

'Optimising potential, maximising performance', a Healthier Dancer event that took place on 27th November at Laban, focused on ways to evaluate performance and health to ensure effective dance training. A wide range of people with their own specific interests visit these kinds of events. In my role as student support manager at English National Ballet School, I was particularly interested in new ideas on effectively supporting young talented dance students during their training and preparing them for the transition into the professional dance world. A diversity of speakers presented their findings and views on the theme of the day; and although not all that was said was new to me, it was good to reiterate previous research and results. In this article, I have focused on the presentations that tie in with what I am currently working towards at English National Ballet School.

Young dance students who enter vocational training face numerous challenges, issues and decisions in their young lives. These years are important and formative years for teenagers in general, let alone for young dance students. The change that adolescents undergo is an important feature in working with students; helping them to move from dependence to independence makes this transition from young adolescent to adult a less bumpy ride.

It is important to emphasise factors that optimise performance during dance training and to remember that these include good support and guidance from the moment future dance students enquire and apply for vocational training. It must continue throughout their training and after their graduation, supporting them in their transition into professional employment. Emma Redding pointed out in her presentation that identifying talent depends on the criteria held and what each organisation is looking for and is able to achieve with the selected talent.

There are different ways and methods to select talented students and both Laban and ENBS made a presentation on one aspect of talent selection which is their screening processes. Particularly interesting was the psychological screening that Laban recently introduced in collaboration with the University of Birmingham. In this screening they look for factors that relate to optimal functioning or well-being and what role social environment plays in both intrinsic and extrinsic motivational factors.

When the first challenge of auditioning and the selection process has been successful, a student starts their three-year training. This is a time in which a vocational school nurtures, develops and optimises the talented young students. The importance of this was pointed out by Joan Duda in her introduction. She added that talent needs the right instruction, right coach and the right facilities, i.e. a well balanced programme of development. Teachers are very important in helping to nurture and develop talent and Greg Whyte emphasised the importance of not only the training institutions but the role of coaches. He feels that

the culture in the UK has to change in this regard and that more money should be invested in good quality coaches who can identify talent and know how to effectively work with the young people in order to maximise performance.

In addition to effective teaching, it is vital to have a student centred approach and to offer students a support curriculum that provides the right skills, knowledge and tools necessary to manage the demands of the changing environment of the professional dance world. In this way, students will be well equipped to meet the challenges of the dance sector and able to maximize their performance potential. The 21st century is looking for intelligent dancers who take responsibility for their work, achievements, personal health and well being. As Wayne Eagling said at the previous Healthier Dancer event, it is ultimately the intelligent dancer that will win through.

The conference provided interesting information and an opportunity to share experiences and ideas with colleagues. It is encouraging to know that the desire to develop intelligent dancers is felt at both ends of the spectrum and this inspired me in my work of continually developing the student support programme to prepare our dance students for the professional dance world – fit and ready for the 21st century.

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