The project is based in the Department of Performing Arts at De Montfort University and aims to:

Examine and promote ways in which students of dance, drama/theatre and performance may learn more effectively from their practical experience by engaging with it in a reflective way.

Embed changes in learning and teaching which enable learners to develop reflective skills appropriate to personal and professional development and employability.

The project team consists of seven staff members teaching Dance, Theatre and Performing Arts at HND, BA and MA levels. The team has addressed some generic issues and some more specific to dance and theatre education. These include:

- Facilitating and supporting reflection
- Assessing reflection
- Reflection within the devising process
- Developing a critical framework for making performance
- Using video as a reflective tool
- Reflection and personal and professional development
This presentation reported on the project’s work in identifying the role of reflection in the professional development of freelance dance and theatre practitioners and considered the implications for undergraduate education in dance and theatre.

Reflection as a means of learning from experience is not new. John Dewey is generally acknowledged as the first educationalist to recognise that learners need to be involved not only in doing but also in considering what arises from that doing. In the last twenty years, perhaps especially since the publication of Donald Schon’s work in the 1980s, there have been many definitions, and re definitions, of reflection. The definition we have used in speaking to professional artists (and to students) is that of purposefully thinking about experience to gain understanding and change practice.

Though based at De Montfort University, the project has visited thirteen other Higher Education institutions and has received questionnaire responses from a further fifteen institutions. What we have learned has confirmed the centrality of reflection and
reflective practice to dance and theatre education in HE (even if these terms are not necessarily used in a formal way). Perhaps because reflection is so central there is considerable interest amongst staff in these subject areas in improving the effectiveness of students’ reflection on practice. Interests include how best to engage and support students in processes they might not immediately understand or welcome.

It is generally acknowledged that reflection can be time consuming and not necessarily comfortable (especially if we move beyond the affirmation of experience to a more critical appraisal). Students wanted to know how reflection figured in the professional lives of artists and practitioners. It was suggested that both staff and students would find examples of reflection and its relevance to professional dance and theatre artists and practitioners useful.

Working in the arts and entertainment industry is often an uncertain and discontinuous experience. Indeed many graduates entering the profession give up within their first year after graduation. (Birch 1998) Those practitioners who do work successfully frequently do so by creating a portfolio of work, projects and professional opportunities. Such work demands some key abilities:

Portfolio workers

‘work in a diverse and fragmented industry in which it is vital to know what the career opportunities are; plan for them; find new directions and access the necessary knowledge, skills and experience.’

Vivien Freakley (2000:13)

During the course of the last year the project has interviewed representatives of regional agencies with responsibility for the support and development of artists. These have included East Midlands Arts (the regional arts board), Arts Training Central, Dance 4 (a national dance agency) and the Community Dance Foundation (a national organisation based in the region). The project has also interviewed 10 regional artists (5 dance and 5 theatre practitioners) who are working successfully in the region. (The criterion for success was their ability to stay in employment!)
Arts agencies were asked about the skills and abilities needed by artists in sustaining themselves in the complexity of the current work environment. They reported that, in their experience, artists and practitioners needed a diverse range of skills:

**Artists need:**
- understanding of operating contexts
- ability to network
- ability to be pro-active
- good written communication skills
- focus, ambition, desire, passion
- curiosity and openness to make connections

Moreover, to operate strategically and to take advantage of new opportunities, organisations felt that artists and practitioners needed to:
It was recognised that artists need to take responsibility for developing their own career. (There are few formalised, strategic frameworks for professional development in the industry). Artists need to make connections between arts policies and their own practice in order to link aspects of their own work to those of organisations with which they might work. Organisations felt that artists not only need a clear idea of who they are and what they have to offer but also need to be able to communicate this in a variety of ways.

All of these demands require high level meta-cognitive skills. Reflection (purposefully thinking about experience in order to gain understanding and change practice) is a key process in developing these abilities and applying them strategically.

