

Dance Research Matters: Event Report

On 27th May 2021 the Centre for Dance Research (C-DaRE) at Coventry University, in collaboration with the AHRC, held 'Dance Research Matters', an online event that brought together dance scholars, choreographers, PGR students, postdocs and dance artists in discussion regarding the future of dance research in the UK. The day began with an introduction delivered by Professor Sarah Whatley, who welcomed the nearly 250 participants and spoke about the origins of the event, from discussions that were started over 18 months ago between C-DaRE and the AHRC. The event was held at the Belgrade Theatre in Coventry, and Sarah Whatley acknowledged the significance of this, with Coventry being the 2021 City of Culture. Sarah posited how the event is part of a strategy to address how "dance needs to be more visible, more valuable, more present. We need to be at the table, every table". Much of Sarah's opening welcome reflected thoughts from her pre-event position paper, which you can read [here](#). Sarah then welcomed Helen Weedon and Victoria Plomer from the AHRC, who proceeded to introduce the work of the AHRC, specifically referring to the dance research they have funded and their relationship to the dance research sector.

The day was split into four panels, as well as a discussion between Baroness Deborah Bull and AHRC Executive Chair, Professor Christopher Smith. The first panel was exploring the question 'how do we evidence value and the public benefit of dance research?' (learn about Panel 1 speakers [here](#)). Rosemary Lee opened the panel with a passionate and moving provocation of what dance means to her; the participation and transformation of others within a poetic and personal space. These were understandings that many of us attending could relate to (as evidenced by the chat discussion), explaining how dance involves "moments of discovery and knowing in myself" and how she is "in it for the sanity". Rosa Cisneros spoke next about how we might evidence the benefit of dance, suggesting that evidential outputs from dance are "living, breathing documents. Tangible, intangible objects" and that "evidence reflects messiness, that process" of engaging with dance. Just as dance evolves, so should the evidence we provide.

The third speaker for the first panel was Emma Redding, who presented four points: 1) Isn't any evidence of the value of dance worth gathering? 2) The need to evidence value through different languages and lenses 3) One form of truth (e.g. scientific) does not invalidate other forms of truth (e.g. artistic) and 4) Collaboration is key to sustaining dance research. Emma presented a number of points based from her experience of dance science projects, rooting her ideas in response to the "oppositional mentality that dance and science don't meld together". The final speaker(s) for the panel was Kate Marsh, who was due to be joined by dance artist Dan Daw but unfortunately he could not attend. However, Kate shared Dan's thoughts and their interactions via WhatsApp (thank goodness for technology, eh?). Kate spoke about her lived experience as a disabled dance artist and researcher, as well as her collaborative relationship with Dan, explaining how disabled performers are often "invited in on terms that exist already for normative bodies and normative dancers. So, there are limited spaces of autonomy and ownership in the way we practice and contribute... We are evolving our position as disabled artists researchers, away from the historic context of being silent inspiring bodies on stage into thinking and contributing people in in dance research and dance practice". Sharing her questions to Dan and his responses, Kate explained how

Dan raised that inviting researchers “adds depth” to his line of inquiry, but that when the work explores crip identity and movement, it is “vital that the researcher is disabled” as it “sets up an unapologetic rehearsal space”. Kate finished the discussion by acknowledging that this unapologetic stance by disabled dance artists in making their “social and political positions really clear” helps them to “understand individually how we value our individual practice”.

The Panel 1 Q&A followed, with some fantastic suggestions regarding the gating of dance research, and how evidence of and access to dance research needs to be reconsidered. How can we be gate openers? How can the gates not be impenetrable? How do we get the keys to the gates? How can more diverse people get keys? In the chat, Struan Leslie shared how, “Often we - working in ‘dance’ are not the gatekeepers but rather are the pathway creators, while others build the gates and limit the access”. Emma Redding picked up on this, suggesting that the pathways we create often don’t always have gates only at points along the way, but also along the sides, which we need to open to let people in to witness what we are doing.

