

# Benchmarks for quality of community dance projects

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Below is a summary of the findings of some research and consultation with the community dance sector in the UK conducted in 2011.

These 'benchmarks' provide an interesting example of attempting to address 'quality' of artistic practice, and highlight the criteria that people were using in practice in their work, rather than seeking to define a prescriptive evaluation approach.

## **Introduction**

The Foundation for Community Dance has previously shied away from setting down quality criteria, regarding this as the remit of the individual practitioner. However, it seemed to us that the context in which we operate has shifted significantly and it is incumbent on the dance sector to clarify how it is making quality judgements, particularly in relation to work being undertaken in partnership with agencies outside the arts. This piece of research provided us with the opportunity to begin to identify the areas of community dance where practitioners are applying criteria of quality and what they are using as benchmarks to identify quality in their work.

*'It's a complex issue - recognising this may be a benchmark in itself.'*

The discussions about quality were inevitably complex and reflected the diversity of professional roles of those who participated in the seminars and the different mix of participants from region to region. Discussions were wide-ranging and touched on issues relating to values, contexts, partnerships, intentions, purposes, planning processes, evaluation, measurement, the perspectives and assumptions of different viewers, teaching styles, ethical practice and art and aesthetics.

There was in addition an interesting discussion about the difference between notions of quality and success. For a significant number of practitioners the quality of the process was more important in evaluating success (dependent on context) than received or personal notions of the quality of artistic 'outputs'. Indeed, some argued that because risk-taking was part of the process, it was inevitable that some outputs were of quality even though they had not satisfied external aesthetic criteria.

It was acknowledged that a key difficulty in looking at issues of quality is the problem of operating purely in the realm of subjective judgements. 'Liking' and 'disliking' were not regarded as benchmarks, although they were accepted as having validity as opinions.

Consistent across the country was the understanding that the 'context' for the work was crucial to making any judgements or generating any criteria/benchmarks for quality, as is having absolute clarity about what and whose agendas are being pursued.

It must be emphasised that we were attempting to identify what the common benchmarks were for identifying quality in community dance, not measures for evaluation or how people exercised individual aesthetic judgements.

Some key benchmarks did emerge which begin to hint at the range of ways in which we can identify quality in community dance:

## **Quality of Purpose**

Recognition that people had to have a vision about why they were undertaking any given piece of work or making any particular intervention in a community context. This is not necessarily about having a 'big' choreographic idea, but is about 'knowing why' - why this dance, with these people, in this context, at this time and with these resources? Without this knowledge, practitioners stated there could be no reason to make partnerships; there could be no basis for learning, progression or change, and there would be no starting point from which to assess or measure achievement.

### **Quality of Planning and Communication**

All recognised planning as a key element of quality practice, both artistically and managerially. A range of benchmarks emerged here:

- A clear route map
- A common and shared understanding between stakeholders
- A common agreement about values and purposes between stakeholders
- A shared agreement between stakeholders about what was to be evaluated and measured
- Clarity about where the intervention might lead
- Flexibility and freedom for change
- Opportunities for negotiation built in
- Realism about the scale of the intervention and its achievability
- Managing resources appropriately
- Being true to intentions, not trying to 'fit in' or 'sell soul to devil'
- Being clear where the initiative sits within one's own development

### **Quality of Practice and Process**

The discussion about practice and process most closely related to earlier discussions about values and purposes. The following benchmarks were perceived to be key in identifying quality practice and process:

- It matches values and purposes
- It has transparent aims and objectives
- It is ethical, responsible and safe
- It has clarity of purpose throughout
- It is respectful of difference
- It is respectful of the learning style of learners
- It has processes that are structured, planned and have a sense of achievement and completion
- It provides opportunities for reflection
- It provides opportunities for individual and collective risk-taking

### **Quality of Engagement**

Identifying the quality of participants' engagement in dance formed the most substantial and complex part of the discussions. Different people, depending on their views about values and purposes, had different benchmarks. However, we have summarised the discussion and identified ten headings under which practitioners said they applied a benchmark of quality.

They were looking for participants demonstrating, at an appropriate level:

- Readiness and openness to the experience
- Focus and attention
- Competence appropriate to the task(s)
- Active creative contribution(s)
- Responsiveness
- Consciousness and reflection
- Change and overcoming
- Preparedness to take risks and experiment
- Expressions of pleasure and enjoyment
- Aspiration

### **Quality of Outcomes**

What emerged strongly right across the country was that community dance was about positive change or making a difference for the people engaging with it – individuals, groups and communities.

A range of criteria emerged that practitioners are using to identify positive change:

Change by Individuals

- In their physical and technical ability, awareness, concentration, commitment, confidence, communication, creative expression and critical reflection both within and outside the dance
- In their attitudes and relationship to dance, themselves and each other
- A broader understanding of dance and a range of aesthetics

- Acknowledgment by the participants themselves that change had happened and that they could put this change in context
- Acknowledgment by other stakeholders, including parents and carers, that change had happened
- That individuals wanted to continue dancing
- Change by groups/communities
- Change in attitudes to dance
- A greater understanding of the contribution and 'difference' dance can make
- A more developed sense of community
- An enhanced willingness to participate across the specific/targeted community
- Ongoing dance activity
- Ongoing partnerships between stakeholders

These benchmarks need to be set alongside the other more detailed statistics relating to outputs which can then form the basis of further work relating to assessment, measurement and evaluation. It was never our intention through this research to produce a handbook for evaluation; there are many excellent examples elsewhere. What we have identified is a more detailed framework of what practitioners actually say they are doing, rather than a blueprint for excellence in community dance.

Ultimately, these discussions about values, purposes and quality revealed a profession of enormous integrity that has, through dance, made a very real difference to the lives of the people they strive to reach. They bring to these engagements a keen intelligence, creative energy, a high level of artistic skill, their passion for dance, their belief in its power to make a better world, and a deep commitment to and respect for the people they work with.

**For more information:**

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