

Boys Dance Too: a case study on building peer communities among male-identifying dancers within Higher Education

Tessa Palfrey, University of Lincoln, Tpalfrey@lincoln.ac.uk

Project summary

There is a wealth of research which indicates the negative effects that lack of male role models might have on male-identifying people interested in participating in dance (Risner 2007, 2009a; Polasek and Roper 2011; Halton and Worthen 2014). For those who have chosen to participate in dance training and have continued through to Higher Education, this lack of role models and peers continues to provide some additional challenges. The following project focuses on the participation of male-identifying students within dance, with a focus on exploring how building a sense of community might contribute to student engagement and wellbeing within higher education.

Although this research rejects absolutes, and is not concerned with gender binaries, students, participants and the extra-curricular dance company are referred to as 'boys'. This is a deliberate decision based on the language used by those involved with the project, and allows the project to target a very specific, underrepresented community within dance.

This project tracks the ongoing extra-curricular weekly choreographic sessions as part of 'Lincoln Boys Company' and its potential to create peer communities for male dancers within Higher Education. The research proposes structured collaborative performance making as a tool for building and maintaining positive peer communities among male dancers in HE, and thus enhancing the student experience.

Over the course of 4 years, the project situated the lived experience of the company members at the forefront to gain an insight into the value of peer communities. Fundamentally, the Lincoln Boys Company project is a practice-based endeavour which focuses on the creation of dance works.

The research connected to the project offers an understanding of how this project has perceived benefits for students and does so by following a qualitative research model, as outlined by Merriam and Tisdell (2015). Relying on a person centred line of enquiry, the research focus is on understanding how participants interpret their experiences and how this might contribute to how they 'construct their worlds'. Alongside the practical workshops, the methods used balance verbal reflections and focussed observations.

Description of project

The overall aims of the Lincoln Boys Company project were to

1. Generate a sense of community among male-identifying students within the School of Creative arts
2. Provide weekly sessions which focus on playful approaches to choreography

3. Create a public performance which showcases the creative talents of those involved within the company

In 2018 Lincoln Boys Company was formed. During this time there were many conversations relating to the student experience of male identifying students enrolled on the BA Dance programme, and the wider school. Students often referred to feelings of isolation, lack of community or support and a general sense of otherness. For context, when the project started, the national statistics provided by Hefce in 2018 suggested that males studying within the Creative Arts made up 39.4% of the student population. This was thought to be considerably lower on dance courses, and on a micro level, at the University of Lincoln the Dance course was receiving an average of 1 male student per cohort of 20 students. In light of these statistics, and the conversations held with students, the company was formed in order to create a sense of community, and therefore a sense of belonging. The decision was also underpinned by existing discussions which suggest that having more male peers may alleviate challenges around low confidence and feeling isolated (Risner, 2010, Williams 2003).

Male identifying students from the School of Creative Arts were invited to audition. As an extra-curricular project, the company did not offer formal educational benefits such as contribution to grades, however it directly addressed the concerns of lack of community and peer support for male-identifying students. Opening the company up to students from across the school also provided an excellent opportunity for cross pollination; an exchange of skills and knowledge among students enrolled in any of the 6 programmes run by the School of Creatives Arts at the time, and exposure to different ways of working and engaging with students from adjacent creative practices.

The company is founded on a teaching and creative pedagogy rooted in playfulness, in order to both engage and understand the participant experience. This playfulness is as much theoretical as it is practical, and Sicart's (2014) theory of playfulness as a way of being in, and knowing the world is strongly embedded into the company ethos, and is explored in the structure of each session. The practice is also informed by Leach and Steven's (2020) investigations into relational creativity and relies on Edmiston's (2008) position of play as a collaborative activity. These positions allow a focus on the practice as an opportunity for collaboration and co-authorship of the final performance.

Each week the company takes part in a two hour workshop whereby choreographic tasks are explored in order to create a public performance at the end of each semester. The task-based choreographic method is based on the researcher's own method for creating work, informed by the second of Carter's (2000) identification of three types of dance improvisation whereby improvisational tasks offer space for spontaneous movements and responses for use in a set work. The aims of each workshop are decided by the choreographer, however as the sessions unfold the space becomes more democratic in that shared ideas unfold, and the direction of each aim is changeable. The workshops offer a space in which the students are able to create together, and where ideas can be communicated and received with a sense of equality (Wise et al, 2020). It has often been suggested (Stinson, 2005, Milner, 2017) that male identifying students within Higher Education dance often struggle, particularly in the early stages of their training, with integrating into the class in terms of ability. It is suggested that this could be caused male-identifying students often starting their

dance journey later, and missing out on fundamental training. This is then thought to have a direct impact on confidence and engagement.