The second panel of the day was focused on dance practice, considering the question, ‘if practice is part of dance research, then what needs to change to reflect the value of practice as an epistemic system? (learn about Panel 2 speakers [here](#)). Choreographer Jonathan Burrows opened the second panel with a provocation about practice as an ecological process; a kind of ‘meshwork’, drawing upon anthropologist Tim Ingold’s thinking. Jonathan’s offering suggested that “Dance begins with embodied knowledge which is a fluid and unfolding process of overlapped experiences and awareness”. Efrosini Protopapa followed this with a discussion about how being a practice researcher is chameleon-like, being skilled in transmitting, transposing, translating and changing as needed. She proposed that being a practice researcher is an opportunity, stating how “Practice researchers, I would argue, are in a unique position to be able to invent and set up systems that support multiplicity and complexity that connect the workplace to the socialization that happens outside the workplace. And they could do this in a way that involves listening and acknowledging differences. While at least trying to avoid exploitation of themselves and others”.

The third speaker was Funmi Adewole who spoke about the importance of lived experience within practice research and to acknowledge the invisible work that goes with bringing the lived experience forth, particularly for marginalised communities. She also raised the role of grey literature, which is often created outside of the academy but plays an important role for practice researchers, as “you find that if you don’t have an academic discourse around your practice, it will affect how you operate within the profession”. The final speaker was Simon Ellis who focused on the position or relationship of practice with the academy, how it can be a haven for some researchers to engage with practice as part of their academic inquiry. However, Simon raised the question of how practice research might reach out and extend practice dialogically with other disciplines in order to shift the functioning of the academy, communicating “how might these hard to grasp methods move the extraordinarily large mass of the academy?”.

Next we welcomed AHRC Chair Professor Christopher Smith and Baroness Deborah Bull for their conversation session. This discussion covered the valuation of particular ways of knowing, such as how more value is often placed on writing, rather than embodied ways of knowing, not just by the wider academy but sometimes by dance scholars as well. Picking up on some earlier themes, the discussion discussed the relationship between the ephemerality of dance and how this is understood and handled within research. The drive to demonstrate economic or social impact, particularly linked to successful funding bids, was also referred to, with Deborah explaining how:

Currently, arts and humanities and, indeed, social science research is excluded from R&D funding, on the basis that it doesn't come up with a technological solution, which ignores the fact that it comes up with insights about behaviours, which are part of a solution to some of our contemporary challenges, but it is this question of how we value that kind of knowledge which furthers as a society or furthers other individuals, and how we should value that at a time when resources are scarce. They are really big questions.

Other points that were tackled were concerning absent voices in dance research, choreography as an act of research, leadership learning through dance, partnerships and transdisciplinary initiatives to bring people in, expertise vs. experience and how much dance learning is carried down organically from generation to generation.

The penultimate panel of the day was around the topic of dance research beyond borders: What are the conditions and contexts in which dance research can flourish? (Read about Panel 3 speakers [here](#)). First to speak was Dame Siobhan Davies, who offered an impassioned provocation about how dance can embrace change through shifting the lenses through which we view the world. Siobhan referenced a written piece by Lucy Suggate from *Material*, which proposed that dance is the art form of the 21st century, and Siobhan embraced this, adding how dance can inform how we interact with the world. Rachel Krische was next to speak, and her offering centred on how dance already crosses disciplinary boundaries, due to how it connects to other topics, subjects and experiences. Linking back to some of the points raised in the previous discussion between Deborah Bull and Christopher Smith, Rachel highlighted that we need to value the cognitive and embodied experience of dance as much as we do "verbal thinking"; that dance in transdisciplinary initiatives can "stand on its own legs" and lead.

The third panellist for this session was Scott deLahunta, who discussed his explorations of the human imaginary, and connections between dance and technological enquiries. From his experience in multidisciplinary projects, Scott emphasised the need to assert dance's autonomy as a discipline, one that has so much insight and innovation to offer. Scott also considered what it feels like to cross borders of interdisciplinary projects, emphasising the increasing interest of other disciplines in better understanding bodily and embodied experiences of functioning. Kate Elswit was the penultimate panellist, discussing her project 'Dunham's Data' and her experience working within digital humanities spaces. This emphasised the challenge in communicating the nuanced of dance-specific data work and advocating for a return to the body, whilst also advising caution in order to prevent the body simply becoming "a metaphor". The final speaker for this panel was Timmy de Laet, who spoke from Belgium (the only speaker not currently based in the UK), and how this gave him a unique perspective, due to the absence of dance happening formally within

universities and the effect this has on the dance research culture and (lack of) ecology in Belgium. Timmy introduced how this understanding led to the creation of Cultures of Dance, or CoDa, a research network for dancers, emphasising that dance shouldn't be an isolated endeavour but, rather, part of a collective action.

