

# **Higher Education and Profession Theatre Conference, 10<sup>th</sup> September 2015**

## **Student Perspectives**

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### **Summary**

This report focuses on the student contribution which occurred as a live response to the panel discussions and speakers throughout the day of the conference. This response was convened via a social media site where current students at De Montfort University were invited to respond to questions raised by the speakers as they occurred. Students were encouraged to have their own discussions about topics raised by the speakers. Conveners directed the discussion through references to the speakers and the questions they were raising.

Students who are in their second and third year of study on the Drama Studies course at De Montfort University were invited to join a closed social media group prior to the day of the conference. They were advised about the topics being discussed during the conference and how they could contribute to the discussion remotely. The students in this group were asked to make themselves available as much as possible during the day of the conference to respond to any issues that arose. 60 students participated during the conference discussion, either as observers and readers or as direct respondents.

Three areas of discussion have been identified as of most interest to the student group and are as follows. The first area of discussion related to student concerns about participating in the collaborative performance projects, with particular focus on when these collaborations would happen during the academic year. Discussion area two was about the new skills

acquired by the students during the collaborative performance project and their transferability into 'real world' situations. The third area of discussion refers to employability and whether the students have this in mind when they opt to audition for the DMU / Curve collaborative performance project.

### **Discussion Area One: Student concerns about participating in the collaboration**

Students were asked to discuss their expectations for being involved in future collaborations. Four out of the five participants in this discussion had not been involved in previous DMU/Curve performance collaborations. They were asked to discuss any factors that influenced this decision.

In all four cases the overriding factor for not participating was concern about missing classes. Students felt very unsure about whether this would actually be the case. Three of the students also comment that the performance dates were very close to their assessment dates. One of the students says that 'I wanted to take part but it clashed with our final important drama assessment and the rehearsal dates meant I wouldn't have been able to contribute to my group's work when they were rehearsing'. Another participant in this discussion added that she thought that 'if the performance dates of the Curve collaboration were a bit later on in the year more people would feel encouraged to take part as not everything would be happening at once'.

The student who was involved in the 2015 production commented that while she did not miss class at any point during the rehearsal process, group work for assessments was a concern. She said that 'you'd have to be careful about group work for university; you may be set back because of taking part in the show which has happened to everyone'. This

student admits that people who participate in the collaborative performances do have to be realistic about the commitment they are making including being available during the holidays even though they might not be needed for all of the rehearsals. She concludes her involvement in the discussion by saying that 'I don't regret taking part, you just have to be someone who is already committed to university, who doesn't miss classes because this is another big project to take on'.

### **Discussion Area Two: Are the skills being taught / learnt actually transferable into the 'real world'?**

Students were asked to discuss the types of skills they were learning and how easy they found it to transfer these skills across to both their degree study and into ideas about what they might want to do in the future. There was a good deal of discussion about whether it was possible for academic and professional theatre pathways to cross over at all, and participants also discussed the different kinds of learning available in both places. This discussion moved beyond that of the DMU / Curve relationship because some of the students who participated in this particular discussion saw themselves as emerging theatre makers who perhaps were not looking for quite the same experience as those students taking an active role in the collaborative performances or wanting to gain experience as actors.

One student who participated in the discussion felt that the skills they had learned which were transferable had come from the degree and that they were able to easily relate these skills to lots of areas. It was much harder for the students who participated in this discussion to define skills learned during the collaborative performance process. Some students who wanted to become professional actors, noted that they still did not 'know

where to start' despite the experience. There was some perception that the activities they had engaged with had not been 'real', something that also impacted on their perceived ideas that it would not make them employable. One participant explained that the experience provided 'hypothetical' learning which did not teach students what they would actually need to do in order to develop a pathway into the industry once they had graduated.

Students who perceived themselves to be emerging theatre makers also discussed a lack of learning with regards to using their skills outside of a university context. One student commented that 'we learn a lot about making a show but not really about putting a show out there, applying for Arts Council funding etc'. The same student also goes on to say that 'a lot of what you need to know in the real world is not really taught or discussed in university'.