Artists were asked if they used reflective processes and if so how? They were invited to describe the impact such processes had on their professional work. Artists reported that they used reflective practice to:

**Artists need to:**
- take responsibility for nurturing and developing own Continuing Professional Development
- integrate skills, knowledge, information, vision and passion
- identify and communicate their artistic vision and clarity of purpose

**Artists use reflective practice to:**
- draw on experience
- create and manage uncertainty
- find new ways of working
- plan and focus
These artists described reflection as core, integral, or organic to their work although they would employ it differently in different contexts. ("Reflection is what has allowed us to create seven new works of theatre in two years. We reflect at every level." “I think the role of an artist, if there is one, is to go to a place of not knowing and look around in there … Reflection makes it possible to go to this place and come out the other side.")

For many of them reflection is a key driver for change ("It allows for development rather than repetition."): to get from one place to another; to turn things around; to change habits; to move things forward ("It allows you to turn negative experiences into positive ones, to break out of damaging patterns, to develop new ways of working, to solve problems and create problems.")

Some artists found that reflective practice developed confidence in making change happen and in dealing with the uncertainty and challenges both of artistic endeavour and within the professional environment. ("It develops confidence in challenging and changing situations. You know you can survive them." “It diffuses frustration and fear, because you identify what the problem is and take steps to avoid repetition.")

Organisations and artists were also asked about the drawbacks of reflection:

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<td>resources</td>
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Making time for reflection was a common problem. One organisation that worked with artists found that reflection was sometimes compromised because artists were concerned about being seen as not busy. The artists felt that their funders might think they were just wasting time. The organisation felt that, in their experience, it was important that all practitioners were ‘given licence’ to take time to reflect.

Time was not the only resource constraint. Funds to provide a mentor were not always
available. East Midlands Arts and Arts Training Central have recognised the value of interactive reflection and have piloted a mentor scheme as a crucial stage in the creation of an infrastructure for artists’ professional development.

Uncertainty of outcome was found to be an inhibiting factor. One artist said “I find it quite scary, nerve wracking. What if I think about things so much that I realise my priorities in life have completely changed?” Another recognised that reflection “doesn’t always feel very nice because it forces you to acknowledge things you may not want to. It may prompt you to take a decision you would rather not make, or a course of action you didn’t want to make.”

Some practitioners feared that reflection could lead to an over analytical, and ultimately unproductive, approach. One artist reported “You can get stuck in it, just sitting and analysing can make you very, very stuck and you don’t get up and do in the studio.”

Some practitioners felt there was resistance to reflective approaches by others and that this could impact negatively on the development of collaborative projects. They noted that, in order to reflect usefully and move forward, they needed to be able to talk freely and discuss openly with others.

Despite the difficulties experienced organisations and artists felt that reflective practice was important and identified the following benefits:

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<td>articulate and informed individuals:</td>
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<td>• practising artists who have a clear</td>
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<td>sense of their work, what they are</td>
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<td>doing and what they need to do;</td>
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<td>• graduates with a realistic approach</td>
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Freakley (2000) has suggested that practitioners need to be able to operate broadly on a number of levels.

- On a macro level they need to keep updated on, and responsive to, changes of policies and theories of arts practice
- On a meso level they need to build networks, assemble resources and develop
partners in order to create, present and distribute their work

- On a micro level they continue to wrestle with the form itself and all the business of managing a portfolio of freelance work

Reflection is a means by which the individual practitioner can consider and locate his or her own practice in relation to these various contexts.

One company reported that reflection “helps us to maintain a healthy perspective on the direction of our lives and our company. We can take a moment to appreciate how much we have accomplished, the skills we have learnt, the potential the future holds for us. Reflection keeps us sustained, encouraged and hopeful.”

These particular artists were successful in managing their careers because they were able to use reflective practice as a tool for change and development. In both the making and the management of their work they were able to work through uncertainty, flux, challenge and problems. They learnt from experience to turn many situations to their advantage. For them reflection transformed experience into

- new work
- new ideas,
- new possibilities
- new ways of doing.