The final panel of the day was focused on postgraduate dance study, and we welcomed PhD candidates, postdoctoral researchers and those involved in the leading of PGR programs (learn about Panel 4 speakers [here](#)). Postdoctoral research fellow Vipavinee Artpradid began the session by discussing her progression through her PhD at C-DaRE and the experiences working on projects that were invaluable to her understanding of dance research. Vip emphasised the need for more opportunities for PGRs to contribute to wider dance research activity, as a form of development, because, as Vip described, "being embedded in the dance research ecosystem created a new nodule of whatever it is I am becoming". This was followed by Mira Gorkul, who shared her journey and influences that led her to her current PhD research around Bharatanatyam. Mira asserted that, through dance, we are owners of our own embodied knowledge and that doctoral research opportunities offer a "magnifying glass to understand how we experience the world, to understand our humaneness, to understand the intimacies and the secrets that constitute the world".

Next up was Vida Midgelow, who is Principle Researcher for the Artistic Doctorates in Europe project. Vida spoke of her admiration for the rest of the panellists, and reflected on her experience of supervising doctoral students, at one point describing a fascinating list of projects she has been involved with. Vida emphasised that the rise of practice research degrees pushes for greater ways of knowing, but called for more significant consideration of life beyond the PhD and the long-term benefits of completing a PhD. The fourth panellist for this final session was Paul Hughes, who gave a stimulating provocation around the precarity of dance in higher education in the UK, considering why and what we are fighting to save. Paul emphasised the need to consider how dance research can work to decolonise the academy, but only if we collectively challenge the power structures on which the UK university system is based, and still functions, asking "Is the university worth fighting for?".

Tia-Monique Uzor, another postdoctoral researcher, was next to offer their provocation, discussing her experience working on interdisciplinary postdoctoral projects, reflecting on dance's role in these instances. Tia-Monique reiterated a particular point from earlier sessions, that dance should not be resigned to the margins of interdisciplinary endeavours, but rather it should "central and equal within theoretical inquiry, using embodied knowledge and data analysis to push ideas within [other] fields". The final speaker for the day was PhD candidate Kat Hawkins, who spoke from their position as a disabled dance researcher, beginning by reflecting on their relationship with dance, and the journey that led to them gaining this position as a PhD researcher. Kat spoke passionately about the uniqueness of dance for understanding the world, reflecting back many of the shared beliefs that were offered throughout the day, how dance needs to expand and to include, to challenge and to communicate its worth. The session finished with a Q&A discussion (unfortunately very short due to time) where ideas concerning the divide between priorities and anxieties, the need for greater support for PGR students (financial, wellbeing and

academic support, particularly for international or marginalised students) and breaking down the elitism of academic study.

Sarah Whatley closed the day by thanking the speakers, chairs and brilliant organisers (especially Kate Marsh and Lily Hayward-Smith from C-DaRE) for contributing. She also encouraged that the discussions started today should continue beyond this particular event, with new connections being developed and with the seeds of innovation being planted and nurtured. The day was a brilliant coming together of different people involved in dance research, and the interest in the event demonstrates that it was a much longed for focus. Particular themes emerged, especially around how dance evidences value and impact, the need to expand not reduce, dance as a lead player in inter/multi/trans-disciplinary projects, collaboration as a way to sustain the field and the need to diversify. How the rumblings from this event will impact the future of dance research is not clear (yet), but it certainly was a catalyst for networking, dialogue and collaborations. The Society for Dance Research is listening to and having discussions, as well as considering how the event might influence our future activities, to address the issues that were raised throughout the day.

Finally, the Dance Research Matters website is a great resource for information on the event and the speakers from the day, as well as thoughts around the provocation that 'Dance Research Matters', which will be added to over the coming months with outputs from the speakers and responses from event rapporteurs. Visit the website [here](#).