After 3 years of running the company informal discussions, and more formal semi-structured interviews, were held and through these discussions, it became clear that students felt part of a supportive community and by feeling supported, they were then able to offer support to each other. The impact of the project is evidenced through interviews with the company members, combined with researcher reflections, and is discussed in detail below. Crucially, within the Lincoln Boys Company sessions, all voices are able to be heard without feeling the sense of 'otherness' experienced by male-identifying students, as discussed earlier. With this, it is observed that the students feel empowered in the creative abilities and choices; an experience mentioned directly by students within the interviews –

“When I first came to the audition, I didn’t know I could do it because it was dance and I only had experience a little bit. When I came to University I had only done a few technique classes” – Participant C

“At the beginning I was like everyone is going to be better than me here, but when you let those feelings and thoughts go, and you’re just moving around with people It completely goes and you all dance equally” Participant B

Evidence of impact

Community and belonging

This research indicates that building relationships with peers outside of curriculum teaching, can positively impact both student experience and engagement by addressing feelings of isolation and lack of confidence, often reported by male dancers in Higher Education (Milner, 2017). These feelings are likely birthed out of both a lack of opportunity for many young male dancers, and a lack of advocacy for those who find themselves pursuing the discipline.

The sessions with Lincoln Boys Company are as much social as they are creative. Having opened the company to students from across different programmes, it has always been important to draw on the skills of each performer. With this, we move somewhere between physical theatre, dance, and devised theatre. It was observed that the participants enjoyed learning from each other through their joyful interactions, as well as the standard of the work they were producing, which increased over time. The students were able to directly comment on this skills exchange -

“I feel like the dancers, because they know more about it because they obviously study it, they are able to do more advanced things. Erm but its about combining or learning from them as well...so I still feel equal to them because I can do other things” Participant C

Our process leans on Fink’s (1960) notion that play is a phenomenon experienced by everyone, and therefore opens up a common language between participants. Much like our performance making process, play is also collaborative and enables

participants to co-author reality (Edmiston, 2008). In this respect, the research draws links between play and dance, and asks the participants of the company to approach each of their choreographic tasks playfully by investigating all possible outcomes in an environment void of judgement. The students are also encouraged to infuse the work with their own sense of humour and aspects of performance which they would enjoy watching. The relational benefits of playfulness are well documented (Chang et al, 2016; Mangusson & Barnett, 2013; Proyer et al, 2018) and this project supports the assertion that a playful environment aids communication, creativity and therefore community -

“It’s not just about collaboratively creating work, its about the environment that I’m in, so we erm...the boys in the company they make me laugh and they calm my stress” Participant D

“It was a safe space and...yeh...just that banter as well, the jokes that we can have and still create at the same time” Participant A

Mentoring and Leadership

The creation of boys dance companies within Universities is not a new concept; during her time at Edge Hill, the trailblazing work of Debbie Milner with EdgeFwrd (Milner, 2017), for example, set the stage for those to follow. These all-male dance companies serve as both a solution to the otherness experienced by male-identifying students, and a marketing tool for recruitment. The shortage of males in dance might be seen as cyclical; there are considerably fewer male dancers than female dancers, therefore fewer males are drawn to the practice due to lack of inspiration. This reflection is directly related to Stinson’s (2005) observation that it can be difficult to recruit males at audition due to the general shortage, resulting in young male dancers enrolling in Higher education dance programmes despite lacking in some of the fundamental training of their female counterparts due to a lack of accessible dance for younger male dancers.

The research suggests that prior learning inequity and distinct differences in abilities may cause lower levels of confidence in male-identifying students in Higher Education dance, and that this lack of confidence may affect the way in which students engage with both their studies, and their peers. Therefore projects which aim to generate a sense of community among male identifying dancers within HE may subsequently help to build confidence and keep students engaged. This was evidenced in some of the reflections by the participants -

“Yeh I do feel more confident now, and I feel like I can speak up. It was very tough the first few times to come. But now ive got friends who push me and all that and say it’s something I should do” Participant A

“When you’re in a higher year, you’ve obviously got more training and more knowledge and understanding of what to do and how to assist people, so I like to help people. There’s an essence of being a helping hand” Participant D

