Arts Leadership and Mentoring to address social and artistic isolation: a reflective case study.

Tessa Palfrey, University of Lincoln, Tpalfrey@lincoln.ac.uk
Kirsty Russell, University of Lincoln, krussell@lincoln.ac.uk
Kirstyn Michalczyk, University of Lincoln, 16629961@students.lincoln.ac.uk

Summary

Following several months of lockdown and online learning, collated anecdotal evidence suggested that Dance students at the University of Lincoln were experiencing negative consequences of both social and artistic isolation. To address this, the dance department created the extra-curricular Arts Leadership and Mentoring Programme (ALMP) in September 2020. The programme was heavily influenced by a Student as Producer ethos, a model of teaching and learning developed at the University of Lincoln in 2010 by Professor Mike Neary. This concept promotes students as collaborators and producers of their own knowledge (Neary, 2014).

The programme was aimed at undergraduate students on the BA (Hons) Dance course, and postgraduate students on the MA Choreography and Performance Practices course. The ALMP followed a natural progression whereby postgraduate students were offered mentoring from academic staff, which then supported the development of the peer mentoring sessions between undergraduate students. Both schemes were designed to support students and staff to help other individuals "address the major transitions or thresholds that the individual is facing and to deal with them in a developmental way" (Megginson, 1994, p.165). To address the different needs of undergraduate and postgraduate students, the ALMP consisted of two strands; this paper discusses the impact and effectiveness of each strand.

Outlined below are the two strands of the programme and a description of how each strand targeted the needs of each cohort. The ALMP was an unfunded project which aimed to reconsider existing resources and relationships between students and staff, to provide additional support tailored to the needs of students during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Description of project

The overall aims of the Arts Leaderships and Mentoring Programme were to:

1. Build a community of supportive artists and students through establishing a peer mentoring network.
2. Increase student satisfaction and engagement through providing additional support strategies during the Covid-19 pandemic
3. Provide a platform for students to share experiences and develop skills as a critical friend
4. Enhance employability through the development of skills relevant to potential graduate careers

The Artist Development Scheme (ADS) was targeted at building leadership skills among Postgraduate students on the MA Choreography and Performance Practices course, by creating a two-way working relationship with academic staff. This involved a work-based learning model (Wagner and Strach, 2020) where students shadowed and worked alongside staff on various short-term projects. The objective was to provide opportunities to gain knowledge, and practice skills in preparation for the various career pathways after graduation. The relationship between mentor and mentee in this study follows the definition from Collier (2017, p.9) where "the mentor is typically older and definitely more experienced in the institutional/ organizational context, and draws upon her experience to guide and support the mentee's efforts to advance within that same context."

The ADS was an extra-curricular scheme which took place outside of formal teaching, but aimed to support the development of necessary professional qualities (Clegg, Stevenson, & Willot, 2009). The opportunities to develop these qualities related to potential career pathways, for example, if a student was interested in producing or tour management, they might apply to work with staff on planning and developing the small-scale performance tour as part of the MA Choreography and Performance Practices course. The student would then shadow the staff member in all discussions with potential venues and may be given small responsibilities such as finding a quote for travel expenses.

One of the benefits of this scheme, beyond developing career-based skills, was that it enabled students to maintain a sense of community both with each other, and with academic staff. It also gave additional opportunities for feedback and ongoing development of skills. Students were required to send an expression of interest for each ADS position, however, by the end of the year each student had access to at least one opportunity. This was to ensure fair and equal opportunity so that personal obligations such as caring responsibilities and paid employment did not affect the students' access to the scheme. It is our belief that by supporting the postgraduate students in this way, we were able to demonstrate a model which encouraged autonomy, critical thinking skills and the capacity to mentor undergraduate students.

The second strand of the programme, The Peer Mentoring Scheme, primarily targeted undergraduate students and aimed to help new students settle into university life and to provide continued support for level 5 and 6 students. The relationship between mentor and mentee was designed to be "conducted between people of equal status" (Topping, 2005, p. 321). Students voluntarily participated as mentors as part of the scheme, and each mentor undertook an online training session to understand the expectations of the role. This workshop advised the students of their responsibilities and provided further information on how to communicate with their peers. The tutor discussed essential communication skills, how to project confidence, speak audibly and how to use positive body language techniques. This developed into a discussion of fundamental listening skills such as eye contact, tone of voice and encouragement. The workshop information was consolidated into a Student Mentor Handbook which included further information on signposting and university services.