In terms of the pathways of academia and professional theatre working alongside each other students in this discussion felt that the success of the relationship from a student perspective is very dependent on 'what route you want to go down in your career'. They feel that in terms of learning about the process of putting on a professional show that the collaboration provides a good foundation for broadening 'the way you think about theatre'. Students believed that the collaborative project had taught them to consider other aspects of the industry that they had not previously engaged with. This included producing, administration and, for two of the student in this discussion, there was a realisation about how many people were involved in the process. One student commented that in previous learning environments that there was always pressure to 'perform well' and that the perceived focus was on having 'well-rehearsed actors' when in fact they were only a tiny

part of what actually happens. Students who participated in this discussion and who aspired to be actors or performers all agree that the collaboration were a positive experience but that it did not, in itself, help them to 'become employable'. It seems to be that the collaborative relationship might be breaking down previously held ideas by the students that they would be instantly employable in their chosen area once they had graduated. All of the students in this discussion revealed concerns that they would need to do more than completing their degree programme to achieve their goals within the industry.

### **Discussion Area Three: Employability**

Initially the students who participated in this discussion were asked to think about whether they were auditioning for the DMU / Curve collaboration with thoughts of future employability in mind and whether or not the experience would enhance their CV's. This conversation soon turned to students' thoughts on 'professionalism' and its various implications, such as the perceived value of the experience of working in 'professional' venues such as Curve and with 'professional' personnel, the latter being defined exclusively by the role of the 'professional actor'.

Most students who participated in this discussion agreed that there were some benefits to having experience performing at a professional venue with a professional artistic team. Almost all said that it would definitely enhance their cvs and that it might play a role in successfully applying for jobs after graduating. The students did find it difficult to pin-point the exact benefits they thought that the experience would give them but their feeling was that it would enhance general employability skills such as communication and time management.

One of the students who participated in this discussion expressed the opinion that no matter where the performance occurs, it would always be considered as 'amateur' by potential future employers because there had been no professional actors in the production. To clarify this point the student was discussing their view from the perspective of obtaining professional acting work after graduating. Like 'real theatre world', 'professionalism' was both a powerful and problematic term in the students' sense and discussion of the value of collaborative relationship and one inevitably linked to the always-derogatory valuation of 'amateurism'.

Some students argued that having the opportunity to work with professional actors would be valuable. One student commented that, 'ultimately, by going into these performances, we are wanting a professional acting experience and by being able to act and learn alongside professional actors who are earning from their skills it would be a brilliant experience and something that I feel is missing'. Again, this point is raising the issue of students interpreting the term 'industry professionals' to include only actors.

Others were of the opinion, however, that collaborative performance projects were a place for student learning, and that maybe having professional actors in the productions would mean the students' learning would no longer be given priority. At this point a past student from De Montfort University joined the discussion. I have included the long quotation here because this view point has a weight of experience behind it different to that of other student contributors. Furthermore, this also includes more explicit views about the actual value of the collaborative relationship in this particular case.

Here is what she had to say: It is interesting that you guys have been talking about working in collaboration with professional actors. I did this in 2012 with a Theatre Company whilst in

2nd year of University and the results were mixed. There were 3 professional actors in the main parts, then myself as a fourth, smaller character. Then there were 3 emerging artists, 2 of whom came from the Theatre Design course at Trent University, and 1 of whom did Film at DMU.

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I learnt a lot through the process and think about it as my first professional credit - I still look back on it happily. However, I was lucky that my role was significantly bigger than the three other 'emerging artists' working with the company because I'd already dedicated a year to doing unpaid Research & Development with the company. This meant the company knew of my abilities and subsequently entrusted a larger role to me.

The other three joined when the production began full-time rehearsals. They received less than minimum wage for the production, and ended up being very little more than stage hands, briefly puppeteers and laundry assistants.

