clinkard, T. 2015). My faculty at my institute now fully embrace the EdgeFWD providing funding to ensure that more men can benefit from the experience.

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