

Never have I ever...

By Claire Pring with input from Professor Liz Durden-Myers, Bath Spa University and Managing Director of PE Scholar



Torrifon Primary School by One Dance UK Dani Bower

I have never....

A few years ago, whilst on a long, tedious car journey, my travelling companions and I engaged in a game of 'I have never...' where we revealed things that were considered commonplace, yet had somehow passed us by. This included never having seen 'Star Wars' and never having eaten an avocado but it was my admission that I had never played football that received the greatest level of incredulity. Once the teasing subsided, which took a while, I pondered why this might be. I grew up in the 70's and attended a large primary school where PE lessons were segregated on the basis of gender, girls played netball whilst the boys played football. This was further compounded by attending an all-girls high school with another traditional offer including hockey, tennis, gymnastics and dance – and home life was a sister and parents who were bookish rather than sporty, living in a street where we were the only kids.

I don't feel I missed out. On the whole I enjoyed the activities that were available, but I did feel out of my depth as a primary teacher trying to deliver high quality football lessons to key stage two who knew so much more than me about the game, the range of skills involved and how to develop them.

Whizz forward in time to the last decade or so. The focus in my work is solely dance in education, and I regularly deliver CPD to primary and secondary teachers as well as write resources to provide further support. I did think, with dance being a compulsory element within the National Curriculum for so long, that new teachers would be coming through stronger with dance having been a compulsory part of their education experience which would lead a notable upturn in the confidence and quality of lesson delivery. Unfortunately this doesn't seem to be the case. Many people entering the profession still have a limited personal experience of dance during their years as a pupil, similar to my lack of experience in learning football. I recently spoke to a number of ECT primary teachers who received only three hours of PE input during their training, and none of that dance related. It feels like a huge hill to climb to ask people with no concrete dance education of their own to feel confident and comfortable when delivering dance.

Now jump forward to last Summer, and an afternoon of playing games with my colleagues from the team who had conceived and written the Oak Academy PE resources. I got into a deep conversation with Dr. Liz Durden-Myers, Managing Director of PE Scholar and Senior Lecturer in Physical Education at Bath Spa University on exactly this point and what type of intervention might be needed to fast track current trainee teachers into appreciating the value of dance as an educative process. With a bit more mulling I suggested that we offer students an intensive dance experience where they are guided through a collaborative process to create a group dance in a short space of time. Straight away Liz's response was 'yes, how can we make this happen?'

So on a bright Wednesday morning twelve PGCE Secondary PE students and I spent three hours together in a studio. They used ideas inspired by the game of rugby to work in groups and generate contrasting sections based on making a run, the lineout and the scrum. Working entirely through improvisation and choreographic tasks the students generated every piece of the action. Once the sections were complete I guided them to make choices, such as deciding which order the sections should come in; where these should be placed on the 'stage'; whether they should be joined by another group at the same time or overlap, whether we needed to adjust the dynamics of the content; maybe include pauses and consider how we should link one section to the next. In short, I asked them the questions I ask myself when choreographing.

As the piece developed we continued to put the various sections in place, like pieces of a jigsaw puzzle, positioning them, adjusting them and connecting them. At this point the choice of music emerged. Until then I had used a playlist of various pieces I felt would be likely to suit the action content, but 'Arise' by E. S. Posthumus seemed to reflect the energy and intention of the work most effectively. By simply rehearsing the dance to it the students easily fell into phrasing their actions to complement the rhythm patterns and tempo. No counting, the students simply 'felt' the music and very (very) soon the timing emerged.

After the final run through, Liz and her colleagues guided the students to reflect on the process and what the standout features were for them as they prepare to enter the profession. These included a sense of surprise at how complex action content was generated from a simple initial tasks, which, by gradually layering more elements to it, increased in challenge and provoked discussion in a way that felt manageable and playful... that throughout the process, at no point was any action content placed onto them, they were involved in generating, shaping and arranging the movements (choreography), collaborating with group members to perform them effectively (performance) and an on-going process

of self and peer reflection to further refine the work or consider choreographic alternatives (appreciation)... they also noted how inclusive this process was, by using open-ended questions and language that was appropriate to all, everyone was able to join in at a level they were comfortable with and challenged to a degree that moved them forward in their skills and understanding without feeling overwhelmed or dispirited.

I suspect that the real impact will be evident further down the line when these new teachers will be embedded in the life of a school, inspiring students to participate in a range of physical activities... and their dance provision will be delivered with energy and enthusiasm because they had the opportunity to really taste what a dance experience could and should be like from the perspective of the participant.

There is a clear distinction between dance training and dance education, and yet so many teachers (and resources) use the 'copy me' training model which limits creativity, inclusion and engagement within an education setting. There is an alternative and it's rooted in strong educational processes and is so much more accessible for the non-specialist teacher to deliver successfully. In order to offer dance that is vibrant and relevant we need to provide an environment where we value and celebrate the knowledge, ideas and contributions of our pupils... then hopefully none of them will say 'I have never... enjoyed a dance lesson'.

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Based in Derbyshire, Claire travels across the UK delivering Dance CPD. She is a member of afPE's Professional Development Board; authored the dance resources for Oak, devised and delivered Step By Step for BBC Teach and works closely with a number of dance companies including One Dance UK, People Dancing, Birmingham Royal Ballet, Dance Leaders Group and Fabric.