As educators we need to consider what this means for the design and delivery of undergraduate programmes that may lead some graduates to work as dance and theatre practitioners. The findings of our interviews with arts organisations and artists suggest that undergraduate provision should consider how to:

- create opportunities for and support ‘risk taking’
- value uncertainty and encourage divergent thinking
- emphasise process
- create time and opportunity for reflection
- integrate reflection in ‘classroom’ activities
- balance challenge with affirmation
- design activities to provide progression and coherence
- be critically reflective practitioners ourselves
- model reflection in our teaching
Creating opportunities for and supporting 'risk taking', valuing uncertainty, encouraging divergent thinking and emphasising process present no small challenge in the current environment. Higher education has become increasingly concerned with ensuring publicly accountable standards and has moved almost exclusively to outcome based learning (a criticism of which has been that it pays little attention to process). An increasingly diverse student population means that not all students come to university with a burning desire to pursue their chosen subject (having the focus, passion and desire that arts organisations expect of practitioners). The subject community’s perception is that an increasing number of students come to higher education with the prime intention of gaining a degree in the expectation that this will improve their chances of employment. This means not only getting a degree but getting a ‘good’ degree and this ‘mind set’ can militate against risk taking and divergent thinking. Such students are unlikely to welcome the uncertainty and indeterminacy they encounter in these subject areas.

Curriculum design and delivery must be purposeful in enabling students to learn how to be curious (since this valuable attribute cannot be taken for granted). We need to make our values very explicit. Reflective practice has a role to play in appreciating and dealing with uncertainty and in understanding and applying values.

We need to consider carefully the problem of finding or creating time for reflection. If we value reflective skills we have to allow for their acquisition and development. Pressures on contact time for practical work mean that some radical decisions may have to be made. ‘An overfilled curriculum is one of the greatest disincentives for teachers to give time for reflection and for learners to take time to reflect.’ (Moon 1999:166)

Our research shows that reflection is most productive when it is part of teaching activities and not left largely to student, self managed learning. Reflective tasks and activities need to be such that they result in action. (We may otherwise promote the over analytical approach perceived by some practitioners). This demands not only individual, private reflection but also practical interaction between students, and between staff and students.

Whilst we must move beyond affirmation of experience if we are to critically question it we also ‘need to be wary of scaring learners away by introducing prematurely the threatening act of deconstructing and challenging [their] familiar ways of understanding … We may need an extensive period of affirmation to establish the trust needed to bring learners to the point of critical readiness.’ (Brookfield 1987:130) At the same time recent thinking on the attributes of graduateness most effective in employment and continuous learning is that of self confidence and a belief in self efficacy. There is a
balance to achieve here since reflection may encourage negative thinking about the self.

Reflection may provide a vehicle to synthesise information and integrate new learning. Designing tasks that require students to take a broad or a long view of their learning may help counteract the fragmentation that modular structures can encourage. Such tasks can support the integration of skills and knowledge seen by arts agencies as vital to portfolio practitioners.

It has been suggested that 'one of the most important reasons why learners never reach … critical analysis is because adult educators themselves do not model the very process they are urging on learners. Many of us … constantly attest to the importance of learning that involves critical thinking, critical reflection, critical analysis and so on. Yet we pay insufficient attention to how we can model this kind of learning in front of our students.' (Brookfield 1987:130) A recent colloquium on rethinking graduate employability emphasised the need for reflective skills but also suggested that for reflective practice to be effective it must permeate a whole institution. Students soon pick up whether staff advocate an approach or apply it rigorously to their own life and work. The same colloquium, however, recognised that the present situation in which academics are under pressure and pushed to cope with teaching large numbers of students is a serious obstacle.

Finally, it has been suggested that a successful student who genuinely takes to the subject is not merely learning about the subject but learning to be a practitioner in that discipline. It is vital then that students of dance, theatre and performance acquire the skills of critical self reflection which practitioners of dance, theatre and performance see as essential to their artistic and professional development.

If you are interested to know more about the project or about other findings please contact us or visit our website:
References referred to:


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1 *Rethinking Graduate Employability*’ London, June 2002