The production was incredibly strong and got great reviews, but the learning experience for the other three artists was minimal. From personal conversations with them throughout the process - which lasted around 3 months - I know that they felt a little used at times.

I guess there's an issue of trust there, where the professional cast of the production may be valued more highly than the emerging/ amateur artists simply because from a conventional understanding they have more experience and talent. It'd be interesting to find a working model where professional and emerging actors could work together equally, without that being detrimental to the artistic value of the

production. Because there is a risk when working with students, that a production will be less than what it might be with professionals. Of course there is. So how do you break through that wall in a rehearsal room to allow people to work in true collaboration, trusting one another's talents so that their potential can shine through? The gentleman from fanSHEN mentioned in his speech at the conference that 'Everyone's a genius at something'. So how do we create a space to discover that in a learning environment which is also professional and productive?

I know for a fact that the DMU Film Studies student in particular had a wealth of talent which was never seen in the rehearsal room or on stage. He's since gone on to do great things.

In my experience, DMU's Collaboration with Curve is unique because it doesn't place you alongside professional actors yet bills the production with the same marketing and credit as any other professional production. I think it places more value on the production because of that, and the addition of professional actors to the mix might undermine the value of the students involved.

That's not to say the model of collaborating between professional and student actors isn't valuable, only that it should be approached with caution, and a very open, collaborative viewpoint from the Creative Team managing it.

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**Outcomes: Impact on participants**

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Much of the discussion amongst student participants was concerned with the 'stature' of collaborative relationships. The students all raised concerns about the perceived value of performance projects that were neither degree performances nor 'professional' performances, raising questions about exactly how such initiatives are framed as student experiences, both by HE institutions and professional theatres.

Students who felt that they had benefited from the DMU / Curve collaborative project believed that the collaboration was a powerful medium for them to practise skills they had been learning at university. There was, however, less evidence to show that students were able to identify the skills they had learned through participation in the collaborative process. This may be, perhaps, because they were accustomed to the explicitly stated 'learning outcomes' that define their degree-level study, outcomes that may not be appropriate to the process-based, experiential values of extra-curricular collaborative projects.

Ensuring sustainable participation in the projects that are available for students through this relationship was also a key concern for students who sensed the potential pressures that they brought upon assessed work, particularly in the final year of the degree programmes. All the students who commented upon this seemed to feel that collaborations embedded within the degree programme and consequently assessed by reference to stated learning outcomes would be more attract broader participation. Such judgements were, however, made without reference to the potential disadvantages of such models that were also debated in the conference discussion.

In general, and perhaps surprisingly, aspirations for the impact of collaborative projects were connected to issues of professionalism. Students expressed a desire to learn from professional performers, believing that this will enhance their employability whilst omitting

the value of learning from other industry professionals such as directors, designers, technical staff, and so on. Students who aspired to be theatre makers also showed an interest in learning production and administrative skills as part of their degree programme.

### **Considerations for Future Discussions**

The discussions suggested that prospective student participants were willing to consider a range of collaborative models that might draw upon the expertise of a range of theatrical and performative practices, something that was touched upon in the conference's debates about the advantages and disadvantages of HE relationships with larger and smaller companies. As those discussions indicated, the different administrative structures as well as artistic approaches offer possibilities for collaborative experiences tailored to the particular ambitions and interests of individual students.

The relationship between collaborations at undergraduate and postgraduate levels - and the transition points between those modes of study - might also prove a fruitful source of future investigation. As the range of student and ex-student participants to this survey suggested, the perspectives of current undergraduates, postgraduates and graduate practitioners, and aspirant practitioners, are at once different and complementary. Projects that could draw upon these different perspectives might encourage that sustainability of partnerships between HE institution and professional theatre that participants identified as a key aspiration.

As the debate around the status of 'professionalism' suggested, the ways in which collaborative ventures are framed, described, understood and evaluated by participants in all areas of the partnership might not be straightforward. Some further reflection upon the

key terminology of collaboration, its implications and its relationship to the perceived values of collaborative experience might prove valuable for all.

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