

Making Space for Possibility

Suzie West

28 November 2015

# Making Space for Possibilities

## Merge8 R&D project with SpinDrift Dance Collective

SpinDrift Dance Collective is a large group of local dance artists and dance teachers from recently graduated to retired that dance together weekly and create work for small scale touring and education partnership projects. The ethos of the collective is to work creatively and closely together to invest in the local dance community. Education is Spindrifit's passion and new work is never made without the process and product being shared with local schools and the next generation of dancers. SpinDrift wants to offer sustained relationships with mutual engagement between schools and artists that can facilitate aspirational learning. Merge8 is a research and development project that was about advocating possibility in dance. Layer upon layer we asked 'what if?', when planning the projects, creating work and evaluating, to make space for new thinking or solve a problem.

The past action research was based on the Dance Partners for Creativity model by Chappell, Craft, Rolfe and Jobbins in their book 'Creative Encounters.' The pedagogy and methodology from DPC were 'meddled' with in Merge8 and used as the principles for the creative frameworks. The evidence and evaluations observed how these frameworks brought about aspirational learning using both qualitative data and quantitative data. Regular interviews with 5 sample participants from each school and artist led project were conducted and recorded to study the qualitative responses to questions and open discussions. Web graphs were made by the samples to diagrammatically represent their view of the dance ecology they lived in and their relationship to it. Quantitative data also showed the longitudinal numbers of participants from each school as they journeyed through the Merge8 projects to track participation from age ranges and geography.

Anna Craft discusses the Model of Possibility Thinking in 'Creativity and Education Futures'. The methods of learning listed in this model included posing questions, play, immersion, innovation, risk taking, being imaginative and self determination. These experiences were the outcomes and learning patterns we were seeking in the research - Merge8 sought to find a place for 'possibility thinking' to be experienced to promote aspirational learning in students, teachers and artists. Using aspirational learning Merge8 hoped to feed the local dance ecology and sustain pathways of progression, choice and further partnership. If the combined group of inspiring artists, engaged teachers and new young dancers were all asking 'what if'

there is a psychological shift from ‘what do we have?’ “what is this?” to “what can we do with this?” “what next?”.

Merge8 posed a question; ‘How do partnerships between artist and schools lead to a culture of artist, teacher and students aspiration?’ Underneath this question we were looking for HOW partnerships form spaces of possibility. The community of practice model that is suggested in ‘Creative Encounters’ is a unique combination of artist, teacher and a dedicated space for a project. Together this physically and metaphorically holds a new space for possible creativity and dialogue. Merge8 expanded on this community of practice by planning 8 communities of practice and interwove them to create an outward facing, interconnected community of practice across Devon, Plymouth and Cornwall. The 8 schools provided a space for artist and teachers to plan a project with their school. Phase upon phase the schools were merged together into three hubs (Devon, Plymouth and Cornwall) and then into larger regional platforms and creative projects, The aim was to steadily bring the schools and local artists closer together and provide as many opportunities as possible to ask ‘what if’.

There were four key methodologies that facilitated possibility thinking and aspirational experiences were plural perspectives, dialogic space, capacious ethos and generative possibility. There were many ways of experiencing plural perspectives in dance training and dance creativity. Firstly with the combined co-constructive approach of the students, teacher and artist. The flattened hierarchy meant that all participants experienced leading, creating, sharing, performing and observing within the creative projects. The aspirational learning was experienced because they interacted together and set up a plurality. Jeffery suggested aspirational learning should be experienced “*investigative, interactive learning in a place outside of school learning or institutions and also beyond the ordinary and the everyday*” (Jeffery, 2004, 144) There was also plurality in their learning environments as the hubs shared dance spaces and theatres but the projects also placed dance in new spaces such as universities, city centres and public open spaces. The layered programme of the Merge8 Platforms themselves also offered many perspectives on dancers in training and dance as a career. The showcases were a visible representation of progression routes so the participants and audience could ask more than ‘what if’, they could ask ‘what next?’.