Each mentor was allocated a small group of students in the first month of the academic year. Owing to Covid-19, the scheme operated entirely on Microsoft Teams. The scheme had its own Teams classroom and each mentor had a private conversation

thread with their mentees. Participants could have confidential group conversations through the chat functions or hold video calls. Where communications were visible to the tutor, they remained confidential. There were five formal group mentoring sessions organised throughout the academic year, although the option to communicate more frequently was available.

The mentors' role was to listen to their mentees, signpost them to the relevant support and service, and offer constructive advice. Mentors were encouraged to view themselves as a critical friend, "a trusted person who asks provocative questions, provides data to be examined through another lens, and offers a critique of a person's work as a friend" (Costa and Kallick, 1993, p. 50). The scheme ran for the entire 2020/21 academic year.

Evidence of effectiveness and impacts (500 words)

Towards the end of the academic year, tutors held online feedback sessions to gather informal reflections from students. A series of questions were designed to collate the experiences and students were encouraged to contribute in an open and active dialogue, which allowed them to share their insights. These responses are outlined below in relation to the aims and objectives of the ALMP.

Building a community

One of the key initiatives as part of the Artist Development Scheme was a student led choreographic testing ground called Creative Lab. This was a weekly session for all students planned by Postgraduate students following a mentoring session with the tutor. With this, students were able to actively generate and contribute to a thriving artistic community, and experiment with different choreographic ideas. One student described how this

"*allowed the students to play and explore creatively together. It helped to start combating the creative isolation from lockdown, and to play with new movement ideas again and to reflect upon them as a group*" *(Student A)*

Recent studies have identified the social isolation created by the pandemic in HE, Leah Filho et al (2021, p.13) reveal that "the suddenly imposed social isolation led to staff and students experiencing problems of lack of social interactions, motivation, and mental health problems such as boredom, loneliness and anxiety". Student anecdotal evidence suggests that the ALMP offered opportunities to work together and therefore helped to prevent social isolation during the pandemic.

Student engagement throughout COVID-19

As both schemes progressed over time it was noted that more students got involved and were enthusiastic about the sessions and opportunities. Specifically, during times of national lockdown when lectures were held online, the students appreciated the additional structure and routine at a time when motivation was running low. With this, it was evident that the ALMP helped to strengthen the sense of community among the

students, by offering structured sessions during which they were able to discuss course related activities and tasks, outside of class time. Additionally, the Postgraduate students were able to continue to build their working relationship with tutors and gain additional career related skills, despite not being able to physically present.

Critical friendship

Throughout the ALMP, students reflected positively on their experience of supporting their peers. In the peer mentoring scheme specifically, one student mentor described that their mentoring experience:

> *"is quite rewarding in the sense that when they have been like struggling with something or struggling to find something like, the information you give, and they say that's helpful, or, like, for example, they say, at the beginning, they didn't know how to sign up for the doctors and stuff. So I put all the web link and stuff in. …And just knowing that I've done that, for them, is rewarding." (Student B)*

The ALMP aimed to develop these critical friendship skills to reflect and self-reflect on the students' development as artists. This type of reflexive discussion supports Mason et al's (2003, p.10) suggestion that "meaningful engagement in the discourse and activities associated with specific communities of practice might be as beneficial as the activities themselves."

Employability

In line with previous studies surrounding student engagement in relation to extra-curricular activities, this project aimed to develop students' expertise and job prospects by offering consistent yet varied opportunities for work based learning (Milner, 2015). The feedback from students revealed that they felt their transferable skills had improved, one student stated:

> *"I feel like I've learned how to like work with someone else as well. Like, working with Student A like, we've had to try and bounce off each other because we have different things that we want to ask or, like, if they need help with, like, we've had to try and work together." (Student C)*

One of the biggest challenges seemed to be the organisation and planning, as the students crossed levels, trying to find convenient times to meet was difficult. One student revealed:

> *"We noticed that we wasn't available each time like every week or every other week. So it's quite hard to slot in times, because of availability." (Student D)*

It was evident that most of the students felt a frustration toward the online environment and there was a clear aversion to Microsoft Teams as the platform for communication. This seemed to be because of the functionality of the platform; unlike mainstream social media platforms, MS Teams did not provide immediate notifications and so the response time between students was sometimes extensive.