In 2022 the company received internal funding through PEARL (Public Engagement for All with Research at Lincoln) to run *Boys Dance Too*. The project sought to encourage participation of boys in dance, by creating a positive peer mentorship between KS3&4 students and the extracurricular Lincoln Boys Company through a workshop series. It was decided that the members of the company would lead the workshops to offer participants positive role models, but also to give company members a chance to facilitate and, in their own words, 'give back'. Many of the students involved in Lincoln Boys Company have expressed a desire to go into teaching upon graduation. Therefore, this project was used as an opportunity to mentor these students in their facilitation, and to offer feedback on their planning and delivery in a real-world setting. This aspect of the project was grounded in the proposition that work-related learning can offer a depth and maturity of skills (Hardacre and Schneider, 2007)

The project ran in 3 schools and community dance organisations within Lincolnshire. At the end of the workshops, participants took part in focus group discussions to reflect on their experience of the workshops and participating in dance in general. The findings from these discussions indicate that holding space for male identifying dancers, and offering positive and accessible role models helps to create a sense of community and belonging which encourages long-term participation in the discipline.

Ownership and resilience

The solution to an overall lack of male identifying dancers within higher education therefore, might come in two strands – the first is to create accessible and attractive dance for young male dancers. Feltham and Ryan (2022) have recently suggested a range of considerations for dance teachers which includes, being mindful of language in class, titles given to introductory class names, and of course offering role models. This leads to the second strand, which may be to create supportive environments for those in Higher Education, with the view that they might forge a more resilient and sustainable sense of community for younger dancers.

Without delving too far into the general benefits of extra-curricular activities for higher education students, it is impossible to not mention how projects such as this both attract and support students with the desire and ability to give more time to their practice and therefore take more ownership of their own learning journey. During interviews with company members, they mentioned never having seen an all-male dance company before – they hadn't seen an initiative which catered for them as a minority in the dance field. Over the past four years, I have observed that the company has provided a tangible sense of validation, which is reflected in the way that participants talk about their experience together –

“It's like we are all in the same boat, its like no one is a minority like in lessons and stuff. Now we are altogether, so we like how it feels. Its like...yeh we all enjoy this kind of stuff, so lets just do it” Participant E.

Reflections and Follow up plans

Although not formally recorded as part of the project, it is important to note that over the course of the four year project, there has been a noticeable shift in the way that the students engage with their programmes of study, and with their peers. This is evidenced in observations made by the researcher and wider staff team about how the students engage, specifically in creative and group tasks. Importantly, the research suggests that these changes are intertwined and equally beneficial. The practical elements of dance training are improved through engagement with the creative tasks during the workshops, and due to their collaborative nature, the tasks incorporate a community centred pedagogy (Fitzgerald, 2017). Traditionally, dance training may have focused on developing physical training, however by offering opportunities to learn and practice relational skills, this project allows for a repositioning or a reconsideration of the hierarchy of skills learnt within dance, and suggests that this will better prepare students for a successful career upon graduation.

From the researcher's perspective, one of the most important aspects of the project is cultivating an enjoyable atmosphere for learning through playfulness and humour. This directly intersects with Bieg and Dresel's (2016) study on how humour, specifically from the teacher, may support learning. Paralleling the project with Lincoln Boys Company, Bieg and Dresel (2016) found that students were more likely to positively associate humour with their interest in the course. The participants of Lincoln Boys Company reflected on their enjoyment with each other as being positively associated with their enjoyment of the project, meaning that playfulness can be seen as a contributing factor to building peer communities.

On reflection, building peer communities is vital for the experience of students, specifically those who may be identified as under-represented. However, these communities can be argued to have a long lasting effect, which extends beyond the 3 or 4 year programmes of study. There is a plethora of research on transferrable skills; we know that employability is high on our collective agenda as HE providers. It is these soft currencies (Maher and Graves, 2008) such as team working, self-confidence, self-management and commitment which we might consider the root of community in our current students and future graduates. Lincoln Boys Company, and the related community projects offer an environment which validates, builds up, and cultivates connectedness. During reflective discussions, without exception, company members have spoken about a rise in confidence and belief in themselves.

"its just been getting better and better and I'm feeling more and more confident"
Participant D

In discussing her work in various community and professional contexts, Rosemary Lee (2017) describes the role of facilitator as being concerned with stewardship, not ownership. This sentiment is very much echoed in the approach to education and creative practices within Lincoln Boys Company, where the product is important only to serve as a vehicle for the process, and the process serves as a vehicle for people.

In terms of the follow up for Lincoln Boys Company, there are now 3 graduate company members working in arts education and 2 completing postgraduate education. These are excellent statistics and mean that they can continue to act as positive role models

for aspiring young male dancers and performers. As the discussion around gender binaries and identities continues to move forward, there are questions around the need for an all-male company at the University. However, based on the findings of the current project, and the experience of workshop participants and company members, it is clear that the need to offer acceptance and guidance in the form of positive peer role models remains.

Related publications and resources

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