Each creative project in phase two of Merge8 brought together two or three schools and two to three artists. For example Plymouth School of Arts a brand new free school, Plymouth High School for Girls and Eggbuckland Community College. Three local dance artists worked with the teachers from Eggbuckland and PHSG to produce a dance piece for the students, families and local community at PSCA’s new theatre. In order for the project to be co-constructed and planned they had to maintain a dialogue and an open mind. They experienced difference and compromised on their normal methods to problem solve and find new possibilities. The creation of a dialogic space within that community of practice makes thinking space for new possibilities. “*Eckstein proposes that through using the tool of reframing it is*

*possible to encourage learners and indeed for peers to encourage one another to see a problem or situation from a fresh perspective in order to generate possible strategies for engaging with it...It involves quite literally, bringing a new set of assumptions to an existing situation, to facilitate thinking.”* (Craft, 2005, 136) Creativity itself can set up an opportunity for the participants to overcome challenges and problems together and the success of their venture brings the community of practice closer together as communal cohesion. The qualitative data and quantitative data is evidence that through projects with dialogic space, the community of practice remained at a consistent or increased number of participants and also experienced challenge, excitement, self realisation, empowerment and confidence. Their own understanding of difference, strength and weakness was experienced to provide self reflection and empowerment.

It was important in the action research project that these communities of practice did not strengthen and solidify as separate units but remained connected and aware of the larger community around it. Merge8 applied the capacious ethos that David Parker discusses in his book ‘Creative Partnerships in Practice- Developing Creative Learners’. He persuades the reader that we are stronger together than apart and when times in education are tough, it is not about shrinking behind the gates of the school walls but opening them up to allow exchanges of ideas a external support. Merge8 ensured this with the phase upon phase merging of schools and artists together to make bigger projects or multiple lenses. The layered programmes in the Merge8 platforms also gave the audience and participants a chance to look outside the gates at training opportunities. Bodmin College have continued to use their school as a venue for rural touring and used their last £300 as a payment for Freefall Dance Company to become resident in the school for the week of their show. Callington Community College have offered a 12month teaching contract to three local dance companies so the dance academy can train with a variety of dancers.

A perplexing challenge for the evaluation of Merge8 was how to evidence the participants making choices, and shifting from seeing and observing new possibilities to actually taking them. Chappell's chapter ‘Not Just Surviving by Thriving’ in ‘Creative Encounters’ explains that the actioning of choice requires an important sense of belonging, knowledge and awareness. *“Leaping demands familiarity with known boundaries, sensitivity to what might be appropriate next, confidence and capability in journeying into new territories with others”* (Chappell, 2011, 127) When evaluating whether new and immediate possibility had been reached by the participants in particular we looked at these attributes and qualitative words in the discussions and written evaluations. The humanising creativity that occurs in partnership projects is the first layer of generating possibility. *“In exercising their creativity children..are not just making things, but are helping to shape themselves and their future; and teachers who enable this are engaged in one of the most exciting creative processes of all.”* (Eaude. T, 2007. 67 We can apply this to the teachers and artists also as they learn what it feels like to generate a confident, creative and successful version of themselves.

Naturally, as Merge8 draws to a close it is important to sustain the partnerships or monitor the partnership and dance training opportunities continuing in the communities of practice to observe how new possibilities are emerging. SpinDrift Dance Collective will be continuing to use the DPC methodologies and frameworks explained to develop new projects but with a conscious decision to lead the enquiry with 'what if', 'what next' and 'what can we do with this' rather than 'what do we have already and what do we know that works'. It is important we solve the problem, develop a dialogue and see what really is available at the moment of beginning a project rather than working with an old framework. Choice, variety, aspiration venues and open dialogue will be the essential ingredients for SpinDrift's educational ethos. The capacious, innovative and co-constructive relationships formed will also be a vital philosophy for pooling resources and funding so that the partnerships can be sustained and not fully reliant on public or private funding.

Please see the Merge8 Documentary on SpinDrift Dance Collective Vimeo Page  
or [www.spindriftdancecollective.com](http://www.spindriftdancecollective.com)

## **BIBLIOGRAPHY**

*Chappell, K, 2011 "Not Just About Surviving But Thriving"; Dance Partners for Creativity: Close Encounters, Stoke on Trent, UK and Sterling, USA, Trentham Books. 159*

*Craft, A. 2005, Creativity in Schools - Tensions and Dilemmas. London & New York, Routledge, 136, 144*

*Eaude, T. 2007, Creativity and spiritual, moral, social and cultural development, Creativity in Primary Education. 67*

*Eckstein, D. (2004) 'Reframing' as an innovative educational technique: turning a perceived inability into an asset. The Korean Journal of Thinking and Problem Solving 14(1), 37-47.*

*Jeffery, B. Final Report on the Creative Learning and student Perspectives Research Project (CLASP), A European Commission funded project through the Socrates programme, Action 6.1, Number 2001204682/002-001.SC2- 610BGE, Milton Keynes. <http://clasp.open.ac.uk>*

*Parker, D. 2013. Creative Partnerships in Practice; Developing Creative Learners. London, Bloomsbury Education. 76.*