The broader challenges articulated by the students seemed to be logistical in nature, relating to organisation or method of communication. This is promising in the sense that these challenges can be addressed and improved in the future. Regardless, the students were able to articulate the skills and positive experiences the scheme had provided.

Staff Reflections

Artist Development Scheme

Owing to working one-to-one with staff, there were limited positions available through the ADS. With this, the positions were decided by the staff team by asking the students to write an expression of interest which outlined what skills they thought the position might offer, and how these might relate to their intended career. However, this meant that often positions offering more practical skills, such as extra-curricular company rehearsal director, received more interest than the tour booking or administration positions. As tutors, it was important to consider how to harness the broader, or 'soft' skills, that are often gained unknowingly within a studio setting. In line with Mary Fitzgerald's (2017) discussions surrounding leaning on community-centred pedagogy in order to reposition the practical elements of dance training, we focused on communicating how the benefits of the more practical opportunities might also extend beyond the physical. This was supported by including the Creative Lab sessions as part of the scheme, and in this way, each student received one-to-one mentoring from staff in relation to their planned activities, but also had the opportunity to give and receive peer feedback.

In addition, by the end of the year, each student had an opportunity to participate in an individual project as part of the ADS, ranging from dance facilitation through to arts administration. However, the favouring of purely practical skills and sessions was also evident in how students engaged with the online PMS sessions.

Peer Mentoring Scheme

During the initial phases of the COVID-19 pandemic, there were short periods of the academic year where all teaching took place online. When face-to-face sessions did resume, theory lectures remained online, and for some students this resulted in screen fatigue. Therefore, getting those students to engage with their peers online was a challenge, this refers particularly to the first year students, the mentees. As dance artists, the students are primarily used to communicating with and through their bodies, to be asked to communicate solely through screen meant that some of the students found it harder to engage. As one student commented:

> *"As much as you say like with like, we can have socials and stuff digitally. But it never matches up to just being with everyone and in the same setting an environment. And I think that goes to the same with actually having our chats as well. Because when you're with someone in the space, you can kind of get an inkling when somebody else wants to talk. Or you can tell by someone's body language," Student B*

The necessity of running the scheme online meant that the second and third year students struggled to encourage the first year students to engage. In addition, it was evident to see that their ability to form meaningful relationships with their peers was inhibited by their inability to communicate and move in person together. This is where initiatives run by the postgraduate students, such as Creative Lab, were vital in developing a sense of community amongst budding dance artists.

Student reflections on impacts and effectiveness

The pandemic and its resulting lockdown left a distinct gap in student experience, most notably our ability to connect across year groups and our opportunities to gain industry experience and connections. The Arts Leadership and Management Programme allowed for the dialogue between year groups to be kept open. The new level 4 students were able to still develop connections with students in other year groups despite losing the opportunities to interact across the cohorts. Within both strands of programme, undergraduate students were able to gain support from postgraduate students who had similar experiences of completing their studies during the pandemic. This helped to maintain the supportive nature of the dance community.

Within the Peer Mentoring Scheme, each mentoring group had a mix of students, who were seeking advice but also offering motivation to each other. As well as creating an environment for support, it allowed the students who were mentors to develop those skills in listening and providing advice in an unbiased way. The pandemic left many people struggling with communication and these skills are seen as vital, particularly for those looking to work with community groups or in education; an aspiration of many students in Higher Education dance settings.

Overall, the schemes were beneficial to the student community, in supporting students by developing necessary skills. As there were only a limited number of opportunities within the ADS, students were required to apply and to practice application and interview skills which will always be vital. Additionally, it provided the opportunity to get a taste for an area that perhaps wouldn't have been considered otherwise.

