

**making it
happen**

a toolkit for Youth Dance



NORTHALLERTON YOUTH DANCE

Written by Helen Brown and Kelly Jane Goodwin

Helen is a Freelance Dance Practitioner and qualified Dance Teacher, working in school and community settings. Helen runs her own dance business KINESISdance, delivering regular classes to all ages in a range of styles.

Kelly is Freelance Dance Practitioner and has worked within community settings for many years teaching various styles of dance. After studying at Newcastle Performance Academy, Kelly developed a Freelance portfolio and setup her dance school Curve Dance.



WHAT DREW YOU TO THE RURAL STEPS PROJECT?

Helen - I was keen to be involved in a project that gave young people in rural areas the opportunity to learn and perform within a group.

Kelly - I have a particular interest in Creative Dance and thoroughly enjoy providing young people with exciting and innovative dance tuition that focuses on their creativity while giving them confidence through movement. I got involved in Rural Steps as it was a chance to share my passion for dance further.

GETTING STARTED

In Northallerton there is a variety of dance schools offering a range of dance styles, so we knew that there were young people interested in dance as a starting point.

We began our Ignite days in February 2019 at Northallerton Forum, as it was an ideal central venue, and chose to begin delivery in half term. We recruited for the Ignite sessions using boosted Facebook posts, sharing in local Facebook groups and advertising with existing dance school participants to provide them with a new experience. These methods seemed effective and on our first day we had 12 eager participants. In addition to this open taster, we contacted a local school to see if we could deliver an Ignite session there. Both workshops were really well received by young people, parents and teachers and we sent forms home to allow young people to sign up and receive details about future workshops. Despite the interest, unfortunately we did not receive any forms back from the school workshop but did from the Northallerton Forum session.

All those involved in the Ignite workshops seemed interested in what we were offering and all wanted more information for the next stage of the project. We believe that the chance to be involved in the Dance It Up North event at York Theatre Royal gave the project an extra incentive from the beginning.

We came across some difficulties when it came to trying to establish a regular group due to a number of different factors. Firstly, finding a day we were both available was tricky as we both teach regular classes throughout the week in York, Northallerton and surrounding areas. In addition, we struggled to find a venue that was available on the days/times that we were free. In addition, we found that most participants had after-school activities which clashed with our session, making it difficult to maintain a consistent group. We advertised on Facebook, again with boosted posts and targeted sharing to local groups, and within local schools and groups, and decided to charge £4 per hour based on what we both currently charged for own dance classes and as a similar price to other dance provision in the area. Despite making it clear from the start that the initial workshops were the starting point to a bigger project, and that we would be working towards a final performance, we found that attendance and commitment reduced as soon as we started charging for the sessions.

*"My daughter loved it and loved
working towards a show"*

- Northallerton Youth Dance Parent

MOVING FORWARD

Our sessions comprised of ice breaker games, an energetic, fast-paced warm up, travelling sequences and creative tasks and choreography. We found that throughout the Ignite and Create days the participants thoroughly enjoyed creative tasks and adapting choreography in groups/partners. Our first few sessions were really inspiring as participants didn't know each other and started the session very quiet, but by the end were all talking and working really well together in groups. They had lots of ideas of how to develop the movement we had taught. I believe our icebreaker games and group conversations at the beginning of the session really set the foundations for building these relationships, between us and the participants and between the participants themselves, forming a new community of dancers.

We had 5 young people that attended 4 consecutive Thursday sessions which launched the Sustain phase of the project, and we managed to recruit more young people join us for rehearsals nearer the performance date. Sessions followed the same format as the Ignite and Create sessions which worked really well and proved to be productive and enjoyable. Participants really enjoyed working together, creating choreography and developing motifs. We worked with props and incorporated their voices within the music, which we feel gave them a sense of personalisation and ownership of the piece. In addition to the regular Sustain sessions leading to the Dance It Up North performance, we decided to run a dance film project, developing a site-specific work outside a church hall we had hired. We ran this due to low numbers of participants and the young people had also expressed an interest in doing some filming as they had never had the opportunity. The hall we used had some lovely areas around it to film which inspired us as artists with new movement ideas. The participants enjoyed taking their choreography from the hall to the outside area. The aim was to show, on camera, the beauty of nature and being at home in the countryside which I feel we clearly portrayed in the final edit. The filming was a lot of fun, and participants enjoyed the freedom of dancing outside, using the different spaces we found to inspire and adapt our choreography. Throughout the process it was clear to see the confidence grow within each participant and how they all became more forthcoming and creative with their ideas.

PERFORMANCE

As we moved towards the main performance we had 8 young people who were regularly committing to rehearsals and this group worked towards the final performance at York Theatre Royal in October 2019. We did have a lot more interest from other young people at this stage however they were also involved in other activities and had a clash of schedules meaning they were unavailable on rehearsal dates and could not be involved on this particular occasion.

On one of our first sessions we all wrote on a big piece of paper what 'home' means to us; what made Northallerton feel like home. The answers from the young people were all different so we chose to voice-record their answers and use their voices as part of the piece. We brought in some white feathers as a prop explored ways to move with them and incorporate them within the piece. The participants were full of ideas and it was their idea to show a busy city life at the beginning of the piece which they think is the opposite of Northallerton. Showing the contrast between a city and their interpretation of Northallerton really enforced the reasons why they love their hometown. We chose city noises and strong, drumming music to show the city life and contrasted this with calming music to represent their rural hometown.

The performance went well and our group thoroughly enjoyed the fantastic experience of performing at a theatre in front of an audience. They watched the first half of Dance it up North and saw a wide range of dance styles, genres and performances. During the interval, it was amazing to hear their thoughts on each performance .



REFLECTION AND THE FUTURE

After Dance It Up North, the sessions came to a natural pause as that event had been the main aim of the first stage of the project. We did not re-start sessions at that time because we agreed that the lead up to Christmas was a very busy time for us both. This year we need to discuss the next steps for the group and would like a project end-goal to work towards before restarting the group as we know the participants would be keen to work towards something to keep them committed.

Knowing what we know now, as a result of working on the project, I believe we would have looked for a set venue for the regular sessions much earlier. Northallerton doesn't have many places to hire so they are booked up in advance which we didn't realise and which made things slightly difficult to maintain a regular rhythm.

Within classes we filmed and photographed our process to the best of our ability, however, having a professional around at the sessions would have been really helpful. The marketing side of things is where we struggled slightly (but did our best!) as we had to do this ourselves and, despite having some experience with this, we are not marketing professionals. Having some support with creating advertisements, getting the word out about the workshops, editing videos etc. from specialists in these areas would have made our experience a lot easier, particularly if we wanted to focus on the digital side of performance. This would have then allowed us to focus our time and energy on the creative and choreographic side, which is where our main skills lie.

We feel that there will always be a place for Youth Dance in Northallerton as it offers something different from the more formal, exam based classes which are in abundance in many areas. There is a sense amongst young people that Youth Dance is a space where they don't have to have lots of previous experience, or be able to do the splits, but instead gives them the freedom to explore their creativity, learn techniques for performance and choreography, and find a new group to become a part of. The problem we found in Northallerton is how to attract the young people, hook them in and maintain a level of commitment in their already busy lives. There is a lot of competition with other dance schools which most young people go to but, if advertised, promoted and set up correctly from the start, we believe there is still very much a place for a Youth Dance group in this area.

Our advice for others when setting up a Youth Dance group would be to prioritise finding a venue and selecting a set evening before delivering the first taster sessions. Having plenty of time to promote the sessions beforehand is key to gaining commitment, and similarly having a performance event to work towards gains more interest from prospective participants; young people want something to work towards and like to perform so this can be a really important feature when starting a Youth Dance group.

"There is a sense amongst young people that Youth Dance is a space where they don't have to have lots of previous experience, or be able to do the splits, but instead gives them the freedom to explore their creativity, learn techniques for performance and choreography, and find a new group to become a part of."

Overall, the project was a positive experience, giving lots of young people the opportunity to get involved with a fresh, local dance project, some of whom had not had any previous dance experience. For us as artists, it was refreshing to work alongside another dance artist, sharing and developing creative ideas and techniques and working towards an exciting final performance.