The mentoring scheme was most beneficial for continuing the community atmosphere. However, some mentees still struggled at times to reach out to ask for advice. Mentors continued to check in with mentees and keep that line of communication open so that mentees knew that they had someone to speak to if they wished. Particularly for an arts-based degree, it is important to build a sense of community, so that students come out to support each other, over the course of their studies, but also to develop connections which expand beyond the course.

Follow up plans

The next stage in the programme is to continue the transition of the Arts Leadership and Mentoring Programme to face to face interaction. As Higher Education Institutions return to face to face teaching, it is vital to consider the social and artistic impacts of the pandemic. Having spent considerable time away from peers, dance students' ability to communicate, and interact with other bodies may take some time to return or develop more slowly.

Although it is evident that the students are keen for the ALMP to return face to face, as tutors and mentors it is important to consider this transition carefully. As part of the PMS, The Microsoft Teams channel created a safe environment where students could engage with each other under the supervision of the tutor. This meant that if needed the tutor could step in to offer support. Returning to in person delivery may prevent the tutor from overseeing the interactions, and therefore the scheme may be more vulnerable to safeguarding issues. To remedy this, further support and training sessions will be delivered to the mentors, and specific instructions regarding minimum group numbers, location and scheduling guidelines for face to face meetings will be provided.

The initial phase evidently demonstrated that students were able to upskill in a range of transferable skills. Most importantly, the students demonstrated an enthusiasm to engage and support their peers as part of their academic journey. In order to lean into this and continue to build a community of engaged artists and students, the ALMP will consider ways to bring the two strands together. There will be a trial phase of a face-to-face feedback platform between undergraduate and postgraduate students, allowing for staff-student mentoring to continue to feed into peer-peer mentoring. In addition, the dance department has begun to develop paid internships for students to work alongside permanent staff on artistic and research projects.

Future considerations also include offering a more diverse range of opportunities as part of the Artist Development Scheme, which are more tailored to the intended careers of the students. One example of this has been the co-authoring of this paper by a student who is interested in pursuing a career as an academic.

Related publications and resources

Collier, p. (2017) Why peer mentoring is an effective approach for promoting college student success. Metropolitan Universities. 23 (3). Available at: https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1152723.pdf

Costa L. Arthur, & Kallick, B. (1993). Through the lens of a critical friend. Educational Leadership, 51(2), 49.

Fitzgerald, M. (2017). Community to Classroom: Reflections on Community-Centered Pedagogy in Contemporary Modern Dance Technique. Journal of Dance Education, 1, 1.

Leal Filho, W., Wall, T., Rayman-Bacchus, L., Mifsud, M., Pritchard, D., & Lovren, V. et al. (2021). Impacts of COVID-19 and social isolation on academic staff and students at universities: a cross-sectional study. BMC Public Health, 21(1).

Mason, G., Williams, G., Cranmer, S. & Guile, D. (2003) How much does higher education enhance the employability of graduates? (Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE)). Available online at: http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/rdreports/2003/rd13_03/default.asp

Megginson, D., (1994). What's Happening in Mentoring Research?, European Mentoring Centre Conference, Sheffield Business School. Cited in Woodd, M., (1997).

'Mentoring in Further and Higher Education: Learning from the Literature'. Education and Training. 39. 9. pp. 333–343.

Milner, D. (2017). 'If the Hat Fits' Examining the impact of male-only, extra-Curricular provision on male dancers studying in Higher Education.. Theatre and Performance Research Association (TaPRA) Conference, Salford, United Kingdom. http://www.salford.ac.uk/conferencing-at-salford/conference-management/past-conferences/tapra-2017

Neary, M., Saunders, G., Hagyard, A., and Derricott, D. (2014) Student as producer: research-engaged teaching, an institutional strategy, Evaluation Report for Higher Education Academy, York.

Topping, K.J., (2005). Trends in Peer Learning. Educational Psychology. 25. 6. pp. 631–645.

Wagner, A., & Strach, P. (2019). Internships and Applied Work-Based Learning Experiences in Higher Education. New Directions for Higher Education, 188, 51.